Making Space for Heritage: Collaboration, Sustainability, and Education in a Creole Community Archaeology Museum in Northern Belize

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Abstract: Working with local partners, we developed an archaeology museum in the Creole community of Crooked Tree in the Maya lowlands of northern Belize. This community museum presents the deep history of human–environment interaction in the lower Belize River Watershed, which includes a wealth of ancient Maya sites and, as the birthplace of Creole culture, a rich repository of historical archaeology and oral history. The Creole are descendants of Europeans and enslaved Africans brought to Belize—a former British colony—for logging in the colonial period. Belizean history in schools focuses heavily on the ancient Maya, which is well documented archaeologically, but Creole history and culture remain largely undocumented and make up only a small component of the social studies curriculum. The development of a community archaeology museum in Crooked Tree aims to address this blind spot. We discuss how cultural sustainability, collaborative partnerships, and the role of education have shaped this heritage-oriented project. Working with local teachers, we produced exhibit content that augments the national social studies curriculum. Archaeology and museum education offer object-based learning geared for school-age children and provide a powerful means of promoting cultural vitality, and a more inclusive consideration of Belizean history and cultural heritage practices and perspectives.

Keywords: archaeology; descendant communities; community museums; Afro-Caribbean history; Creole; Belize

1. Introduction

Heritage-oriented archaeology is an inherently public endeavor, often involving the select preservation and display of material remains from the past with an eye to the potential political, economic, and social impacts of archaeological research [1,2]. Heritage projects, such as community-based archaeology museums, are often part of an ongoing dialogue and negotiation about who controls the past, and benefits from the production of archaeological knowledge in the context of economic revenue generated from heritage-based tourism [1,3–5]. Tourists have been the primary target audience for archaeological site museums established at Maya sites in recent decades across Belize, as part of the country's tourism development initiatives led by the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) [6] (p. 75). While the economic promise of tourism is often an important consideration in the Maya region, the tourism industry is an unstable enterprise, particularly in rural communities [1,7–9]. This article describes the development of a community-based archaeology museum in a rural Creole community in northern Belize. While tourists were a consideration, the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center was designed primarily for Belizeans, namely school-aged children. Working in partnership with local teachers, we designed the exhibition content

to complement the national social studies curriculum, and to address the concerns expressed to us by members of the community regarding the loss of traditional Creole cultural heritage.

Crooked Tree Village is located in northern Belize within the Maya region, just south of Quintana Roo, Mexico (Figure 1). The community of Crooked Tree was specifically selected as the site for the museum and learning center for several reasons. This area shows archaeological evidence of continuous human occupation spanning roughly 6000–9000 years, from Paleoindian times to the ancient Maya and into the colonial period [10,11]. In addition, as one of the oldest Creole villages in the country, this community holds a valuable repository of colonial archaeology, and community members hold a wealth of local knowledge in the form of oral histories. The Creole are descendants of Europeans and enslaved African people who were originally brought to Belize by the British colonists, primarily to work as slaves for the logging industry beginning as early as the seventeenth century. These British colonists who brought with them enslaved Africans penetrated far into the forests of northern Belize in search of logwood and mahogany and displaced the Maya residents living in this area [12–16].
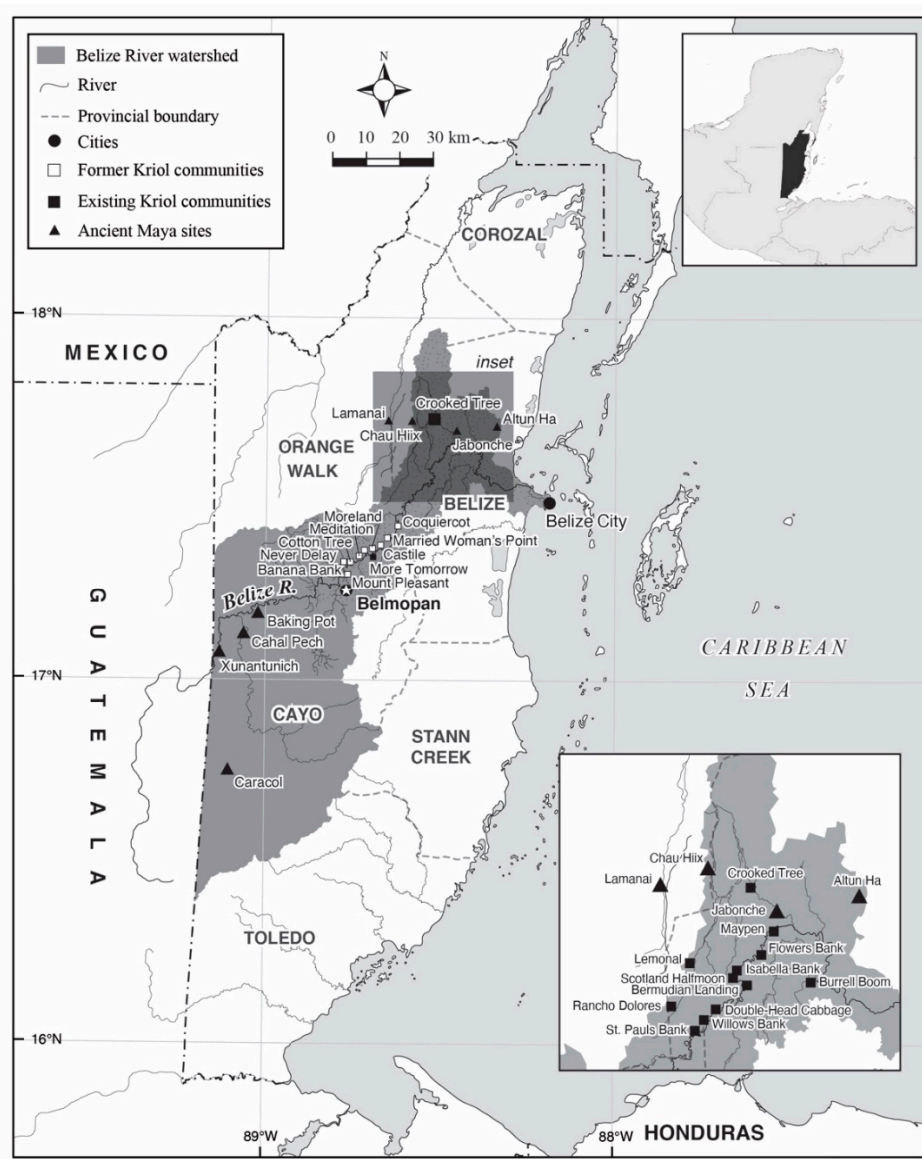

Figure 1. Map showing former and existing Creole communities in the middle and lower half of the Belize River Watershed, which encompasses the Belize River East Archaeology (BREA) study area. Inset map highlights settlement in the lower Belize River Watershed (map prepared by M. Brouwer Burg).

While slavery was abolished in 1834, Belize was a British Colony up until 1981, so colonialism is not a thing of the distant past for Belizeans. For this reason, our approach to the museum project featuring archaeology of the lower Belize River Watershed has paid particular attention to the decolonization of museum practice [17–19]. Belizean history in the national curriculum de-emphasizes Creole cultural heritage and is heavily focused on the ancient Maya civilization, which has dominated Belize's heritage preservation efforts and tourism development in recent years [20]. While ancient Maya culture has been thoroughly documented through previous archaeological research, Creole history and culture have been largely undocumented archaeologically and make up only a small component of museum content in Belize. The Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center aims to address this blind spot, making space for a more inclusive consideration of Belizean archaeological history and cultural heritage practices and perspectives. Integral components of this heritage-oriented project, described below, involved community-based collaboration, sustainability, and education.

2. Project Background

For this project, our goal was to develop a community-based public archaeology museum exhibition focused on the deep history of human–environment interaction in the lower Belize River Watershed, covering roughly 6000–9000 years of human history. The Maya period of occupation has been the most thoroughly investigated [21–27]. However, there is also a rich historical record for the Creole, and this has been the focus of more recent archaeological investigations by the Belize River East Archaeology (BREA) project, assisted by a group of well-trained excavators from Crooked Tree village [10,14,28]. The first author, who has conducted archaeological research in Belize for nearly 30 years, directs the BREA project, which encompasses a 6000 km^2 study area in the lower half of the Belize River Watershed. As part of the BREA research project, her work examines local oral histories, alongside archival and archaeological evidence, in an effort to reconstruct the colonial history and settlement in this area. The second author joined this project as a specialist in education and the design of learning experiences in museums, and was instrumental in helping to develop the exhibition content, with an eye toward creating accessible experiences for a range of audiences including local school-age children.

When the first author initiated the BREA project in 2011, the goal was to document ancient Maya settlement in this area, but it quickly became apparent that, in addition to hundreds of ancient Maya sites, there were also a wealth of colonial sites in the lower half of the Belize River Watershed [10,14,28–31]. This area is often referred to as the "birthplace" of Creole culture. Many of these historic communities, including Crooked Tree, were originally established as logging camps, and most today are comprised of direct descendants of mixed African and European descent. As many young people move to be closer to the highways and cities, the rural Creole communities in the lower Belize River Watershed show signs of dwindling populations, and there is legitimate concern about the loss of cultural heritage [32,33]. Most of the Creole villages noted on the inset map of Figure 1 show diminishing populations, and others have been abandoned all together. For instance, nearly all of the Creole communities from Banana Bank to Coquiercot in the middle Belize River Valley, where we have conducted an archaeological survey, no longer exist today (see sites marked as white squares on Figure 1). The one exception is More Tomorrow, which, like Crooked Tree, is one of the oldest Creole communities in the Belize River Watershed.

The BREA project started working in the Crooked Tree area in the summer of 2014. Our first public outreach initiative in the village occurred in the summer of 2016 and involved a collaborative, interdisciplinary humanities project, which culminated in a temporary community exhibit at the Crooked Tree Visitor's Center, a building managed by the Belize Audubon Society. This public history exhibit featured information on contemporary ethnographic research in Crooked Tree, which was led by Dr. Alicia McGill of NC State [33,34]. The BREA team contributed several panels for the exhibit featuring the "deeper history" of the Creole, which we gathered through our oral history, archival, and archaeological research. The opening of this temporary public history exhibit garnered a surprising

amount of attention from the local community. Many people read the informational panels, but what seemed to engage them the most was a small vitrine with a collection of ancient Maya and historical artifacts that had been arranged in one corner of the visitor's center. While many of the younger kids were unfamiliar with the rusted metal objects in the vitrine, the older visitors quickly piped up and explained how they recalled their father using spikes like the ones in the vitrine for climbing chicle trees to harvest the gum and how their ancestors used the "dog" to haul mahogany logs and float them down the river to Belize City where they were loaded on to ships destined for the U.S. and European markets (Figure 2). What was clear from this experience was how artifacts helped trigger people's memories of the past; they served as cues for an historical narrative, which locals provided to us (the "experts"), rather than the other way around.

Figure 2. An example of an iron dog used with chains to float mahogany logs down river to be shipped out of Belize City, found in the lower Belize River Watershed (courtesy of the BREA project).

Tragically, almost exactly a year after the opening, the visitors' center where the temporary exhibit was housed burned down. All of the panels and the collection of artifacts on loan from the community that were in the vitrine were destroyed in the fire. It was a huge loss, particularly the artifacts which are irreplaceable. However, despite the loss of this tangible heritage, it also served as a reminder of how precious the intangible heritage is that remains preserved, including the oral histories of the Creole, who remain alive and well in the village and who are instrumental in reconstructing the local history.

3. Project Objectives

At the opening of the temporary exhibit, the first author spoke with the new Chairman of Crooked Tree Village. They both agreed that a future goal should be to build a permanent museum in the village, featuring the archaeology and deep history of this area, which includes the rich Creole history and cultural heritage. A year-long Public Humanities Fellowship from the Whiting Foundation and a grant from the Alphawood Foundation enabled the first author to initiate this project in 2017. Critical to the success of the museum project were a series of key collaborations, including those with the second author, Dr. Sara Clarke-Vivier, as well as the village council and community of Crooked Tree, and members of Belize's National Institute of Culture and History (NICH). These valuable

collaborations, described below, led to the building of the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center in the "old" Community Center, which was no longer being used, and was donated by the village council to serve as the museum.

Three overarching objectives guided the development of the public archaeology museum project:

1. *Collaboration* in archaeology and museum practice in partnering with local stakeholders;
2. *Sustainability* in the cultural content and physical structure of the museum exhibition; and
3. *Education* geared for local school-age children with exhibition content and displays that complement the national social studies curriculum.

Below, we describe our efforts throughout the process of the museum development to employ each of the three objectives outlined above. We begin with an overview discussion of postcolonial approaches to museum practice, specifically in the collaborative development of community museums "with, by and for" descendant communities [35]. In this case, the concern for Creole cultural sustainability expressed by the community shaped our approach to this heritage project, spawning new directions for the Crooked Tree Museum that ultimately impacted the outcome of the exhibition. In this paper, we discuss our focus on issues of collaboration and sustainability, and how education in this rural Creole community has been a central component of the museum development. We conclude by discussing future directions for the museum, which opened in June 2018, including a series of teacher workshop initiatives, involving collaborations with local teachers and other educators associated with the Belize National Institute of Culture and History (NICH). These workshop initiatives have continued to stress collaboration, sustainability, and education in the promotion of this community archaeology museum to school children throughout Belize.

4. Developing Community Archaeology Museums "with, by, and for" Descendant Communities

Building on an idea put forth by George Nicholas [36], Sonya Atalay [37] suggests that collaborative archaeology should be done "with, by, and for" descendant communities, in an effort to decolonize the practice of archaeology. She specifically advocates for greater scholarly partnerships with indigenous communities, calling for "research that is community-driven and that produces results relevant for the communities involved" [35] (p. 10). Carol McDavid [38] (p. 172) echoes these sentiments in her collaborative work with African American descendant communities, noting that such projects should "create new knowledge that is relevant to archaeologists and communities alike." These collaborations have involved archaeologists and a range of stakeholders, and include community participation and multivocal projects, which emphasize how archaeology can serve the needs and interests of local communities, with the goal of mutual empowerment [39] (pp. 164–166). The development of a community archaeology museum falls along this "collaborative continuum" [40]. Rather than a singular or uniform practice, this continuum involves "a range of strategies that seek to link the archaeological enterprise with different publics by working together." [ibid] (p. 1).

As Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton [41] (see Chapter 5) observe, heritage projects like community-based archaeology museums share many of the same concerns and issues as collaborative archaeology and the closely related field of community archaeology, where relationships with the community do not end at the "dig". The collaborative development of a community archaeology museum requires partnerships where power is shared between communities and the researchers in negotiating not only the cultural legacies depicted therein, but also in navigating the local, national, and international politics around heritage management, ownership, and reporting [42–46]. Therefore, an important first step in forming partnerships is to gain trust with the community and other stakeholders, to become familiar with the political landscape, and to devote the time to listening to and talking with a wide range of individuals, who may (or may not) support the project [43,45]. This form of one-on-one engagement with stakeholders fosters the kind of open dialogue in heritage discourse advocated by scholars such as Laurajane Smith [46]. Bonnie Clark and Audrey Horning [47] (p. 344) observe that, when dealing with multiple stakeholders and divergent perspectives, a successful

collaboration requires a genuine awareness and deep understanding of the local contexts, as well as mutual respect. "Beyond those two principles, there is no one-size-fits-all model" [ibid.] (p. 344).

Recent research on community museums in Central America and the Caribbean demonstrates the opportunities and challenges inherent in building public educational spaces that bridge the multiple needs of collaborating partners [42,48]. Community or "grassroots" museums cover topics that are of interest to local communities, and as such fill gaps in heritage education left by larger, mostly government-run museums, located principally in central urban areas [42]. Depictions of "culture" in local versus national museums may vary dramatically, and it is worth noting that national narratives about heritage, ethnicity, and culture are often influenced by larger patterns in national politics [18,44,49]. Nationalist agendas can perpetuate dominant historical narratives and can obscure subaltern histories and voices [41]. In response, scholars promoting multivocal, collaborative, and community-based projects in archaeology have advocated a "relational" approach, defined as "a turn toward decentering and flattening existing hierarchies—as a decolonization of knowledge production" [50] (p. 64). When applied as an approach to decolonization, "relationism" implies collective groups of disenfranchised people in a politically fragmented landscape becoming liberated through a process of democratization and "bridge-building" [50] (p. 65). However, a relational approach does not invariably suspend difference or asymmetry in power relations within these communities. Some scholars worry that relational approaches can risk obscuring inequalities or difference, and inhibit a full consideration of the range of political actors, both in the past and present [51–54].

In the context of contemporary heritage studies and museum practice, some scholars suggest that the academic's "quest" for democratization in knowledge production and participation may be a politically correct move, but it is not necessarily an elixir for dissolving political inequities and may, in fact, mask the continued unequal distribution of power that actually exists in reality for certain groups [55]. Applying collaborative approaches and other participatory design practices in the development of community museum content can provide opportunities for a more inclusive heritage story, but these practices can also be exclusive depending on who is identified as being a part of that "community" [42]. Scholars, like Agbe-Davies [56], encourage practitioners engaged in community work to be more aware of the "non-homogeneity" of communities [45], and to be more self-reflexive, taking into account their own roles as participants in the communities where they work. "It is when we—particularly by virtue of our shared interests, locale, and social interactions—participate in the making of 'communities' that our discipline's work most effectively 'serves' them" [56] (p. 385). Anne Pyburn [57] comes to a similar conclusion in her discussion of "lessons learned" from her own community-based work in Crooked Tree Village. Heritage-oriented archaeology projects that foster local investment are most effective when archaeologists not only align their research interests with those of the community, but help to solve pressing issues that the community (not just the archaeologist) identifies as important [57] (pp. 235–238).

Many collaborative community-based projects involve working closely with "descendant communities." According to McDavid and Brock [39] (p. 161), these communities are a "self-defined group of people in the present that link themselves—socially, politically, and economically—to a group of people in the past." However, descendant communities may not all self-identify or relate to the past in the same way. In the case of Belize, the Creole are considered a "descendant community" who are neither African nor European, but are a mix of these two ancestries "born" in the New World. While Creole identity in Belize is often linked to the history of British logging and African enslavement, how Creole people define themselves as a descendant community in this former British colony has varied over time, and was particularly obfuscated during post-emancipation society of the nineteenth century [58] (p. 26). As Assad Shoman [59] observed, the rejection of African identity and heritage was essential during post-emancipation for the enslaved and their descendants. This was imperative if "they wanted to be included in the world from which they were being excluded, the world where decisions were made and where there was greater access to material goods. The struggle for freedom was one for integration, not separation, although a space for the exercise of some cultural autonomy

was still sought. This tension, then, this quest for inclusion, and at the same time for the freedom to be different, is what most characterizes the evolution of Creole culture" [59] (p. 127).

In Crooked Tree, it became clear to us through conversations with community members that some people connected with their African ancestry (mostly younger people), but others (mostly older adults) were brought up to reject this heritage in favor of their European ancestry. The national social studies curriculum has sought to provide education that addresses the tensions between Belize's mixed African and European identities, while minimizing the "colonial legacies of dividedness" [60] (p. 70). This tension between pan- and multi-ethnic identity narratives was also apparent in early attempts to develop a Belizean national museum at the time of independence [49]. Trying to define a singular pan-Creole identity, both today and in the past, appears as fraught as trying to apply a pan-Maya identity in this region [5,50] (see Chapter 6). These descendant communities are far from homogenous ethnic groups [7] (pp. 229–230 for a Maya example). When Belize was a former colony, Johnson [61] (p. 25) notes: "the British racialized Maya as an ultimate 'other.' Yet, there was also intermingling between Maya and the English and African descended people who lived here. Many Belizean Creole people today can identify a Maya person in their ancestry, and the foods people in rural Belize eat and plant-based medicines they use have traces of Maya influence."

Treating ethnicities like Creole, Maya, Garifuna, Mestizo, and others in strict isolation belies the 'mixed' ethnicity that characterizes the lived identity of many Belizeans [62,63]. This lived experience impacted the overall narrative for the Crooked Tree community archaeology museum, which centers around the history of human–environment interaction through time and presents identities of place, rather than just isolated identities without context. These place-based historical narratives on display in the museum capture the cultural and archaeological stories that have shaped past and present communities living in the lower Belize River Watershed. The exhibition highlights themes such as the use of natural resources, foods, and transportation for those who have inhabited this particular landscape over the years. This approach is similar to other contemporary heritage projects involving archaeologists and descendant communities in the Maya region of Yucatán, Mexico [3,5,64]. Here, scholars describe this approach as *relational*, but define this collectivist perspective in terms of those who dwell in the same landscape and share ways of being and doing in their community [5] ([65], p. 362).

In describing the Afro-Caribbean Creole culture in Belize, Johnson [61] illustrates the history of rural Creole identity as entangled with the landscape and waterways of the lower Belize River Watershed. She describes 400 years of identity-making that is not static, but always in a process of becoming through ongoing human and "more than human" relations in-the-world [61]. While Johnson's observations are based primarily on ethnographic and ethnohistoric data, the power of archaeology in articulating the history of the African diaspora, and the role of descendant communities in identity-making and knowledge production, has also been made clear, particularly among scholars and stakeholders of African American archaeology in the U.S. [43], ([66], p. 590). In Belize, the power of archaeology and oral history for the Creole people is starting to emerge and be featured in museum work, albeit on a much more limited scale than in the U.S. In 2016, for instance, NICH and its national Museum of Belize (MOB) developed the exhibition "enSlaved: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in Belize", which focuses on the material culture of the British colonial period, the Afro-Caribbean diaspora and history of enslavement, and the African roots of Creole culture. In addition, NICH's House of Culture in Belize City is part of the so-called Downtown Rejuvenation Project designed to feature the Creole and British colonial heritage of Belize City. The ongoing project involves the renovation of the Governor's House and other historical places in downtown Belize City, which will be turned into public museum space. The "enSlaved" exhibition may be permanently housed in one of the renovated buildings, and there are plans to develop an expanded display featuring Belize's colonial history.

5. Development of a Creole Community Archaeology Museum in Crooked Tree

In the case of the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center, the permanent exhibition presents the archaeological history of the Belize River Watershed—from Paleoindian times onward—but the primary focus of the exhibition is a rural perspective of the Creole and their European and Afro-Caribbean diasporic history. Below, we discuss how cultural sustainability, collaborative partnerships, and the role of education have shaped this heritage-oriented project. This collaborative effort involved a range of stakeholders—from local members of the Crooked Tree community, such as builders and craftspeople—to national entities, such as various governmental bodies of NICH, including the MOB and the Institute of Archaeology (IA). Working with local teachers, we produced exhibit content that augments the national social studies curriculum. By designing a learning space geared for school-age children, the archaeology museum in Crooked Tree offers object-based learning and provides a powerful means of promoting cultural sustainability, strengthening cultural vitality, and presenting a more inclusive consideration of Belizean history and cultural heritage practices and perspectives.

5.1. Collaboration

With a public-facing project like a community museum, it is imperative for a scholar to seek the public's input and collaboration in the project from the outset, not after the fact. However, because all communities are composed of variable members, we should not assume that all stakeholders would want to participate in the same way throughout the course of a heritage project [67]. Given the variability in the community of Crooked Tree, members brought different interests, expertise, and applied skills to various components of this heritage-oriented project. As partners throughout this process, we met and communicated regularly with our core collaborators, which included the Crooked Tree Village Council, to seek their input and direction on the proposed museum project, and with teachers, who offered their feedback on the primary themes of the exhibition. We also worked one-on-one with locals who are trained excavators, and who have spent many field seasons working on the BREA project conducting archaeological investigations in and around Crooked Tree (see further below). For us to connect with the wider community, this required a diverse means of engaging with the public, which ranged from open archaeology days to community meetings and public forums to interviews (formal and informal conversations) with local participants and collaborators at different stages of the project.

Our starting point was asking community members what it was they wanted to learn more about in terms of their own history, and how it was that we could help them to achieve this. Engaging in this way allowed for key collaborators to be established, namely people who were engaged and excited to participate in the project. Advocates of community museums suggest that these spaces "should exhibit those materials that are deemed the most important archaeological components for community groups to engage with in order to understand their own history" [68] (p. 209). The ancient Maya history is featured in the Crooked Tree exhibition, but the most important archaeological components for the community was their own Creole history, which occupies the majority of the 1500 sq. ft museum space. For us to develop this museum content, it was imperative that we sought the input and collaboration of the local community as our starting point, because they served as both informants and active participants in the collection, recording, and presentation of their own history. When asked where the oldest historical settlement in the village was located, multiple individuals pointed us to the grounds of the Baptist Church located in the center of Crooked Tree village. With the permission from the church and local officials, the BREA team and local excavators from Crooked Tree village spent a field season in January 2018, performing a series of shovel test pits and test excavations throughout the churchyard. Our investigations yielded a rich assemblage of historical artifacts from the nineteenth century [28]. The oral histories that directed BREA's historical excavations in Crooked Tree were instrumental in helping us to better understand this rich Creole historical settlement area, which is featured in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center (Figure 3). The artifacts recovered from our excavations are displayed in the museum, alongside numerous historical objects that were

donated by local community members, which also serve to inform our historical reconstructions (see further below).

(**a**)

(**b**)

(**c**)

(**d**)

Figure 3. (**a**) BREA historical excavations at the Baptist Church (formerly a church and school) in Crooked Tree; (**b**,**c**) BREA staff discussing the historical excavations with an elder who shared their experience attending school here in the early 20th century; (**d**). historical artifacts donated by community members and from BREA excavations on display in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center. Note the metal cross from the excavations curated and on display (photos courtesy of the BREA project).

The community was also invested and involved in other steps of the project, including the architectural redesign of the museum building that was done by a local architect and the building renovation, which was carried out by local contractors living in the village (Figure 4). Hiring local residents to design and overhaul the museum building offered economic benefits to professionals living in the community. To avoid any intra-community conflict, we worked with the village council and made a joint decision to hire a trusted and respected professional architect, who lives in the community and owns his own business in Belize City, to oversee the bidding and construction project itself. Together, we reviewed his architectural plans at a public community meeting and announced a contract bidding process for the project. Having this individual oversee the renovation was one of the best decisions that we made, and having local builders (although not without its challenges)

had many unexpected benefits. They had more personal investment and pride in their renovation of the community museum; they not only worked around the clock to have the museum ready for the opening, but members of the construction crew donated historical pieces to the collection, offered their input in the content of the exhibition, and were thrilled to share the museum with their friends and family at the opening.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 4. The renovation of the museum space in Crooked Tree during 2018: (**a**) Eleanor Harrison-Buck and Sara Clarke-Vivier in the space during January 2018 prior to renovation; (**b**) Eleanor Harrison-Buck with the village chairman and architect from Crooked Tree discussing the building design; (**c**) before and after shots of the building exterior; (**d**) Local contractors working on the building renovations.

These various kinds of collaborations and partnerships require trusting relationships [69]. In places like Belize, where the colonial roots of archaeology are not long dead, and the majority of archaeologists are foreigners of Euro-American descent, there is deep seated mistrust that is difficult to overcome,

because of a long line of archaeologists, not all of whom developed trusting relationships with local communities. Rumors regularly circulate about past archaeological expeditions that involved tomb excavations where workmen were sent away and artifacts were taken out of the country to the U.S., Canada, or some other distant location, never to be returned again. Whether these rumors are true or not, archaeology's connection to a long line of colonial oppression is undeniable and, as a result, these relationships have been damaged and the mistrust is not easily overcome. We found that transparency throughout the process was critical and that public community meetings could facilitate more open dialogue where some rumors could be addressed like: "Are you or are you *not* CIA?" The community member who asked this question at our very first community meeting ultimately became our lead contractor on the project! We laughed about his question a year later, but the deep seated mistrust that exists is real and there is no quick and simple way to overcome it. As he noted at the end of that first meeting: "we just need to get to know you." To develop mutually trusting relationships takes time, a lot of listening, and a great deal of face-to-face communication, but these partnerships are crucial for a community-based collaborative project to be successful.

5.2. Sustainability

The term sustainability is used here in several different ways. First, we employ the term in the sense of cultural sustainability, defined as preserving cultural heritage for present and future generations [70]. The concept of sustainability is also employed here from the perspective of implementing sustainable strategies in the development and design of an exhibition space. The renovation and reuse of an abandoned building could also be construed as an act of sustainable development, reviving a central area of the community and potentially "[enhancing] environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability" [71] (p. 74). The principles of cultural sustainability share many of the same values as collaborative heritage-oriented archaeology, including moral and ethical considerations, the concept of stewardship, social equity, and community collaboration, paying particular attention to descendant communities whose cultural traditions are being threatened by an increasingly homogenized and globalized world [2].

In the context of a community archaeology museum, cultural sustainability centers around "the need for the protection of cultural heritage and the strengthening of cultural vitality" [72] (p. 191). This definition of cultural sustainability captures the tension manifest in cultural heritage. While, on the one hand, it appears to be a static and finite resource in need of preservation and protection, on the other hand, cultural heritage is a vibrant resource, constantly being contextualized and reimagined among present-day communities. The display of artifacts and panels in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center help to preserve and protect cultural heritage, and, at the same time, provide cues for remembering and commemorating, which are "fundamental to many people's sense of 'heritage'" [46] (pp. 213–216) and can serve to strengthen a community's sense of cultural vitality. In our many conversations with community members, elders in the village consistently tell us that the kids who grow up in Crooked Tree today have no idea what life used to be like and how hard things were 40 or 50 years ago, reinforcing that Creole cultural sustainability is a pressing concern for them and that there is a need to remember and commemorate the past to not only preserve and protect the cultural heritage but to strengthen Creole cultural vitality in the community.

The loss of first-hand knowledge about former Creole traditions and the generational disconnect about heritage practices guided the development of the community archaeology museum in Crooked Tree. We planned the museum so that a large section was devoted to the rich colonial history of the lower Belize River Watershed and featured Creole traditions that have not been practiced regularly in the village for the last 40 or 50 years or more. Villagers shared with us their knowledge of traditional Creole practices and ways of life from "those days." For instance, one elder female in the village shared with us how they used to process the arrowroot plant (*Maranta arundinacea*) into a starch, which was used in ironing clothing up until as late as the mid-twentieth century. The starch processing is featured in one of the exhibits in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center, along with

several "old fashion" irons used for this purpose. Another example entails fishing and bird hunting practices regularly used 40 or 50 years ago, which were recorded by a senior male member of the community, who also constructed replicas for the museum of a traditional fish pot and *calaban* trap used for catching birds. The material culture and information provided through oral histories from community members were instrumental in reconstructing these traditional Creole practices, which are featured in the museum displays (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Example of a display in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center showing the traditional processing of arrowroot (*M. arundinacea*) into starch used for ironing clothing.

In addition to stressing cultural sustainability in the development of museum content, we were challenged to design an exhibition that was also structurally sustainable. The first thing that you learn when you work in Belize is that Murphy's Law *always* applies (if it can break, it will). Therefore, we aimed to develop an engaging, but low-tech exhibition, which is accessible to a diverse audience. While "high tech" designs are compelling alternatives for most contemporary museums, simple and relatively "low maintenance" exhibitions are preferred in developing countries like Belize. As one might imagine, without climate control, sustaining technology in this wet tropical environment is almost impossible. We also had an educational rationale for limiting technology use in the museum—the unfamiliarity of visitors with how to use technology, specifically as a tool for learning and teaching. Even the most prominent public schools in urban areas of Belize that have access to computers and the internet generally do not integrate technology into the delivery of the daily curriculum.

The challenge we faced was developing engaging and interactive exhibits with no digital technology—low tech, but engaging exhibits that incorporate material culture (artifacts) as well as

replicas with which visitors (namely school kids) could interact. Some examples include a dugout dory produced by a local Creole craftsman from Crooked Tree (Figure 6). Children are able to sit in the canoe and hold a paddle and imagine themselves paddling the three days it took (one-way) to reach Belize City.

Figure 6. A local craftsman from Crooked Tree builds a dugout canoe from a single tree trunk (**above**). A child sits in the dugout dory on display in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center and pretends to paddle down the Belize River (**below**).

Another interactive display is a heavy mortar (*mata*) and pestle for pounding rice and other materials. The reproduction of the *mata* was made by an older member of the Crooked Tree community. Kids are able to pick up the heavy pounding stick and feel the weight of the action, gaining a better appreciation for the hard work in the past required of their ancestors. In several instances, we also have 3-D models on display, which was one means of safely displaying ancient Maya artifacts, such as jades and pottery, without the concern for heightened security. In one instance, we mounted a 3-D model of a polychrome painted ceramic pot on a rotating "lazy Susan" that allows visitors to spin the piece and look at all sides (Figure 7). Our goal is for visitors to not only look at and read about the local history, but where possible have them actively engage with it. This kind of objects-based, experiential education has been shown to have the most lasting impact and greatest learning gains (as described further below).

Figure 7. A replica of an ancient Maya vase on display in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center (photo courtesy of Yoshinori Wakabayashi).

While we kept the exhibits low tech, we made the museum more widely accessible through the use of technology by creating a virtual tour available online (Figure 8). Dr. Clarke-Vivier and her students and colleagues used widely available and low-cost tools to take high-quality digital images of the museum objects, as well as 360-degree photographs of the museum space. These efforts yielded a museum virtual tour, making the story of human–environment interaction in the lower Belize River Watershed accessible to individuals who may not otherwise be able to visit the area, as well as to educators who may use a virtual experience to prepare students for, or extend onto, an in-person visit to the museum. The object photographs and associated meta-data tagging also make it possible to build a searchable online database, accessible to other researchers from around the world with an interest in Maya and Creole history and culture of the lower Belize River Watershed. The use of technology for a virtual tour enhances the sustainability of the mission of the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center by granting increased access and flexible use of the exhibit content to audiences, beyond those who are likely to be able to enter the museum itself, and by building these digital technologies upon a robust, high-quality collection of digitized images, which could exist in perpetuity in the virtual world. The utility of these virtual resources has only increased as museums pivot toward virtual tours and other online offerings, to provide access to collection content while their doors remain closed during the COVID-19 pandemic [73].
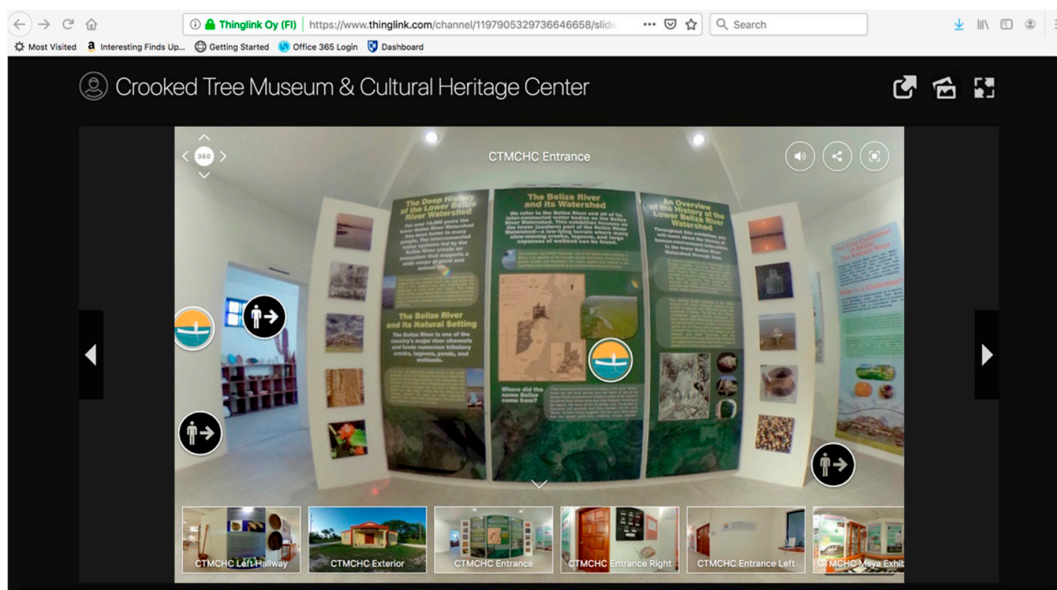
Figure 8. Virtual Tour of the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center (https://www.thinglink.com/video/1235694926616854534).

5.3. Education

One of our efforts to promote the long-term sustainability of the museum has involved an ongoing collaboration with teachers and other professional educators in Belize. Early in the planning stages for the museum, we established the goal of developing engaging exhibits linked to educational content specifically geared for local teachers and school-age children. Although we anticipated that tourists would visit the museum, Belizean school children and teachers are the primary target audience (Figure 9). In developing content for the exhibitions, we worked with the local teachers at the Crooked Tree Government School through interviews, observation, curriculum study, focus groups, and surveys, in order to leverage their expertise in both the national curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge for history and social studies. We also worked with museum educators in local and national Houses of Culture, to learn how other informal learning environments were addressing school-based learning, field trips, national curriculum connections, and teacher professional development.

First, our research with teachers explored relevant themes in their existing national social studies curriculum for Standard I-V (2nd through 6th grade). Not surprisingly, under British rule, the education in Belize did not highlight the history of African slavery. Even today, while West African history and culture are introduced, Creole history and culture make up only small components of the social studies curriculum. We found that teachers were eager to see this content featured in the museum, so that they could address these understudied issues head on with their students. In response to teacher desires, we designed exhibit displays that augment the existing curriculum where children ages 8–12 are introduced to topics that directly relate to Creole history, including the history of slavery, British colonialism, and the logging industries, and the rich African heritage found in contemporary Creole culture and language (Figure 10).

Figure 9. A local school group visiting the Museum of Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center.

Second, we explored teaching methods and pedagogical content knowledge amongst our collaborators. Pedagogical content knowledge is the way that skilled teachers integrate subject-area expertise and teaching strategies to improve instructional efficacy and student outcomes in different content areas [74]. One of the challenges for us was learning how Belizean teachers approach teaching and how it differs from practices in the US. The educators with whom we worked were experts at the content of the national curriculum, but were less familiar with developing the kind of hands-on, object-based or applied learning experiences found in museum settings.

This is due in part to the fact that there are only a select few museums in Belize (there is only one national museum in Belize City, the MOB, which opened in 2002). Additionally, expectations of teachers are to provide clearly documented lesson plans focused on knowledge acquisition geared toward student preparation for national exams. These challenges are not just experienced by educators in Crooked Tree alone, but reflect what Brown-Lopez [75] (p. 5) characterizes as the "19th century paradigm" that underwrites the entire Belizean educational system. This paradigm, rooted in British colonialism, privileges rote memorization of facts over the acquisition of flexible and functional skills geared towards individual and civic development [75]. Despite these constraints, the educators with whom we collaborated understood the value of the kind of experiential learning that characterizes museum-based education. They were particularly enthusiastic to learn how to integrate hands-on and object-based instruction into their existing lessons and field trips.

Figure 10. A school group engaging with the Creole material culture (traditional mahogany bowls used for kneading bread) on display in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center.

Our work with educators made it clear to us that the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center could serve as a valuable space for teacher training and student learning in museum-based education. To that end, we have been working to develop educational materials in collaboration with local teachers and students at our universities that correspond with the museum's curricular themes and map on to the existing Belizean national curriculum standards. To tailor museum pedagogy to meet the teaching needs for the Belizean social studies curriculum, we organized our first teacher workshop and educational training during the summer of 2019 (Figure 11). The workshop, which we were able

to get accredited with the National Ministry of Education, was a collaborative effort with educators from NICH's Banquitas House of Culture. Our aim with this and future workshops is to encourage local teachers to integrate the exhibition and curriculum design into their classroom curricula, and to help teachers to think about new ways to teach students that encourage student-centered teaching and hands-on active learning. Our plan is to continue to offer future workshops that will engage local teachers in Crooked Tree and other nearby Creole villages, as well as teachers in training at the two main universities in Belize (Galen and the University of Belize).

(**a**)

(**b**)

(**c**)

Figure 11. Teacher's Workshop in summer 2019, including (**a**) group shot of all participants; (**b**) Cindey Rivero (left), the Director of Banquitas House of Culture, and (**c**) Sara Clarke-Vivier (right), Director of Museum Education for the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center.

6. Discussion

Ah waahn noa hoo seh Kriol noh ga no kolcha!....

[*I want to know who says Creoles have no culture!....*]

Ah waahn noa hoo seh Kriol noh ga no hischri!....

[*I want to know who says Creoles have no history!....*]

Leela Vernon [76]

The lyrics to this song from the album *Kriol Kolcha* by Leela Vernon, a Belizean singer and Creole cultural icon, challenge a common belief that Creole people lack any sort of culture or history worth recording or learning about. The school children of the Crooked Tree Government School chose this song for a dance they performed for the Opening Ceremony of the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center in June 2018. Leela Vernon's song, like the museum in Crooked Tree, celebrates the complexity of Creole identity and its rich history born in the lower Belize River Watershed, with its blended roots stemming from Europe, West Africa, and the wider Caribbean.

The museum in Crooked Tree is an ongoing collaborative effort aimed at documenting this diasporic history, and addressing Creole concerns regarding cultural loss, as numerous villages along the lower Belize River Watershed have been abandoned, and their own community has undergone increasingly rapid changes over the last several decades. In our many conversations with members of the Crooked Tree community, people regularly noted to us that modern developments, such as better roads, electricity, and introductions like air conditioning and cell phones have brought convenience and made life easier in the village. However, they also lamented that these modern introductions fundamentally changed daily life and profoundly impacted traditional culture and heritage practices. As Paul Shackel [2] (p. 10) notes, heritage-oriented archaeology aims to address concerns of cultural loss "by sustaining local identity and a sense of place, especially for those communities and locales that are threatened by transformations in the global economy." For Crooked Tree, the community museum presents an historical narrative of identities entangled with the environment of the lower Belize River Watershed. Creating space for heritage can "have a value to well-being and quality of life [for] communities, can help mitigate the impacts of cultural globalization and can become an incentive for sustainable development" [71] (p. 74).

As one of the oldest Creole communities in the country, Crooked Tree holds a valuable repository of archaeology and oral history, and its villagers are interested in seeing this rich cultural heritage documented and shared with the public, namely school-age children, many of whom have lost touch with their history and cultural heritage practices. The Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center protects and preserves a diversity of historical resources and cultural practices and in this way works toward the goal of a 'sustainable historic environment' [70]. The displays of artifacts that fill the Crooked Tree Museum promote and preserve the rich cultural assets of the community's heritage, but it is the remembering and commemorating triggered by the artifacts that serve to strengthen the community's cultural vitality. By combining archaeology with museum education geared for school-age children, the Crooked Tree Museum provides a powerful means of promoting cultural sustainability that effectively strengthens Creole cultural vitality, offering a more inclusive consideration of Belizean history and cultural heritage practices and perspectives.

7. Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions

In heritage-oriented archaeology projects, collaboration cannot happen after the fact, and it is never peripheral to the work; it is the work. Doing it well requires developing diverse means of engaging with multiple stakeholders throughout the process, and revisiting and maintaining those relationships as the project unfolds. Scholars interested in doing heritage-oriented archaeology work are most effective when they are doing work and helping to solve a problem that matters to the community. Engaging in this way allows for lasting collaborations to be established, namely with people who are enthusiastic about the project and invested in its long-term success. In the case of

the Crooked Tree museum, members of the local community were involved each and every step of the way and participated in different capacities—from sharing oral histories and assisting us in excavations, to providing their skills in architectural design and renovation, to helping make pieces for the museum and donating historical objects for the museum collection. There is no doubt that the long-term success of the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center is contingent on this continued collaboration, support, and active participation both now and in the future.

A key collaboration we formed was with local teachers in the public school in Crooked Tree, as well as with branches of the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH). The goals of our educational work were to develop museum content that enriched and extended the Belizean social studies curriculum, and to support teachers as they learned new pedagogical strategies for integrating object-centered and museum-based learning in their instructional plans. It was clear from the beginning that building a museum in Crooked Tree that was geared for public schools across Belize and managed by the community's village council would provide a more sustainable model than building a museum with high recurring overhead costs that was dependent on tourist dollars to survive. The precarious relationship between tourism income and museum sustainability has been brought into sharp relief by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Museums around the world are facing the challenging reality that, without tourist income, they will be forced to close their doors [77].

Among the biggest challenges moving forward is how to maintain a thriving community-oriented learning space over the long-term. This was the impetus for the teacher's workshop we organized in collaboration with the educators from NICH's Banquitas House of Culture in June 2019. Together, we developed a workshop that introduced local educators to the resources of the museum, and familiarized them with the value of out-of-school experiential learning in a museum setting. The aim of this and future workshops is to help local teachers organize fieldtrips with a lesson plan that connects the national social studies curriculum for their standard and discipline to the collections in the Crooked Tree Museum and Cultural Heritage Center. Our ultimate measure of success is when museum education and Belize's rich history reaches not just thousands of international tourists, but the next generation of Belizeans.

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