

Don Elijio Panti 1893-1996.

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Don Elijio Panti, distinguished Maya healer from Belize, passed away on February 4, 1996 at the age of 103. Don Elijio was heir to generations of knowledge about traditional healing and spent his life in service to others. He was recognized throughout the Americas for his skills in using the simple but ancient system of Maya healing, employing plants, prayers, massage, acupuncture, and herbal baths. Beginning in 1931 he practiced his art of healing in San Antonio, a village of Mopan and Yucatecan Maya people. Don Elijio Panti was trained in the forests of the Peten, Guatemala, by a Cadbe Indian, Jerominø Requena, when they were both employed as chicleros or collectors of the Sapodilla tree sap that is made into chewing gum. Although he could never read or write, alongside his teacher, Don Elijio enthusiastically learned about Maya medicine.

His work took on international importance in the mid 1980s, as he began participation in a collaborative project of the Ix Chel Tropical Research Foundation and The New York Botanical Garden. This project was an effort to survey the forests of Belize for the collection of medicinal plants for screening against AIDS and cancer in association with the U.S. National Cancer Institute (NCI). Don Elijio participated in a great deal of field work. His knowledge resulted in the collection of hundreds of plant samples for this important endeavor. Even now plants collected through Don Elijio's knowledge and collaboration are being evaluated for their use in contemporary medicine.

In recognition of his many international contributions, he was awarded the "Distinguished Citizen Award" (University College of Belize), "Most Valuable Senior Citizen" (Help Age Belize), "Distinguished Contribution to Science" (The New York Botanical Garden), and Member of the British Empire" (her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of England).

Don Elijio's work and his life story were immortalized in two books, *Rainforest Remedies: One Hundred Healing Herbs of Belize* (1993), and *Sastun: My Apprenticeship With A Maya Healer* (1994). Through these published works, as well as through the many films and videos in which he was featured, Don Elijio's work has touched millions of people around the world and will continue to do so for a very long time to come.

I was introduced to Don Elijio Panti in 1987, after an invitation from Rosita Arvigo to visit Ix Chel. Since that time, I have made periodic visits to San Antonio to work with Rosita, Greg Shropshire, and Don Elijio in collecting the plants for colleagues at NCI, and co-authoring the scientific papers and books that report on those endeavors.

It has been a great honor to have been one of the lucky few to work with Don Elijio Panti. He was always ready to tell us stories about plants that would delight and inspire us, to share his life's experiences with those who would listen, and to offer words of encouragement. Because of his unselfish sharing, his work, his healing and, indeed, his life, he will forever be present with us. Thus, it is with great sadness that we mourn Don Elijio's passing, but it is with great joy that we celebrate his life and its many decades of service to his family, his neighbors in San Antonio Village, his countrypeople in Belize, the many people from around Central America, as well as the many people around the world whom he was able to help. Rarely in history has there been anyone as gifted, as selfless, and as giving as Don Elijio Panti. With these words I bid farewell to my teacher, to my friend, and to my colleague. Hasta luego, Abuelo. (Goodbye, Grandfather.)

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