

GUATEMALA, THE INDIAN AND THE LAND*

Joaquín Noval

To the south of Mexico, framed by two isthmus and two seas and linked by the Tropic belt, extends the country of Guatemala. Its territory is small — just a little more than one hundred and thirty thousand square kilometers — and its configuration is so strange that sometimes the term north seems to us a meaningless reference, but its geography is impressive: mountains with steep flanks and sharp ridges, volcanoes that occasionally shake the landscape, fast rivers that become noisy in the maritime plain, deep ravines and interspersed lakes whose stillness is broken in the afternoon by impatient winds. Whoever leaves the coasts and the cities behind and goes far enough into the mountains will be able to see how the mountain valleys, velvety and green, become a nest to house the small villages of the children of the Mayans.

Just over three million people live within this panorama today: all of them are Guatemalans. However, the contrast of their customs is obvious. On one side are the inhabitants of the cities, the smallest segment, whose life takes place within the framework of non-Indian customs usually called Ladinas. Then there is the population that lives in the rural villages and in the fields, participating in the Ladino customs to a much greater extent than in the Indian ones. Finally, there is the indigenous ethnic group, composed of a little more than half of Guatemalans.

* Taken from *Revista Américas*, Washington, D. C. 6 (4) 1954, pp. 3-7.

The population of Western culture is concentrated in the cities and that of rural Ladino culture is mainly grouped in the eastern towns and in the flat lands of the Pacific. The indigenous population reaches its highest density in the regions that we usually designate with the name of western altiplano and Alta Verapaz. But it is difficult to find a village without indigenous people and probably there are none without a few ladinos.

The descendants of the first settlers of Guatemala and the heirs of the men who, in 1524, brought the seed of a different culture are integrated today in different ways, but they do not form a society. We can consider an indigenous population of Guatemala as a society and all indigenous populations as a loose class of society.

With the exception of the Caribs of the Atlantic coast, all the indigenous regions of Guatemala are included within a single cultural area. Their general scheme of customs, despite local variations and mutual dependence, helps to consider them as a whole compared to the non-indigenous conglomerate of the country, the anthropologist Richard N. Adams tells us that the Ladino generally syndicates the Indian as stupid, as a person who lives like an animal and neither desires nor deserves the advantages of Western civilization. On the other hand, the Indian judges the Ladino as an unscrupulous person, who threatens his way of life, clumsy about country things, safe from evil spirits and therefore suspected of being in league with them. It is likely that an indigenous person who changes his customs and, more easily, when he gets rich, moves from the indigenous society to the Ladino one. But it would be extremely difficult for a Ladino to enter an indigenous society.

Professor Sol Tax has said that two different economic systems coexist in Guatemala. In the altiplano, the system of production, distribution and consumption of goods is virtually independent, both from remote farms, as well as from importing and exporting houses and banks in Guatemala City. This is the economy of the indigenous people; the other is the national and international economy of Guatemala, that is, the upper-class economy.

An important aspect in the relationship between indigenous people and Ladinos is the one that refers to coffee production, something very important for Guatemala. The owners of the plantations, as well as the exporters and importers, move within the upper-class economy. But coffee keeps its market open based on quality and good taste, which requires, in addition to a certain rigor in the way it is processed, that the bean is cut just in time.

As the procedure for grain harvesting is slow and exclusively manual, it requires a large number of braceros; it is here that the regional economy gives its fundamental support to the international economy. However, the benefit that the indigenous person obtains is almost zero. It is possible that the overall amount of money that large coffee growers send to the regional economy, in terms of wages, is high. But this simply means that the number of workers is huge.

I have heard it said that the upper-class economy would inevitably die without the support provided by the regional economy; the latter, on the other hand, would suffer only in terms of iron ore agricultural tools, mainly hoes and machetes. Unfortunately, this situation is not verbalized by the indigenous people, nor do many Ladinos seem to understand it. It is possible that this is due to some of the insults that the indigenous has traditionally “suffered”.

The regional economy of the indigenous people is monetary. It receives money from the cities for sales of poultry, some meats, fruits, legumes, grains and other groceries; flowers, charcoal, firewood and a whole constellation of items from indigenous crafts. In addition, there is the salary received by agricultural labor. All this money moves within the regional economy and is also used to buy some items of domestic or foreign invoice. No indigenous community produces everything it consumes. Hence the great activity of the vast network of regional markets derives. Almost every community “specializes” in something: some in different areas of handicrafts, others in the production of agricultural surpluses for sale, others in the supply of labor and still others in the transportation and mobilization of other people's products.

Broadly speaking, the indigenous population of Guatemala is engaged in the following activities: agricultural work, non-agricultural or non-directly agricultural work; domestic service, family farming, family industry and small trade. The most important activities are agricultural work and family farming, which have traditionally merged into men without land or with very little land, who are the most. The *aparecerías* and similar ways of exploiting Guatemalan agriculture have taken hold there.

The family industry is very important for the indigenous, in some parts, because it is remunerative by itself; in others because there would be nothing else to do at certain times of the year.

Wasting time does not seem to be an Indian habit. There are many family industries such as rigging, ceramics, toys, silverware, wooden articles and furniture, some construction materials, etc.: but the importance of pottery and textiles (even from the point of view of the Ladino consumer) is undeniable. Perhaps there is not a single Guatemalan household where an Indian earthenware vessel or pot is not used, and perhaps there are very few without a woven woolen blanket in the highlands. Other indigenous fabrics adorn the houses of all the foreigners who have visited Guatemala, in addition to most of the Indian and Ladino houses in the country. Let no one suppose that indigenous handicrafts are a wonderful source of wealth. One of the looms in use is Spanish, from the time of the conquest; the other is even earlier. The pottery procedures do not seem to be fast enough, even within the manual. In one place in the extreme northwest, in order to process the salt, the earthen vessel used as a boiler has to be broken.

Earning a living is, of course, not the only activity of the Indian, like everyone else, he also takes care of beautifying it and squandering it a little. Like all societies, the indigenous also have a religious system. Some people say that ninety-nine out of every hundred Guatemalans are Catholics; others claim that all Indians are pagans. In reality, it seems that the indigenous populations have a religion that is neither "pagan" nor "true". A European religion of the sixteenth century and the Indian religion of the time came into contact. Inspiration? Arquebuses? Logical processes? It's not important. For one or more reasons, a system has emerged that every indigenous population has in force and in esteem today. Perhaps there is no basis for thinking that the son of the Maya derives less satisfaction from the exercise of his religion than anyone else does from the exercise of his. However, how difficult it is to agree on the right that everyone has! As soon as a discussion arises, we make our moral concepts intervene: we want to instill our morals in the Indian, but we cannot give him our way of life, The State, as a normative matter, recognizes complete freedom in matters of beliefs, but this is not enough to calm the indignation of some good people. I was once involved in a calm discussion with an honest pastor of souls who had come into conflict with some villagers from the shores of Lake Atitlan. They, in their village, expressed their beliefs in their own way, which the religious considered a "trope".

I begged him to be patient, trying to explain the diversity of directions that human has adopted. The conflict was not in the facts, but in the way of seeing them; history and geography were to blame; but the official point of view lost the peaceful battle, and I perhaps sacrificed a little of my unearthly right.

If anyone were to deduce from this incident that human intolerance is the norm, they would be profoundly mistaken. I do not know a single case of an Indian forcing a Ladino to believe in the Spirit of the Mountain, nor of indigenous people who suffer anger or resentment because the Ladino does not prostrate himself before his idols.

Scientists have observed that in several regions of the Mayan area, the political and religious systems of the indigenous people are intertwined. Charles Wagley describes the case of a village of the Cuchumatanes, where to get to the top of the hierarchy you have to go through all the religious and political posts first. Goubaud Carrera also spoke about customary law in certain populations, in which the indigenous mayor is the tribe's own justice of the peace, marital and other conflicts are resolved there by ways that Ladinos do not understand.

In a more frivolous aspect, there are the indigenous dances described by writers and scholars. Almost every Guatemalan who travels through the indigenous regions or lives in one of them, has something to say about these dances. If we ask any citizen who returns from watching an indigenous festival for his opinion, he will tell us more or less: "They dance for a long time, they drink, the dance must have something religious because it is connected with the feast of the saint of the people; certain costumes are very bizarre but the stockings are somewhat ugly, some dance masks are magnificent... anyway, I think dancing is useless, but it amuses me and amuses people." What would a citizen's compliment say if a social scientist asked him the little question about the tie? Is it any use to you? Does it amuse you?

In general, the Indian does not behave differently at parties than the Ladino. He sells, buys, has a little fun, gets a little drunk and denies something from those who scam him. If he is regularly religious and the priest does not reside in the village, he will cooperate to be invited. If you are a member of one of the brotherhoods or groups that intervene in the management, you will feel very satisfied to leave the milpa for a while, although I am afraid that there will also be a few who, as in the Ladino villages, live fleeing from being included in the "committee for such and such a thing".

Much could be said about the indigenous people of Guatemala; about their past, whose study drew from Morley a beautifully measured admiration, or about their present, in which about twenty languages and a hundred (maybe two hundred) dialects are spoken.

But the important thing is that the Indian has his environment, his materials and his techniques; his social organization, his political and religious structure; his way of thinking, believing and seeing the world. His life takes place within this vast context and it is precisely this that separates the Indian, as a people, from any other people. Of course, Indian traditions differ from the “Moderna” ones of Guatemala. On the other hand, there is something that unites them; all Guatemalans are elements of a single State. Perhaps this has made the situation to be considered from a single point of view: the Western point of view, in whose hands trade, plantations and the government have always been.

It is not up to us to decide whether the Indian cultural tradition is good or bad, but we do have the right to say that it is less productive, less efficient and less healthy than the country needs to print a certain rhythm to its progress, From this point of view, the Indian is undoubtedly a problem.

There are an infinite number of ways to approach this issue. The nicest one is to deny it: less than five decades ago the problem was officially solved in Guatemala. Then come the modern apostles who usually do not get beyond self-conviction: those who start the discussion by proclaiming that they are brothers of the Indian, “but.Moderna...”; those who are going to “socially organize the community” as if there could be a railway station without track distribution! Those who want to frame the Indian right now within a modern cooperative, simply because they say that he sows his Moderna milpa by giving and asking for a hand from the neighbor. In addition, there are those who would like to perform collective surgery on Indian men; those who would like to distribute early indications in quotas for the white.

All the above formulas have a common denominator: they reduce the problem to Indian terms, according to these ways of reasoning, the Indian is the only backward one and he is precisely because he is Indian; Guatemala is not a backward country and, if it were, this would be due exclusively to the Indian, as if he had conquered the Spaniard and had assumed the leadership of the country for four centuries.

Now a theoretical counterpart of all the above has come into action. The ideas of our Revolution do not see the Indian as a thing apart from the rhythm of the country. The Indian is backward and the Ladino is backward, although in other respects; as a consequence, the whole of Guatemala is backward.

It is significant to note that the Political Constitution of 1945 does not establish specific rules for Indians or Ladinos. But if we were to put the Indian on "reservations," we would undoubtedly have to spend our lives guarding the fences. According to the 1950 census, the indigenous people of Guatemala numbered 1,411,725 and constituted 53.5 percent of the total population; in 1893 the figure amounted to 882,733 and 64.7 percent.

Under the impulse of the Revolution the country begins to structure itself. Laws and regulations, practical applications and administrative constructions, have always been made and are being made today. But in the past the thesis was simply to maintain the situation, while in the present it is to overcome it. In this sense, we can say that the State has taken on the indigenous issue not as something ideally isolated, but within the total context of Guatemalan self-improvement. All this is new and moves the whole of Guatemala.

The Guatemalan Revolution is not satisfied with the Indian living the way he lives; mainly it accuses him of not consuming enough. In addition, he discusses his right to continue dying of typhus, when he could equally well die later in a plane crash or in any other way, he also denies his traditional right to not have land. And this is a very serious thing. These new trends affect not only the way of life of the Indian, but also the general system of production. It is therefore natural that they arouse diverse and conflicting opinions.

The event that will undoubtedly affect the indigenous most profoundly will be the agrarian reform. This is a general measure, but no one is unaware that the Indian is the great sharecropper of Guatemala. Agrarian reform, in short, is a mechanism by means of which the Nation can buy from the individual owner his uncultivated lands that exceed a certain extension, or the lands that he gives to the worker-peasant in compensation of salary, or to the peasant under certain conditions of sharecropping. Although the term "buying" is real, it seems to the landowner who sells land to the Nation that it is not as quickly remunerative as it should be. However, if Erskine Caldwell, the author of **Some American People**, had he come to see the agricultural production mode of Guatemala, his report would have managed to move even the *dead*.

The agrarian reform is such a recent historical milestone that it can be judged a priori or through more or less distant American experiences. Frequently and for obvious reasons, people ask me: What is going to become of the Indian, to be a traditionalist and ignorant, when he lacks his little employer to watch over him and his children?

If the Indian depended on the products he harvested and not on wages, what he will do is stop giving the boss 33.3 or 50 percent of his harvest, to give the Nation 30.5 percent. If you depended more on the salary than on your own harvested products, you will probably have to choose to be an agricultural worker or a peasant. In this case, will he get a job? Well, if there is no wage labor on earth, we don't need to be magicians to assume that there will be land. Living exclusively on an agricultural salary, with the exception of a few plantations, is a pure miracle in Guatemala.

Some are opposed to the agrarian reform on the grounds that not enough technical and financial assistance could be provided to the new owners. With this they seem to say: "Since I'm not going to give you lunch or dinner, I'm not giving you breakfast either!"

Less than a year ago, someone well versed in these matters asked this question: Who guarantees that the peasant will not one day come to claim the land from us, brandishing something more effective than his needs or his human rights? Indeed, the case of 1950 coldly demonstrated that small-scale farming has been plaguing the country for who knows when. The forbidding slopes of the mountain, on the other hand, yield less to each passing winter. It is not remote that if the situation is allowed to run its course, when it erupts it will affect less those who suffer it than those who provoke it or ignore it.

Although the agrarian reform seemed to be an unusual event in Guatemala, in a short time it has managed to create what could well be called an "agrarian climate". The public health service struggles to expand its rural work: the national education system opens its second "regional" school to train rural teachers; literacy in the indigenous language is evaluated. In addition, a deep and extensive feeling has arisen among the young people. It is no prediction to say that all this has to have a profound impact on rural life in Guatemala.

But the agrarian reform is only a historical milestone on the road to Revolution. Something more is expected than the satisfaction of the desire for justice: the agricultural revolution is expected, that is, the overcoming of a whole stage in the methods, tools and tendencies of cultivation, together with all its consequent results. It is also legitimate to expect the emergence of new industries and the development of existing ones. However, the current trend is to think more in terms of agrarian reform than revolution.

If a peasant is located in the geographical orbit of the agrarian reform, or \$and moves to place himself in it, he automatically falls within the focus of interest of many State agencies. Otherwise, there seems to be some reluctance to deal with him immediately. Since the economic possibilities of the State are not unlimited, it is logical that anyone who can answer in the sphere of production should be taken as a focus of immediate interest.

However, something must be done for the benefit of others.