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ESSAYS

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GUATEMALAN FOLKLORE IN 19TH CENTURY TRAVELERS

Paulo de Carvalho-Neto

GUATEMALA

BRIGHAM

William Tufts Brigham, Guatemala, **The Land of the Quetzal**. A Facsimile Reproduction of the 1887 Edition. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1965.

See pages: 30, 32, 52-53, 70, 71, 82, 95-96, 117, 132-133, 162, 171, 185, 197, 205, 218-221, 229-232, 233-234, 244, 247-249, 421-423.

The present text is part of the unpublished work titled ***Antología del Folklore de Centroamérica y México*** (Anthology of Folklore from Central America and Mexico), which the author entrusted to the Center for Folklore Studies to be published in the upcoming Problems and Documents collection of this research institute.

During his recent visit to Guatemala, Professor Carvalho-Neto gave a lecture at the School of History of the University of San Carlos de Guatemala on the same topic. We present in advance to readers the chapter dedicated to Guatemala and express our gratitude to Paulo Carvalho-Neto for this new gesture of friendship toward the Center for Folklore Studies. (Editor's note).

Feast of the Immaculate Conception

"Preparations were in progress for the December 8 celebration, that of the Immaculate Conception. One of the participants proudly showed us a large doll representing the Virgin Mary, standing atop a blue globe full of silver stars. Beneath her feet was a large snake with a twisted tail and its tongue sticking out, much to the delight of the devout Indigenous people. The priest, if that was his title, wanted us to closely examine the lace garments of the "Queen of Heaven" and to particularly notice the decorations.

Upon returning to the hotel, we heard a marimba and soon encountered a religious procession, composed mostly of women. In a small *plaza*, we saw a decorated shrine with flowers and fruit, especially long strings of chamomile, covering the image of the Virgin. Before this image, men and women [of high standing, we were told] danced in disguise with grotesque masks representing devils and animals."

Beliefs

"On the wall of the nave, there was a roughly painted watercolor depicting a young boy falling headfirst into a cliff, while a young woman, also appearing through an opening in the sky, tried to save him using a vine. The legend states that this young man, during a dark night as he rode along the edge of a terrible cliff (he was returning from his club above the lake), mistook the shine of the water for the road and drove his horse into the abyss. While falling, he prayed to the "Mother of God," who then opened her window and threw him the vine to save him. (...)

A very beautiful blue butterfly (Morpho), more than twenty centimeters wide, I couldn't catch it, and Guillermo didn't even try because, according to him, it was "bad for the eyes." This curious superstition about butterflies is common throughout the country. I admit that, while chasing them in flight under the dazzling sun, the brilliant wings do produce a great eye strain, which may explain the origin of this popular belief."

Tortillas:

"Here, we first observed the complete process of making *tortillas*. The corn was soaked in lime water, washed in the lake, and then laboriously ground on a metate stone, forming a thick dough. This dough was then skillfully patted into a pancake form ten to fifteen centimeters in diameter, round and thick like a form of a common pancake. They were then toasted on an iron griddle or *comal*, but not browned. They must be eaten hot, as that is when they taste of roasted corn. The Guatemalan metates are made very simply, undecorated; they are not as elaborately carved as those in Mexico or further south, but they serve their purpose just as well.

A woman who cannot make good *tortillas* in Guatemala is not considered fit to be a housewife; in fact, there are few dishes that require more care in preparation than this unleavened bread. Except for the Hawaiian poi (a paste made of Colocasia esculenta or Taro), I do not recall any other food that demands more physical labor. In both cases, tropical inhabitants set aside their proverbial indolence to earn their bread, quite literally, by the sweat of their brow."

DUNN

Henry Dunn, Guatemala, Or the United Provinces of Central America, in 1827-182. New York: G. & C. Carvill, Broadway, 1828.

Henry Dunn's indignation over the "worship of images," especially the image of the Virgin, is striking. He feels similarly disturbed by the feast of Corpus Christi, though he describes it objectively. However, he regards it as "a ridiculous and propagandistic

spectacle, used by the Church of Rome to exploit the masses in their ignorance and superstition, justifying the Jesuits' claim to guide the subjugated nations," etc. Dunn asserts this is "corrupt Christianity," with a "degree of power and influence" that is "offensive and dangerous." He concludes that "perhaps there is no other country in the world that has as many religious processions or as fanatical populace as Guatemala."

Elsewhere, he records a miracle in which the Virgin ended an epidemic fever due to the townspeople's plea; the miracle was confirmed not only because the pestilence ceased, but also because the Virgin's face allegedly sweated for many hours, a fact that was certified by two public notaries. In another passage, he informs us about daily meals and the vice of smoking. "A gentleman consumes between 15 and 20 cigars a day, while a modest lady easily smokes 50 cigarettes."

Henry Dunn's intolerant tone remains nearly unchanged through the 318 pages of his work; whether he is describing a wedding (pp. 86-87), smoking habits (pp. 76-77), or colonial architecture (p. 68). See also pp. 49, 59, 112-114, 123, 133-13 133-134, 152-153, 265-266, 275-276. Despite so many records, Dunn is not an author deserving of our appreciation. Writers like him remind me of the early paragraphs by Pablo Lévy in his **Notas Geográficas y Económicas sobre la República de Nicaragua** *(Paris: Spanish Bookstore of E. Denné Schmitz, 1873), where he critiques the shortcomings of many travelers. Lévy writes: "What leads many travelers to mistaken their judgments, despite their indisputable and recognized talent, is that, too frequently and regrettably, their conclusions are generalized, attributing to an entire population customs that should only be seen as exceptions to the general habits and traditions." He adds that an even graver error, "into which all foreigners fall when they see a Hispanic-American country for the first time, is trying to compare everything with what exists in the great capitals of Europe and the United States." (p. 259). Let these observations apply not only to Henry Dunn, but also to many other Latin America travelers in general.*

Corpus Christi Day:

"Under the name of amusements rather than religious exercises should be classified those numerous and splendid processions that so frequently demand the time and reverence of all social classes in Catholic countries. In Guatemala, it is rare for a day to pass without one procession or another, which draws devotion from some and ridicule from others. A brief description of the celebration known as "Corpus" will give the reader an idea for judging the rest.

It takes place in June, and on the appointed day, shops close and business halts. Around ten o'clock, the parade leaves the cathedral. A military troop marches slowly at the front, followed by six of the most graceful indigenous women that could be found. They carry large wax candles and wear the traditional dress of their tribes, accompanied by a large drum carried on an Indigenous' back and played by two others. These are followed by men carrying wooden platforms bearing images of saints. More representations follow of

canonized cardinals and bishops escorted by angels with open wings. Then comes an immense image of Saint Peter (San Pedro in spanish), with his keys, held by angels on either side. Other images follow in succession, preceding the sacred Host, which is carried under a splendid canopy and accompanied by the archbishop and dignified clergy. Several orders of friars, priests, and seminary students in robes follow; more images of saints and angels, with another military troop, bring up the rear.

As the procession circles the *Plaza* (town square), it stops at each corner, where there are elaborate altars, which seem expensive, adorned with flowers, mirrors, and wax candles, and hundreds of the faithful kneel along the sides. The return to the Cathedral is heralded by the constant lighting of fireworks, and the houses along the sacred Host's path hang red fabrics or silks."

HABEL

S. Habel, "The Sculptures of Santa Lucía Cosumalwhapa in Guatemala, with an Account of Travels in Central America and on the Western Coast of South America". Published in **Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge**, v.22, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C 1878. Pp. 3-16.

Tortillas, beans and tamales:

"During my stay, my shotgun occasionally provided the officers' table, four in total, (at which I had a seat) with fresh meat, which was very scarce in Salinas. In this way, we obtained two Mexican turkeys (curassows), a macaw, a monkey, and once I shot a fifteen-centimeter-long snake whose meat was highly appreciated, not inferior to that of domestic poultry. The most delicious vegetable tasted in this region was the tender, cooked shoots of two palm species called *Paterna*. They surpass in flavor and tenderness any vegetable I know. There was also a kind of gray-colored mold that grew on decaying wood; it was more tender than mushrooms and had a better flavor.

The basic food of all inhabitants of the Republic of Guatemala, without distinction, and of most Central American states, consists of boiled beans and tortillas. These two food items are almost the exclusive sustenance of rural people and the working class. Occasionally, on rare occasions, dried meat, a piece of cheese, or a fried egg is added. The preparation of beans varies depending on the individual's social class; the poor simply boil them in water without adding anything, not even salt, while the wealthier season them with salt and lard. Prepared this way, beans are the main course of every meal.

The preparation of tortillas is a more complicated process. The shelled corn is boiled in water to which a bit of lime (Hydroxide) is added, either slaked or quicklime, mixed with wood ashes. The lime is added to whiten the corn, and the ashes help separate the husk from the grain. After boiling long enough, the corn is taken to a stream and washed multiple times

so that the husk, lime, and ashes are removed. After being washed, a certain amount is placed on a stone designed for this purpose and is ground there. This is done by a woman kneeling. The word grind expresses...”

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Cemetery.

One day, while I was near the cemetery, I heard lively and cheerful music in the distance, as if it were a celebration. It came from a group of young people carrying a litter covered with flowers. Every face showed a joyful expression, and they entered the cemetery with soft steps as if going to a wedding. Surprised by the sight of such a group in a place so unconnected to joy, I instinctively followed them until they stopped at the edge of a deep grave, one of those left open, waiting for a body. I approached and asked one of them the reason for such a cheerful gathering. “We’re burying a child,” was their simple answer, and they looked at me with a surprised face, as if saying, “Why would you ask such a question?” The explanation reminded me of an incident from my experiences in Hispanic countries, which, with the reader’s permission, I shall recount.

While we were in a small port in the Algarve called Villa Real, where I had gone to embark for the Guadiana, I was awoken in the middle of the night by a noisy concert mixed with joyful shouts coming from a neighboring house. The noise continued until dawn, in other words, until the hour of our departure. When we reached the river channel, a breeze began to blow, the sail was hoisted, the rowing ceased, and the sailors, who now had time, began preparing a frugal meal of bread and olives. The captain invited me, and we started to converse, and I mentioned the concert of the previous night.

“It was a celebration,” he explained, “for the death of a child in one of the town’s homes.”

“What?” I exclaimed, surprised. “Is this how people express grief in Villa Real?”

“Sir,” he replied seriously, “I don’t know the customs of other places because I’ve never left this country. But here, when a child of seven dies, we sincerely rejoice, because it is the will of God; his soul escapes the miseries of this world and returns to the Creator’s bosom without the stain of any sin.”

As the old sailor expressed these sincere words, I looked at his sun-darkened, weather-worn face, sweaty and with hands roughened by hard labor, and I reflected on his poor fate, his misfortunes, and the daily dangers of the sea to which he was exposed. Then I fully understood the strength of his words. Such is the rationalization of a custom that grows out

of a deep religious consideration of worldly misfortunes. But in the Hispanic-American colonies, where its true meaning has been lost or is not understood, the burial of a little angel (child) serves as an unexpected pretext or occasion for joy and festivity.

Tortillas y pulique:

The markets of Guatemala are well stocked with vegetables from nearby places but with different climates. European fruits, relatively few and of lower quality, are often confused with American ones, to the point that even the vendors don't know their origins. Scattered here and there are small shops where Indigenous people gather to buy cheap food. First, they order a supply of tortillas, which are sold separately, and then they extend their deep plates or gourds to be filled. For a *cuartillo* (three cents), they are served *pulique*, a thick red soup made of corn, peppers, and bits of tortillas. Nothing could be more tempting than this national dish, although the general way of serving these meals in Indigenous eateries is extremely nauseating. One day, forced by the rain, I had to take shelter under one of the arcades of the plaza, and I was able to observe the economic system of these establishments. The one closest to me was run by an elderly *mulata* (a woman of mixed black and white ancestry) woman. She was crouched like a monkey beside a small stove, on which there were three clay pots. When a customer arrived, she pulled a large banana leaf from a basket nearby, reached her wrinkled hand into one of the clay pots, and took out a steaming portion of food, which she spread on the leaf. She then added a layer of beans. Finally, the same hand, still dripping, disappeared into the third pot and came out with a fascinating orange color, since it now held the *pulique*, that highly seasoned soup I mentioned before, which gave her customer's plate the final touch of perfection. The mulata's culinary skill was clearly much appreciated, judging by the high demand for her exquisite food.

Sarape and other garments:

"The townspeople's local attire is extremely simple. Men wear a kind of short jacket made of thick woolen cloth woven by the natives, cotton pants, a palm-leaf hat covered with oilcloth, and a multicolored *sarape,* the equivalent of the Mexican poncho. Women's clothing is not, in any way, peculiar or extraordinary. Indigenous women wear the simplest dress, consisting of a blue cotton *faja* (strip) tied around the torso above the hips, to which is sometimes added a short white blouse, occasionally embroidered, but usually plain. Their hair, braided with a red cord, is wrapped around their temples, forming a kind of crown.

THOMPSON

G.A. Esq. Thompson, **Narrative of an Official Visit to Guatemala from Mexico.** London: John Murray, Albemarle St., 1829.

See pages: 152, 157, 161, 164, 167.

Serenade:

"A deep silence covered the village of Amatitlán. Just as I was about to sleep, I heard musical chords in the distance. At first, they seemed like no more than the melodious vibrations that linger in the ear after a dance, and which often, like other uncertainly obtained things, cause bewilderment. Soon those chords became clearer, and finally they stopped in front of our house, where the musicians continued playing for about an hour. They were two guitars and a violin, and from the peculiar sound of some notes, I concluded that the performers were gentlemen. Indeed, they were giving a serenade to the kind daughter of our hostess, whom I could hear moving about in her room, giving thanks for the compliment paid to her honor and chatting with the gallant musicians through the iron grille on her balcony window."

OTHER AUTHORS

A descriptive Account of the Republic of Guatemala by the department of Public Works og Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 1893.

Popular art:

In arts and handicrafts, one can observe notable progress every day. Artisans, as a rule, are very skilled, and many of the items manufactured in our workshops, considering their good taste and durability, are by no means inferior to imported ones. There are excellent workshops for carpentry, furniture making, silversmithing, blacksmithing, tailoring, shoemaking, watchmaking, tinworking, and other highly valued metalwork. Masonry is also very advanced. Among both ladinos and Indigenous people, one finds exceptional ceramic work, as well as skill in colorful fabric printing and in wood and stone carving. (p. 20)