DISTRIBUTION OF INDIGENOUS POPULATION ON THE EAST OF GUATEMALA. (XVI-XVIII)

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When speaking about the population of eastern Guatemala, almost immediately one thinks of the Ladinos descended from the Spaniards: blonde, white, tall—that is, the classic stereotype commonly elaborated by those from the capital city. And while this physical characterization may be correct for some regions, such a situation cannot be generalized. In the past, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, the region had a significant indigenous population, and even today the eastern Pokomam and Chortí peoples are quite numerous.

However, it has been a very complex and widely discussed task among archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, and linguists to carry out—at least approximately—an argument about how indigenous peoples were distributed and organized in the eastern territory of Guatemala before the Spanish conquest. There have also been various sources of information still used for this purpose: archaeological excavations, colonial chronicles, some indigenous texts—although scarce—manuscripts and colonial documents, censuses, dictionaries, vocabularies, and grammars of the languages conducted by catechist priests; in addition to meticulous linguistic and cultural studies.

While the north, particularly the region of the Verapaces, and the western part of the Republic of Guatemala have shown and continue to show a high density of indigenous population—meaning human settlements very close to one another—the central and southern regions exhibit a strong biological mestizaje (mixture) and a growing process of ladino cultural assimilation. In contrast, the eastern region becomes particularly interesting because its indigenous population is dispersed; each village is quite far from the next and surrounded by ladino communities.

The Pipil people primarily settled in the southern and southeastern region of Guatemala, especially in the coastal area—specifically in the estates of El Baúl, Pantaleón, Aguná, and Los Tarros—and in the municipal seat of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa (Escuintla); in the southeast (part of Jutiapa), in the east (San Agustín Acasaguastlán, El Progreso), and in Salamá (Baja Verapaz). They also extended into Sonsonate, San Miguel, and San Salvador (El Salvador) (Vivo Escoto, 1972: 8; Termer, 1957: 28). The Pipil people arrived in Central America through two or three major Nahua migrations originating from Mexico during the 7th, 8th, and 12th centuries AD (Armas Molina, 1974: 13; De Solano, 1974: 64).

Currently, the Pipil language has been almost completely extinguished. When Otto Stoll visited Guatemala in 1888, he observed that in the upper Motagua Valley, in Guastatoya, in Chimalapa (now Cabañas, Zacapa), Mita (Jutiapa), and Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa (Escuintla), Pipil had become extinct and was replaced by Pokomam and Kaqchikel spoken by groups of new settlers (Stoll, 1958: 3).

The Pipil people had the Tz'utuhil as neighbors to the west and along the coastal region, and the Kaqchikel to the north. The eastern boundary of Pipil territory at El Baúl was situated near the hills of Mirandilla.[1] Adjacent to these groups were speakers of Xinca. Termer acknowledges limited knowledge about the Pipil populations in the east, which would be crucial to establishing the relationship with the Pipil people of El Salvador (Termer, 33-35). The commercial, social, and labor relations between the indigenous and Ladino populations of eastern Guatemala with those of neighboring indigenous and Ladino communities in El Salvador have been continuous and close, a topic that will be further elaborated upon in subsequent discussions.

From the 12th to the 16th century, the Pipil people expanded throughout the southern coast and the east, primarily engaging in salt exploitation, cultivation of cacao and cotton, jade craftsmanship, and trade in quetzal feathers. According to De Solano, the population most affected and susceptible to the effects of Pipil expansion was the Xinca, which likely became reduced between Cotzumalguapa and Ahuachapán, and functioned simultaneously as a service sector, serving as a submissive population under the Pipil (De Solano, 1974: 65).

Very little is known about the Xinca or Sinca language and culture, which encompassed the towns of Taxisco, Chiquimulilla, and Guazacapán in the present-day department of Santa Rosa. When Harry McArthur visited the mentioned region in the 1950s, he discovered that only a few elderly individuals admitted to having known a few isolated words of the language (SISIG, No. 20, 1966: 425).

It is probable that between the 16th and 18th centuries, some small groups of Xinca people migrated inland and northward towards the towns of Yupiltepeque, Atescatempa, and Comapa. Pedro Cortés y Larraz, who traveled through Guatemala on a pastoral visit between 1768 and 1770, wrote that "Jutiapa has some mountains that appear lush and are nearby, about half an hour away; it is situated in a plain but arid region. It is the head of this parish with three annexed villages: 1. Yupiltepeque, 2. Atescatempa, 3. Comapa." The clergyman then added that "the language spoken in these villages is Xinca, also known as Xinka, and one of them speaks Mexican (Nahuatl)..." (Cortés y Larraz, 1958: 237).

According to del Busto, the Xinca area had the following boundaries: to the north by the Nestiquipaque mountain range; by the town of Guanagazapa (Escuintla) and the Michatoya River to the west; and to the east with the towns of Pasaco and Moyuta (Jutiapa), which were also considered part of the Popoluca area (Del Busto, 1962: 104).

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[1] Mirandilla, cerro en jurisdicción del caserío Los Pocitos de Barrera, en el municipio de Casillas, Santa Rosa. avanzada edad las que admitieron haber conocido algunas palabras sueltas de tal lengua (SISG, No. 20, 1966: 425).

On many occasions, the doctrinaires and priests, who compiled indigenous dictionaries and vocabularies, recorded the Xinca group simply as "Popoluca of Guatemala" or as a "Popoluca-Xinca" group. It could be said that the Xinca area was bilingual, with Nahuatl and Xinca spoken simultaneously. Originally, the region stretching from Guazacapán to Atescatempa was Xinca, but later experienced the incursion of Pipil and Tlaxcaltecan groups brought by Alvarado.

In summary, the Xinca group of the 16th century inhabited the southeast of Guatemala, from the Michatoya River to the current border with El Salvador. By the 18th century, the Xincas were on the verge of disappearance, or at least there is few written evidence of their existence. The Xincas were either assimilated into Ladino culture or absorbed by Nahuatl-Pipil speaking groups. Some linguists believe that a dialectal variant of Xinca was spoken in Conguaco, Yupiltepeque, Jinacantán, and Jutiapa (De Solano, 1974: 234-35). Nowadays, some intellectuals dedicated to cultural and linguistic endeavors divide the population into four major groups: 1. Maya-K'iche', 2. Garífuna, 3. Ladino, and 4. Xinca. However, in our opinion, the few isolated Xinca speakers in the department of Santa Rosa could not be placed at the same numerical level as speakers of the other three major groups.

Contemporary Pokomam people occupy the eastern highlands of the country and are divided into three main groups living in Mixco, Chinautla (Guatemala), San Luis Jilotepeque (Jalapa), and Palín (Escuintla). In the 16th century, the Pokomam area was extensive and not divided as it is now. Some villages were located between the Chixoy and Polochic rivers in the northwestern part of Guatemala. In this way, their region bordered to the southeast with the Pipil people of the middle Motagua Valley, but there were also Pokomam communities south of the Motagua River, according to S. W. Miles (Miles, 1983: 22). Meanwhile, to the east and northeast, the Pokomam people shared borders with the Chortis.

In general, it cannot be affirmed in any way that there were precise or exact geographical and cultural borders among the eastern indigenous peoples. Sometimes, a group was immersed within the territory that was under the political dominion of another group. For example, according to Miles, the town of Chalchuapa, which was a small nucleus of Pokomam people (Miles, 24), was surrounded by Pipil communities.

It is attributed to the Pipil people who settled in the central Motagua Valley the fact of having divided the Pokom area into two sectors: the northern and the southern. It is very likely that the ancient inhabitants of San Agustín Acasaguastlán were Pipil. The name Acasaguastlán itself has Mexican origin; in colonial chronicles, indigenous texts, and other documents, it is written as Acacevastián or Cacevastlán, a name that undoubtedly derives from Nahuatl. Some scholars like Juarros argue that in San Agustín, the language spoken was alaguilac or vilil. Perhaps this refers to Pipil, but under another name.

In any case, the fact remains confirmed that there was a Pipil population in San Agustín Acasaguastlán from time immemorial, in addition to the Pipil who arrived after the conquest. It is also asserted that Pokomam was spoken in this region. Therefore, it could be a bilingual area where Pokomam and Nahuatl were spoken simultaneously (Miles, 28). In the colonial documents of the 17th and 18th centuries, there are references to the existence of indigenous tribute payers in this region, but there is never mention of the language they spoke or their ethnic group. In the books of current regional historians, the Pipil population appears as Nahoa, although they maintain that it is the same group (Alvarado, G., 1982).

When Alvarado conquered the southern part of Guatemala, he enslaved some Pipil people and took them with him to serve him. This was the case for those Pipil individuals who inhabited Salamá, Baja Verapaz. Additionally, it should be noted that the indigenous people who came from Mexico in the 16th century significantly altered the language and culture of certain native inhabitants of Guatemala. It is believed that the Uzumatec auxiliaries who came with the Adelantado were possibly settled in Usumatlán (Zacapa), in the Motagua Valley (Miles: 29).

The question that still intrigues the researcher is whether the Pipil people already lived in the territory of the Motagua before the Spanish invasion, or if it was the Spanish who pushed them to settle in that place that had been an ancient Pokomam settlement. Both assumptions can be correct and complementary. It could also have happened that the ancient Pokomam people residing there were bilingual, meaning they spoke both Pokom and Nahuatl, a language they had learned through contact with Pipil groups during one of their migrations (Miles, 32).

Miles proposes an interesting hypothesis. In it, he explains that during the pre-Hispanic era, the Pokomam and Pipil peoples amalgamated in El Salvador and the southeastern region of Guatemala; the Pokomam in Guatemala presented a numerical and linguistic superiority that had already been lost in El Salvador, where only scarce remnants remained like the aforementioned Chalchuapa. On the other hand, in the Motagua Valley, both Pokom and Pipil were spoken, making it a bilingual region as mentioned earlier (Miles, 34).

In the 16th century, the Pokomam-speaking area was very extensive. In Jalapa, for example, many villages were inhabited by this ethnic group. During that century, the Pokomam region extended from Amatitlán and Mixco in central Guatemala to the area where the current borders of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras meet. The Pokomam people had the Chortis as neighbors to the north, the Xinca-Popoluca groups to the south (De Solano, 1974: 215), and the Kaqchikel to the west.

Specifically, the Pokomam population settled in the area of the Ermita Valley—where they also mingled with the Kaqchikel population—in Santa Catarina Pinula, Chinautla, Valle de las Vacas, Ingenio de Palencia, Sierra de Canales (in the Curato de la Ermita-Santa Inés), Pueblo Nuevo (in the Curato de Petapa), San Juan

Amatitlán, Santuario Niño de Belén, Ingenio de Anís, Ingenio de la Compañía (in the Curato de San Cristóbal Amatitlán), San Pedro Pinula, Jilotepeque (Jalapa), and Santa Catarina Mita (Jutiapa) (De Solano, 1974: 217).

In the northeastern part, the indigenous inhabitants of Chiquimula, Esquipulas, Jocotán, Camotán, Olopa, San Jacinto, Quetzaltepeque (Chiquimula), and La Unión (Zacapa) are the Chortís, who belong to the Chol linguistic branch within the Mayan family (Kaufam, 1974:85). Culturally and linguistically, the Chortís are related to the Chontales of Tabasco (Del Moral, 1983: 247-253) and the Choles of Chiapas (Mexico). The Choles and the Chortís had already separated before the Spanish conquest. The former migrated northwestward while the latter remained in what was likely their original region (possibly from La Unión (Zacapa) to beyond Citalá, Chalatenango).

Gates asserts that Chol and Chortí are nearly equivalent languages, and both are much more closely related to Yucatec than to the Pokom-K'iche' languages (Wisdom, 1961: 22-23).

In the 16th century, the region inhabited by the Chortís extended northward to the present-day department of Izabal, where they bordered the Chol group, which in turn encompassed the current state of Chiapas (Mexico), the jungles of Alta Verapaz, and the shores of Lake Izabal, reaching the coasts of the Bay of Honduras. To the south, the Chortís occupied part of El Salvador, specifically the towns of Citalá and Tejutla (Chalatenango) (Girard, 1949: 156 and 198).

On the eastern side, the Chortís inhabited Copán, Ocotepeque (a former Pipil settlement) (Girard, 53) up to the city of Gracias (Lempira, Honduras) (De Solano, 1974: 230).

The Chortís apparently had cultural and especially commercial relations with the eastern Pokomam group, mainly with those from Jilotepeque (San Luis Jilotepeque, Jalapa), the small Alaguilac or Pipil group (San Agustín Acasaguastlán, El Progreso), and perhaps with the Xinca (Santa Rosa and part of Jutiapa).

Some of the present-day towns in the department of Chiquimula were established during the colonial era on ancient pre-Hispanic settlements, such as Camotán (Chiq). (Galindo, 1945). Other towns originated from the 16th century onward, after the conquest. Girard explained that due to colonial wars, the Chortí population underwent a process of displacement, leading to the extinction of some villages and the formation of new ones. Juarros also indicated that the foundation of Jocotán and San Juan Ermita does not date back further than the early years of the colony. (Girard, 1949: 6-7).

Over the years, the Chortí area significantly diminished. By the 18th century, the region occupied by the Chortís barely extended beyond the Sierra de las Minas, particularly to the south, where the San Sebastián River served as a border with

Pokomam and Xinca ethnic groups. During that century, the Chortí area was more closely linked to Honduras and northern El Salvador. In Guatemala, the Chortí area appears as a block in its southeastern part, around the curacies of Zacapa, Jocotán, Chiquimula, and Esquipulas (De Solano, 1974: 231).

The progressive decline of the Chortí population began, similar to other ethnic groups in the country, in the 16th century with the onset of colonization, as the Spanish system of repartimientos and encomiendas seriously affected indigenous populations. The mistreatment and abuse inflicted upon the native population by encomenderos and corregidores, coupled with diseases contracted during indigo production labor and epidemics of smallpox and measles, caused considerable devastation in indigenous communities.

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