

## HISTORICAL IMPRINT ON MIND AND CULTURE OF GUATEMALA'S SOCIETY

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### Introduction

Analyzing the culture of Latin America and southern Mesoamerica, such as the case of Guatemala, is not an easy task, since, one way or another, the analysis can be distorted if not approached with its proper historical context. Furthermore, the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Discovery of America in 1992 inflamed passions and led to a loss of objectivity. Hence, our concern is to approach the essence of traditional popular culture of Mesoamerica in its true historical and social aspect.

In this regard, we start from a basic premise: current Guatemalan popular culture, and consequently its literature and traditional music, is a historical product, with a deeply embedded<sup>1</sup> historical time that keeps it relevant, turning its sources of origin into the fundamental substrate that articulates it.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, the popular culture of different ethnic groups today manifests within a framework of globalizing operation, as a product of historical development, with elements amalgamated and loosely interconnected in the sense indicated by Antonio Gramsci.<sup>3</sup> Within this context, it is possible to find the foundation of the

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<sup>1</sup> La categoría de tiempo histórico incorporado y valor de uso en el campo de la cultura popular, es muy esclarecedora en cuanto a la comprensión precisa del fenómeno folklórico y el proceso histórico particular que le da origen. Cfr. al respecto, Antonio Erazo Fuentes. Sobre la preservación de valores de uso de carácter folklórico: Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Centro de Estudios Folklóricos, 1976), p.39. En el mismo sentido, tal y como lo reconoce Boris Putilov, el folklore de cada nación o grupo sociocultural "se basa en el reconocimiento de su profunda especificidad como esfera del arte que se forma y se desarrolla históricamente. Entre los rasgos más importantes y permanentes del Folklore están el carácter sintético y la naturaleza colectiva del mismo". Boris Putilov, "Tipología de la naturaleza del folklore y de su especificidad", en Temas, 1987 (12): 125. Asimismo, como señala Octavio Ianni, "La cultura no es inocente. Todas las expresiones culturales, que incluyen valores, formas de pensar y de decir, modos de vivir y de trabajar se crean y recrean en la trama de las relaciones sociales. Las diversidades y los antagonismos sociales, políticos y económicos se manifiestan también en el ámbito de la cultura". Octavio Ianni, "Cultura y Democracia", en Casa de las Américas, 1906(159):28 Vid, también, Luis Brito García, "Cultura, contracultura y marginalidad" en Nueva Sociedad, 1984(73):38-47, en particular, pp. 39-42.

<sup>2</sup> Para una mayor exposición al respecto, Vid. Celso A. Lara Figueroa. Algunos Problemas Teóricos de la Literatura Oral en Centroamérica. Ponencia presentada a la II Reunión de Expertos sobre el Rescate de las tradiciones Orales de América Latina y el Caribe, (La Habana- Cuba: marzo de 1989), pp. 2-5.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "Observaciones sobre Folklore" en Antología (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1978), pp. 448-491. También cfr. L. M. Lombardo Satriani, "Observaciones Gramscianas sobre el folklore. De lo pintoresco a la contraposición", en Antropología Cultural (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1975) pp. 6-27 y Néstor García Canclini, "Gramsci y las culturas populares de América Latina, en Temas, 1986 (10): 5:20.

specific keys of Guatemalan popular culture, which is rooted in orality, socio-cultural institutions, and popular religiosity, resulting in its own specificity as a people.<sup>4</sup>

Although the topic is of broad resonance to be addressed within such limited space, we wish only to outline some general guidelines that should be considered as preliminary ideas presented in a concise synthesis, in the perspective of a broader work.

#### i Consolidation of Guatemalan culture

We share George Foster's viewpoint that the culture of Spanish America is formed through the adherence of socio-cultural events, recontextualized, which from the 15th century onwards are added to the basic indigenous culture, as Europeans burst into the New World, initially turning it into a culture of conquest.<sup>5</sup>

This means that the indigenous, pre-Hispanic cultural substrate remains solidly present in all social expressions upon which Western culture is established in the 16th century, fundamentally. From this moment on, and as the colonial process, at the socio-economic level, consolidates with its own particularities in the New World of the Americas, cultural events acquire more or less autonomous features and undergo intense transformation until they become distinct cultural phenomena, laden with new, re-elaborated, and restructured content. In this process, the events produced by different societies in conflict and in contact eventually express the values and worldview of the emerging society, and by reinterpreting the new socio-economic and cultural reality, they are resemanticized. The ancient social contents are integrated with the new ones, thus acquiring their own intense and contemporary significance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Para una mayor amplitud al respecto, Cfr. Celso A. Lara Figueroa, op. cit, 1989, pp. 7-11; del mismo autor, "Bases teóricas para el estudio de la literatura popular" en *Diario La Hora*, 1987 (25) y 26 de abril: 2/11; Imelda Vega Centeno. *Aprismo Popular: mito, cultura e historia* (segunda edición) (Lima-Perú: Editorial Tarea, 1986), pp. 85-93 y 121-136; Esteban Emilio Monsonyl, "Raíces de la oralidad indígena y criolla" en *Oralidad en la literatura y literatura de la Oralidad* (Venezuela). Cuadernos de Investigación, Instituto Universitario Pedagógico Experimental, 1985), pp. 12-30. Además, vid. Imelda Vega Centeno "Tradición Oral y discurso popular andino en *Oralidad*, 198(1): 51-58, y el ya clásico estudio de Jan Vansina, *La Tradición Oral* (Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1968). Finalmente, compartimos la opinión de los especialistas de la Reunión de Expertos en Tradiciones Orales, convocados por la UNESCO y reunidos en La Habana Cuba, en julio de 1986, en el sentido que la oralidad en América Latina es expresión del "carácter personalísimo y tradicional de los pueblos de América Latina, de las posibilidades teóricas y metodológicas es, en fin de cuentas reconocernos en nuestras propias memorias colectivas: es, en última instancia, aceptar que los pueblos con amnesia histórica son pueblos sin futuro". En *Oralidad*, 1988 (1): 63.

<sup>5</sup> Nos basamos en los penetrantes estudios de George Foster, en particular, *Cultura y conquista* (México Xalapa: Universidad de Veracruz, 1962), pp. 53-61 y pássim, en torno al mestizaje cultural de América y Mesoamérica. También Cfr. Roberto Díaz Castillo, "Influencia ibérica en la cultura popular de América Latina *Cultura Popular y Lucha de Clases* (La Habana-Cuba: Cuadernos Casa de las Américas, 1989) pp. 50-77.

<sup>6</sup> Sobre el desarrollo social y económico del período colonial en la historia de Guatemala, se ha escrito buena cantidad de obras de diferentes calidades; para efectos de lo que nos interesa señalar, consultamos básicamente Severo Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo* (Sexta edición)

Within this context, we argue that Guatemalan popular culture, originating from ancient pre-Hispanic cultural forms predating the 16th century, and European and African-origin cultures emerging after this century, began to consolidate and take shape as we know it today in the second decade of the 17th century. This was due, among other factors, to the socio-cultural characteristics acquired by this century in Spain, and to the relative autonomy of the Hispanic colonies from the peninsula, particularly towards the end of the reign of the Habsburg dynasty.<sup>7</sup>

In such a way, indigenous and Spanish cultural institutions, undergoing a process of folklorization, begin to acquire their own physiognomy (they start to accrue their own historical time), culminating in their definitive shaping in the 18th century. The keen observations of Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz, in the second half of the century, unmistakably demonstrate the syncretism acquired by Guatemalan culture.<sup>8</sup> In this same vein, the exegesis conducted by Jesús García Añoveros on the "Descripción Geográfica y Moral del Reino de Guatemala" by the illustrious Archbishop, indicates that by the end of the 18th century, the key elements of Guatemalan popular culture, both on a social and spiritual/material level, were already established and delineated at their fundamental core, particularly in terms of socio-cultural institutions.<sup>9</sup>

However, its ultimate consolidation occurred in the 19th century, between 1837 and 1871, with the establishment of the Republic of Guatemala by Rafael Carrera and the development of the Conservative Regime in the country.<sup>10</sup> It should

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(San José de Costa Rica: EDUCA, (1979), pp. 197-256; 260-417 y pássim; André Saint-Lú. *Condición colonial y conciencia criolla en Guatemala 1524-1821*. (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1978), pp. 129-150 y 173-193. Sobre el tema específico, cfr. Edilberto Cifuentes y Celso A. Lara Figueroa. *La Formación del Nacionalismo en Guatemala*. Ponencia presentada al I Seminario Internacional de Historia Latinoamericana (Lima-Perú: octubre, 1987). Además sobre la conformación del sincretismo de la cultura indígena, vid. Carlos Rafael Cabarrús, *La Cosmovisión Kekchi en Proceso de Cambio*. (San Salvador-El Salvador: UCA editores, 1979). pp. 25-83 y Ricardo Falla, *Esa Muerte que nos hace vivir* (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1986), pp. 97-123.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. entre otros, José L. Asián Peña, *Manual de Historia de España*, (Novena Edición) (Barcelona-España: Casa Editorial Bosch, 1976), pp. 204-234; Carl Grimberg. *La Hegemonía Española* (Madrid: Ediciones Daimon, Manuel Tamayo, 1968), pp. 136-155; J. Vicens Vives, *Historia Social y Económica de España y América*, Tomo III (Barcelona: Editorial Vicens Vives, 1977), 463-485 y pássim, y John Lynch, *España Bajo Los Austrias. España y América, (1598.1700.)* (Barcelona: Ediciones Peninsula, 1972), pp. 273-322.

<sup>8</sup> Pedro Cortés y Larraz. *Descripción Geográfico-Moral de la Diócesis de Guatemala*. (Guatemala: Biblioteca Goathemala. Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> Jesús María García Añoveros. *Población y Estado sociorreligioso de la Diócesis de Guatemala en el último tercio del siglo XVIII* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1987), pp. 58- 76 y 127-192. Cfr. además, Cristina Zilbermann de Lujan. *Aspectos Socio-económicos del traslado de la Ciudad de Guatemala (1773-1783)*. (Guatemala: Ediciones de la Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, 1987), pp. 131-143.

<sup>10</sup> El proceso histórico del régimen conservador en Guatemala ha sido relativamente poco estudiado. Sin embargo, Cfr., al respecto, J. C. Pinto Soria. *Centroamérica, de la colonia al Estado Nacional (1800-1840)* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1986), pp. 169-280, como antecedente; en torno al periodo en general, J. Antonio Villacorta, *Historia de la República de Guatemala*

be noted that during this period, the economic foundation was primarily based on the exploitation of cochineal, a natural dye of which Guatemala was the largest exporter to industrialized countries in Central Europe, particularly the Netherlands and England.

Cochineal or "grana" was a backyard crop and had its highest concentration in the mestizo and ladino areas of eastern Guatemala and in the central highlands of the country with indigenous settlement. Consequently, the specific methods of cochineal cultivation did not require the use of large land holdings, allowing ancestral communal lands held by municipal authorities and indigenous groups to continue thriving and expanding, eventually constituting 60% of productive land.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note in this same vein that during these thirty-four years of Guatemalan history, the mestizo population essentially formed the economic base. Indigenous groups, in their various ethnicities, although not entirely disconnected from the fundamental economic process—providing agricultural labor in workshops and estates, supplying daily consumption items to centers of power, particularly to Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, and contributing various taxes to support the republic—were relegated to the western and northern highlands of Guatemala. As a result, their socio-cultural institutions continued to strengthen with relative autonomy in the syncretic process that had been ongoing since previous centuries. These are the elements that have persisted to the present day within Guatemalan popular culture.

Thus, their social institutions—such as brotherhoods, guilds, and municipalities—economic practices involving traditional farming and trade, and spiritual expressions through music, literature, dance, and theater, ultimately became the fundamental nodes of contemporary Guatemalan popular culture. Therefore, we can affirm that elements contributed by the pre-Hispanic world, the Western world, and remnants of African-origin culture come together to form a symbiotic, syncretic, and dialectical crucible that characterizes the culture of

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(Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional 1960), pp. 207-399 y Fernando González Davison. Guatemala, 1500-1970. (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1987. Para aspectos más concretos sobre el tema económico-social, cfr. J. C. Cambranes, Desarrollo económico y social de Guatemala, 1965-1885 (Guatemala: IIES-USAC 1975) pp. 77-112 y pássim y Antonio Vásquez. Consideraciones sobre la destrucción de la propiedad comunal en Guatemala, 1850-1871 (Guatemala: Escuela de Historia, USAC, Tesis, 1980. En relación con el estado del indígena en este período, vid. Jim Handy. Gift of the Devil. A History of Guatemala. (Canadá: Between the lines press, 1984), pp. 35-57; Cifuentes y Lara, op. cit. pp. 9-11 y Edna González Camargo. Surgimiento del Estado de los Altos durante el régimen de Rafael Carrera. Guatemala: Escuela de Historia. USAC, tesis, 1983), pp. 61-88.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Vásquez, op. cit. pp. 79-83.

Guatemalan ethnic groups today. Hence, the conservative period represents the definitive formation of Guatemalan popular culture.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, it is important to consider that starting from 1871, indigenous communities were compelled by the same economic laws of liberalism and the export-oriented economy to work on coffee plantations, aiming to erode the specificity of their syncretic culture by disrupting a large part of their communal economy.<sup>13</sup> However, indigenous popular culture, by this point, was already fully formed. It is during this period that their socio-cultural institutions became even more important as centers of ethno-resistance and repositories for the self-valorization of their collective memory. They have remained as such since then, albeit modified, of course, by the uneven economic development of the national society.

In this sense, indigenous and Guatemalan popular culture in general cannot be defined solely by its pre-Hispanic content, without considering the contribution of the Western world that modified this culture from the 16th century onwards, nor can it be defined solely based on the Spanish arrival in 1524. Thus, when critically understood, many elements of Guatemalan indigenous popular culture incorporate Western traits, but these traits play a deeply internalized role within their cultural sphere, thereby becoming a fundamental expression of the worldview and life of Guatemalan ethnic groups.

Finally, in this long historical process, one must not overlook the violent insertion of capitalism into Guatemalan agriculture after the 1960s, as well as the systematic penetration of non-Catholic fundamentalist religious sects, which have not only changed the contents but also the deep structures of the mythical-symbolic thought of traditional popular culture in Guatemala.

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<sup>12</sup> Para el estudio del origen y las fuentes del folklore de Guatemala y su distribución socioespacial en Guatemala, vid. Celso A. Lara Figueroa, "Origen y dispersión del folklore guatemalteco", en *La Tradición Popular* 1980 (29/30): 2-16 y del mismo autor. "Carrera y los fundamentos de la identidad cultural guatemalteca" en *Suplemento Cultural. Diario La Hora* (Guatemala: sábado 31 de marzo de 1984), p. 7 y Cifuentes y Lara, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Para la comprensión del régimen liberal en Guatemala, cfr., entre otros, J. C. Cambranes. *Café y Campesinos en Guatemala, 1853-97*, (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1985). pp. 125-160. Fernando González Davison, *El Régimen Liberal en Guatemala (1871-1944)*, en especial, pp. 20-27; Hubert Miller, *La Iglesia y el Estado en Guatemala, 1871-85* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1976), pp. 108-127 y *pássim.*; Francisco Lainfiesta. *Apuntamientos para la Historia de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Editorial José de Pineda Ibarra, 1974), pp. 35-144 y para un análisis global del positivismo decimonónico en América Latina, vid. Beatriz González Stephan *La Historiografía literaria del liberalismo hispanoamericano del siglo XIX*. (La Habana-Cuba: Ediciones Casa de las Américas, 1987), pp. 153-176. En relación al pensamiento positivista en torno a la cultura del indígena, cfr, Edgar Barillas, *El "Problema del Indio" durante la época Liberal*. (Guatemala: Escuela de Historia, IIHAA, USAC, 1988), pp. 40-79; Héctor Roberto Rosada Granados, *Indios y Ladinos* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1987), pp. 163-180 y Jorge Hugo Zelaya Azurdia *La Ladinización como objeto de estudio de la Antropología de la Ocupación en Guatemala* (Guatemala: Escuela de Historia, tesis, 1989), pp. 87-100 y *passim*.

