

Accelerated Acculturation of the Mayan Indians of Guatemala

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Down to recent times the life of the Mayan Indians in the Guatemalan Highlands has been characterized by isolation induced by the very topography of the land which separates the small villages. Now, however, the Pan-American Highway is changing the face of the Highlands, culturally as well as physically. It is with this cultural change that the present paper is concerned (1). It may be conjectured that the villages nearest to the new highway will "suffer" most in this process of acculturation.

The pattern of the villages varies little from the colonial Spanish pattern—government offices, church, and market place forming the center of the town, village, or city. In most of the Guatemalan Highland villages this pattern is observable, with the land holdings of the individual Indians lying outside this centralized area.

In the domain of food, the main item is still corn. The crops are planted on the steep grades—some ranging up to a 60° angle of elevation—using the ancient hill method which involves the planting of several grains of corn in the same hole, and then hoeing up the dirt around the corn stalk as it begins to grow. An innovation is the use of metal hoes and machetes.

The ancient household tools, the *metate* and *mano* (stone rolling pin and mortar) are commonly used by the modern Mayan Indians. Here, too, one notes that small food grinders occasionally appear, and with the increase of a cash income, the Indians are willing to pay a cent or two to have the day's supply of corn ground at the water-powered mill. One progressive Ladino (2) installed a small generator to power a small electric grinder. The basic corn product used in the daily menu is the tortilla, a sort of corn-pan-cake, which is usually fried on a pottery griddle. Pottery cups and plates are being replaced by metalware. Finally, a watery corn drink, called atoli, is drunk in a non-fermented state.

The diet of many of the children is being augmented by the use of powdered milk and vitamin pills—both supplied by U. N. E. S. C. O. These same two new items in the diet of pregnant women are apparently helping to cut down the infant mortality rate.

In the domain of clothing there is the most noticeable change. Wherever the trend is heavily toward the Europeanization (or Americanization) of the Indians, the type of the clothing the people wear is an accurate barometer to ascertain how far this trend has gone. Especially in the dress of women is the change observable. In place of the beautifully woven or embroidered blouses many of the women are wearing simple western style clothes which are generally less colorful. For the men the switch to western dress involves the discarding of the black slip-over type of loose garb for suits or jackets.

Itinerant merchants travel on the roads that bring the buses, trucks, or jeeps to the villages. Thus, whole stocks of cloth and dry goods, as well

1. The material was gathered in Guatemala from February to December, 1958, the time spent by the author in field work among the Mayan Indians. Indiana University provided the use of a tape recorder and a grant-in-aid for audio-visual materials.

as items like flashlights, are now being sold regularly in the village markets. Cheap costume jewelry now appears at most markets.

Permanent cement laundry trays and fountains are becoming more numerous. This partially eliminates washing clothes in the rivers and small streams. But in most cases the water still has to be transported from the village fountain to the private homes. Usually the water is carried in special water jars by the women. These jars are pottery vessels with two handles. A tump-line is stretched across the forehead, thus supporting the jar which is carried on the woman's back.

For the anthropologist who has but a short time to visit a Guatemalan village, one would give the advice: go to the market. There not only do you see the contrasts in clothing and diet, but also a bit of the thrift of the Indians. Thus, for example, discarded oil cans are used for washing glasses and cups; old jeep tires are used for shoes. By checking with the merchants one can find the distribution of products among the highland villages themselves as well as the sources for foreign items.

While it may be said that western civilization is creeping into the lives of the Indians in many subtle ways, there are some patent newcomers into the cultural life of the Indians. Dancing the Indians always had, but the Spanish dances show acculturation. Feasting undoubtedly was present in pre-Columbian days, but the *fiesta*, or festival, is a comparatively young—not more than 400 years old—innovation. The "Hollywood flare" was introduced say in the last decade with the selection of queens for the *fiesta*. These are little girls about 12 years old. Now, some of the villages take cognizance of the cultural differences that do exist among the people in the village, and give them two queens for the *fiesta*, one Indian and one Ladina. In San Miguel Acatan, in 1958, both queens rode on the float, the only float, in the *fiesta* parade, while the governor and the missionary walked together. Though there are ancient ball-courts in the highlands, the introduction of basket-ball represents athletic acculturation.

As the traditional isolation of the Mayan villages is broken down, and as the pace of acculturation is accelerated, one wonders if the ancient Mayan culture will all but disappear in the highlands of Guatemala.

Notes

(1) International interest in the acculturation of the Mayan Indians was recently shown when the author was invited to speak on this subject at the 34th International Congress of Americanists at Vienna, Austria. That this acculturation problem is not of merely local proportions may be judged from the magnitude of the Andean Program of the International Labor Organization currently operating in South America. The author has been invited to conduct an acculturation study of the Aymara Indians. This study would be in conjunction with the four anthropologists now working in the Peruvian section of the Andean Program.

(2) Ladino is a term that originally had some basis in the fusion of the Indian and Spanish bloods. Now, it is rather a cultural distinction: if one wears European type clothes and shoes, and can speak Spanish, he may be called a Ladino.