

Pagan Marriage Practices in Guatemala

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When we speak of pagan in reference to Guatemaltecan Indians, we understand that most of these Indians are baptized, and therefore, in the theological sense of the word, they are not pagans. But those who are without training have some elements in their creed, code, and cult, which are definitely not christian. Current usage sanctions the term, and it refers to the connotation of the words rather than their denotation. Perhaps it would be better to call them "Superstition Indians." In this frame of reference, however, we can speak of the "pagan marriage practices" found in San Miguel Acatan.

A bride price is paid by the father of the boy to the father of the girl. This amounts, in total, to twenty or thirty dollars. If however, the father of the boy cannot afford to pay the stipulated amount, then the boy goes to work for the father of the girl for two or three years.

As far as residence is concerned, this arrangement usually means the boy moves into the house of the father of the girl for two or three years. It takes so long, because the father of the girl supports the two of them, and it is only the excess of the work (after repaying for their support) that accrues to wipe out the debt. When the debt is paid, the young pair moves into the house of the boy's father, or into a new house. Usually, it is into the boy's father's house; it stands to reason that if they do not have enough to pay the bride price, they won't have ten times that amount, the sum needed to build a new house.

If, however, the bride goes home to mama after they move out of her father's house, her father has to pay for all of the work done by the boy during their stay at the girl's family's residence.

The informant, Juan Pedro Mendez, recalled one unique case in which a man paid twice for the same bride. For some reason she went home after they had started to live together. He had paid ten dollars for her in the first place, and really wanted her to be his wife. So he paid the same amount the second time.

A usual procedure here is for the father of the boy to ask the father of the girl if a marriage can be arranged. He offers a voluntary amount, and the father of the girl thinks it over. It is generally wise to accept the offer, because if it is refused, the boy will steal his bride by kidnapping her or eloping with her.

If the girl's father agrees, the boy's father pays ten to fifteen dollars in cash and gives bread, coffee, and liquor to the girl's family. The boy's father also offers his costumbre sacrifice—candles, copal and ocote, burned in his house and at the church—to give thanks for a wife for his son.

In discussing marriage practices, it must be remembered that about 80% to 85% of the people in the pueblo are not married either civilly or civilly and ecclesiastically; they are just living in unions that last for a longer or shorter time.

Wedding Feast, September 20, 1958

This morning there were three weddings in the church at the 7 o'clock mass. The ritual followed is that of the Rite of Toledo—the symbolic chain is placed about the necks of the bride and groom, and an offering of 13 two-cent pieces is made as a part of the ceremony. The present Vice Rector of the Catholic University of San Juan, Puerto Rico, says this symbolizes the bride price, but there are those who disagree.

Then we went to one of the three wedding breakfasts. We visited the second, and the third was out in the aldea of Paiconop.

At the wedding breakfast we attended, there were two tables set with nice white cloths. In the center of each was a huge pile of slices of bread. There were about twenty places set at each table. The place of the padre was moved over a little bit, and then a second place was set next to it for the second padre. They sat at the end of one table, and could see all of the guests. An individual tamale (maize and pork, baked in a banana leaf) was served hot to each guest. Some ate with spoons, some with forks. The native reserve of the Indians came out at its best—the meal proceeded in silence, almost.

With just a word of encouragement, the marimba team went into action. The five men got a lot of cheery music out of the instrument, which has 40 keys. Then, when they were finished, there was another bit of silence until they began to play again. Somebody slipped a tamale off of the table onto the floor, and one little boy—quite contentedly—had his breakfast home style, because most homes are without tables.

By this time the first set of guests had quaffed the last bit of their cup of chocolate, finished their breakfast, and was ready to give place to the next set of guests.

There seems to be no formality about wandering into the house, for along the two walls nearest the door, there were quite a few men, women and children, not counting the babies, who were just watching.

The bride, decked out in the finery of a fiesta blouse and its lace trimmings and the accompanying (ankle length) corte, seemed to enjoy the breakfast as did all of the other guests. Like the other guests, she said practically nothing, and at times there stole into her eyes a far away pensive look. The groom was dressed in neat Ladino clothes and drew leisurely on the cigarette the padre offered him.

Meanwhile, out in the little cook house behind the breakfast hall—an adobe house not quite completed—a corp of about eight women tended the wood fires, stirred the pottery jars of cocoa, and kept the hot supply of tamales coming out to meet the demands of the newly placed guests: a delightful celebration that will go on all day. One couple had to interrupt their celebration to go to the *huzgado* to get civilly married—a detail they were supposed to take care of yesterday, according to the law, but neglected to care for.