

CONQUEST AND POPULATION: Maya Demography in Historical Perspective*

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How many Mayas are there? That deceptively simple question has seldom met with an unqualified answer, especially in Guatemala, where both question and answer invariably trigger ideological positions that are not easily reconciled. The Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, the year a Maya woman, Rigoberta Menchú, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, offered a timely juncture for reflecting on the matter. In this research note, we chart from the eve of conquest to the present the collapse and eventual recovery of an Indian population that today numbers more than twice as many as it did at European contact, a trajectory of survival experienced by few other Native American populations. The figures we examine are the best we could find, although none of them should be considered definitive. Moreover, they all indicate an Indian presence without ever being clear or consistent as to whom the definition applies. These figures are displayed in table 1. Any figure contemplated must also be appreciated in relation to the sources and methodology of its calculation. Discussion of this issue, however, we have kept to a minimum. Our aim is to summarize the salient features of a complex demographic situation in the hope of shedding light on an enduring Maya presence, one that increasingly challenges traditional notions of what a Guatemalan nation-state should be and on what terms Maya peoples contained within it should live (Cojtí Cuxil 1991; Smith 1990, 1991).

Demographic Trends, 1520–1770

At the time of the Spanish conquest, some two million Mayas inhabited the area of present-day Guatemala south of the Petén rain forest

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(Lovell and Swezey 1982). This figure represents about two-fifths of the indigenous population of all Central America at contact (Denevan 1992; Lovell and Lutz 1992). Spanish intrusion in the 1520s ushered in a century, possibly more, of demographic collapse. The erosion of Maya lives was precipitous during the first fifty years or so of colonial rule, continued at a drastic pace for the remainder of the sixteenth century, and may not have abated until the 1630s or 1640s. Warfare, culture shock, ruthless exploitation, slavery, forced migration, and resettlement all hastened Maya demise and worked together in horrific, fatal unison. Of all the agents operating jointly, however, none proved more destructive than an array of diseases introduced by Spaniards from the Old World to the New (Cook and Lovell 1992). As many as eight pandemics (smallpox, measles, typhus, and plague, alone or in withering combination) lashed Guatemala between 1519 and 1632. Some twenty-five episodes relating to more localized epidemic outbreaks have been recorded between 1555 and 1618 (Lovell 1992a). Maya depopulation during this period was but one downward spiral of a general, although regionally variable, pattern of New World decline. The Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were in all likelihood the scene of the greatest destruction of lives in human history (Lovell 1992b).

At different times and in different places during the first half of the seventeenth century, decline ceased and recovery began. Table 1 indicates that by the 1680s, the Maya population of Guatemala was larger than at any time in the preceding one hundred years. A fall in numbers between 1684 and 1710, however, suggests that the process of recovery was irregular. Disease lingered throughout the colonial period, causing reversals in the upward movement of population in certain regions of Guatemala even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Lovell 1988). By the time Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz (1958) coordinated a survey of the diocese in the late 1760s, the population he and local clergy recorded for Guatemala numbered some 315,000 inhabitants, of whom 220,500 were considered Indian (Woodward 1980; García Añoveros 1987). Cortés y Larraz's report made it clear, however, that the actual Maya population was larger, as evidenced by his frequent references to "infidel Indians" living as fugitives in the mountains well beyond the reach of Christian fellowship, effective enumeration, and incorporation into what he considered "proper society." The archbishop's report, faults and all, has allowed scholars to envision the colonial period drawing to a close with Maya Indians constituting some 70 percent of the total Guatemalan population, a percentage that was to remain constant well into the next century (García Añoveros 1987; Lutz 1993).

Demographic Trends, 1778–1992

The 1770s represent a watershed in terms of our sources and calculations. Prior to that period, available data are based almost entirely on counts of Indian tributaries or the taxes they paid. For the years preceding the 1770s, therefore, population has been estimated essentially by multiplying surrogate categories or indices. This method works reasonably well for calculating Maya population but does not permit any confident measure to be made of total population. The more systematic treatment of Cortés y Larraz (García Añoveros 1987), however, makes such a calculation possible and also provides a reliable measure of ethnic composition: 70 percent Maya and 30 percent non-Maya (ladinos, mulattos, Spaniards, and blacks). A survey conducted several years after that of Cortés y Larraz calculated the total population in 1778 at 355,000, which we estimate to have included a Maya component of 248,500 (Juarros 1936; Woodward 1980, 1983). Unlike earlier colonial counts, which fluctuate through time and across space, the 1778 totals mark the beginning of a period of steady growth in the Guatemalan population as a whole.

For the early nineteenth century, available data once again facilitate straightforward calculation of both Maya and non-Maya population. We estimate that in 1804, Spaniards and ladinos numbered 125,000, which suggests an Indian total of 292,000. By 1820 the two groups had grown to number 150,000 Spaniards and ladinos and 350,000 Indians (Luján Muñoz 1976; Lutz n.d.; Pinto 1989).

The estimates that span the decades between 1820 and 1870 are based on Ralph Lee Woodward's reckoning that total population "increased at an average annual rate of about 1.2 percent during that period" (1983, 7). Woodward, however, does not provide much specific data as to differences in Indian and ladino rates of growth. Scattered baptismal data for 1858–1882 pertaining to the Indian "west" and the ladino "east" of the country (MacLeod 1973; Lutz and Lovell 1990), broken down by ethnic group and identifying children born in or out of wedlock, indicate far higher rates of legitimacy among Mayas than among ladinos (Woodward 1983; Ortmayr 1991). Maya preference for marriage as opposed to ladino propensity toward informal union raises an interesting question: could matrimonial stability among Mayas have translated into higher rates of fertility and population growth than those found among ladinos? If we believe subsequent government censuses, apparently not.

Between 1820 and 1870, the population of Guatemala grew from 595,000 to 1,080,000, reflecting an indigenous increase from 416,500 to 756,000. By the time of the first official census, taken in 1880, the Maya population had more than doubled in size since independence was declared in 1821. According to government sources, it took not another sixty years but closer to seventy for the next doubling to occur.

TABLE 1 Estimates of the Maya Population of Guatemala, 1520–1992

Year	Maya Population	Total Guatemalan Population	Maya Population as % of Total
1520	2,000,000	2,000,000	100
1550	427,850	—	—
1575	236,540	—	—
1595	133,280	—	—
1625	128,000	—	—
1684	242,020	—	—
1710	236,208	—	—
1770	220,500	315,000	70
1778	248,500	355,000	70
1804	292,000	417,000	70
1820	350,000	500,000	70
1820	416,500	595,000	70
1830	—	600,000	—
1830	469,000	670,000	70
1840	525,700	751,000	70
1850	592,900	847,000	70
1860	665,700	951,000	70
1870	756,000	1,080,000	70
1880	844,384	1,224,602	69
1893	1,005,767	1,501,145	67
1914	—	2,183,166	—
1921	1,343,283	2,004,900	67
1940	1,560,000	2,400,000	65
1950	1,611,928	2,870,272	56
1964	2,185,679	4,339,204	50
1973	2,680,178	5,589,543	48
1973	2,984,500	—	—
1980	3,230,393	6,873,176	47
1988	4,000,000	7,500,000	52
1991	5,423,000	—	60
1992	—	9,500,000	—

Explanation of sources and calculations. Figures for 1520 are based on estimates made by Lovell and Swezey (1982). Figure for 1550 from Lovell, Lutz, and Swezey (1984). Figure for 1575 derived from AGI, Guatemala 39. Figure for 1595 derived from AGI, Contaduría 969. Figure for 1625 derived from AGI, Contaduría 973. Figure for 1684 computed from a document in Enríquez Macías (1989). Figure for 1710 derived from AGI, Contaduría 973. Figures for 1770 based on Cortés y Larraz (1958), Woodward (1980, 1983), and García Añoveros (1987). Figures for 1778 based on Juarros (1936), as cited by Woodward (1980). Figures for 1804 based on García Añoveros (1987), Luján Muñoz (1976), and Lutz (n.d.). For 1820, the first set of figures are based on García Añoveros (1987), Luján Muñoz (1976), and Lutz (n.d.); the second set are based on Woodward (1983) and García Añoveros (1987). For 1830, the first figure for total population was taken from Cecilio del Valle (1930); the second set are based on Woodward (1983) and García Añoveros (1987). Figures for 1840, 1850, 1860, and 1870 based on Woodward (1983) and García Añoveros (1987). For 1880, both sets of figures come from the *Censo general de 1880*. For 1893, 1921, and 1940, the figures for total population are

TABLE 1 (continued)

official census figures recorded in Gall (1976–1983). For 1914, the figure for total population relates to the number of people alive before the impact of the influenza epidemic of 1918 and was computed from documents held by the U.S. Department of State (1910–1924). For 1950, 1964, and 1973, the corrected census figures can be found in Early (1983). For 1973, the second figure for Maya population is that of Scheetz de Echerd (1983). The 1980 figures for Maya population and Maya percentage of the total population come from Early (1983), from whose data we calculated total Guatemalan population. For 1988, the figures are those of Le Bot (1988), with our calculation of the Maya percentage. For 1991, the figures for Maya population and Maya percentage of total population come from NACLA (1991), computed on the basis of Mayer and Masferrer (1979) and World Bank (1991). For 1992, the figure for total population is from Lovell (1992c), based on several current Guatemalan sources. Ligorred (1992) and Cuz Mucú (1993) provide useful surveys of the number of speakers of the twenty-one different Maya languages that can still be heard in Guatemala. A special issue of *América Indígena* (1990), which estimates the Maya population of Guatemala at six million, places present-day Indian numbers in comparative hemispheric context.

The 1880 census represents another watershed in the data, furnishing the first officially verified statement of Maya numbers, 844,000 out of a total population of 1.2 million. Yet as the 1880 census openly acknowledged, this Maya total included at least three regional estimates (for Huehuetenango, Quezaltenango, and Totonicapán). At that time, Mayas constituted 69 percent of the national population. From 1880 onward, official reports and censuses show a gradual but seemingly inexorable decline in the percentage of the total Guatemalan population classified as Indian. We find this trend intriguing. Is it mere coincidence that the percentage of population considered to be Maya Indian diminished soon after Justo Rufino Barrios came to power, his Liberal government enacted sweeping land and labor reforms, and the “modern” nation-state emerged with all its ladino biases? To what extent does the falling Maya percentage objectively reflect the “success” of Guatemalan social integration? Could it instead have been the result of statistical manipulation, a self-fulfilling prophecy advanced by non-Maya officialdom long desirous of a whiter, less-Indian Guatemala?

Table 1 shows that the total Maya population and the total Guatemalan population rose in every national census conducted between 1880 and 1973. The percentage of population considered Maya Indian, however, declined steadily: from 69 percent in 1880 to 65 percent in 1940, 56 percent in 1950, 50 percent in 1964, and 48 percent in 1973. Officially recognized Maya totals and percentages for the period 1950–1973 are even lower than those presented in table 1, which incorporate corrections for underreporting made by John Early (1982). Another way of interpreting these figures is to consider that since 1973, in the eyes of the state, the Maya no longer constitute the majority of the Guatemalan population. They assume instead the status of a demographic minority, one to which they already had been relegated socially for centuries. From this point on, cultural and numerical inferiority coincide.

The 1973 census was the last enumeration undertaken in Guatemala before the violence of recent years. A census was carried out in 1981, but conditions of civil war prevented any accurate count from being made, especially in the countryside. Between 1980 and 1984, the Maya suffered dreadfully from what Robert Carmack has aptly termed a "harvest of violence" (1988). Some researchers and organizations have attempted to counter the statistical and more recent ethnic cleansing of the Maya by insisting on higher Maya numbers and a greater Maya percentage than official reckoning has indicated (Le Bot 1988; *América Indígena* 1990; NACLA 1991). Regardless of what the actual figure is, the fact that so many Mayas still survive is from a historical point of view nothing short of remarkable. We consider an estimate of about five million Mayas alive in Guatemala today to be well-founded. Thus the Maya now number more than twice what they did when Spaniards first invaded Guatemala almost five centuries ago, and more than ten times their population at independence. These figures make it clear that neither past nor present iniquities can prevent Maya Indians from being a decisive force in shaping Guatemalan society in the coming century.

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