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## THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE IN THE CUCHUMATAN HIGHLANDS OF GUATAMALA

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Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act....

Between the conception  
And the creation  
Between the emotion  
And the response....

Falls the Shadow.

T.S.Eliot, The Hollow Men

### Introduction

Over the years scholars in various fields of learning have added significantly to our understanding of the colonial experience in Latin America. Despite many important advances, however, considerable lacunae remain. There are, for example, large gaps in our knowledge of the events and circumstances of life under Spanish rule in regions too poor or too isolated to be of primary interest to the colonial authorities. The Cuchumatan highlands of Guatemala can be considered one such region. In view of this situation, a recently completed doctoral dissertation has sought to reconstruct, chiefly from unpublished archival sources, the broad features of what may be regarded as aspects of the colonial experience in the Cuchumatan Highlands.(1) The principal objective of the dissertation was to determine what happened to the land and the people in this remote northwestern corner of Guatemala during three centuries of Spanish domination. This paper will briefly review some of the basic findings in the hope of throwing into sharper focus the kind of existence led by subjugated peoples in a colonial backwater.

### The Regional Setting

The Cuchumatan highlands, or Altos Cuchumatanes, are the most massive and spectacular non-volcanic region of all Central America. Ranging from 500 to more than 3,600 metres in elevation, and rugged

and broken throughout, the Cuchumatanes are contained within the present-day departments of Huehuetenango and Quiche, and comprise some 15% (approximately 16,350 sq.kms.) of the national territory of the Republic of Guatemala (See Map 1). During the colonial period the region formed part of the administrative division identified at various times as the corregimiento, alcaidia mayor, or provincia of Totonicapan and Huehuetenango. The Cuchumatanes, like most of highland Guatemala, were densely settled in late pre-Hispanic and early colonial times. Today about one-half million people inhabit the region, of whom some 73%, or roughly three out of four, are Indian. The native peoples of the Cuchumatan highlands are descendants of the ancient Maya and speak several closely related languages belonging to Mayan stock, the most important of which are Aguacateca, Chuj, Ixil, Jacalteca, Kanjobal, Mam, Quiche, and Uspanteca.

### The Colonial Experience

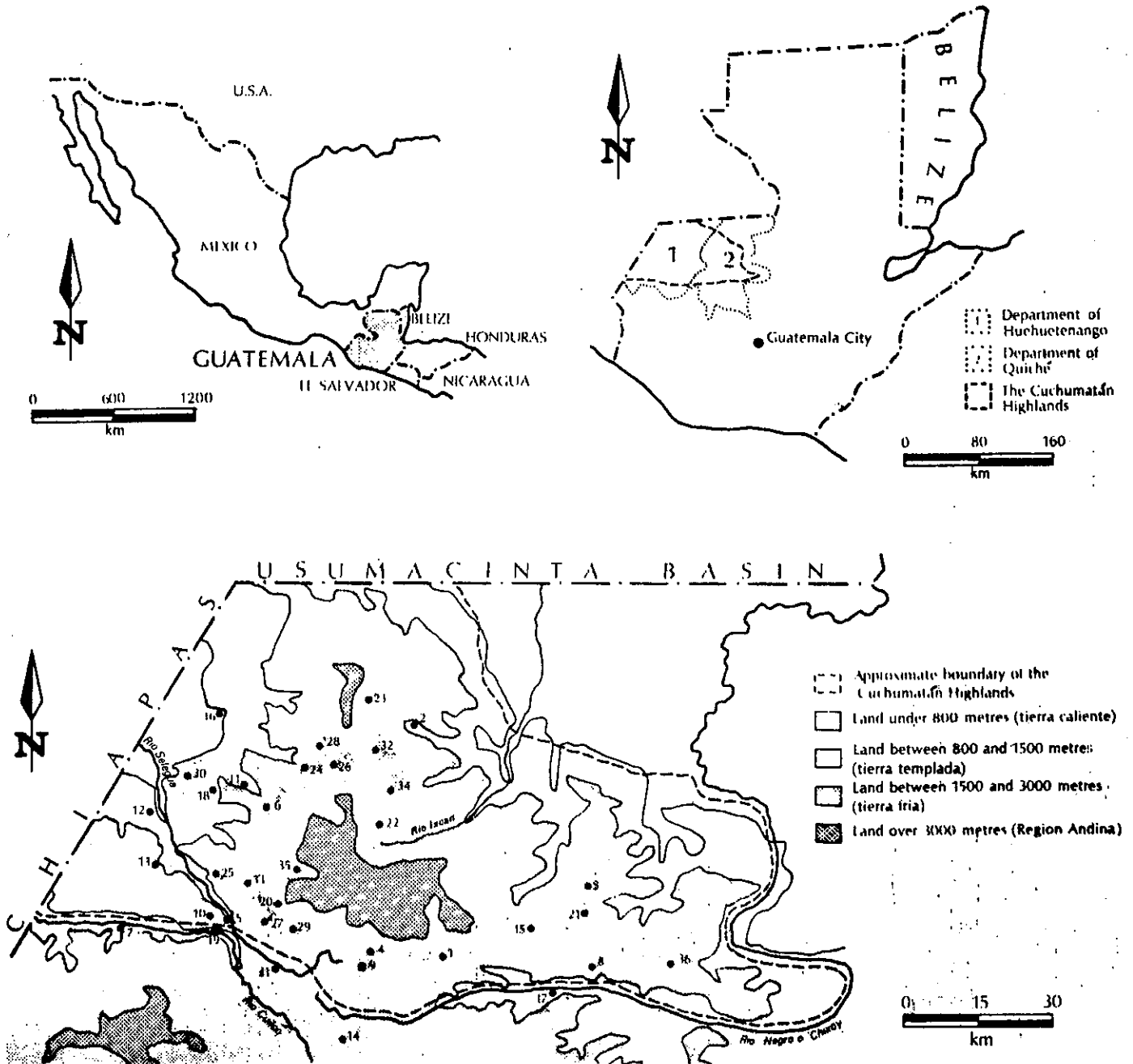
During the fifteenth century. most of the Cuchumatan peoples came under the hegemony of the Quiche of Gumarcaah, a strongly Mexicanized group who, in the course of two or three generations, succeeded in establishing tributary jurisdiction over many communities throughout the highlands of Guatemala. By 1500 Quiche domination in the Chuchmatanes had diminished, and Indian groups in the region had emerged as small, self-determining nations. Their hardearned autonomy was not to last for very long. Between 1525 and 1530 native communities in the Cuchumatan highlands were confronted and defeated by an alien force far more formidable than anything they had come in contact with before: imperial Spain.

The Spanish conquest of the region was not accomplished without prolonged and bloody conflict. Resistance to the European invaders was widespread, but was particularly marked among the Mam, the Ixil, and the Quichean people of Uspantan. By 1530, however, Indian opposition in most parts of the Cuchumatanes had been brutally crushed, and the region entered an era of Spanish domination which lasted until 1821.

Throughout the colonial period, prospects in other parts of Central America held a greater potential for the Spanish desire for wealth than did the Cuchumatan highlands. The slave trade in Nicaragua and Honduras; silver mining in the hills around Tegucigalpa; the cultivation of cacao in Soconusco, Suchitepequez, Guazacapan, and Izalcos; cattle raising and the indigo dye industry in the lands to the south and east of the capital city of Santiago de Guatemala; all these activities, and others, were more attractive to materially-minded Spaniards than the limited entrepreneurial opportunities offered by involvement in the Altos Cuchumatanes, rugged, remote, and with few major exploitable resources. With the possible exception of supplying much needed Indian labour to the cacao plantations of the Pacific coast, the region therefore had little direct participation in the great economic booms which had such a dramatic and long-lasting impact elsewhere.(2) If, in terms of its status with the mother country, Central America was indeed "the richest of the poor, or the poorest of the rich relations"(3), then

MAP 1

THE CUCHUMATAN HIGHLANDS, GUATEMALA: THE INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING



- |                  |                        |                              |                                 |
|------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Aguacatán     | 10. Itahuacán          | 19. San Gaspar Ichil         | 28. San Sebastian Coatán        |
| 2. Barillas      | 11. Jacaltenango       | 20. San Juan Atitán          | 29. San Sebastián Huehuetenango |
| 3. Chajul        | 12. La Democracia      | 21. San Juan Cotzal          | 30. Santa Ana Huista            |
| 4. Chiantla      | 13. La Libertad        | 22. San Juan Iscuy           | 31. Santa Barbara               |
| 5. Colotenango   | 14. Malacatancito      | 23. San Mateo Ixtatán        | 32. Santa Eulalia               |
| 6. Concepción    | 15. Nebaj              | 24. San Miguel Acatán        | 33. Santiago Chimaltenango      |
| 7. Cuico         | 16. Nentún             | 25. San Pedro Necta          | 34. Soloma                      |
| 8. Cunfán        | 17. Sacapulas          | 26. San Rafael Independencia | 35. Tohil Santos                |
| 9. Huehuetenango | 18. San Antonio Huista | 27. San Rafael Petzal        | 36. Usulután                    |

the Cuchumatan highlands probably ranked among the Spanish crown's least prized possessions.

This is not to say that, because of the region's physical location and limited economic or entrepreneurial potential, the land and the people of the Cuchumatanes were untouched by three centuries of Spanish rule. The colonial experience here was marked only by differences of degree, not of kind.

Like all native groups throughout highland Guatemala, the Indians of the Cuchumatanes in the middle years of the sixteenth century were either persuaded or forced into leaving their old homes in the mountains and taking up residence in new church-dominated centres known as congregaciones. Established primarily with a view to converting the Indians to Christianity and to creating centralized pools of exploitable labour, the policy of congregacion produced an orderly pattern of nucleated settlement which contrasted greatly with the predominantly random and scattered arrangement of pre-Hispanic times. Although the imprint of congregacion persists to this day, the operation of the policy in the Cuchumatan highlands was not without its failures and frustrations. Particularly during the economically depressed years between 1635 and 1720, with Spanish authority in the region growing weak and less effective, many Indians abandoned congregaciones for outlying areas. The centrifugal movement away from the congregaciones was accompanied by a revival of pre-Christian Mayan religion, a development which was apparently just as distasteful to the colonial authorities as the fact that the Indians once again practising "their ancient erroneous rites" were no longer contributing to the economic well-being of the colony.

A number of devices were introduced by the Spaniards to control and exploit the human resources of congregaciones, the most important of which were the encomienda, the tasacion de tributos, and the repartimiento. Prominent and prestigious chiefly during the first century of colonial rule, encomienda was a means whereby a privileged individual was granted the right to enjoy the tribute, and originally also the labour, of a certain number of Indians in any town or group of towns. The amount of tribute owed by a town was stipulated by the tasacion de tributos, a count which assessed tribute-paying capacity principally in terms of age, sex, and marital status. Through the operation of repartimiento, labour was coerced from the Indians and channelled into a wide variety of menial and servile tasks.

Coming to the New World first and foremost as entrepreneurs who sought to profit from the work of others, the Spanish conquerors and colonists turned to the acquisition of land only after their search for gold, silver, or a successful cash crop--a produit moteur--proved fruitless.(4) Apart from a few early titles in the Huehuetenango area, the taking up of land on the part of the Spaniards began significantly only during the seventeenth century depression, when a frugal self-sufficiency was not without advantage. The trend continued throughout the eighteenth century as Spaniards who acquired land in the Cuchumatanes, particularly on the lush meadows of the Altos de Chiantla, became aware of the potential of the region for the raising

of livestock, especially sheep. Although sizeable haciendas were developed, precipitating conflict between Spaniards and Indians over land rights and boundaries, the emergence of the landed estate in the Cuchumatán region was not attained wholly at the expense of the territorial integrity of native communities. Some Indian towns, particularly in the south, may not always have had enough land to feed their populations and meet their tribute requirements, but they held on tenaciously to what little they had. Other Indian towns, especially along the northern frontier bordering sparsely settled tropical lowlands, apparently never experienced a man-land crisis throughout the entire colonial period.

Under Spanish rule, the Indians of the Cuchumatanes were introduced not only to the conqueror's religion, language, and customs; they were also exposed, as were native groups elsewhere in the Americas, to an array of diseases inadvertently brought by the invaders from the Old World to the New. The effect of this transfer on immunologically defenseless native Americans was devastating and may well have caused "the greatest destruction of lives in history".(5) Due to the ravages of epidemic disease, Indian numbers in the Cuchumatán highlands between 1520 and 1670 fell from possibly 260,000 to 16,000 a drop of over 90% in a century and a half. Although population doubled by the end of the colonial era over its nadir level of 1670, demographic recovery was both sporadic and intermittent because the Indians only slowly acquired immunities to the contagions long endemic to the Spaniards. Epidemic disease was therefore a debilitating peril with which native communities constantly had to contend. Its impact on Indian life was profound. When disease broke out, it invariably precipitated a chain of events, including catastrophic mortality, the inability of stricken towns to pay tribute, and the failure on the part of the Indians to plant their fields for the year ahead. Famine, misery, and a wretched existence were then never very far away, and served only to increase the susceptibility of the Indians to renewed outbreaks of pestilence. With the recurrence of such unforeseen human tragedies, imperial expectations soon proved naive and unattainable. Perhaps more than any other single factor, it was the unleashing of Old World diseases on a physiologically vulnerable Indian population which caused a shadow to fall between the idea and the reality of Spanish colonial rule, not just in the Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala but throughout the entire Hispanic American realm.

#### Notes

1. W.G.Lovell, Land and Settlement in the Cuchumatán Highlands (1500-1821) A Study in the Historical Geography of Northwestern Guatemala (University of Alberta, Edmonton: unpublished PhD dissertation, Fall 1980)
2. M.J.MacLeod, Spanish Central America, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 374-389.
3. P.Chaunu and H.Chaunu, Seville et l'Atlantique, quoted in Macleod, op.cit., p. xiv.

4. MacLeod, op.cit., pp. 374-375.
5. MacLeod, op.cit., p.20

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## ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE INFORMAL SECTOR

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When it first appeared in the development studies literature in the early 1970's, the concept of the informal sector seemed to offer promise of a satisfactory solution to the chronic unemployment problem which had manifested itself in the Third world throughout the previous two decades. The continued explosion of the urban populations of Africa, Asia and Latin America had more than negated the positive effects of the employment generation of development policy, and unemployment had become recognised as the most pressing problem in the developing world. The suggestion by Hart (1973) and the International Labour Office World Employment Programme Mission to Kenya (ILO, 1972) that the absorption of surplus labour might be successfully carried out by encouraging the expansion of previously disparaged 'traditional' enterprise, in what they dubbed the informal sector, was greeted enthusiastically by researchers and development agencies alike.

Almost immediately, however, a number of studies appeared, strongly critical of the new informal sector concept. Leys' appraisal of the ILO Kenya mission contained the allegation that growth of informal sector enterprise were 'naive and utopian' (Leys, 1974) and work by LeBrun and Gerry (1975) and Bienefeld (1974) strongly questioned the belief propounded by both Hart and the Kenya mission authors that a major reason for the poverty of indigenous, small-scale enterprise was their lack of contacts with large-scale 'formal' markets, methods and firms. On the contrary, Bienefeld and LeBrun and Gerry argued that very definite links did exist throughout the urban economy, and that these contacts were very much to the benefit of large-scale, often international capital. Furthermore, the continued existence of these links would guarantee the continued exploitation and subordination of indigenous small-scale 'informal' enterprise.

Throughout the remainder of the 1970's, the literature dealing with unemployment in Third World cities, and in particular with the specific issue of finding solutions to the problem through the encouragement of the informal sector, has flourished. A recent bibliographical compilation of works dealing directly or indirectly with the informal sector contains over one hundred and thirty entries (Sinclair, 1978) and this list is by no means complete. The continuation of the World Employment programme of the ILO has been responsible for several of the most influential informal sector studies, and much of this work is summarised, and commented upon by Moser, (1978) and Bromley (1978). A number of recent studies, however, have adopted approaches to the problem of informal sector based employment policy slightly differently from earlier, and dare one say it after so short a time, traditional informal sector studies.