

El Salvador's Indians

In late January 1932 Jose Feliciano Ame, the *cacique* or local Nahuatl leader of Izalco, was publicly hanged in a small plaza opposite the Church of the Assumption. Salvadoran soldiers then rounded up hundreds of other Izalco citizens. Those identified as "Indians," either by their dress or their physical features, were bound together, marched behind the church, and shot. Similar executions occurred in the nearby towns of Juayua, Nahuizalco, and Acajutla, as well as in the villages throughout the southwestern Departments of Ahuachapan, Sonsonate, and southern Santa Ana. When the massacre was over, about 25,000 Indians lay buried. These killings (*matanza*) were the official response to the uprising of 22 January 1932, when thousands of rural laborers and landless peasants briefly took control of several towns in western El Salvador's rich coffee-growing region and, in doing so, murdered approximately 35 landowners and merchants (Anderson 1971).

The fears which generated such violent repression can be traced back to two aspects of the revolt: that the insurgents were identified as Indians, and that they were thought to be "Communist-inspired." Since Communists and other social organizers had been active in El Salvador for over a decade, it was convenient, even tempting, to single them out as the cause of the revolt. Indeed, those most commonly identified as leaders of the 1932 revolt — Augustin Farabundo Marti, Mario Zapata, Alfonso Luna, and Miguel Marmol — were influenced strongly by Marxist writings and had worked to gain popular support from rural and urban areas. But to lay the revolt at their feet would simply perpetuate a misunderstanding of the movement and blur the motives for Indian participation.

Indian involvement in the 1932 revolt, and the fear of them which the movement revealed, briefly exposed a strong Indian presence in El Salvador. Ironically, its long-term effect was to further mask that group's distinctiveness. El Salvador's volcanic landscape was once dotted with populous Maya and Nahuatl settlements, yet today it is considered one of the most "white" nations of Central America.

As a reaction to the repression of 1932, many Indians consciously masked their ethnic identity. Adams (1957:504) writes that

one informant reported that following the termination of the movement, he noticed an overt effort on the part of Indians to take over *Ladino* ways. Previously, when migrants came to the *fincas* during coffee harvest, they manifested the usual Indian customs with respect to language

and dress. Following the movement, the same people began to appear in *Ladino* dress, and Spanish was used more frequently.

Similarly, in present-day Izalco,

the position of *cacique* is not part of a hierarchy or extensive political system such as is found in traditional Guatemalan Indian towns . . . at one time the functions held by the Izalco *cacique* may have been vested in an officer of the Indian political system, but something (perhaps the downfall of the Communist movement) acted to separate him from the older organization (Adams 1957:494).

Such actions were reinforced by radio broadcasts, pamphlets, and magazine and newspaper articles which, even three years after the revolt, called for the total extermination of El Salvador's Indian people to prevent a repetition of the 1932 revolt (Ramirez 1977:XVIII).

Mutual fear, therefore, partially accounts for the infrequent mention of El Salvador's native population. It may also explain why a national census, taken in 1930 but not published until 1942, lists only 5.6 percent of the population as Indians. By contrast, an unofficial survey indicated that about 20 percent actually considered themselves Indians (Marroquin 1975; Adams 1957).

The events of the 1930s, however, were not the only ones working to diminish the visible presence of Indian people in El Salvador. Since the colonial period, *Ladinoization* — the blending of Spanish and indigenous cultural characteristics — had been altering the ethnic composition of Central America. Nevertheless, those Salvadorans who define themselves as Indians see themselves as distinct from *Ladinos*. At any particular historic moment, this may be manifested in expressive modes such as dress, dance, or language. The nation's Indian people, as a group, have maintained unique forms of social organization, with integrated political, religious, and economic patterns.

Throughout most of Central America *vara* groups (rotating political offices in which the symbol of office was a staff, *vara*), *cofradias* (organizations responsible for the perpetuation of ritual events), and labor exchange (patterns of reciprocity in agriculture and other chores) integrated Indian communities while distinguishing them from others.

In the early colonial period, Spanish control over Indians was maintained through the *encomienda* system, royal grants which charged a Spaniard with a particular Indian population, from which he exacted tribute and labor service, supposedly in exchange for teaching the Indians the Christian religion. Initially,

given a substantial supply of natives who provided them with produce and labor, the Spanish *encomenderos* had little reason to alienate Indian lands. Traditional Indian forms of social organization were easily maintained.

As European diseases rapidly decimated native populations, however, the Spaniards' economic status became threatened by a shrinking Indian labor pool, and individuals slowly began to claim or grab the lands occupied by Indians. By the mid-19th century most private landowners did not identify themselves as Indians. Several older, "whiter" families owned huge cattle ranches. The majority of the *Ladinos*, however, were small holders whose plots provided them with basic subsistence and a few cash crops, principally indigo, cochineal, and other dyes.

During most of the year these landholdings did not require a large resident labor force. A few employees worked the large estates and family labor cultivated the dye crops of the small holdings. When seasonal assistance was required, various forms of forced labor — debt peonage, laws against vagrancy, and tax obligations — drew Indian labor to the lands of the *Ladinos*. In addition, Indian populations were congregated into settlements where non-Indian administration paralleled local Indian organization and was mediated by the local *cacique*. By and large Indian people, who constituted about 43% of the population at the time of the war of independence (Marroquin 1975:754), obtained their subsistence through communal use of *tierras comunales* (lands granted to Indian communities) or *ejidos* (lands granted to municipalities) previously granted by the Spanish crown. Use rights for such lands were accorded to each Indian family, and plots were worked through various forms of labor exchange.

The introduction of coffee production in the mid-19th century sharply altered patterns of land tenure and land use. As coffee prices rose, family farmers who had produced small quantities of indigo and cochineal began to cultivate coffee plants and grasped for land which would allow them to expand such production. To accommodate the new planters, the government initiated a land reform program designed to convert subsistence agriculturalists into coffee producers. Indian communal land was the program's focus.

By the mid-1870s, the government encouraged municipalities to convert *ejido* lands into privately owned plots. Several communities experimented with new forms of land tenure, often forcing *ejido* landusers to cultivate coffee. "Those who cultivated such plants were rewarded by being made owners rather than users of their plot, thereby alienating land from common ownership" (Browning 1971:182). In 1879-80, municipal decrees, notably in the Department of Sonsonate, encouraged permanent planting of communal lands. In 1879, the national government ordered a land survey to document and assess this conversion. The survey revealed that one-quarter of the nation still lay in communal lands, particularly the rich lower slopes in the Departments of Ahuachapan and Sonsonate.

To speed the conversion of Indian land, President Zaldívar passed legislation in 1881 which permitted government expropriation of communal lands, calling them a "public entity of the worst sort, one in which land use pattern only stifles agricultural development" (Torres Rivas 1971:67). A year later, the Salvadoran

government passed the *Ejido Extinction Laws*, which permitted municipalities to break up *ejidos* and sell the land at auction (Torres Rivas 1971:66).

Indians, however, were reluctant to give up subsistence crops for coffee. In departments such as Ahuachapan, which has large areas of communal lands, the governor refused to implement the laws. Such intransigence did not halt the spread of coffee plantations. In many localities, new legislation merely legitimized a pattern of land grabbing which was already well underway (Browning 1971). Since the mid-19th century, coffee plantation owners had been gradually usurping communal lands. With the loss of this land, Indian communal or reciprocal labor exchanges were no longer appropriate (Adams 1957:492). Heads of households either became private property owners or worked on plantations.

Economically, the *Ladinoization* of the Indian community was completed when communal lands were lost. But this change was not a transition, by the entire population, from one form of land tenure to another. Private ownership greatly reduced most individual's access to land; there were far more claimants than available land. Most Indian people, who once farmed communal plots for subsistence needs, later worked the same land to obtain wages from those who planted coffee, thus claiming the land.

The Indians' desire to maintain their communal land stemmed from a need to guarantee subsistence security for the entire community despite changes in local population or world markets. When this land was converted to coffee plantations, such security ended. For the Indians of Ahuachapan and Sonsonate, occasional high wages were not important if subsistence was threatened.

Their fears were not unwarranted. The wage-earning economy was put to the test, and failed, with the depression of the 1930s. Coffee prices dropped sharply. And along with them went production, employment, and wages. Wages could not provide a living and communal lands were unavailable for subsistence farming. Indian communities were ripe for the uprising of 1932.

Despite the gradual process of *Ladinoization* of Indian economic systems and the violent repression which forced the sudden disappearance of Indian forms of political organizations and other visible signs of Indianness (dress, language, etc.), the idea that El Salvador has eliminated its "Indian Problem" is fallacious. As late as 1957, Adams (1957:497) noted that distinct Indian forms of religious organization — *cofradías* — persisted in a number of communities. These belief systems and the rituals which accompany them are not simply patterns of worship relegated to specific contexts and isolated from the everyday world of politics and economics. They are cosmologies, concise and unique expressions of what the world is and what it should be.

For Middle America in general, Wolf (1959:1) writes "the ancient prophets of this land spoke of five great periods of time, each destined to end in disaster . . . the fifth period of time is our own; it will come to an end when the world disintegrates in a cataclysmic earthquake." Perhaps it was more than coincidence that on the day that the revolt of 1932 erupted, so did the nearby volcano, Izalco. It sent a shudder and a blanket of ashes as far as Nicaragua (Anderson 1971:1). Perhaps

...and blurring the orders from "Communist" leaders in San Salvador was the hope of re-creating a world which, for the Indians — and certainly not because of them — had gone out of whack.

The Salvadoran Indians' own story, however, is still to be told. Despite efforts to deny their existence, Marroquin (1975:755) estimates that in 1940 there were at least 375,000 Indian people in El Salvador. Evidence of their persistent, if periodically concealed, sense of ethnic identity, is revealed in Judith Maxwell's article in this CSQ.

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