ASSIMILATION AND ETHNICITY:

Ecological and Demographic Factors in Colonial Chiapas, Mexico

by

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Culture change has traditionally been a major research problem in anthropology. Work on this problem has focused primarily on studies of internal and external factors which influence culture change. This discussion concerns external factors and focuses on changes that occur in one culture as the result of prolonged and continuous contact with a second culture. This paper addresses the question of why some populations adapt to culture contact by assimilation while others adapt through the maintenance of cultural distinctiveness. This problem is well-suited to analysis from an ecological perspective because it involves mutual adaptation to a new social environment brought on by the contact situation.

In order to demonstrate the utility of examining culture contact from an ecological perspective, ethnohistoric and enthnographic data from Chiapas, Mexico will be presented. This region has been studied by ethnographers and ethnohistorians during the preceding two decades and there is a wealth of information available in the literature concerning interaction between Indian populations and the dominant Spanish-Ladino populations both in the past and present (MacLeod 1973, Wasserstrom 1983, Sherman 1979, Gerhard 1979, Vogt 1978). The evidence indicates that the impact of Spanish conquest and colonization in Chiapas brought about a range of responses on the part of indigenous populations. Some populations became totally assimilated into a Spanish/Ladino cultural pattern, while others remained subordinate ethnic castes. Furthermore, it can be

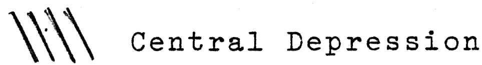
demonstrated that ecological factors, such as patterns of land-use, land tenure, demographic structure, and strategies of economic interaction between Spanish and Indian populations determined the ultimate response of individual Indian populations.

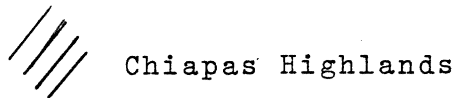
Environment

The modern state of Chiapas, Mexico, is divided into six distinct environmental zones: 1) the Pacific coast; 2) the mangrove swamp; 3) the Central Depression of Chiapas (also known as the Grijalva River basin); 4) the Chiapas highlands (or, the Meseta Central); 5) the eastern rainforest; and 6) the southern portion of the Gulf coastal plains (Collier 1975: 20). The first three zones constitute the region known as the Soconusco. The remaining zones, exclusive of the eastern jungle, comprise the Spanish Colonial province of Chiapa proper (see Map 1).

Prior to Spanish contact, the mangrove swamp served as a major transportation and communication artery along the Pacific coast. The primary economic products of the region were fish and birds. Inland, the coastal plain is a narrow strip of land with volcanic soils. Because it is somewhat sheltered by the Sierra Madre to the northeast, it has a pronounced dry season, and the soils are not subjected to as much leaching and weathering as soils located further inland (MacLeod 1973:26). The coastal plain is the only zone in Chiapas that can support double cropping. This region and sections of the piedmont were

Map 1 The Southeast Frontier in 1517
(After Gerhard 1979)


Central Depression


Chiapas Highlands

important in Preconquest times for the cultivation of cacao. Today, coffee is cultivated in this area. At the time of Spanish contact, the Soconusco supported a dense population and was a tribute state to the Aztec empire (MacLeod 1973: 33, 60).

The foothills of the Sierra Madre are somewhat less fertile than the Pacific coastal plain, but could have supported agriculture using sectorial fallowing (MacLeod 1973:30). Today these lands are used primarily for ranching and coffee cultivation (Pozas 1952). The Central Depression, on the other side of the Sierra Madre, is a large valley formed by the Grijalva River. The soils are fertile and during Preconquest times, supported a large agricultural population. Some water control techniques are necessary for optimal agricultural exploitation of this area. Currently the Central Depression is used for cattle ranching and the cultivation of subsistence crops such as maize, beans, and sugar (Collier 1975: 20-21).

The Meseta Central, or Chiapas highlands, is the least agriculturally productive zone. The soils are limestone derivative and are easily exhausted. In addition, the highlands are heavily dissected. The frostline restricts agriculture above 6,000 feet. Between 6,000 and 3,000 feet the climax vegetation is broadleaf deciduous forest with a dense undergrowth. At present, the highlands are farmed by Indian populations practicing slash and burn agriculture. The fallow time needed for land farmed for one year ranges from 5 to 15 years depending on altitude (Collier 1975: 21).

East of the highlands is the eastern tropical rainforest. Prior to Spanish contact, it was inhabited by Chol-speaking populations who practiced hunting and gathering. Spanish contact with these populations was rather ephemeral and difficult to trace through the Colonial period, so this region will not be considered further. The southern Gulf coastal plain is larger in areal extent than the Pacific coastal plain. It is less attractive for agriculture because it does not have a marked dry season (MacLeod 1973:26). Throughout the Colonial period, this region's economic importance was primarily as an access route for products from the Central Depression and the highlands to the port of Veracruz (MacLeod 1973: 26).

Historical Overview

At the time of Spanish contact, the coastal plain of the Soconusco was inhabited by Zoque speakers related to the Mixe linguistic group of Oaxaca (Gerhard 1979). Because this region was a tributary state of the Aztec Empire, there was an enclave of Nahuatl speakers at the settlement called Soconusco. Archaeological reconnaissance of the region has demonstrated that the Soconusco was densely populated until the Spanish conquest. At contact, the estimated population in the Soconusco region was approximately 30,000 families (Gerhard 1979). Since this area was under the control of the Aztec empire, it was automatically incorporated into New Spain after the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. The area was officially conquered by Alvarado

in 1522. Cortez claimed tribute from the Soconusco cacao groves as part of his spoils of conquest in 1524-1526, but the Spanish Crown moved quickly to impound the tribute and claimed the entire region as a Crown colony shortly thereafter.

Preconquest populations in the Central Depression of Chiapas were settled within nucleated settlements in defensible locations (e.g. steep ridgelines, bluffs, or hilltops) (Adams 1959, 1962). This has been interpreted as indicating a period of intraregional competition and warfare (Calnek 1962). Ethnohistoric and linguistic data indicate that the northern part of the Central Depression was inhabited by a population referred to as Chiapanec at the time of Spanish contact (Calnek 1962). The Chiapanec formed a small political confederation centered in the modern town of Chiapa de Corzo (referred to as Chiapa de los Indios throughout the Colonial period). The Chiapanecs received tribute from the settlements of Chamula and Copanaguastla. Zoque populations inhabited the southern end of the Depression and were hostile to the Chiapanecs. Calnek has reconstructed the social organization of these groups as that of landholding lineages with a four-tiered hierarchy of chiefs, nobility, commoners and slaves (Calnek 1962).

Information on subsistence is minimal. It is generally assumed that commoners supported higher status groups with surpluses from slash and burn agriculture. It is possible that more intensive cultivation methods were used. Some water control features were found associated with the Classic component of Copanaguastla (Adams 1959), but no archaeological features

indicative of intensive agriculture have been recovered that date to the Protohistoric period. Since population densities in this area remained constant until Spanish contact, the lack of evidence of agricultural intensification may be a result of the lack of any substantive work on reconstructing subsistence practices for this time period.

In 1522, Luis Marin was appointed by Cortez to lead an expeditionary force into the Central Depression to subdue the indigenous populace and establish a Spanish settlement (Gerhard 1979). Marin conquered the Zogue around the modern city of Tuxtla-Gutierrez, as well as the Chiapanecs at Chiapa de los Indios. Immediately after the fall of Chiapa de los Indios, welcoming delegations were sent to Marin from Zinacantan, Chamula and Copanaguastla (Diaz de Castillo 1961: 293). Soon afterwards, Chamula rebelled against Marin and forced the Spaniards to withdraw before a Spanish town could be established. In 1527, Diego de Mazariegos returned to the area and reconquered the Central Depression and the highlands. A town was founded at Chiapa de los Indios, but after two months it was moved to the highland site of Ciudad Real (now known as San Cristobal de las Casas).

The settlement pattern in the highlands before Spanish contact consisted of major settlements surrounded by a sustaining rural population in dispersed hamlets (MacLeod 1973, Vogt 1969). The eastern portion of the highlands was populated by Coxoh and Tzeltal speakers, while the western part was the homeland of the Tzotzil. All three languages belong to the Mayance branch of

Mesoamerican languages (Kaufman 1985). The social organization of the Tzotzil, Tzeltal and Coxoh was somewhat less cohesive than that of the Chiapanecs. La Torre, 16th century Dominican missionary stationed at Zinacantan and Copanaguastla, stated that there was no true chief at Zinacantan, but the highest ranked lineage appointed one of their members to lead the town in raids against other settlements. This war captain was subject to replacement if judged to be incompetent (Ximenez 1929: 31).

The subsistence system in the highlands at Spanish contact is assumed to be similar to that of the ethnographic present (see Collier 1975: 19-47). In addition to the cultivation of maize and beans using slash and burn agriculture, cotton and honey were also produced during the Protohistoric period (Calnek 1962). Ethnohistoric accounts indicate that the highlands participated in a pan-Mesoamerican trading system. Zinacantan, in particular, had a reputation for being a town of merchants, and controlled access to the only good salt mine in the region (Calnek 1962). Remesal (1932: I, 378) states that Zinacantan was conquered by the Aztec emperor Montezuma II, who stationed a garrison there. Zinacantan does not appear on any of the Aztec tribute lists, and it is possible that the Aztec presence was not for the purpose of imperial conquest, but served to insure that trade routes through the region were not disrupted.

With the establishment of the Spanish colony at Ciudad Real in 1527, highland populations were brought under the direct control of the Spanish conquistadors. Soon after, Mazariegos

assigned the lowland and highland Indian settlements as encomiendas to each member of his expeditionary force. Initially, there was much interest and competition for encomiendas in Chiapa due to the presence of gold-bearing streams (Wasserstrom 1983: 11).

Indian populations in the Soconusco, the Central Depression, and the highlands underwent a drastic demographic decline in the generations following Spanish conquest. The population crash did not occur due to armed conflict with the Spanish, but was instead the result of widespread epidemics and subsequent famines that swept all of Chiapas following contact with the Spanish. In the Soconusco, the Indian population at the time of contact was approximately 30,000 families. By 1570, the population had declined to 1,000 families due to disease and famine. The population crash was not as severe in the Central Depression and the highlands as on the coast, but it was still substantial. The combined population estimates for both the Central Depression and the highlands at Spanish contact was 275,000 Indians. By 1611, this figure had declined to 78,320 (Gerhard 1979: 159).

The demographic decline in Chiapas was not unique. Epidemics in the New World invariably followed initial contact with Old World populations. This is because New World populations were completely isolated from Old World diseases from 10,000 BC until the Spanish conquest.

> Migration of man and his maladies is the chief cause of epidemics. And when migration takes place, those creatures who have been longest in isolation suffer most, for their genetic material has been least tempered by the variety of diseases...The fatal diseases of the Old World killed more effectively in the New, and the comparatively benign diseases of the Old World turned killer in the New (Crosby 1972: 37).

Early Colonial documents are extremely vague in identifying which of the Old World diseases were responsible for creating each epidemic. Many of the epidemics were notes as "peste" (which may have been pulmonary plague), "viruelas" (probably measles or smallpox), "sarampion" (measles or smallpox), and "matlazahuatle" (probably typhus) (Crosby 1972: 43). Any of these diseases would have severely affected the demographic structure of a non-resistant population. In assessing the impact of Old World diseases on New World populations, MacLeod has estimated that some regions in the New World experienced as much as a 90% reduction in the indigenous population (MacLeod, personal communication).

The population crash in Chiapas was an economic disaster for the Spanish conquerors. This was due in large part to the particular patterns of economic interaction that the Spaniards attempted to establish throughout the New World after the Conquest. These patterns emphasized control of human labor rather than land. The Spaniards who came to the New World in the 16th century had one primary objective: to accumulate

sufficient capital in a relatively short period of time in order to return to Spain. There was little interest in long range economic development (MacLeod 1973: 47). The means to accomplish this objective were to obtain products which had a high enough market value in the Old World to outweigh the costs of transport. A second strategy was to find a product that was important in the indigenous economy and could be easily converted into capital. For the Soconusco and Chiapa there were three products that met these requirements: gold, cacao, and Indians.

In the Soconusco, Crown officials repeatedly tried to maintain the cacao groves in the face of a declining labor force. **Cacao cultivation is extremely labor intensive, and requires a large skilled labor force to maintain optimum productivity.** During the initial period contact, there were no attempts by Crown officials to gain direct control over the cacao groves. Instead, the groves were left in the hands of the Indians, and the processed cacao beans were collected as tribute. By 1565, the decline in tribute was so noticeable that the Crown took steps to enforce the replanting and maintenance of the groves. This put additional stress on the Indian populations, who had no time to cultivate subsistence crops. By 1570, famine was widespread throughout the Soconusco (MacLeod 1973: 76). In an attempt to induce Indians from the highlands to work in the Soconusco, highland Spanish encomenderos began to accept only cacao or silver as tribute from highland populations (MacLeod 1973: 77). This ploy was successful in stabilizing the population in the Soconusco at around 2,000 families (Gerhard

1979). However, the groves continued to decline in productivity because the imported population was not skilled in the techniques of cacao production.

Another solution to the decline in productivity was to use the less productive cacao groves to run cattle. Cattle ranching was an acceptable economic alternative because hides had a relatively constant market value in the New World economy. A second benefit was that cattle ranching did not require a large labor pool. It did require land, however, and historical records show a steady increase in court litigation involving the dispossession of land from Indian communities after 1570.

In the Central Depression and the highlands, the economic situation was no better for private encomenderos after the Indian population declined. Mining activities in the Central Depression ceased during the first few decades of Spanish domination. Some encomenderos leased their Indian labor force to Crown officials in the Soconusco for seasonal labor. This soon became officially prohibited by the Crown due to the efforts of the first Bishop of Chiapas, but the practice nonetheless continued throughout the Colonial period (see Calnek in Adams 1959, MacLeod 1973: 107-108, Gerhard 1979: 169). The decline in cacao production on the coast affected tribute payments in the Central Depression, and ushered in a century long economic depression in both areas as officials and encomenderos struggled to find a product that could be exported to Spain and more prosperous regions in New Spain (MacLeod 1973: 153-171).

The demographic crash not only caused economic problems for the Spanish conquerors, it was also disastrous for the corporate structure of the Indian communities. Soon after the conquest, the Spaniards initiated a resettlement policy whereby non-viable Indian communities (in terms of surviving members) were combined and placed in a location convenient to secular and religious authorities to facilitate labor recruitment and conversion to Catholicism. Communities which were not as severely affected by disease were usually resettled into more tightly nucleated settlements (see Foster 1960). There is some evidence that this occurred at Copanaguastla. The effects of the Spanish resettlement policy on traditional forms of land tenure were dramatic, and greatly facilitated the appropriation of land by the Spanish later in the 17th century.

Another consequence of the decline in population that affected Indian communities in the Soconusco and the Central Depression was the leveling of social differences within Indian society as a whole. Frequently, tribute lists were not kept up to date with the actual numbers of tributaries. The elite segment of Preconquest Indian society was most severly affected by this. In the initial years of contact, Indian elites acted as cultural brokers between the Spaniards and Indians. They were responsible for the collection and delivery of tribute to Spanish officials and encomenderos. With the decline in population, the Indian nobility often had no recourse but to make up the difference between the tribute collected and the tribute exacted. The nobility became increasingly unable to afford the material

symbols of their social position. Some symbols, (e.g. cacao), that functioned to denote elite status in Preconquest times lost their function as they became available to all levels of Indian society.

A third consequence of the demographic crash was the premature promotion of younger males to traditional positions of authority within Indian communities. Often these males had not completed training for these positions before they were obligated to fill them. The result was a loss of traditional knowledge. Spaniards encouraged premature promotion because often younger males became little more than syncophants to Spanish encomenderos. Many traditional positions of authority lost prestige and power as a result of the inexperience of the candidates and their obvious dependency upon the Spanish to uphold what little authority they maintained.

In the face of the 17th century depression, Spaniards in the Soconusco and Chiapa entered into a period of economic experimentation. The trend was toward the development of products which required control over land, rather than labor, for their successful exploitation. This affected the settlement patterns of the Spanish colonists. In the 16th century, the Spanish lived primarily in towns. In the 17th century, many Spanish abandoned the towns and took up residence on their encomienda land (MacLeod 1973: 312). In Chiapa proper, this involved movement from the highland town of Ciudad Real to the Central Depression towards Comitan, where the land was more fertile. Spanish encomenderos in the Central Depression turned

to cattle ranching and indigo production. Both products had fairly large markets and only required a seasonal supply of semi-skilled labor. Furthermore, both cattle ranching and indigo cultivation could be combined on the same parcel of land. Cattle could be turned out to graze in fields of young indigo plants, and would weed and fertilize the fields without damaging the plants. This mixed economy had already begun in the Soconusco in the preceding century after the decline in the cacao industry.

Encomenderos with holdings in the highlands did not have the option of returning to their land. Highland land was essentially unproductive for intensive agriculture. However, unlike the situation in the Soconusco and the Central Depression, Indian populations were stabilizing in the highlands, and, in some areas, beginning to recover from the epidemics of the 16th century. The Spanish encomenderos in the highlands therefore had one resource that was in great demand elsewhere: labor. It is not surprising that during this time period, the system of labor recruitment changed. In the 17th century, the encomienda system fell into disuse. It was replaced by the system of repartimiento, whereby each Indian community was forced to send a number of workers during certain periods of the year for "public works" (MacLeod 1973: 207, see also Sherman 1979). The term "public works" had a very broad interpretation based on the needs of the Spanish community (Wasserstrom 1983: 36). Although in theory every Indian community was to participate equally in the repartimiento, this rarely occurred. Communities closest to

Spanish settlements were drafted more often than distant communities (MacLeod 1973: 295).

Spanish encomenderos in the highlands devised another system for accumulating capital. This was also referred to as repartimiento. Under this system, Spanish encomenderos would sell raw goods to certain communities for partial processing, then buy the partially processed goods back and resell them to other communities for final processing. A mark-up was charged with each transaction. Some researchers see the origins of economic specialization by municipality observable today in the Chiapas highlands in this system (Collier 1975: 181).

For Indians living in the highlands, both types of repartimiento made community affiliation disadvantageous. Various forms of peonage were attractive alternatives to many Indians because they involved individual contracts between Indian and Spaniard for labor in exchange for protection from the labor repartimiento. Since this was a time when traditional Indian community rights to land were being eroded, peonage was an attractive alternative for Indian families (Sherman 1979). This system further damaged the corporate structure of Indian communities.

The 17th century economic depression, precipitated by the demographic crash of the aboriginal population in the 16th century, forced the Spaniards to change their economic strategy from short-term to long-term economic development of the region. This made control of land as important as control of labor. The entire state became increasingly isolated from the interregional

economy of New Spain. In the Soconusco, the remnant Indian population was used in cattle ranching, indigo production and vanilla cultivation. Cacao continued to be cultivated in the area southeast of Mapastepec. Spanish settlement was concentrated at Huehuetan and Escuintla, but by the end of the 17th century, more Indian villages had Spanish families in residence (Gerhard 1979: 171).

In the Central Depression, the primary industries were cattle, indigo, horses, sugar and cotton. Indian population density was somewhat higher in the Depression than in the Soconusco; however, the bulk of the Indian population was located in the highlands. These highland Indians were seasonally translocated to the Central Depression and the Soconusco (Gerhard 1979: 160). The relatively infertile land of the highlands was left primarily in Indian control. In this region, the Spanish exploitative pattern in which control over labor was more important than control over land continued because the Indians were more valuable to the Spanish than their lands. Except for demands on the highland populations for the repartimiento, Indian municipalities were left alone by Spanish encomenderos.

In addition, Indian communities in the highlands gradually became less closely supervised by the religious sector of Spanish Colonial society. During the preceding century, the responsibility of converting the Indian population to Catholicism was left to the regular clergy (e.g. clergy affiliated with monastic orders). The role of the secular clergy in the 16th century was largely confined to administering to the Spanish

colonists (or _cristianos viejos_). Part of the conversion process carried out by the regular clergy was to establish residency within Indian villages. In the 17th century, many of the duties of the regular clergy were gradually assumed by the secular clergy, who usually resided in Spanish communities and commuted to Indian settlements only on certain feast days. The religious life of the newly Christianized Indians became less and less supervised. This allowed highland communities the opportunity to create a synthesis of aboriginal and Spanish ritual behavior. One of the results was the ritual cargo system observable today in such municipalities as Zinacantan and Chamula (MacLeod 1973: 231; see also Cancian 1965 for an ethnographic account of the cargo system).

Basic economic patterns established in the 17th century in Chiapas continued throughout the Spanish Colonial period. The entire region remained an economic hinterland to the rest of Spanish America. During the 18th century, the highlands of Chiapas were the focus of a series of Indian revolts. Each of these was brutally suppressed by the Spaniards of Ciudad Real. The rebellions all followed a similar pattern. They began with a supposed visitation by a saint or the Virgin to a woman who was told to form a special cult. In return, the Virgin (or saint) promised to deliver the Indians from Spanish domination. The cults were repressed by the Spanish, and the repression resulted in outbreaks of violence against the Spanish colonies (see Bricker 1981).

An interesting aspect of the 18th century revolts is that they are obvious attempts at cultural revitalization, yet they are set within the framework of Catholicism rather than the Preconquest religious system. This is partially explicable as a result of the loss of detailed knowledge of a Preconquest religious system.

The Spanish Colonial period ended in the early 19th century. In 1856, the Ley Lerdo, which dispossessed the Catholic church of extensive landholdings in the Soconusco and Central Depression, was enacted (Collier 1975: 150). The objective of the Ley Lerdo was to enable Indian communities to purchase additional land. For example, Zinacantan purchased additional highlands tracts from Ladinos at this time (Collier 1975: 28). Unfortunately, most of the viable farmland available for sale under the Ley Lerdo was bought by Spanish/Ladinos, who created large cattle haciendas. By the late 19th century, most of the land was under the control of a Ladino elite living in San Cristobal de Las Casas (formerly Ciudad Real) (Vogt 1969: 19, Collier 1975: 150). A similar situation existed in the Soconusco (Pozas 1952). By this time, most Indians were involved in some form of peonage with individual Ladino landholders. Peonage was one of the only ways in which Indians could gain access to land on which to farm for their own subsistence needs.

The Mexican revolution of 1910 brought another period of land reform. The ejido system was designed to break up large Ladino landholdings and give the land back to the Indian municipalities, who were required to petition for its use and

manage it collectively. The ejido reform system was slow to reach Chiapas and was not entirely in effect until the reforms of Carranza in the 1930's (Vogt 1969: 19).

During the early 20th century, the Soconusco experienced an economic revival. German speculators came into the region and set up coffee plantations. Seasonal labor was recruited from highland Indian populations under a debt-penury system. Workers were brought down in wagons from San Cristobal de Las Casas and worked under the direction of mestizos conversant in both Spanish and Tzotzil (or Tzeltal). Pozas notes that the highland workers wore traditional costumes and did not speak Spanish at this time (Pozas 1952).

With the Carranza reforms, labor syndicates were created for seasonal highland workers. Some syndicates successfully petitioned for land on the coastal plain and began coffee cooperatives. At this point, Indians from the highlands began wearing Ladino clothing and spoke Spanish while working in the Soconusco. Upon returning to the highlands, they reverted back to their traditional clothing and language (Pozas 1952).

The Soconusco area today is completely Ladinoized; everyone on the coast dresses in non-traditional clothing and speaks Spanish. The primary industries are cacao (near Tapachula), coffee, and subsistence products. In the Central Depression, corn, sugar and cattle are the major products produced. Most of the land is still controlled by Ladinos, but the era of the large hacienda has passed (Cancian 1972: 33). A significant proportion of landowners do not reside on their land,

but work as professionals in Tuxtla-Gutierrez (Cancian 1972: 33). The resident population in the Central Depression is Ladinoized. Indians from the highlands who work seasonally for the landowners, or who rent land to supplement their highland tracts have adopted Ladino dress and Spanish while in the lowlands.

In the highlands around San Cristobal de Las Casas, the Indian population continues to be a distinct and subordinate caste. This separation is marked by language, dress, diet and economic activity. The Ladinos reside in San Cristobal de Las Casas while the Indian populations live in distinct municipalities surrounding the city. Each municipality consists of a town with a plaza and church as well as a few public buildings and dwellings. Dispersed hamlets surround the town, and may have separate names (e.g. the hamlet of Apas in the municipio of Zinacantan).

The Ladinos in San Cristobal de Las Casas are either professionals (e.g. lawyers, doctors, etc.) or merchants, selling processed materials to each other and to the Indians. For the most part, the Indians remain the primary producers of basic commodities (food, beeswax, firewood), which are sold to the Ladinos in San Cristobal (Collier 1975: 14). Municipal economic specialization is also present. Zinacantan, for example, specializes in muleterring and salt, while Chamula specializes in the production of aguardiente and furniture.

Within municipalities, little of the traditional politico-religious structure remains. It has been replaced by the cargo system, which has its roots in 16th century European

peasant Catholicism (MacLeod 1973: 231). The system comprises an alternating hierarchy of ritual and political offices. Passage through the system increases the participant's prestige and authority within the community. To the extent that the cargo system is a mechanism for recruiting individuals to fill positions of authority within the community based on achieved rather than ascribed status, it serves to insure against the premature promotion of inexperienced individuals. The top roles in the system are held by older men within the municipality. It is possible that the cargo system served as the mechanism by which colonial Indian communities insured the recruitment and training of competent individuals for positions of authority when the population had declined to such an extent that no individuals of the appropriate ascribed status remained to fill the positions (see Cancian 1965).

Most of the highland Indian municipalities have experienced population growth since the 1930's and 1940's (Collier 1975: 157). This has had a profound effect on land tenure patterns and Indian economic strategies. Chamula and Zinacantan are highland municipalities in which intensive ethnographic work was conducted in the 1950's and 1960's (Vogt 1978). Zinacantan's land holdings are at a lower elevation than Chamula's, and the Zinacantan municipal boundaries are adjacent to the Central Depression. Zinacantecos can thus farm using swidden agriculture in the highlands with a relatively shorter fallow cycle than the Chamulans. In addition,

Zinacantecos have easy access to lowland farmland which they rent from Ladino landowners (Cancian 1972, Collier 1975).

In Zinacantan, population growth resulted in the shortening of the fallow period in highland tracts. In 1962, this trend ended and highland tracts became less intensively farmed. The resulting differences in yields were rectified through land rental in the Central Depression. Lowland rental has acted as a buffer for the rising population. As a result, land tenure patterns have remained stable. All male children inherit highland houseplots from their father at the marriage of the male offspring. Highland farmland is inherited at the fathers death; each male offspring receives a portion commensurate with his contribution to his father's funeral expenses (Collier 1975: 69, 76). Land in Zinacantan cannot be sold to people outside the municipality. Zinacantan remains a closed corporate group despite population pressure on an unchanging amount of highland land. This is because lowland farm rental allows Zinacantecos with marginal highland tracts to continue farming in the municipality (Collier 1975: 157).

The situation is different in Chamula. Fallow periods were shortened as a result of the population increase that began in the 1930's. Because the highland tracts are at higher altitudes than those of Zinacantan, shortening the fallow period resulted in degradation of the land into grassland. In response to the degradation, Chamula began raising sheep and selling the wool to Ladinos. Overgrazing eventually led to severe erosion of the highland tracts. Most of the land held by Chamula at the

time of Collier's study was rendered unproductive by these activities. Unlike Zinacantan, Chamula does not have the option of renting farmland in the Central Depression because these lands are so distant that transportation costs to highland markets are prohibitive. For Zinacantan, transportation costs are balanced by higher yields in the lowlands, making them as profitable as highland tracts. The options available to Chamulans were economic activities which were not linked to the land such as wage labor and furniture manufacturing. Land tenure patterns in Chamula have changed in response to this economic diversification. Land inheritance is partible in both the male and female line since land is not currently economically valuable. Population in Chamula has continued to grow, and Chamula has currently embarked on an aggressive expansionist policy at the expense of neighboring municipalities (Collier 1975: 109-122).

Conclusions

In viewing the history of Spanish-Indian interaction in Chiapas, two points need to be considered: the assimilation of Indian populations in the Soconusco and Central Depression to a Ladino cultural pattern, and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries between Indian and Ladino populations in the highlands. Unfortunately Colonial period documents are silent as to when and how Indian populations assimilated to a Spanish, or a Ladino, cultural pattern. What documentary evidence exists is generally restricted to parenthetical statements, such as when Ximenez

attributes the 1611 epidemic at Copanaguastla to a resumption of idolatrous practices amount the Indians (Xime'nez 1929). More precise information on the time frame of assimilation in these areas is needed. Archaeological investigations of early Colonial sites in the region could yield information on this subject (Lee and Markman 1976).

Nonetheless, the cursory review of the history of Chiapas in the Colonial and modern periods implicates several factors which can be used to explain the assimilation that occurred in the lowland areas and the retention of ethnic boundaries in the highlands. The first and most obvious of these factors is demographic. The impact of 16th century epidemics on aboriginal economic and social structure cannot be overestimated. For example, the Coxoh Maya of the eastern highlands ceased to exist as a distinct cultural group (Lee and Markman 1976). However, the Spanish response to the decline in Indian populations seems to have been the primary cause of eventual assimilation of lowland groups. The Spanish economic strategy of controlling the Indian labor force in the face of its diminishing numbers led to the policy of congregacion, where residual populations were reaggregated into new communities. This led to the simplification of traditional cultural patterns, as subtle cultural differences between groups in the newly aggregated settlements decreased through time.

Premature promotion of individuals to positions of authority, also a result of the population decline, reinforced the trend towards simplification and led to a general leveling of

the indigenous social hierarchy. By the end of the first century of Spanish contact, almost all Indians were referred to as macehuales, or commoners (Wasserstrom 1983). The Soconusco and the Central Depression experienced the greatest population decline, and did not recover as quickly as populations in the highlands. Further, these areas had metal and cacao, two of the most economically viable resources to the conquering Spanish.

During the 17th century, Spaniards holding encomiendas in the Soconusco and Central Depression changed their economic strategy from short-term gain to long-term development as they searched for products that could be produced with a small amount of Indian labor. Products such as cattle, horses, and indigo were ideal because only a small semi-skilled labor force was required for their production supplemented with seasonal, unskilled labor. Control over land was required for the production of these products, and the success of this new economic strategy depended on dispossessing Indian populations of their rights to cultivate in these areas for their own subsistence needs.

Modern ethnographic data from Zinacantan and Chamula indicate that the loss of economically viable land destroys a closed corporate structure of land tenure. Collier's study documents a change in Chamulan society from a traditional pattern of land tenure to a more open "ladinoized" pattern. It is therefore probable that the sequence of economic strategies adopted by the Spanish in response to the 16th century decline in

Indian populations caused the eventual assimilation of residual groups into a Ladino cultural pattern.

The highlands remained relatively unaffected by the 17th century Spanish land acquisitions that occurred in the Soconusco and Central Depression. The relative infertility of the highland tracts made them less attractive to the Spanish than lands in the other two areas. Furthermore, unlike the lowland populations, highland Indian populations were not as severely decimated by disease in the 16th century. During the 17th century, highland populations began to recover from the crash of the preceding century. Highland Spaniards continued to have access to a significantly large labor pool. The repartimiento systems developed to insure that highland labor was efficiently exploited, and that highland labor remained a highland resource. The return of Indians to the highlands after seasonal work in the lowlands was crucial for the continued success of exploiting this labor pool. Ethnic boundaries remained in effect in the highlands because they suited the economic objectives of both highland Indians and Spaniards. The retention of traditional costumes and language served to quickly identify members of the Indian population to both mestizo overseers and Spanish landholders. Indian ethnic markers facilitated social control of the highland labor force by inhibiting Indian escape attempts. In the highlands, the same markers became corporate membership credentials validating rights to certain land tracts and non-agricultural economic activities.

Several lines of evidence from the ethnographic record support this interpretation. The first is the fact that ethnic markers continued to be displayed in the lowlands by highland seasonal workers until the Carranza reforms. These reforms abolished the abuses of the debt-penury system of highland labor recruitment. The use of ethnic markers as a form of social control was no longer necessary. Since displaying these markers in the lowlands did not grant highland Indians access to any lowland resource, they were dropped in favor of Ladino clothing and language. These ethnic markers are readopted when lowland workers return to the highlands (Cancian 1972: 15). This implies that ethnic markers continue to function in the highlands.

The most visible markers of ethnic status currently used in the highlands simultaneously denote both ethnic and municipal affiliation. In highland Chiapas, the municipality to which an Indian is affiliated determines his access to certain highland tracts. Most municipalities specialize in certain economic activities, and ethnic markers validate an individual's right to practice these economic activities in the eyes of outsiders (e.g. other Indians and Ladinos) (Collier 1975: 177). Because of the advantages of municipal (and implicitly, Indian) affiliation in the highlands, it is not surprising that highland Indians feel a stronger identification with their municipality than their ethnic group (Collier 1975: 12, Cancian 1965: 10). This economic function of ethnicity, and the role of ethnic markers, has been observed in other ethnographic contexts (Horowitz 1975, Cohen 1969). The historical record suggests that in the Chiapas

highlands, this basic economic function of ethnicity has a considerable time depth, and was reinforced by Spanish economic strategies throughout the Colonial period.

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Notes

[1] This ethnic identification is still somewhat tentative. The accounts given by Spaniards during the first decade of intrusion into the area are somewhat vague and contradictory.

[2] The encomienda system was established as an attempt to set up a quasi-feudal system in the New World similar to that already extant in 16th century Spain. Individual Spanish conquistadors agreed to take responsibility for military protection and spiritual guidance of the populations held in encomienda in exchange for regular tribute and labor. (see Simpson, G. The Encomienda In New Spain. 1950 University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles.)

[3] In the summer of 1984 I made a reconnaissance of the abandoned town of Copanaguastla. Contrary to the report made by Adams in 1961, neither I nor Michael Blake of the New World Archaeological Foundation could find any evidence that the site was occupied during the Proto-historic period. We hypothesized that at contact the site called Copanguastla by Bernal Diz was probably located on a bluff overlooking the valley where the Colonial site is located. Time did not allow us to test this hypothesis.

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