"A DARK OBVERSE": MAYA SURVIVAL IN GUATEMALA, 1520–1994*

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ABSTRACT. Between 5 and 6 million Maya Indians today constitute roughly half of Guatemala's total population. From the eve of conquest to the present, the collapse, recovery, and growth of the Maya population reveals a trajectory of survival few Native American groups have been able to sustain. A review of archival and published sources indicates an enduring Maya presence from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, a demographic fact that official state institutions like the national census have tended to downplay or have documented inadequately. Accurate, reliable assessment of indigenous numbers thwarts present-day investigations as much as those rooted in the past, for Maya Indians fled far beyond Guatemala's borders during civil strife in the early 1980s and now form sizable communities in Mexico, the United States, and even Canada. *Keywords: Guatemala, Maya Indians, population history, Carl Sauer.*

> *We know of scarcely any record of destructive exploitation in all the span of human history until we enter the period of modern history, when transatlantic expansion of European commerce, peoples, and governments takes place. Then begins what may well be the tragic rather than the great age of man. We have glorified this period in terms of a romantic view of colonization and of the frontier. There is a dark obverse to the picture, which we have regarded scarcely at all.*
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> —Carl Sauer, "Theme of Plant and Animal Destruction in History," 1938

Carl Ortwin Sauer (1889–1975) was a complex, multitalented individual whose research interests covered a range of diverse topics (Kenzer 1987). Contrary to the construction of him in recent years as a figure of conventional, conservative bent (Jackson 1989; McDowell 1994), Sauer's geography abounds in examples of radical, innovative thinking. The latter trait is readily apparent in the inaugural volume of Ibero-Americana, which Sauer coauthored with Donald Brand in 1932. Ibero-Americana for decades served as the showcase for pioneering research on Latin America conducted by scholars associated with the University of California, Berkeley, a forum to which Sauer made several provocative, influential contributions. In their study of Aztatlán, for example, perusal of documentary sources in conjunction with field observation led Sauer and Brand (1932) to conclude that, at the time of Spanish intrusion,

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the area of Mexico under scrutiny supported a population roughly the same size as the one occupying the land in the early twentieth century, which in 1920 was 225,000. Sauer made the same case for all of Northwest Mexico in another Ibero-Americana volume published three years later. In asserting that "aboriginal rural populations and present ones are much the same," Sauer (1935, 32) believed he had reached "not a sensational conclusion, but a quite natural one." Between the late pre-Columbian past and the early twentieth century, however, lay a population history of "disastrous decline and slow recuperation." Sauer's ruminations about the *longue durée* in Mexico, we shall see, apply also to Guatemala (Sauer 1935, 32).

A foray into the field of population history cannot be considered one of Sauer's primary intellectual pursuits, though he did keep sight all along of the catastrophic impact that Spanish colonialism had on Native American welfare, nowhere more tragically rendered than in *The Early Spanish Main* (1966). The "dark obverse" of which Sauer wrote in 1938 has been illuminated bit by bit by a number of scholars, for whom issues of Native American population history have become a central concern (Lovell and Lutz 1995).

In the discussion below we review diverse sets of data relating to Maya survival in Guatemala. We chart, from the eve of conquest to the present, the collapse and eventual recovery of one of Latin America's most fascinating Indian cultures. The population statistics at our disposal should in no way be considered definitive, for all of them indicate an Indian presence without ever being clear and consistent as to whom, precisely, the definition applies. These statistics are displayed in Table I. Any statistic we contemplate must also be appreciated in relation to the sources and methodology of its calculation, as well as the ideological context of which it forms a part. Discussion of these issues, however, we keep 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 (or, in some cases, now living beyond it) should live (Smith 1990, 1991; Cojtí Cuxil 1991, 1995; Warren 1994; Wilson 1995; Fischer and Brown 1996).

Demographic Trends, 1520–1770

At the time of the Spanish conquest, some 2 million Mayas inhabited the area of present-day Guatemala south of the Petén rain forest (Lovell and Swezey 1982). This figure represents about two-fifths of the contact population of all Central America (Denevan 1992; Lovell and Lutz 1995). Spanish intrusion in the 1520s ushered in a century, or possibly more, of demographic collapse. The erosion of Maya lives was precipitous during the first fifty years or so of colonial rule, continued to be drastic for the remainder of the sixteenth century, and may not have abated until the 1630s or 1640s. Many factors—warfare, culture shock, ruthless exploitation, slavery, forced migration, and resettlement—were responsible for the Maya demise and worked together in horrific, fatal unison. Of all the agents jointly at work, however, none

TABLE I—GUATEMALAN POPULATION ESTIMATES, 1520–1994

YEAR	GUATEMALAN TOTAL	MAYA TOTAL	% MAYA	SOURCE
1520	2,000,000	2,000,000	100	Lovell and Swezey 1982
1550	—	427,850	—	Lovell, Lutz, and Swezey 1984
1575	—	236,540	—	AGI, Guatemala 39
1595	—	133,280	—	AGI, Contaduría 969
1625	—	128,000	—	AGI, Contaduría 973
1684	—	242,020	—	Enríquez Macías 1989
1710	—	236,208	—	AGI, Contaduría 973
1770	315,000	220,500	70	Cortés y Larraz 1958; Woodward 1980, 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1778	355,000	248,500	70	Juarros 1936; Woodward 1980, 1983
1804	417,000	292,000	70	Luján Muñoz 1976; García Añoveros 1987; Lutz 1994
1820	500,000	350,000	70	Luján Muñoz 1976; García Añoveros 1987; Pinto Soria 1989; Lutz 1994
1820	595,000	416,500	70	Woodward 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1830	600,000	—	—	Cecilio del Valle 1930
1830	670,000	469,000	70	Woodward 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1840	751,000	525,700	70	Woodward 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1850	847,000	592,900	70	Woodward 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1860	951,000	665,700	70	Woodward 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1870	1,080,000	756,000	70	Woodward 1983; García Añoveros 1987
1880	1,224,602	844,384	68.9[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística [1881]
1893	1,501,145	971,241	64.7[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística [1894]
1914	2,183,166[b]	—	—	U.S. Department of State 1910–1924
1921	2,004,900	1,299,175	64.8[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística 1924–1926
1940	2,400,000	1,336,800	55.7[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística 1942
1950	2,790,868	1,495,905	53.6[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística 1957; Early 1982
1964	4,287,997	1,809,535	42.2[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística 1971–1972; Early 1982
1973	5,160,221	2,260,024	43.8[a]	Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística [1975]; Early 1982
1973	—	2,984,500	—	Scheetz de Echerd 1983
1980	6,873,176	3,230,393	47	Early 1983
1981	6,054,227	2,536,523	41.9[a]	Guatemala, Instituto Nacional de Estadística [1984?]
1988	7,500,000	4,000,000	[52]	Le Bot 1988
1989	8,663,859	—	37	AVANCSO 1992
1991	—	5,423,000	60	Mayer and Masferrer 1979; NACLA 1991; World Bank 1991
1992	9,500,000	—	—	Lovell 1992a
1994	9,433,293	[4,037,449]	42.8[a]	Guatemala News Watch 1995

[a] Like ourselves, Oxlajuuj Keej Maya' Ajtz'iib' (1993), Tzian (1994), and Cojtí Cuxil (1995) are skeptical of the findings of government censuses that officially "diminish" the Maya presence over the course of the past century. Ligorred (1992) and Cuz Mucú (1993) provide useful surveys of the numbers 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 6 million, places present-day Indian numbers in comparative hemispheric context.

[b] This figure represents the number of people alive before the impact of the influenza epidemic of 1918.

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, with some twenty-five episodes relating to more localized, epidemic outbreaks recorded between 1555 and 1618 (Lovell 1992b). Maya depopulation during this period was but one downward spiral of a general, though regionally variable, pattern of New World decline. The Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in all likelihood were the scene of the greatest destruction of lives in human history (Lovell 1992c).

Decline ceased and recovery began at different times and in different places during the first half of the seventeenth century. Table I indicates that the Maya population of Guatemala was larger in the 1680s 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 diocesewide survey 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). The actual Maya population, Cortés y Larraz makes clear, was undoubtedly higher, for his report is full of reference to "infidel Indians" living as "fugitives in the mountains" well beyond the reach not just of Christian fellowship but also of effective enumeration and incorporation into what the archbishop considered "proper society." The archbishop's report, faults and all, allows us to envision the colonial period drawing to a close with Maya Indians constituting some 70 percent of the total Guatemalan population, a proportion that would remain constant well into the next century (García Añoveros 1987; Lutz 1993).

Demographic Trends, 1778–1994

The 1770s are 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. Until the 1770s, therefore, population is estimated essentially by multiplying surrogate categories or indices. The 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) does make such a calculation possible. It also provides a reliable measure of ethnic composition: 70 percent Maya and 30 percent non-Maya (ladinos, mestizos, mulattoes, Spaniards, and blacks). A survey conducted several years after that of Cortés y Larraz calculated the total population in 1778 to be 355,000, which we reckon included a Maya component of about 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 populations. In 1804, we estimate that Spaniards and ladinos numbered approximately 125,000, which suggests an Indian total of about 292,000. By 1820 the two groups had grown, respectively, to 150,000 and 350,000 (Luján Muñoz 1976; García Añoveros 1987; Pinto Soria 1989; Lutz 1994).

The estimates that span the decades between 1820 and 1870 are based on Woodward's reckoning (1983, 7) that total population "increased at an average annual rate of about 1.2 percent during that period." Woodward does not provide many specific data as to differences between Indian and ladino rates of growth. However, 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 legitimacy among Mayas than among ladinos (Woodward 1983; Ortmayr 1991). The Maya preference for marriage as opposed to the ladino propensity toward informal union raises an interesting question: Could matrimonial stability among Mayas translate 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 (Table I). By the time of the first official census, taken in 1880, the Maya had doubled in number since Independence in 1821 (Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística [1881]). According to government sources, it took closer to seventy years, not sixty, for another doubling to occur.

The 1880 census represents another watershed in the data, for it furnishes the first officially verified statement of Maya numbers, 844,384 out of a total population of 1,224,602 (Guatemala, Dirección General de Estadística [1881]). Total Maya numbers, however, include at least three regional estimates (Huehuetenango, Quezaltenango, and Totonicapán), as the 1880 census openly acknowledges. Mayas at that time constituted 69 percent of the national population.

From 1880 on, official reports and censuses show a gradual but seemingly inexorable decline in the percentage of the total Guatemalan population classified as Indian (Table I). We find this intriguing. Is it mere coincidence that the percentage of population considered to be Maya Indian starts to diminish after the coming to power of Justo Rufino Barrios, the enactment by his Liberal government of sweeping land and labor reforms, and the emergence of the "modern" nation-state with all its ladino priorities? To what extent does the falling Maya percentage objectively reflect the "success" of Guatemalan social integration? Could it not instead be the result of statistical manipulation, a self-fulfilling prophecy advanced by non-Maya officialdom long desirous of a whiter, less Indian Guatemala?

On the other hand, falling Maya percentages may be a result of falling Maya fertility brought about by disruptions to sedentary family life caused by strict enforcement of *mandamiento* legislation. Under the terms of *mandamiento,* authorized by President Barrios in 1876, highland Maya communities were required, by law, to send

men and women to work on coffee plantations that had been established on the Pacific piedmont with a view to developing Guatemala's commercial agricultural potential. Investment by domestic and foreign capital resulted in coffee emerging three-quarters of the way through the nineteenth century as Guatemala's principal export crop, a position it has maintained in the national economy until today. By the 1880s, McCreery (1986) informs us, *mandamiento* furnished each year at least 100,000 highland Maya workers for weeks or months at a time. Over the decades, even after the demise of *mandamiento* and other forms of coercion, the numbers involved in seasonal migration grew steadily, approaching 400,000 in the 1960s (Schmid 1967). Maya fertility must surely have been affected by these massive, disruptive movements.

The total Maya population and the total Guatemalan population rise in every national census conducted between 1880 and 1973 (Table I). The proportion of population considered Maya Indian, however, declines: from 69 percent in 1880 to 65 percent 1921, 56 percent in 1940, 54 percent in 1950, 42 percent in 1964, and 44 percent in 1973. Another way of interpreting these figures is to consider that, since 1964, in the eyes of the state the Maya have no longer constituted the majority of the Guatemalan population. They have assumed, instead, status as a demographic minority, one to which, socially, they have been relegated for centuries. From 1964 on, cultural and numerical inferiority coincide.

The 1973 census was the last "previolence" enumeration undertaken in Guatemala. A census was carried out in 1981, but conditions of civil war prevented any accurate count from being made, especially in the countryside (Guatemala, Instituto Nacional de Estadística [1984?]). Between 1980 and 1984 the Maya suffered dreadfully from what Carmack (1988) has aptly termed a "harvest of violence." Some researchers and organizations (Le Bot 1988; NACLA 1991; Tzian 1994; Cojtí Cuxil 1995) counter the statistical and, more lately, ethnic cleansing of the Maya by insisting on higher Maya numbers and a greater Maya percentage than government reckonings indicate. Official records continue to calculate the Maya presence in declining percentage terms (AVANCSO 1992, 24; Orellana González 1992; Tzian 1994). A census conducted in April 1994, which Guatemalan demographers anticipated would reveal a national population of 12 million, for the first time ever inquired about Maya languages and ethnic identity (Ruiz 1994). The results of this census have sparked considerable controversy in the Guatemalan press and have caused no end of confusion, for the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) could only account for 8.3 million inhabitants (Hernández 1995; Salvatierra 1995). To that figure the INE added another 1.1 million (a margin of error of 11.8 percent) to compensate for missing information about nonrecorded inhabitants.

Conclusion

How many Guatemalans are there? How many of them can be considered Maya? How many Guatemalans actually live in Guatemala? How many reside outside the

country, in Mexico, in the United States, and in Canada, where they fled in an attempt to escape the devastating consequences of civil war in the 1980s?

The 1994 census, after correction on the part of the state institution that conducted it, suggests that 9.4 million Guatemalans live in Guatemala, of whom 42.8 percent are said to identify themselves as Maya (Díaz 1995). To these calculations must be added a sizable figure for the number of Guatemalans who live in the United States and Canada, perhaps as many as 1 million people, many of whom are Maya (Burns 1993; Hagan 1994; Jonas 1995). The official count for Guatemalan refugees resident in Mexico is 45,000, the majority of whom are Maya; unofficial counts are considerably higher (Guatemala News Watch 1995). Many uprooted, displaced persons are still within Guatemala itself, which the 1994 census formally acknowledges. We think it reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Guatemalan Mayas must number between 5 and 6 million, not all of them at the moment living on or near the land of their ancestors.

From a historical point of view, the fact that so many Mayas survive is remarkable. They are in number more than twice as many as when Spaniards first invaded Guatemala almost five centuries ago, and more than ten times the Maya population at Independence. These figures indicate a capacity for survival, Sauer's notion of "a dark obverse" notwithstanding, that few Native American populations have been able to sustain. Neither past nor present iniquities can prevent Maya Indians from being a decisive force in the shaping of Guatemalan society in the coming century.

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