

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Among the several Highland Maya language groups the K'ekchi' (Q?eqčiči?, in the orthography used for the body of this thesis) have been less thoroughly studied than most of the others. Yet in terms of numbers, size of territory and isolation from the sphere of machine industry and world commerce they are among the best remaining representatives of Indigenous Americans who retain an autonomous relationship to their habitat.

In order to document and understand the geography of the realm of nature from a K'ekchi' viewpoint and the impact of a K'ekchi' population on its habitat, whether perceived by them or not, the following information was collected. First, the rudiments of the language so that the lexicon of natural history could be understood. Second, the elements of natural phenomena as defined by the K'ekchi' and as defined by scientific measures: weather, landforms, soils, minerals, plants and animals. Third, the crafts by means of which soils and other resources are manipulated to sustain life from year to year and from generation to generation including the culture's arrangements for allocating and transferring rights to resources, especially land. Fourth and finally, the demography and economic activity of one specimen population was collected and by this means the relation of people to habitat through culturally defined behavior was described numerically.

From a synthesis of the foregoing information conclusions are made about the nature and stability of the people-habitat relationship. The population censused happened not to be increasing rapidly, but on the whole the K'ekchi' are clearly increasing in numbers and in area of effective occupation. However, the impact of population increase on the whole of the *Departamento* of Alta Verapaz (and all of the Guatemalan Highlands) is probably being amplified by diversion of superior agricultural land to non-Indian or non-peasant ownership and to pasture or other commercial uses. This, though, is a topic in itself and results from a conjunction of factors outside the scope of a report on one small territory and its inhabitants.

Within their limestone highland context the K'ekchi' would in any case produce a characteristic imprint. To subsist on the maize-beans-squash-chili complex of crops by means of swidden horticulture is to be a consumer of trees, too, and a modifier of the whole of vegetation and wildlife. At present, and presumably through a large stretch of past time, for every hundred K'ekchi' there are approximately twenty-three hectares cleared and planted to maize, another hundred hectares which have been cleared in the last four to ten years, one hundred metric tons' cutting of firewood (dry weight!) each year plus the selected woods to re-house each household every ten to twenty years, and more than a metric ton of selected limestone or dolomite per year dug to make the lime used to prepare maize as food for the hundred. Both the need for animal protein to supplement the diet and the cutting of forest for milpa and firewood

imply impacts on the numbers and representation of non-domestic animal life in any area settled by the K'ekchi', as well. Domestic turkeys and chickens provide some protein supplement, but could not approach the volume of meat presently consumed thanks to the introduction of hybrid pigs and beef cattle.

The traditional way of life of the K'ekchi' and other swidden cultivators appears to make no destructive demands on their habitat provided population remains below some critical number per cultivable area. If the field site population has ceased to increase because it has reached the critical density, a plausible assumption, then for the K'ekchi' kind of land use that density is slightly less than the present 100 persons per square kilometer of cultivable land. 'Cultivable' in this case implies swidden and perennial use in a proportion of roughly four to one, with a rotation of four years or more in fallow for the swidden cultivation. The present density is partly supported by migratory labor outside the *municipio* that provides cash to purchase imported maize. The price of numerical and cultural stability within this context, however, is a death rate to match the birth rate and a spartan standard of material and energy consumption. If and when the cultural values which preserve the K'ekchi' preference for the old and tested (though rugged) way of life collapse, the de- or re-cultured people may or may not reach some other way to come to terms with the soils, plants and animals of their limestone highland before all are degraded to a level far lower than their present worth and numbers.