

CHAPTER XIV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

An inventory of the man-habitat interactions of a culture is difficult to summarize: its details are its essence. Reducing the costs and gains of all activities to a common currency of cash or Calories can be done, but only imprecisely and only with swarms of explanatory comments.

To take the most central example, consider the apparent unprofitability of many Q?eqčiči? families' efforts to grow maize and beans. The appearance might result from errors in my own extrapolation from measurements, but even accurate calculation would describe quantities which are much less precisely known to the heads of a family. Also, my measures reflect only a momentary situation that may not be likely to recur (according to the family's past experience) or that may be embedded in a context of anticipated inheritance (or dispossession) that outlines the family's prospects far more forcefully than the fact of a food deficit.

Non-economic values and norms of behavior are key factors in the culture-ecologic equation, too. To be a Q?eqčiči?, for instance, is to grow and store and dine on one's own maize insofar as is possible; the minute calculation of gain and loss in market transactions does not oblige a Q?eqčiči? to take the same approach to his or her domestic economy. Also, one can draw parallels in terms of margins of self respect and social continuity to match J. K. Galbraith's observation that

the first and most elementary effect of poverty is to enforce attitudes and behavior that make it self-perpetuating. If there is no margin to spare, there is no margin for risk. One cannot try a new variety of wheat or rice that promises an additional twenty per cent yield if there is any chance that it ... might fail altogether. However welcome the extra twenty per cent, it is not worth the risk of not eating for a whole season, the consequences of which tend to be both painful and irreversible.¹

If cultural conservatism has many more dimensions than the economic, then the added dimensions, and the large system of interactions that they imply, may partly nullify the assumption that cultures which have changed little through time are much simpler to study than more 'modern' cultures. However, the reason behind selection of Alta Verapaz and the Q'eqč'i? for study was that they seemed to have larger agricultural and cultural autonomy than other places and peoples in Middle America. Even fragmentary autonomy is better than no autonomy at all when the purpose is to excise a culture and its habitat and account for both as though the rest of the world did not exist. Let no one suppose that the 'conservatism' of Q'eqč'i? culture is an achievement rather than an accident: the potential for changes in land use, especially, is very evident in the field. The barrier to rapid change is not so much obstinate traditionalism as it is a shrewd mistrust of Ladinos and even Gringos bearing gifts, merchandise, and forked tongues. Exploitation of the Indians is a way of life in Guatemala, and Indians as well as *finqueros* know very well that "not the soil but rather the low wages of

¹Galbraith, 1965:3.

our laborors are the wealth of the Coban [district]."²

Although the Q'eqčiči appear not to have experienced recent and drastic changes in the fabric of habitat, economy and society,³ this appearance predicts nothing. The fact that some one hundred persons per square kilometer subsist on my field site without instantly ravaging the land does not prove that a gradual decline in the land's carrying capacity is not going on, nor does it imply that changes in carrying capacity through changed technology will not occur.⁴

With all the foregoing warnings to light the way, a synthesis of the present circumstances in the Q'eqčiči highlands can be offered and some guesses at the likeliest future changes can be made. The most unlikely future of all is one in which no drastic changes are suffered by the Q'eqčiči and their lands! So long as populations continue to increase at 2.4% annually and commercial land use continues to divert the Highlands' superior soils to more profitable (though less intensive) uses than milpa, something will have to give. The number of emigrants to adjacent lowlands will increase, no doubt, but the absentee owners of the prime parts of those lowlands wait like spiders to enmesh the migrants while ambivalent governments

² Higbee, 1947:190.

³ The allusion to Forde, 1934, is deliberate: this remains one of the best early efforts to make more than deterministic sense out of man-habitat relationships.

⁴ On the pitfalls in the concept of carrying capacity, see Street, 1969.

stand by.⁵ The Q?eqčiči? who remain in the Highlands will reduce today's tattered forests to the shrubbery of a sub-minimum rotation swidden cycle in another decade, whether or not anything is done to lower the present rate of natural increase. Ironically, there seem to be no cultural obstacles to a birth control program (supposing the Catholic embargo could be lifted); one man - in his cups - asked me outright if there might not be some means to end the flow of babies while he could yet provide a good home to the five on hand.

The Environmental Impact of Q?eqčiči? Culture

After digesting and simplifying the information which fills earlier chapters it looks as though there are about twenty-three hectares planted in maize, another hundred hectares resting after having been cleared in the last four to ten years, one hundred metric tons (dry weight) of firewood cut, and almost 1.5 metric tons of limestone dug in order to provide and prepare the food for one hundred Q?eqčiči? for one year. While the houses, baskets, ropes, nets, pots and other implements come mainly out of local resources, the largest part of their worth in terms of energy comes from the human effort expended in their making and not directly from the habitat.

In terms of the Calorie equivalent of human effort invested in handcraft articles, a house would be worth about 300,000 Cal.; a basket, 1,000 Cal.; a hammock, 3,240 Cal.; a water jug, 1,000 Cal.; and so forth. These values are calculated from the estimated con-

⁵ Carter, 1969:143-148.

sumption of 3,000 Calories of food per day by a moderately active Indian man (see p. 139, above) in combination with the man-days of work per article recorded in preceding chapters. Total Calorie value would necessarily include the energy content of vegetable materials and of the firewood used to process maguey, pottery and lime.

Calculating the Calorie balance in maize production gives some very interesting results. Supposing that the removal of pericarps makes no significant change in grain weight, then at 2,375 Cal. per kg. of maize at ambient humidity the ratios of workers' food Calories in to harvested maize Calories out in the three cultivation sites were: Koxila, 1:3.6; Caxaneb, 1:3.3; and Saša'an, 1:5.5. The same ratio for our one plot of beans was 1:3.4, supposing a value of 340 Cal. per 100 grams of dry common beans is valid for our crop.⁶

In terms of the relation of the going daily wage to the maize produced for a day's work, at Q0.50 per day our best yield (Saša'an: 7.0 kg., at ambient humidity, per man-day) exceeds the six kilos of maize that fifty centavos will buy in the market although our lesser yields (4.6 kg. per man-day at Koxila and 4.1 at Caxaneb) fall short - but then very few Indian employers pay more than the corresponding Q0.35 to 0.40 daily wage.

In the process of surviving in the traditional way a population of Q'eqč'i? makes some inroad on the population of edible mammals, molluscs, fish, reptiles and birds by taking them for their protein, but this drain must be more than balanced (in sum if not for indi-

⁶Church and Church, 1970:77.

vidual species) by the added productivity of habitats opened up by cutting holes in the cloud forest. And, though the forms may be different, the energy content of food produced by Q'eqčiči' effort but consumed by wild animals is probably greater than that of the wild animal food consumed by the Q'eqčiči' - even with a 90% discount for going one link up the food chain.

Today's diet is said to include more meat than elderly Q'eqčiči's remember eating, most of it purchased beef or pork rather than domestic fowl thanks to the government-pegged price of the nontraditional meats. But this "improvement" in diet is one facet of changes which look very unlike improvements. Pastures are displacing milpa; mice thrive in pasture habitats and prey on Indian maize harvests that barely suffice; meat and more maize must be bought with money, which must be earned; employment favors the better-educated and less scrupulous person who accepts schooling and with it, Ladinoization; and in any case children who spend their time in schools do not spend it working alongside their parents and learning what it is to be Q'eqčiči'.

Economic Equilibrium

For the moment it appears that (with a large margin for error) the returns to labor are comparable regardless of which way an able-bodied man or woman chooses to spend his or her time. Perhaps the meaning of this is that the Q'eqčiči' have taken the marginal profit-

ability of their technology to its final limit.⁷ Despite large errors of estimation in the income from milpa, handcrafts, and migratory occupations, the economic census of the field site showed quite clearly that only a few families were not huddled against the zero net income per adult-equivalent line. From a cynical viewpoint this poverty is no hardship since no beneficial means exists for saving and investing additional money, supposing it could be earned.

The uniformity of net income from time spent on any economic activity makes optimization of resource allocation absurd, unless it can be shown that one activity or another has unexploited economies of scale. This is unlikely since some families specialize in each of the traditional crafts, including milpa, but the only outstandingly rich Indians are userers, shopkeepers, lumber wholesalers, and some pedlars - most of whom fatten at the direct expense of their kinsmen rather than through greater productivity of their labor. The way a Q'eqč'i? spends his working time may more realistically be considered as a function of the set of skills individuals happen to acquire, and this in turn relates to the details of spatial distribution of resources and to family history rather than to market opportunities. The only explicit or implicit optimization made is to take up crafts which dovetail into the fixed parts of the calendar of cultivation, as does potting, or crafts which may occupy any and all spare time, as does the working of lime or maguey. The alternative is to drop agriculture entirely, or to migrate to unhealthy lowland frontiers,

⁷See Schultz, 1964:107.

and with the growing scarcity of heritable land these measures of desperation are being taken by increasing numbers of Q'eqč'i?. But milpa is so integral a part of the culture that the children of tradesmen will surely become Ladinos, while from some accounts the children of immigrants to the lowlands do not often survive.

The Future

Nothing Short of evacuating all non-Indians and placing Guatemala in "cultural quarantine" could preserve Q'eqč'i? or any other Guatemalan Indian culture in an autonomous form recognizably like its present character. Perpetuation of the present caste system with all its shrieking social injustice is about the only likely - though scarcely desirable - alternative. A thorough presentation of the historical roots of this injustice, tying together the Conquest, the Amerindian heritage, and foreign interference, can be found in a recent book by Carlos Guzman B. and Jean-Loup Herbert; the same story without similar documentation appears in an earlier report by Eduardo Galeano.⁸ The irrelevance of Marxian theories to Middle American realities does not invalidate what these authors have to say, though it doesn't make their work any easier to read.

By living with them one learns that the Q'eqč'i? (and other Mayans) are remarkable people. They remain relatively honest, stoic, industrious, perceptive and humorous human beings despite alien domination as long as - and perhaps as cruel as - Turkish domination

⁸ Guzman B. and Herbert, 1970; Galeano, 1969.

of the Balkan countries. Many Qʼeqčiči? are also alcoholic, suspicious, evasive, litigious, and other unpleasant things, but impotence in the face of powerful and unscrupulous Ladinos aggravates these characteristics even if it does not cause them. The fatal Achilles' heel, however, is the same as it was in the 16th Century and the same throughout most of the Americas then as now: non-cooperation. So long as a people can be divided they can be dominated, their habitat expropriated, and their culture erased on a whim. The Indians of Guatemala, including the Qʼeqčiči?, seem to be supremely divisible.

But even though Guatemala and all its Indians will surely be very much changed in another hundred years, the information presented here may have a value quite apart from the antiquarian kind. One way or another, people must come to terms with the problems of survival.

The Qʼeqčiči? seem to have managed to find one of the many possible solutions, though not the ultimate and not permanent thanks to its incompatibility with a competing way of life. But competitive success in the short run is no indicator of potential for long-run survival; if anything, the opposite must be more likely. The truth may be that the price of long life as a species will be the substitution of small joys for the big thrills.