

Esteban Haeserijn V.

ENSAYO DE LA GRAMATICA DEL K'EKCHI'
Prologue: trans. M.R. Wilson

Many people, especially those with a commitment to social justice, deplore the fact that a large part of the population of Guatemala, mainly made up of Indians, lives in poverty and backwardness, "on the margins of culture" as they sometimes say. Study of the causes behind the Indians' predicament and search for methods of solving it make up what I will call the INDIAN PROBLEM.

The present circumstances of the Indians is nothing but the legacy of the initial relationship between foreign conquerors and conquered natives. In the passage of centuries the basic conqueror--captive relationship has been maintained, and only the surface appearance has changed in the transition from oppressors--oppressed to exploiters--exploited to Ladino--Indian.

I

During the colonial era the Indian population lived under the paternalistic protection of the government of Spain, which tried to protect them from oppression and exploitation on the part of Spanish colonists by means of a series of protective laws. Throughout them one senses the spirit of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas; it was he who inspired the first of these laws, promulgated in Barcelona in the year 1542.

II

The era of protectionism ended with independence, and liberalism reigned without restriction; in this period the Ladinos made their laws without ever taking into account the interests of the indigenous peoples. Indians were simply ignored--blanked out--in a state of affairs which culminated with the declaration of the Guatemalan delegate at the Congreso Indigenista Interamericano in Panamá when he said that there were no Indians in Guatemala and therefore his country had no Indian problem. This was the pure and simple negation of the problem current around twenty years ago.

I do not know whether studies have been made of the relation between vices and paranoic crimes on one hand, and the state of living neglected and scorned on the other, but I suspect a tie of cause and effect.

At present no-one accepts the declaration mentioned above, yet in the practices of various organizations the negative spirit of decades ago still lives, and people still act as though Indians were nonexistent.

III

Plainly enough, however, negation of the problem offers no solution at all; instead, it stands in bald contradiction with reality. Consequently, many people only considered it a political declaration for outside consumption and in their own locale accepted the existence of an autochtonous race with its own culture --all the while proposing that this culture should disappear as soon as possible. Indians should become incorporated, should be integrated, according to their belief.

This solution can be termed INTEGRATION, a term signifying that Indians as such have no right to exist. They must be obliged to adopt the national culture: live as Ladinos, and become ladinoized. Education stands out as the principal means to this end. Children and adults are pushed into courses, even by force, in order to incorporate them into the national (that is, occidental) life and culture. (Note that the system based on integration in no way takes account of the indigenous cultures.)

The program of integration is in essence unjust, since it fails to extend equal rights to all the people, and is full of unfortunate consequences. Experience has demonstrated that education, 'integration-style', has failed, and thousands of Quetzals spent on it have been wasted. The great majority of graduates of such schools have either failed to assimilate a single element of the outside culture, or have returned to their ancestral culture with just a germ of nonconformity in their souls so that they cannot even live in the peace and contentment enjoyed by their ancestors. The rest neither wish to, nor are psychologically able to, live where they were born and migrate to the cities, there to increase the number of uprooted malcontents and to live in hovels in the ravines of Guatemala City.

The importance of materialism in the national-occidental culture, furthermore, implies that new-made Ladinos will have desires which it will be economically impossible to satisfy. People thus frustrated will have a strong temptation to take by force that which the society into which they have been integrated refuses them, or cannot supply. How bitterly humiliated must a ladinoized Indian feel when he finds himself still unaccepted in Ladino society.

History itself should have taught us that integration brings disorder, revolution and epochs of chaos. Individuals or populations which change cultures lose the values of their own culture and, from the new culture, accept vices before anything else. Between the point of dropping one's own culture and the point of taking up another there is also a lapse of time in which there remain no principles of stability, no firm rules to guide one's acts, and a person may lend himself to any disorder or follow any leader who preaches revolution against the society in which he finds no place. In Guatemala it will not be the pure Indians from the hills who will join dangerous movements, it will be the rootless ones. And the faster that integration, i.e. ladinoization, proceeds, the greater will be the increase in delinquency as a first phase in general disorder.

An established society has a capacity for absorbing, gradually, a certain number of individuals who change cultures. However, when one obliges 70% of the population to change culture simultaneously the shock will be so tremendous that it will be impossible to avoid catastrophe.

IV

Integration pure and simple is an unsatisfactory solution to the Indian problem, so another is being tried; this we may call MITIGATED INTEGRATION. Mitigated integration consists of a system which seeks integration of the Indians, too, but through more pedagogic means, and it places some value on indigenous culture.

The school of bilingual teachers in Chichicastenango, for example, and the Instituto de Alfabetización en Lengua Quiché, operate with the system of mitigated integration.

Mitigated integration is an incomplete and unsatisfactory solution to the Indian Problem since it, too, fails to accept indigenous culture with all its values and with full rights.

It likewise focusses on the problem from the slant of Latin tradition: an Indian is a citizen of second class; it is he who is responsible for his circumstances--notwithstanding historic facts to the contrary--and he who must become integrated, and he who must change.

Mitigated integration stands in contradiction with itself. In effect, the proponents of this system have hunted diligently and even with affection for indigenous values which need to be preserved, yet have rejected the prime means for preserving these values: the Indian languages.¹ Language is more than a means for communicating ideas; it is the bond among, and the container for, the features which make up a culture. The language is the nation.

Indigenous culture, with all its values, is indispensable for the "development" of the Indian population. It is the base on which they can best receive, assimilate, or graft positive elements from other cultures. Such a process is a present fact in Europe where, through the economic structure and modern means of communication, an extraordinary cultural interchange has been produced without fear of disturbances because each culture assimilates elements from others without abandoning its own essence. Just as social injustice has not been removed with a few crumbs thrown to the starving, in the material field, so there is no social justice in a few values conceded to an indigenous culture, in the cultural field.

V

In all [both] of the preceding solutions there runs a thread, a basic idea the the Conquistadors maintained from the time of the Conquest: Indians have no rights except those which they, the conquerors, judge it well to concede to them out of benevolence or necessity. A generous effort and a sensitive spirit of justice

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is needed to free the mind from this cloak of prejudice. Mitigated integration does prepare minds, freeing them to some extent, in such a way that one can consider it as a favorable, if transitory, phase in the evolution of the genuine solution: complete emancipation.

Emancipation takes as its primary principle the historical fact that Ladino society, spiritual heir to the mentality of the Con-quistadors, is responsible for the present status of the Indian population. It is therefore this society which must change its opinion of the Indians, allowing them all their rights--de jure et de facto--and no longer holding them in a pariah caste. "Nothing less than equality is just among equals. Egalitarian laws are inadequate for resolution of the social inequality (of the Indians) which is the result of centuries of exploitation."²

Emancipation should be understood to mean that native cultures have as much validity in Indian areas as the national-occidental culture has in the capital. In Indian regions, the Indian language should be the official language in schools and courts, churches and temples, and in streets and offices. A sick Indian has a right to the comfort of being attended and consoled in his mother tongue, a birthright of anyone in the world. Native costume should be displayed rather than western modes, not only in museums and traditional processions but in streets and fiestas as an authentic and live value in the indigenous culture.

Equality in deed and law must be upheld in all public and official activities. Plainly enough, economic emancipation must go hand-in-hand with cultural emancipation in order for the liberation of the Indians to be complete and effective.

The application of justice within a system of emancipation should bring a favorable reaction from the Indians. No longer would there be anything to keep them in isolation; they could put aside their timid behavior, acquire a spirit of work and initiative, and feel happy to live in a land which could be called their home.

² Alfonso Caso.

With emancipation, the unfortunate consequences of the above-mentioned systems [of full and mitigated integration] would be avoided. Moreover, official recognition of the cultures of various ethnic groups might favorably influence relations among the several Central American nations, where Hispanic culture itself has evolved along somewhat divergent paths. Yet another bonus would be decongestion of the capital city, because emancipation should imply decentralization of government and distribution of industry over the whole country. How much better the present situation of the Indians [and the nation] would be if the thousands and thousands of Quetzales uselessly spent on integration had been used for emancipation.

Those who will be first to oppose emancipation will be the more or less Ladinoized Indians; they think that by becoming Ladinos they will no longer suffer the contempt dealt to Indians. But given a program of emancipation there will no longer be room for cultural prejudice of any sort, since by emancipation is understood the appreciation and legal recognition of Indian culture and all its values.

In face of the impossibility of fighting the concept of full emancipation with arguments, people fall back on sophisms inspired by outdated liberalism, antiquated conservatism or else exaggerated Hispanophilia. Each such objection is based on an erroneous conception of indigenous culture. Culture, as the word is used here, signifies all human activity, individual or collective, which tends to improve the way of life in a given environment. One must stay in the mountains or the Verapaces [Alta & Baja Verapaz] to learn that the indigenous culture is more appropriate there than the national-occidental culture.

There is one objection which at first sight seems well-founded: cultural emancipation runs counter to national unity, raising the spectre of a nation divided and torn apart. With about as much justification one could call Guatemala, with her diverse cultures, a garden with diverse yet complementary flowers.

Moreover, unity of culture gives no guarantee against secession, nor does diversity of cultures necessarily bring division of a country. For this geographic phenomenon there are several cases in point: Switzerland, France, Belgium, Spain, China, Russia, the United States and many other nations that

harbor several cultures. History and current events show us that in all those countries where justice truly reigns, national life has suffered no disturbance on account of the diverse cultures sheltered in it.

As typical examples we might cite Switzerland and, to pick another former Spanish colony, the Philippine Islands. Ramón Magsaysay, the memorable second president of the Islands, defeated the H.U.K. guerillas not just by arms but, more significantly, through his politics of socio-cultural justice, in which he continued the work begun by Pres. Quezón. Eight indigenous languages were recognized by his government, Tagalog being only the principal one among them.

Yet another objection admits the justice of emancipation in principle, but foresees difficulties in its realization on account of the multiplicity of languages [in Guatemala]; some people count up to 21. This is indeed a problem. But difficult problems, when they involve justice, must be overcome. Their difficulty is in no event a pretext to excuse injustice.

More to the point, just what is meant by language in this context? In no country does the manner of speech in each municipality qualify as a "language"; these variations are dialects. The Mayance languages in Guatemala can in fact be reduced to only four groups: Quiché-Kakchiquel, Pocomam-K'ekchi'-Pocomchi', Mam and Chol. The number of speakers of the latter is very small. Norman A. McQuown says that "the Indians of Guatemala are very closely related linguistically."³

Confusion might be considerably reduced if all authors would use the same alphabet. For instance, in K'ekchi' some people write: Vaquel for Bakel

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Another objection which might be offered is that education within a system of emancipation would prepare people only for employment in a local area. But it is obvious that anyone who aspires to a national post must in any event know more than just his native language; secondary education would be the place to prepare students to carry on their studies at a national level.

VI

For eight years I have continued my study of the K'ekchi' language, out of a deep desire to contribute something for the good of the Indians and Guatemala, my second homeland. The data I have collected have been organized so that this work at last can be printed on my own hand press. I hope that the people who want to communicate with the Indians of Alta Verapaz and parts of Itzabal, Baja Verapaz and the Petén will find this book useful as a guide through the labyrinth of the K'ekchi' language.

Despite its failings, [this work] may have scientific value. At the least, this work's existence means that there is something that can be improved. Toward that end all advice, comments and corrections will be received most gratefully.

VII

The young Justo Rufino Ac Sam helped me in the writing of this work very patiently. I also found the Diccionario de la Lengua K'ekchi' by William Sedat to be extremely useful, and likewise Li ac Chak'rab [The New Testament, translation by The Summer Institute of Linguistics], from both of which I have taken many examples.

To all these people go my sincere thanks, as they do to Mr. Salomón Medinilla Mendoza, who reviewed a large part of the Spanish text, and to Mr. Esteban Pop Caal, who worked on several sections of the appendices.

Among the list of meritorious names we must include mention of the early specialist in K'ekchi', Mr. Pablo Wirsing y W., who provided the information on numbering.

[the text above closely approximates my typescript translation ms.; the following pages place the same content in the Times typeface of the original book]

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[trans. Michael R. Wilson]

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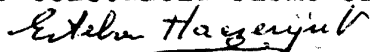
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Convento,
San Juan Chamelco A.V.
Guatemala.**