

THE IDABAEZ: UNKNOWN INDIANS OF THE CHOCO COAST

John Howland Rowe

In the summer of 1948 I had the opportunity to examine a printed copy of the often cited but seldom read Corónica de la Religiosissima Prouincia de los Doze Apóstoles by Diego de Córdoba Salinas, published in Lima in 1651. The book is a bibliographical rarity. The copy I consulted belonged to the Franciscan Colegio de Misiones in Popayán and is now preserved in the Colonial Art Museum of the University of the Cauca, where it was made available to me through the courtesy of the Director of the Museum, Prof. Gregorio Hernández de Alba. Córdoba Salinas' work is a rambling history of the Peruvian province of the Franciscan order, and is one of the longest and dullest crónicas de convento ever written. Buried among its biographies of prelates, monks, and nuns, however, there are two detailed accounts of Franciscan missionary enterprise of great ethnographic interest, based on written reports furnished to the author by the missionaries themselves. One is a history of the great Panatagua mission of the upper Huallaga River in Peru, and the other is a short account of the ephemeral Franciscan mission to the Idabaez Indians of the Chocó coast effected in 1632-46. This second item is especially important, since so far as I know it has never been cited in modern anthropological literature and the Idabaez are entirely unknown to modern anthropology.

The section of the Pacific coast of South America between the Gulf of Panama and Buenaventura, Colombia, has a well established reputation as a hot, rainy, disease-ridden area offering few rewards to the explorer, and even today it is remarkably little known.¹ It was explored very superficially by Andagoya, Pizarro and Almagro in their search for Peru in the years 1522 to 1528 and then was deliberately bypassed by most later travellers. The Bishop of Lima, Francisco Solano, later sainted, was shipwrecked there about 1590 on a voyage from Panama to Peru. He had the good fortune to reach land at a bay in 6°20' north latitude which one of its more recent explorers has called "the finest natural harbor in Pacific Colombia"², a deep, sheltered anchorage with clean sandy beaches instead of the swamps and mangrove thickets so common elsewhere on this coast. A rescue party took the bishop off after a stay of some two months but the bay is still known as the Bahía de Solano in memory of the saint's adventure.³

The place names along the Chocó coast have changed a number of times as a result of intermittent exploration. Few of the names given by Pizarro and Almagro were still in use in the seventeenth century and few of the seventeenth century ones remain on modern maps. The name of the Bahía de Solano is almost the only old name which has lasted and it serves as an important reference point for locating some of the more ephemeral ones.

In the early seventeenth century the part of the coast centering

on the Bahía de Solano was visited occasionally by traders from Panama who applied the general name of La Gorgona to the region. This Gorgona on the mainland is quite distinct from the Island of Gorgona in about 3° north latitude. The name of the island is the older, going back to Pizarro's time; why the same name was applied to a distant area on the mainland I have no idea. The traders also christened a few coasting landmarks on the mainland shore: Ensenada de las Aguadas, Puerto Claro, and Las Anegadas. These names still appear on some eighteenth century maps.⁴

The account of the Idabaez mission which Córdoba Salinas gives is based on three written reports which he collected from people connected with the mission, and on conversations with other Franciscans involved in the enterprise; the chronicler had never been to the Choco himself. The written documents which he cites are: 1) a description of La Gorgona and its natives by P. Fray Matias de San Francisco, which Córdoba Salinas reproduces verbatim (1:185-6) and which is translated below; 2) a report by Fr. Diego de San Marcos dealing with the destruction of the mission in 1646, of which our chronicler quotes some paragraphs (1:192); 3) an account sent at the chronicler's request by Fr. Esteban de Yriarte Mazquirán, "Padre Guardián de Panamá, Predicador, y Vicario Provincial de Tierra Firme" (1:192). Córdoba Salinas also had a chance to discuss the whole matter with P. Fr. Xinez de Dueñas, the originator of the project, who was living in the monastery at Lima while the chronicle was being written (1:184). The account is thus exceptionally well documented.

The idea of establishing a mission in La Gorgona occurred first to P. Fr. Xinez de Dueñas when he was Guardián of the Franciscans in Panama. A local trader named Francisco Martín told him of a trip in which he visited Las Aguadas to trade with the natives, who came to the beach in canoes. Fr. Xinez got permission from the Audiencia and the Bishop of Panama and sailed for La Gorgona with four Franciscans on March 6, 1632, anchoring six days later where Martín had met the Indians. Many Indians came out to meet the party in canoes, transported them to land in a friendly manner, and built them an arbor (ramada). No one in the party understood their language. The friars took possession of the land in the name of the king and in the presence of a scrivener, set up a big cross, said mass, and named the bay Solano. Then they reembarked and followed the coast for eight leagues to another bay which they named San Antonio. The beach there was covered with Indians armed with bows and arrows, as if on guard. The Spanish party landed anyway and was welcomed by the Indians, who again built an arbor for the visitors. Another mass was said there. Thence the expedition returned to Panama to report (1:183-4).

A second expedition was immediately organized, and Fr. Xinez returned to La Gorgona early in April with P. Fr. Gerónimo de Figueroa and Fr. Matias de San Francisco. They were well received by the Indians and built a house and church at the Bay of San Antonio, where Fr. Xinez said the first mass on April 25, 1632, with a congregation of 400 Indians.

They named the church La Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Señora. Fr. Kinez then returned to Panama leaving his two companions in charge of the mission. His report was well received by the Audiencia, which voted a sum to buy a service for the church.

The mission continued for twelve years with various Franciscans taking part. Córdoba Salinas mentions as especially industrious workers Fr. Matias de San Francisco and Fr. Juan de San Antonio, both of whom learned the language. They came from near Seville in Spain and had labored previously in the Panataguas mission. The mission followed the regular Franciscan pattern. The missionaries took along knives, fishhooks, beads and other small objects to give the Indians; set up churches, organized schools, and tried to persuade the Indians to settle in villages and submit to "civilized" government. About 1640 the mission had its greatest triumph. In a space of less than three months some 8,000 Indians came in from the territory within 30 leagues of the mission, and the friars settled them in four towns, in a circuit of two or three leagues, so that there would be room for their fields of maize and plantains. They had over 300 children in their school at that time (1:185-7).

The Idabaez mission soon suffered the same fate as all the other tropical missions: epidemic disease, the ravages of which were made possible by the fatal policy of gathering the Indians into towns in a wet climate without sanitation. In the first big epidemic, two to three thousand Indians died, and in 1642 Fr. Matias died also. Fr. Juan was sick himself and returned to Panama to recover, leaving the mission unattended (1: 187-8).

In 1644, Fr. Juan went back to restore the mission with Fr. Diego de San Marcos. On their arrival at Las Anegadas they found the settlement, which had had some 400 inhabitants, deserted. They were told that some neighboring Indians had raided the place and that the inhabitants had moved for safety to the banks of the rivers Paria and Pobo' (these names have disappeared from modern maps) not far from the sea.

The friars moved the church to the Paria River, where the mission continued for two years more until the Indians' patience was exhausted by another epidemic, this time of some respiratory infection (tos y pechuguera). The Indians consulted their own medicine man (medico, y curandero, a quien propiamente llamamos hechizero) whose title was tubete in their language. He told them that the friars were responsible for the epidemics (as they certainly were, in a sense), and that Fr. Juan de San Antonio had the power to command death to kill them. An unconverted warrior named Hijuoba, accordingly, approached Fr. Juan to ask him for some fishhooks and killed him with one blow of an axe on June 16, 1646. Then he killed four Christian Indians and burned the church and mission house. The bodies were thrown into the river. The avenging party then descended on San Antonio, where they killed two Spaniards, one an interpreter (evidently there were others besides friars at the mission). One was strangled with a cord and the other killed

by lance thrusts. Fr. Diego fled into the forest where he hid for seven days; then he went over to the other settlement where he saw the burned church and was sighted by the Indians, who pursued him to the beach. At the shore he was lucky enough to meet a boat which had just arrived from Panama bringing Fr. Francisco González to join the mission; the crew rescued Fr. Diego and they all returned to Panama.

On learning of the revolt, the president of the Audiencia, Don Juan de Vega Bazán, despatched two gunboats with Fr. Diego and fifty Spaniards and Christian Indians to capture the rebels. The punitive expedition put in at Puerto Claro and Bahía de Solano, killed four Indians, including Hijuoba, and captured 25 more who were taken back to Panama and jailed. Their fate is unknown but is not difficult to imagine (1:190-192).

So ended the mission to La Gorgona. I know of no further record of Franciscan activity there, and the whole region relapses into obscurity. The next missionary work in the Chocó was organized by the Jesuits, working down from the Colombian mountains to convert the Chocó tribes of the Atrato and San Juan rivers in the late seventeenth century, and their operations do not seem to have reached the coast of La Gorgona.

The Indians of La Gorgona are called Idabaez by Córdoba Salinas, probably following Fr. Esteban de Yriarte; Fr. Matias de San Francisco calls them simply "Indians of La Gorgona". The latter, who was one of the two missionaries who learned their language, has left the following sketch of their customs which I translate in full from Córdoba Salinas, 1: 185-186:

"On this day, the 21st of October of the year 1636, the state of the reduction and conquest of the Indians commonly called 'of La Gorgona' is as follows. Because of unforeseen difficulties it has been possible to found only one town, between the banks of a branch of a river and the sea, in which there is a church and three priests of the Order of our Father St. Francis. Fifty-two persons have been baptized. About 200 souls meet to learn the Doctrine and the Catechism, out of a desire to receive the water of baptism.

"Nearly 500 persons come as friends to visit and talk to the friars. The number of Indians of different nations in the general area exceeds 20,000 in a stretch of 20 leagues and it is presumed that there are many more inland.

"The quality of this people is as remarkable as any known in all the nations that have existed. They have no king, chief, governor or captain whom they recognize as their superior. They give obedience to no one. When sons and daughters are somewhat grown they have no respect for their parents but rather despise them, leaving them, forgetting them and refusing to obey them. They have no village, city or state. Their way of life is nomadic (a fuer de alarbes) in the open country and in

the hills, twenty or thirty together in thatched huts. They sleep and rest in hammocks, near open fires in hot country.

"They have no God, idols or huacas (shrines), and have no use for ceremonies. They deny immortality and believe that everything ends with life. They drink, and hold drunken parties, but do not fall down, perhaps because their drink is less strong than wine or chicha. All of them go naked, men and women, and they bathe twice a day in the rivers and the sea. They eat the products of their hunting and fishing: monkeys, birds, turkeys, and fish from the sea, which they enter for fishing. They have an abundance of plantains, avocados, guavas, pacay, mamey, chili pepper and other fruits which are plentiful in the land, especially at certain seasons. They make slash and burn clearings to harvest the maize which they plant in their districts, as they choose, and from it they make their bread. The meat of birds or animals they smoke to make it last like dried mutton. They make presents and offer toasts to one another, but they will not come indoors, a matter about which they are very careful.

"They have two or more wives apiece, and a man is considered more powerful, not if he is braver or nobler or richer but if he has more wives, children and relatives. They are very selfish, especially in their dealings with the Spaniards and missionaries, and they carry this selfishness to such an extreme that if they are given worldly possessions, even the choicest gifts, they will not give a plantain to their benefactor without profit and payment; indeed, the more one does for them the greater grows their ingratitude and selfishness. They have little determination, being rather cowards and lazy, and their occasional wars among themselves are rarely effectual as they have no commander and each man aspires to the position. Their usual weapons are arrows which they trim with deadly poison. Their language is easier than others, as the words end always in a vowel. They do not mine, weave, or make anything with their hands as the rest of the world's peoples do; they are given over always to idleness, except as we have said when they make their clearings to sow maize in order to secure the year's food supply. They have no coin, exchange or business relations among themselves but are content to eat, swim, hunt and fish.

"They are superstitious and obsessed with omens, believing obstinately in dreams and blaming their deaths and ill fortunes on the "blowers" (sopladores) as they call the Indian witch-men, because some serpent or bird spoke to them or appeared to them. When they die, the corpse is burned in a bonfire and they keep the bones and ashes so that the nearest relatives can drink them later on.

"The land is very rich in gold, and inland in certain places there are abundant supplies and very pure. It occurs in the rivers

and is extracted from the sands; the slaves that have been brought from that area tell many tales of it.

"Because this people is all of this condition of life, and because up to now we have had no interpreter and the people are widely scattered and addicted to living in the bush, it has not been possible to do more, and the small settlement with its church and teaching the doctrine has wrung drops of blood from the friars."

In attempting to place the Idabaez of the above account in the anthropological picture of northwestern South America, I have asked two questions. First, is any other tribe reported in the same area? And second, how similar is Idabaez culture to the previously known cultures of southern Panama and the Chocó?

The answer to the first question appears to be that no other tribe is reported in the La Gorgona area before the nineteenth century and that modern travellers have assumed that the Indians seen there belonged to the Emperá tribe. The Emperá or "True Chocó" are closely related linguistically and culturally to the Catió and Chamf of Antioquia and Caldas and to the Noanamá or Nonamá Chocó of the lower San Juan drainage. All four groups speak languages of the Chocó family and are commonly referred to as "Chocó Indians". Norden-skiöld and Wassén have studied the Emperá in recent years and conclude that they are probably newcomers to the coast. Their canoes are adapted to river rather than coastal navigation and they have borrowed Spanish words to designate the whale, the dolphin and many marine fish. Their ancestors are reported occupying the Atrato River drainage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and they probably moved out to the coast as part of a dispersion resulting from the pressure of white and negro settlement along the Atrato, a dispersion which took Emperá groups up into southern Panama and down to the coast below Buenaventura. Nordenskiöld found about 500 Empera on the Sambu River in southern Panama and about 1000 on the River Baudo just south of the Gorgona country. He did not visit the Bahía de Solano himself and assumed that whatever Indians were there were Empera also. Other visitors simply report "Indians" or "Choco Indians" and give no data by which they can be identified.

The northwestern part of the Empera expansion has been into territory evacuated by the Cuna, a numerous tribe whose language is classified in the Chibcha family. The Cuna now inhabit central Darien and the Atlantic coast from the San Blas Islands to the Gulf of Uraba. Nordenskiöld cites Empera traditions, the evidence of place names, and the seventeenth century travellers Dampier and Wafer to show that the Cuna formerly occupied the Pacific coast at least as far south as the River Jurado ("River of the Cunas" in Empera) on the Colombian side of the Colombia-Panama border. There is no evidence that the Cuna occupation ever extended to the area of Gorgona, however.⁴

The predecessors of the Cuna on the Atlantic coast were probably the Cueva, a people known principally from a sixteenth century description by Oviedo y Valdés. Lehmann and others have claimed that the Cueva were ancestral to the modern Cuna, but I am not impressed by the linguistic and cultural arguments advanced to support this theory. Cueva territory is too remote from La Gorgona for it to be likely that the latter was ever under Cueva occupation.⁶

In comparing Idabaez culture with the cultures of other peoples of the area, the comparison should be with contemporary cultures to be valid. Unfortunately, contemporary information on the Emperá and Cuna is fragmentary and scattered and, as we have already noted, the best account of the Cueva belongs to a period a hundred years earlier. A documented comparison must await further work with the sixteenth and seventeenth century histories, and I hope to be able to offer one at a future date. My superficial impression is that Idabaez culture differs from all neighboring ones in its greater lack of formality as well as in specific content.

Certainly Idabaez culture is completely distinct from that of the sixteenth century Cueva and the modern Emperá and Cuna. The Cueva, for example, had an elaborate class society and interred their dead. The Cuna use hammocks, but the Emperá sleep on platform beds which they build in excellent houses raised on piles. The Emperá also make good pottery and baskets. Their social organization is based on patrilineal clans, and they believe in two souls, both of which go on living after death. The Cuna have powerful chiefs, weave hammocks on looms, and have a system of picture writing by which they keep track of an extensive ceremonial literature.⁷

Only one word of the Idabaez language is preserved: tubete, medicine man. The following words for medicine man occur in the languages of neighboring areas:

- Cuna nele (hechicero, adivino). Pérez Kantule, 1938, p. 667.
- Emperá haipana (curandero, brujo). Wassén, 1935, p. 41; Rivet, 1943-4, p. 311.
- Cueva tequina (medico o maestro). Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55, bk. 29, chap. 26, vol. 3, pp. 126, 127.
- Cayapa mí-rū-kū (magician). Barrett, ms., texts A and C.
- Colorado pone (Zauberer). Seler, 1902b, pp. 33, 36.
- Esmeraldas pula (brujo). Seler, 1902a, p. 60.

The last three languages are or were spoken in western Ecuador. None of the words listed resembles tubete and hence this word indicates nothing with regard to the affiliations of the Idabaez.

Some archaeological work has been done in the old Gorgona area by Victor Oppenheim and the results are most interesting. He reports one large cemetery at Bahía de Solano and another nearby at Bahía Utría. The graves in this area are dug two meters deep. Pottery and stone specimens were collected from the surface and have been described by Recasens; the pottery from Solano is coiled redware with sand temper and simple incised and punctate designs. The stone objects included a mano and several celts which had been shaped by flaking and then partly polished. Celts from other Chocó sites are usually polished all over.⁸

If the Idabaez drank the ashes and bones of their dead, the graves found can hardly be their work. Possibly these cemeteries belong to an Emperá population which succeeded the Idabaez. The pottery and unusual celts might belong to either culture; Fray Matias' statement that the Idabaez do not make anything with their hands should probably be taken with a grain of salt.

The evidence to hand is scanty and largely negative, but it certainly suggests that the seventeenth century population of the Choco coast in the Bahía de Solano area formed a cultural unit distinct from the modern Empera population and from all other known peoples of southern Panama and northwestern Colombia. It is quite possible that more information regarding the Idabaez could be found among the Panama papers in Spanish archives, particularly in the records of Franciscan missions. In addition, it would be well worth while for someone to visit the area. The modern travellers who mention seeing Indians around Bahía de Solano have always assumed that they were Emperá but no one has made sure of it. The Idabaez may, of course, be extinct, but it is not impossible that a remnant of them might still be found in their ancient territory of La Gorgona.

FOOTNOTES

1. "...the Pacific coast of Darien, Colombia and northwestern Ecuador has for the most part always lain below the horizon of steamships. It is still the least known continental seacoast in the world." Murphy, 1941, p. 4.
2. Murphy, 1939a, p. 9-10.
3. Mendiburu, 1874-90, vol. 7, pp. 357-359; Otero, 1905, pp. 31-32, 112. Most of this information probably goes back to Córdoba Salinas, 1630, a work which I have not seen.
4. Córdoba Salinas, 1651, bk. 1, chaps. 30-31, pp. 1:183-193; Moreno y Escandón, 1937.
5. Nordenskiöld, 1928, pp. 302-303; Wassén, 1935, p. 168. These references cover both the Emperá and the Cuna. See also Murphy, 1939b.
6. Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55, bk. 29, chaps. 26, 28, 31, etc.; vol. 3. Lehmann, 1920, vol. 1, pp. 96-124.
7. The data on the Emperá and Cuna are taken from Nordenskiöld, 1928; those on the Cueva are from the chapters of Oviedo y Valdés cited in footnote 6.
8. Recasens and Oppenheim, 1944, pp. 352-3, 356-7, 375-8, 391-4, and plate Vlll.

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