INFLUENCE OF AGRARIAN COLONIZATION ON THE INDIGENOUS TZELTAL COMMUNITY AT OCTEN, CHIAPAS[1]

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The Mexican revolution of 1910 and the subsequent years of guerrilla warfare and banditry, brought dissolution of the family ties throughout the country. By 1931 Mexico recognized a need to find land for the wandering homeless and with the increase in the population and the beginnings of industrialization arose a greater need for agricultural products. By 1932 an agrarian movement was well underway. Its major intention was to give land to the homeless and make a larger portion of the population self-supporting.

Agents for the agrarian movement were sent throughout Mexico, offering benefits under the new Ejido land divisions. People were to have a chance to begin again, each man for himself but living together and producing on a communal basis.

The type of people gathered together were of all kinds, and followed a revolution; the fact of homelessness or lack of work did not indicate degeneracy or poor quality of workmanship. On the contrary, many of the people who entered into the colonization were those who had been land holders or overseers on plantations. There were of course many who had been so-called "revolutionaries," that is, men who, as boys, had left home and joined wandering bands of marauders, but even these enthusiastic with the new project, entered into the movement with good will. The agrarian settlement appeared to be succeeding in its land reform.

My work with the Tzeltal of Octen began in 1936, after they had been approximately four years in colonization on the new site in the mountains of Chiapas. For twelve consecutive years I spent each summer in the vicinity of Octen. During this period I worked on a report for the Instituto Nacional de Historia y Antropologia de Mexico and for a time on a Wenner-Gren Foundation grant. In 1954 I went to live on a plantation in that area and was able to make a continuous study of them until September 1958. This June I have returned to the Octen district to complete this and other studies.

In observing many agrarian colonies in Southern Mexico over a twenty year period, I have found that the pattern of development follows almost identical trends. I use the colonia at Octen as a typical example of the result of agrarian colonization among indigenous groups. Although my study has been specialized in Octen, which is a Tzeltal community, observations of other groups of predominantly Ladino types indicate that the general result is the same regardless of basic cultural patterns.

Octen is in Chiapas, too far off the beaten track for the average ladino to wish to go, so national territory was divided for the extension

of indigenous groups. In this high, rich, jungle-covered area, on the gulf side of the Cordilleras, the colony of Octen was begun. In 1935 thirty families were recruited from the district of Yajalon in Chiapas. They were given two thousand hectares in the municipio of Salto de Agua. It had some rocky, steep slopes, but much of it was made up of loam fills, narrow plateaus and small rivers.

The Tzeltal were used to living in high mountains and adhered closely to the Tzeltal ethnic pattern. Their reasons for leaving Yajalon were different from the "revolutionaries" and homeless. Their motives were primarily personal--the lure of agrarian promises, family quarrels, a year of poor crops or poor pay on the coffee fincas, where they occasionally worked, made up the main stimuli. Younger sons who wanted to venture on their own, or a young couple eloping because of parental disapproval were motivated to change.

The thirty families moved en masse from the Yajalon district, the Agrarian agent staying with them for a month to start the colony. They were instructed to clear an area near a river for their houses or "town." Each was to be given land to plant crops and was to build his own house and plant his own garden. This was to be mutually worked out and agreed upon in group discussion, each asking for the plot he wished and having the decision made by common vote. The work was to be done on an exchange basis, each man taking turns helping the others, so that all worked together, but each had his own crop. It was an exchange of labor which carried the label of "brotherhood workers" and was entered into with high hopes and great good will.

Yajalon, the district from which they came, is predominantly coffee country, with little or no contact with the outside world. The ladino population of Yajalon is hardly more than a handful, and the town itself and all the surrounding area is composed of a closely knit Tzeltal clan. It was natural then, that in coming to Octen they brought with them their culture patterns. The practice of endogamy, pride in their traditions and mores, and native dress, were characteristic. They wove cloth from cotton they themselves grew, wove their own hats, and made their own sandals. The women wore the dark blue wrap-around skirt, white blouse with neck and sleeves embroidered and sometimes also wore a huipil. Around the waist, holding the skirt in place, was a handwoven belt three yards long which was tightly wrapped about and looped firmly. They used neither buttons nor pins. The women wore their hair parted in the center and braided with colored ribbons if unmarried, looped up loosely with one comb if married. The men wore homespun white cloth trousers rolled to the knee and buttonless white shirts.

They spoke Tzeltal and understood Chol and Bachajon, but no Spanish.

The economy of this group was primarily corn, beans, and coffee. They used little or no money, and then only silver, having a mistrust of paper money partly because it was not traditional, and partly because some had experienced cheating at the hands of traveling peddlers.

They made their own cooking utensils of pottery, using the thick red or blue clays available in these mountains. They used the metate for grinding corn or chocolate. They planted in the old way, clearing the chosen rectangle for their crop site, then after a drying period burning it off. While the ashes were still hot they planted the corn, using a planting stick. A good planter could drop the trees in such a way as to leave aisles between them so the corn could be planted in rows which made harvesting easier. They made use of the hard wood they found abundantly, pulling the tree trunks out of the area before it was burned and making dugouts and washing boards and stools and tables for their houses. They used machetes, axes, and not infrequently a tool made with an obsidian blade for finer work. Pumice brought from the high mountains was used for polishing and finishing the furniture.

Their houses were built solidly, with high roofs and large living areas of sometimes four rooms and a kitchen building separate from the main house. The roofs were made of palm thatch, the supporting poles, joists and so on notched and fitted and wound with a flat vine that dried tightly against the poles and remained fast. The roofs were made to special clan pattern, unlike other ethnic groups of Chiapas, and were a source of much pride in the effective design and weave which was precise and decorative. This took skill and labor, a common knowledge and a high standard of work. The walls of the houses were pomoy, a light wood similar to balsa, the outer bark removed and the poles placed firmly fitted together in a vertical position. The wood is white and helps give the clean appearance the houses have. The floors they packed with clay, wetting them and mixing ashes on their surface until they became hard and cement-like. This process was repeated every month or so to keep the floors in perfect condition. Each family had a finely carved chest in which to keep the traditional family treasures and records as well as a few charms.

The Tzeltal planted coffee, corn, beans, and vegetables (squash, tomatoes, and yams) and all kinds of fruit, bringing in small seedlings to transplant, or planting from seeds--mangoes, guanavana, guyaba, pineapples, and even coconuts which thrived in the lower canyons and pastures. They frequently made trips out to other areas to find seeds, and each house had a flower garden behind a low stone wall. All this is in the typical pattern brought from their original homes in Yajalon, where those who remained will be found following what has been a traditional way of life.

In the first four years of the colony, eight families gave up and returned to Yajalon. The reasons for this were again mostly personal. Family quarrels had been settled at home; one father had urged a young couple to come back; one family suffered illness, and just general homesickness accounted for the other cases.

By 1950 there were fifteen families left in the colony and two of these were trying to buy land elsewhere. The people now used meat grinders in place of the metate, and the men wore huaraches, made of pieces of rubber tires, bought in the town fourteen hours away. Porcelain dishes and kitchen utensils were used almost exclusively. One woman still made water jars and pots of clay, but none of the younger women knew how to do so. Only one old

man still made baskets. The dresses of the women, with the exception of one or two older ones, were made of bright colored rayon cloth. The men now manufactured straw hats, and although they complained that they did not keep the head cool in the tropic sun or protect them from the heavy rains (their own woven hats were of double thickness and shed water) they still affected the small-brimmed "town" hats. They now raised pigs, fattening them on the corn they grew, and selling them in the town for several hundred pesos. It all appeared prosperous enough, and if one mourned the finely woven cloth and the neatness of the houses that were now cluttered with plastic gaudies and crêpe paper festoons, still it seemed that their communal lot had been, if not culturally an advancement, at least economically sound.

But the situation in the colonia was far from idyllic. Gradually I began to see what had brought about this change in the colonial culture patterns. The houses were dirty; the pigs had brought filth and disease into the colony; and children were now afflicted with sores and running eyes. The many trips to town in the lowlands to buy goods had brought malaria into this group, previously free from it. The people themselves were discouraged and quarrelsome. As I went among them their story became clear.

Eujivildo Oleta complained of a backache and did not go to work for Jubilo. At home, in his hammock, he explained to me, "Jubilo is not a man of honor. His wife has been taking our chickens and turkeys. They eat well over at that house now. They have had bad luck with their animals, and we would have gladly exchanged something with her for ours, but she steals and sends us nothing in return. This is being done all over the colony. We all live too close and there is too much quarrelling and gossipping among the women. In Yajalon we all lived a half hour's walk from each other and had no troubles like this. Then Jubilo, he isn't the only one. He helped me the first two years, but lately he is always too tired when it comes his day to work for me. I give him my strong machete hand with a will, but for exchange he barely cuts down the brush and never remembers to bring his axe to cut a tree. This is true of many others. Now most of us do our own planting. Only our closest friends help us. Perhaps not more than five men work together to make a corn field. Five men cannot plant enough in one season to feed us and have money to buy these things too."

The houses by now were old and hardly repaired at all. The newer houses were smaller and inferiorily made. The people were using pieces of five gallon cans to stuff into the thatching to stop leaks. To build a house takes the help of several men willing and skillful. Half the colony was quarrelling and feuding. The teamwork necessary to make a good roof was gone. Besides this, I was told that the supply of palm thatching had run out. Since everything belonged to everyone, if a man was lazy and did not want to climb a tree to cut the penkas, or branches, he just cut the tree down. So that now there were not enough trees to provide roofs. The same was true of the rattan supply. The men had begun to cut down whole plants and now there were no longer good stands of jachaacte for use in house making.

The year before Eujivildo Oleta's boy fell off a roof framework and was crippled for life. He claimed that Mariano's son had pushed him. Eujivildo

had attacked Mariano that week in his corn field and cut him badly with a machete. The agente municipal tried to keep the news within the colony, but others talked of it in town and the Mexican police made a trip to Octen. Papers arresting the two men were left there, but as both had gone into hiding they were not apprehended. With no place to stay the men returned the next day and the incident was forgotten. But Eujivildo and Mariano were now avowed enemies, and each family entered into a campaign against the other.

In the next three years these situations increased. By 1954 the younger members of the families, now grown and marrying, were trying to buy land elsewhere. They wanted no more of colony communal living. My last survey during 1958 showed these facts:

Of the original thirty families, ten remained. Of the ten, five of the grown children have stayed in the colony and are raising families. The others have either returned to Yajalon or are buying a small acreage of land, working off the purchase price with day labor. Corn crops were not good, and beans developed rot. The land was being used up. Why hadn't anyone followed the old Tzeltal rules for leaving land fallow between plantings? Everyone had worked land wherever he wished. There was no use arguing such things with each other for there was no one in authority to enforce anything. They told me sadly that when they had lived in Yajalon each man had had his own property and guarded his own supply. Here any one who wanted to could cut down a tree. Everything belonged to everyone.

In twenty years no fruit trees have been planted and there are no longer any pineapple or banana groves. Why? The answer is the same in all families. "Everyone else picks our fruit and we never get any. Why should we work hard in the hot sun for our enemies to laugh at us and harvest our fruit?"

The low stone walls guarding the small flower gardens are gone, and so are the flowers. Why? The women shake their heads. The children pick off the fruit to play games with and throw at each other and pull up the flowers. If you object, they do it all the more to torment. "Dona Elodia sends her children over here to pull them up because my daughter has been living with her husband."

I found that the families, rigidly conscious of monogamy when they came from Yajalon, are now indifferent to clan rules and morals. They say, "You can't control the young people," Why? "The government sent us a school teacher. We built a school. The teacher had killed someone back where he came from. We did not know this when he came. He drank and kept two or three women. Our children saw this. What could we do?" In places such as this it is almost impossible to find teachers who qualify. Those who are worthy are kept busy in the towns, and Mexico still has all too few trained teachers. It is usually only the ones who do not qualify to serve elsewhere who get sent to the far places, so the colonies received schools which did not add to the education of the children except to teach them to disregard the moral standards of the original clan and disrupt parent-child control.

In the years I studied the colony I watched the movement go from industry to laziness, from health to anemia and malaria, from an honor code enforced by clan opinion and custom, to slipshod ethics and quarrelsomeness. The coming of the ladino teacher added to the changing pattern as the moral stimulation was poor. The method Mexico uses to teach her indigenous peoples by giving them school primers in their own languages and to increase pride in their own cultures failed in this instance.

It is difficult for me to keep a strict cultural relativism where the colony of Octen is concerned. It is difficult not to make judgments and to maintain a completely neutral approach when in the presence of serious culture lags and a destruction of human values. I should like to refer to Dr. Redfield's words: "Cultural relativism is a doctrine of ethical neutralism, but is not a doctrine of ethical indifference." So if my opinions emerge, even by inference, in this report, if I "view with alarm" the results of these years of observation, it is not that I feel I should determine what a people should do, but a reaction to a disturbing loss in human ethical values, and obvious social waste under the agrarian colonization plan of Mexico.

ENDNOTE

(1) This paper was read to the third annual meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society, May 16, 1959, Berkeley, California.