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Situation and Role of the Indian Woman in Latin America

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The American continent has a feminine population consisting of two large groups, the first embracing those of European descent and the second including those of Indian extraction. In the culture of the latter, multiple pre-Columbian cultural survivals are incorporated.

The conditions of life of the women of the first group are relatively satisfactory, legislation corresponding to them accommodating their aspirations and needs, inasmuch as the laws pertaining to them are inspired by European or North American jurisprudence. As to Indian women, the problem is distinct. Their conditions of life being very low, legislation which satisfies the white woman does not benefit them as it is not made in accordance with knowledge of their needs, aspirations or pre-Columbian cultural survivals.

The native population of America has been studied by diverse investigators, particularly anthropologists, ethnographers, etc., who are almost without exception men. For this reason, the characteristics of the Indian woman are generally little known. If the Indian male is timid in his relations to the investigator, the female *moreso* will not confide to anthropologists or ethnographers. By utilizing women investigators this problem is eliminated. With this end in view, the Interamerican Indian Institute, represented by its Director Dr. Manuel Gamio, and its sub-Director Dr. Miguel Leon-Portilla, are seeking the collaboration of female investigators.

The method followed in this brief synthesis is to use the data from sources and field work of maximum veracity, extracting pertinent conclusions from each case. For this purpose Indian woman of Latin America may be grouped in three divisions :

1. Those of Indian extraction who have achieved at least a partial acculturation, not from external or planned factors, but by simple contact with fully acculturated groups through the centuries. This process has not been premeditated nor carried out according to a preconceived plan. We will be bold enough to assert that it is a kind of mimetism in order to survive. Unfortunately, this type of acculturation has not always given the results that would be desired.

We can say that some groups have almost achieved an acculturation with those who are at a more advanced level, but who in order to realize such acculturation have had to suppress much of their cultural inheritance, producing, as a consequence, traumas that are real barriers to their integral cultural evolution.

2. The second group embraces native women in those countries where the Indian problem is being faced with the emphasis it merits. An adequate solution is sought that will attain an effective acculturation having a favorable response in the native conglomerate and, as a consequence, on national progress as well. These groups make the transition with the least incidence of trauma, aided by experts who have outlined plans to integrate them into the active population. Their mentality and cultural features should adapt themselves to the new pattern without the frustration implied in "spontaneous" acculturation.

3. The third type consists of those women who have not realized any kind of acculturation, planned or spontaneous. Let us refer to them as *marginal* for, as the word indicates, they live on the margin of any outside culture. Nevertheless, in these groups so isolated and almost, we would say, primitive, we may often observe notable features with respect to family union, moral concept, respect for women, etc. Some reject all contact with the outside in order to avoid any acculturation, others inhabit inaccessible places and any kind of contact, such as that of religious workers and investigators, has been sporadic. These groups have become known only unilaterally and it is not certain if they would or would not respond to planned acculturation.

Following this triple division, we will discuss in some detail the situation of the Indian woman of Latin America who shares each of these patterns of life. In face of the impossibility of mentioning all of the numerous Indian groups, we will present some examples of greatest interest in order to better visualize in each case what are the conditions of life of the Indian woman.



The Indian woman belonging to groups of
"spontaneous acculturation".

An example of this type is offered by the native woman of the Guatemalan highlands who, in their majority, belong to the Mayanese group. With certain variations and in spite of the "spontaneous acculturation" which undoubtedly has taken place, it can be affirmed that the place she occupies within the family and the community continues to be that of prehispanic times.

This woman helps her husband in the field, is in charge of carrying food, and even the heaviest articles, to and from the market. House-keeping, the care of the children, and the preparation of meals are her exclusive domain. Through the medium of an art in which she excels, however, her liberation is taking place. Native cloth, which she designs and weaves personally, encounters greater appreciation each day inside and outside the country. Demand for it is so great that it constitutes a veritable industry which she alone operates, directs and exploits. Her economic status has improved and, as a direct consequence, her importance within the family has increased.

But within this same group two subgroups co-exist: the so-called "Ladina" and the so-called "India". Both Indian from the ethnical point of view, their patterns of action are similar; for example, both practice identical food taboos during pregnancy. Cold articles such as lemons are shunned while the consumption of sacred foods used in ceremonies and festivals, such as corn, coa, squash seeds, etc., are increased during this period. They believe that the so-called *antojos*, or foods of whim, are very important and should be taken without delay, for otherwise the foetus is injured and the child will be born with a hare lip, and otherwise deformed, or even dead.

For this Guatemalan woman, illness is the result of *aigre* or bad air, fright, or contamination from impure women: those in the state of menstruation, pregnancy or menopause. The "Ladina" as well as the "India" give birth in their own homes, possibly because their food taboos are not respected in the hospital; nor are such rituals as that of the husband who wears his pants inside out when delivery is delayed. The Mayanese women of Guatemala, who constitute almost the totality of the Indian feminine population, like the Nahuas, give birth in a kneeling or squatting position, a custom which would surely be prohibited in the hospital. Moreover, they have great faith in their own midwives, the *ah moh nak* or "massager of the stomach" who, as their name implies, facilitate delivery by massaging the stomach with liniment.

Although in many respects the "Ladina" and the "India" think and react in the same manner, they consider themselves different. While the Ladina is Indian in her ethnic roots, certain features of her culture are different. For her, the process of *spontaneous acculturation* is taking root. Although she might speak another dialect, the Ladina commands Spanish which she considers her native language; she wears European dress and, desiring to look occidental, arranges her house more elaborately than the "India". Only Ladinas can belong to Catholic organizations known as "cofradías".

Still wearing the typical traditional outfit consisting of *huipil* (blouse), and skirt, the "India" has not changed her apparel. She speaks only a native language, which retards and complicates the process of acculturation. She apparently has no great incentive to learn Spanish. That she has little contact with those who do speak Spanish is also a factor to be considered. Of the 78 % of the national population who are illiterate, 60 % correspond to Indians while 15 % are Ladinos.

Ladinas never consider themselves as "Indians" nor accept such a status. But neither do they look upon themselves as whites and resent not being viewed well nor recognized by the latter. This conflict has created frustrating situations which frequently have led to psychosomatic illness among Ladinos. The conversion from Indian to Ladino is an integrated process. The first step is to improve and consolidate one's economic position in order to raise one's social status. To this end, the Indian works hard to become wealthy. Having become economically respectable, he may change his costume and the arrangement of his house in order to become accepted in religious organizations where his wife may belong to the much desired "cofradía".

For the Indian woman the problem of becoming Ladina has another aspect. Although the demand for her textile craft has given her a new economic strength, she is by nature more traditional than man and her integration, consequently, is slower. Complex and painful, the process of "ladinization" is accompanied by intense frustrations. For the Indian woman there are no longer economic problems that her skills may not resolve. However, while she cannot speak Spanish and continues to dress and arrange her house and person in typical indigenous fashion, she is unprepared to make the change to the status of the Ladina.

In the Indian household, the husband apparently dominates the family but, in reality, the woman exercises extensive influence and her



authority over the children is strong. The same situation applies to political control, exercised by the Indian male but, in reality, shared with the wife. During municipal elections of Solola in the Cakchiquel region, husband and wife are often seen together, and even more, her presence is frequently solicited as an important requisite.

On the contrary, the Ladina woman plays a completely secondary role in family and political affairs. The husband's dominion over her is absolute. Having more free time to dedicate herself to the Church, however, she has more religiosity than the Indian woman. She may belong to "cofradías". In spite of her restricted economic and political role, as a social personality she is able to alternate with, or at least aspire to, the role of the whites. This series of compensations amply offset her limitations.

Legitimate or illegitimate unions between Indians and Ladinos, or viceversa, are unfavorably viewed. Nonetheless, in spite of some aspects of inferiority, "ladinization" is the goal of both sexes, proof of which is that no Indian who has turned Ladino desires to return to the status of the former, in spite of the presence of an insecure psychological state in the Ladino and the cognizance that much is lacking in order to feel equal to the white.

The process of "ladinization" is simpler for man than for woman. Although the female is more conservative and persistent in her customs, she tends to change. Out of 125 typically native villages in Guatemala, 96 have adopted European apparel. It is logical to suppose that "ladinization" is a process of spontaneous acculturation accompanied by economic, political and social problems for both sexes.

In the Mexican Republic, acculturation, particularly of indigenous villages near the Capital, has been spontaneous but not always permanent, a manifestation which the Otomies corroborate.

Hardly speaking Spanish, the Otomies generally live in the poorer zones of habitation. To escape the miserable conditions of life, Otomi women often seek employment as servants in the Capital or in the surrounding towns, where, within a short period after finding work, they begin to copy the apparel of their employers. Having cut their hair, they also wave it, use cosmetics and adopt European dress. When their families come to visit them appareled as natives, they show displeasure and shame. After a period of time, these women may return to their homes. But now they do not feel at home in their newly adopted clothes and return to the clothes and customs which they once abandoned.

In the homes where they have worked, they have learned hygienic practices. These, too, are forgotten. However, upon returning to their employment in the city, such practices, as well as European dress, are readopted. The problem is that this type of acculturation is only temporary, lacking of definitive basis.

Among other groups of Indians, spontaneous acculturation has been achieved almost integrally. In factories and universities, we may encounter women totally acculturated whose only Indian characteristic is their physical inheritance. This demonstrates that in spite of the limitations of spontaneous acculturation, in some cases, principally as a consequence of prolonged contact, the results are worthy of attention and analysis.

The Indian woman in groups where the process of induced acculturation has been initiated

Even though projects tending to make possible scientifically planned acculturation of Indian groups are relatively recent in Latin America, several highly interesting cases may be cited. In Peru, where the percentage of Indians is extremely high, the national government and the Peruvian Indian Institute, affiliated to the Inter-American, have initiated the process of induced acculturation in educational centers. As for women, we may mention the case of the Chindenna in the Province of Uchumbra, Cuzco, who, as made evident in the field work carried out by Dr. Carmen Careño, investigator for the Interamerican Indian Institute, in spite of innumerable privations and problems she must endure, has initiated acculturation. This is accomplished thanks chiefly to the establishment of rural educational nuclei and to the action of sanitation brigades which attempt to counteract the principal endemic illnesses.

If in countries like Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, however, the process of induced acculturation, particularly in relation to the Indian woman, is still limited and manifests itself in a rudimentary state, other examples of greater importance in Mexico and Panama may be cited. In the first of these countries, the National Indian Institute through its Coordinating Indian Centers such as the one established in the Tzeltz-Tzotzil region of Chiapas in the southern part of the Republic, directs the process of acculturation in a rigorous integral form.

Men as well as women receive the benefits of alphabetization, are taught Spanish and learn new techniques of agriculture. Other measures to further controlled acculturation include the improve-



ment of small industries, promotion of sanitation and the organization of consumers' cooperatives.

Of particular importance is the role played by the so-called *promoters*, who are native youths of both sexes. Through knowledge of the Indian mentality and culture, they serve as a bridge between the Indianist and the aboriginal community. Thanks to them, the acculturation of the Indian woman in a profound and integral manner is being achieved. The Coordinating Center of Chiapas been the pilot for three similar projects operating in the Mexican Republic, namely among the Tarahumara of Chihuahua, the Mixtec of Oaxaca and the Mazatec of the Papaloapan Basin.

Another expression of induced acculturation is manifested by the Cuna Indians of the Province of San Blas in Panama where that process has been initiated chiefly through the medium of 17 public schools in which the majority of teachers are Indians. The activity of numerous missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, should also be mentioned.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to mention that the Cuna woman constitutes a notable exception in living patterns with respect to other women of distinctly Indian cultures. Her social, economic, religious and family status is considerably higher. Every aspect and phase of her culture protect her and give her an enviable and privileged position. This does not mean that she abuses these considerations. A sexual division of work assigns her the tasks which she accepts with pleasure, feeling loved and appreciated. As a Panamanian citizen, the Cuna woman attends public schools from the age of 7 as a civic obligation.

On the Island of Nargana the first-year college is located. Nevertheless, the attendance of women is much lower than that of men—1,015 to 345. But when the Cunans have confidence that education will not alter their traditional way of life their daughters are the first to be enrolled in school. Corroboration of this is found in the co-educational public school of the Island of Nargana administered by Franciscan nuns where the number of female students is impressively large.

To promote acculturation and to increase the native female teaching force, the government of Panama grants scholarships to Cuna women to attend high school. Those who have a high school situated within their province face no problem, but others must separate themselves from their family in order to receive an education. Those who

make this sacrifice are testimony that the purpose of planned acculturation through the medium of education has not missed its mark.

The Cuna teacher is the key to any rapid process of acculturation. Having the confidence of and the same psychology as his ethnic group, he is in a position to influence multiple aspects of acculturation, for example, as the collaborator of the doctor in introducing modern medicines to cure endemic illness such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, uncinaria, malaria, umbilical infection, etc.

The Cuna woman still refuses treatment by a doctor. Cases of difficult childbirth are known where, out of respect for their tradition of modesty and prudence, death is risked in preference to consulting the doctor. This grave danger may be avoided by preparing Cuna women as midwives or by supplying white female doctors or midwives to attend native women in childbirth. This problem has been solved in part in the Islands of Nargana and Corazon de Jesus where a Cuna midwife, although not professional, consults a doctor for advice in critical cases.

When the Cuna woman lives almost completely surrounded by whites she begins unconsciously to change her customs. She adopts two names the one given by the Church at baptism as well as the one imposed by native beliefs. In her kitchen she puts aside earthen or ceramic jars which she herself once made in favour of iron and aluminum utensils. The cloth with which in the past she made the « *mola* » (a sort of blouse) is no longer woven by herself but is purchased in the store.

Nonetheless, spiritually she continues being a Cuna. Some have married whites; but they continue educating their children to conform to their cultural pattern : modesty, simplicity and ignorance of sexual facts, etc. To be a Cuna is a source of great pride and no occasion is lost to express it.

Thus, in differing intensities and distinct ways, what we have called induced acculturation has been carried out. It is obvious that there still remains a long road ahead. But the single fact that an intimacy with the mentality of the Indian woman is now taken seriously, chiefly through the medium of female investigators, implies a significant advance. The example of the Indian Coordinating Centers of Mexico, as well as the various projects among the Cuna women of Panama, merit recognition if not emulation. It is to be desired that upon the conclusion of the investigations instigated by the International American Indian Institute concerning the condi-



tions of life of the native woman on the American continent, a more extensive integral planning of the process of definitive acculturation may be furthered.

The Indian woman in groups where acculturation has not taken place

The Indian woman living in groups we have previously designated as *marginal* are here discussed. As their name indicates, they live on the margin of any outside culture. In Latin America, there remain greatly reduced indigenous groups falling in this category. By way of example, we will mention only the Lacandon of the state of Chiapas in Mexico, the Chocoes of the Darien in Panama, the Motilon and others in Venezuela and Colombia; numerous Indian tribes populating the deep forests of Brazil, some groups of the Chaco in Paraguay and Bolivia as well as a few Alacaluf families living in the Tierra del Fuego.

In face of the impossibility of presenting the situation of the native woman in each of the cited marginal groups, we will concentrate upon a brief exposition of the conditions of life of the Lacandon woman who lives in an area of 25,000 square kilometers in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico bordering Guatemala.

The Lacandons are less than 250 Indians of Mayan affiliation living in small nuclei formed by a few individuals. The contemporary Lacandon are direct descendants of the ancient Maya who populated the Peninsula of Yucatan. But only imperceptible cultural features remain of the glorious art, religion, political and social organization of their forefathers.

Pressed by Hispanic conquerors, the Mayans fled from all contact. In order not to fall prisoners or die, they dispersed to inaccessible places, changing residence frequently. This isolation in part explains their present primitivism.

The Lacandon woman is very strong and vigorous. She constantly works at domestic details such as the care of the home, the preparation of meals, etc. In some groups she weaves the cloth with which family clothing is made, but this custom is losing ground each day in favor of cloth acquired at a high price from travelling salesmen, or mint and chicle hunters, who barter merchandise with the Lacandon.

As a general rule, the woman does not attend to the cornfield. She is obliged, however, to prepare the first meal from the first har-

vest. No one is permitted to taste this meal before their gods are offered the same food. Once ready to serve, the menfolk bring food to the braziers. This ritual terminated, everyone may eat.

The semi-nomadic life of the majority of these groups is due to their primitive system of cultivation, for they have two harvests a year of tobacco and maize. When the earth is exhausted they change location. This is why investigators have not found it possible to meet the same group in the same site after more than several years.

The Lacandon « temples » in no way vary from the houses they occupy. The only difference is the mantelpiece against the wall for the "saints", braziers of different sizes on whose brims the heads representing their respective gods may be viewed. There are also vases in which copal is burned. The Lacandon woman takes no part in the religious ceremonies nor enters a temple. They play an inferior role in religious matters.

The Lacandon has a patriarchal type of organization. They are polygamous, possessing, as a rule, two or more wives. The women are not jealous among themselves. On the contrary, the older woman prefers that a younger one lighten some of her domestic burdens. There is no nuptial ceremony of any kind.

It is customary for the married or engaged woman to adorn herself with multicolored feathers. The woman is accustomed to wear her hair long and braided, adorning herself with cheap necklaces and earrings acquired from the few salesmen who reach those distant parts. Their costume, which is always identical among all groups, consists of the classical skirt made of colored cotton cloth over which a printed cotton reaches to the knees. Some still use a type of native necklace made of *Sokpah* shrub seeds intercalated with alligator teeth and bird claws.

The woman is highly esteemed, and wooed among all Lacandon groups. So much so that a girl of 3 or 5 years is often given to an adult male, not for sexual relations, of course, but merely to live with in the same house. Such is the case of a Lacandon by the name of Mateo to whom was given a little girl of 5 years old, who took care of his house. In the future she would be his wife.

The scarcity of women makes it necessary for the male to kidnap women from neighboring villages when the number is not sufficiently large. This results in serious and frequent disputes. Due to the scarcity of females, young boys are also often married to mature or older women. As a mother, the Lacandon woman is particularly amorous and self-abnegating.



As with all indigenous groups of Latin America within or outside the dominant culture, childbirth is a natural and simple physiological event. The Lacandon woman is attended by another woman and by her knees half bent. The child is placed upon large leaves previously laid on the floor. The umbilical cord is cut with the blade of the cane. There are no taboos concerning pre- or post- childbirth. This over, the mother, without further complications, returns to the house with her child in her arms.

Unfortunately, the data obtained about the Lacandon woman are very few. But the reality of her life demands an urgent solution. Lacandon men and women are highly intelligent and have great possibilities if taught properly.

However, isolation has diminished their faculties in every aspect. For example, the artistic sense is no longer the same : the finish of their ceremonial braziers and ceramic drums, or *káyum*, progressively coarsen so that they cannot be compared with those of previous epochs. The woman has forgotten how to weave the cloths in the production of which she once excelled.

What could be the solution of this series of problems? Above all, the application of the indianist policies of the government. By controlling the products they produce to be sold at a fair price. Secondly, by showing them the almost forgotten art of weaving, the tanning of hides, cultivation of new produce appropriate to the climate: vanilla, coffee, cocoa, etc. This would bring them closer to the white man but on a more just basis.

Education in its literal sense would follow as a consequence once the Lacandon could be convinced of the advantages that the white man sincerely offers him. The latter would also gain, finding in this singular group those in whom, due to their refined honesty, he could blindly trust.

The goal would be to find, unify and group all the Lacandon now dispersed over an immense area, but always with an expert hand, sensible and humane, following the wise counsel given by Dr Franz Blom and Gertrudy Duby in their article titled, « Among the Lacandon Indians of Mexico » : " It is worth the effort to try to unite them because the Lacandon are human beings representing a group of superior intelligence still guarding unrevealed secrets".

Conclusion

Such are the three principal levels in which the life of the indigenous Latin American woman is manifested. Doubtless, the greater

percentage is found in those groups belonging to the category of "spontaneous acculturation". Millions of Indian women in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay are included in this category. And even when in spontaneous and often indirect ways the acculturation process is brought about, it is certain that this would often require greater attention on the part of the respective governments and of their specialized Indian agencies.

Much smaller in number are the native groups which receive the influence of a scientifically planned and initiated acculturation. The women of such groups are found in a relatively advantageous position. Many of their problems fortunately receive attention. Principally Mexico, Guatemala, Panama and Peru, have been more concerned in a practical way to foment this systematic acculturation. However, the fact should be emphasized that indianist action in this sense is still highly limited. It is hoped that through the doctrine, methods and techniques diffused by the Interamerican Indian Institute, the same form of integral action which has given such good results in the Coordinating Indian Centers of Mexico will be applied more extensively throughout the continent.

Finally, it is almost superfluous to emphasize that the situation of the Indian woman in the so-called marginal groups is frequently highly disadvantageous. The romantic image of a paradisiacal life in these groups, distant from occidental civilization, is a false one. Unfortunately, these groups are frequent victims of epidemics and other ailments which place them almost on the border of total extinction. Furthermore, the few contacts they have had with the outer world have been very largely of a negative nature. And it cannot be left out of consideration that sooner or later they will have to be in greater contact with the people of the outside. It is necessary that before this happens these groups should have initiated their acculturation in a scientifically planned manner in order to free them thereby as far as possible from what we might call trauma provoked by the violent invasion of a stronger and dominating culture.

It becomes indispensable, then, that indianist action should attempt to exert its influence upon diverse Indian groups, making it possible for the process of integral acculturation to be more humane and feasible, and to extend itself each day. In this way, these groups will take an active part in the life of their respective countries, enriching them simultaneously with new human effort and with not a few values of their own cultural past.



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