

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FMF-28

Mexico: The Indian Society

Mexico, D.F.

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Richard H. Nolte, Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

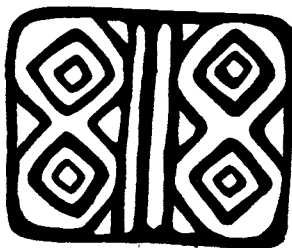
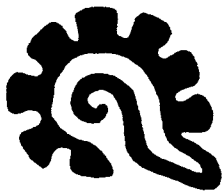
Misery and faith, submission and strength— a paradox —tenacious yet non-violent, the Indian has retained his traditions, his spirit, his physical traits through centuries of subjection and exploitation.

From the time of his first invasion of the Indian lands, the white man has referred to himself and his kind as the gente de razón—the people of reason. Thus, by implication, the Indian became a person lacking in intelligence. But, the Indian has another name for the white man—Coyotl—Aztec for coyote, and this name reflects the tremendous distrust which been nourished in the Indian by four and a half centuries of white men's mistreatment and dishonesty.

Distrust has been bred by experience for so long that it has become almost an innate trait. But, today, in those who have been warmed by repeated treatments of kindness, the distrust has been changed to a cautious reserve mixed with shyness.

The second-class busses have become the Mexican Indian's means of modern transportation. Through necessity, interest and thrift, I used them when I was a student at the National University of Mexico.

In contrast to the first-class busses, the second-class camiones are old, rich in rattles but destitute of springs. A ticket on a first-class bus assures a seat. A ticket on a second-class means foot space in a crowded aisle or a third of a seat meant for two.





LEFT. The market
in Oaxaca: articles
made from the fiber
of the maguey plant.

My most interesting trek was from San Miguel Allende to Querétaro. Since the bus I had intended to take in the evening had never appeared, I decided to catch the earliest bus at 6:00 the next morning in order to have a full day in the state capital.

Expecting to be exclusive at this hour, I was surprised to have to compete with a great many others to get a seat. Yesterday had been market day in San Miguel, however, and a great many of the merchants had stayed all night and were now returning home or progressing to some other market day in another town. The clientele of the bus was constantly changing. The bus driver seemed psychic because, with no apparent signal, he would stop in the middle of nowhere, and an old lady with gray wisps and parchment

RIGHT. The market
in Oaxaca: dried
chile peppers.



skin would get off and disappear between a maguey and a nopal into the arid distance of a time-worn hill.

Sometimes the stopping places were busier. There the people waited for this bus or another---the adults motionless, the children playful. The men were always in straw hats, the wide brims carefully shaped to give each its distinctive individuality; mustaches, the stamp of Mexican manhood, were on every tawny face as soon as physically possible, neatly trimmed and black until the hair grew white when the mustache became less constrained, more pompous; and, the pants, white and soft, were folded over at the front and, in many places, worn thinner than the thread. On this cool morning many men threw their serapes around them,

held high and rigid, covering the face up to the nose and sharp black eyes. Against the cold the men were luckier. The women had only their thin but strong rebozas, long and rectangular---the Indian woman's uniform, tool, and servant---wrapped around to hold her baby, freeing both her arms, or twisted and gay for decoration, overlapped and drawn tight for warmth, slung heavy with pottery or fruit on the way to market, covering her head when she enters the church, or wound around the crown and hanging down her back as protection against the sun.

Just as much the Indian woman's uniform is the child---smooth-skinned and wonder-eyed---gazing curiously at me, a strange being of light skin and hair, and flitting away his glances, embarrassed, when I smile at him. But, always returning his gaze and finally, with persistent work on my part, rewarding me with a shy smile. When the mother sees that I have made friends with her child, she who had not seemed to know I was there is quick to smile, too. Love and pride on the part of the mother seem to envelope every child with soft protection; not once have I seen an Indian mother scold or mistreat her child in public.

The rhythm of the market days governs much of the traveling of the Indians, and many are the big baskets that board the bus with fruits or pottery or flowers coming or going from the commercial center. Geese or pigs or chickens are fettered and, loudly protesting, are forced aboard the bus or, if there is not room inside, they are perched on top and the master, skillfully balanced on the bumper or running board, continues to hold the leash throughout the joggling ride.

The spirit on the bus is one of cooperation rather than complaint. There is help, not grumbling, for the boy with the unruly pig. The bus is jammed beyond capacity, but a little woman with a bulky basket wants to board; everyone inhales and squeezes together a little more to make room for her. It is like a game, and what would be an annoyance for another people is a thing of laughter for these.

The wellspring of their actions is emotional warmth, rather than logical calculation. It has brought the people much joy and much suffering. Religion and art, home and hero, laughter, tears and death have been primary for the indigenous Mexicans. Life and landscape are kaleidoscopes---verdant valleys and arid desert, towering mountains and plunging ocean cliffs, volcanoes and jungles---deprivation and intoxication, relentless toil and exhilarating fiesta.

The church and the fiesta are the peaks that make bearable the drab existence of the Mexican poor. For this reason those of little income will join their few pesos with the scanty savings of their neighbors so that together they can pay for the spiral of firecrackers and the ludicrously-costumed dancers which are vital for a good fiesta; or, the last centavo will go as alms to support the warmth of music and pageantry of the church.

The penetrating emotionalism of Catholicism has always held sway over the cold austerity of Protestantism. Even since the achievement

RIGHT. A vendor
along a street
in Guanajuato.



of religious tolerance by the Revolution, Protestantism has attracted only two per cent of the population.

In his book, El Indio, Gregorio Lopez y Fuentes, recalling his life as an Indian boy in the state of Very Cruz, describes the reactions of his people when, at the end of a three-day pilgrimage, they entered the great church: "Who knows what echoes were roused in the soul of the Indians by the ringing bells, the organ music and the chanting? Surely they were dazzled by the altars, transformed into great centers of light. Jammed in the door of the church, the tribe was like the jungle itself, breathless with amazement. Their attitude, though they were not on their knees, was the symbol of humility itself."



LEFT. The altar
of San Cayetano
(Valenciana) in
Guanaajuato.

Guadalupanismo is the core of Mexican Catholicism. The Virgin of Guadalupe early captured the hearts of the Mexican Indians when she came to them in 1531, just ten years after the completion of the Conquest. Appropriately, her revelation came to an Indian boy; the Virgin's skin is dark; her shrine was erected over the site of the Aztec mother of the gods, Coatlicue, also called Tonantzin. The Indian need was not for the doctrine of the Father, but for the love of a mother. The spirit of the Virgin of Guadalupe spread throughout Mexico. To her image the Indian can go to receive the comfort and solace which he cannot derive from the masculine element of Christianity.

To visit the Virgin's basilica in Villa Madero, a suburb of Mexico

RIGHT. After the
First Communion,
Acatlán, Puebla.



City, is not to be awed by the splendor of the architecture but rather by the piety of the people. Whereas other churches become quiet in off-hours, there is always activity inside and outside the Shrine of Guadalupe. Clustered along the side of the churchyard is a rash of stands selling trinkets, candles and offerings. From the cult of Guadalupe has developed a folk art: ex votos, small paintings depicting a stroke of good fortune—the cure of a disease, the escape from an accident, any favorable happening attributed to the miraculous intervention of the Virgin—and these remembrances are offered to her in gratitude. The people have made Mexico a country of miracles.

Formerly crowded by secular buildings, the Shrine was ennobled by

the government's enlargement of the atrium and the construction of two imposing arcades—each arch dedicated to and paid for by a state. Now, there is more room for the thousands of pilgrims who come to the Shrine for the Day of Guadalupe, December 12. The fervent multitude gather through the day and night before, inching forward on their knees, praying as they approach the miraculous image on the altar.

The holidays in the country are many, but none are more Mexican than the Day of Guadalupe and the Day of the Dead, both the expression of the Indian element of the population. On November 2, the Day of the Dead is as all-consuming as the annual devotion to Guadalupe. The heritage from the Aztec ancestors, the prevalence of disease, sudden cataclysms of nature, historical instability and human unpredictability have all led to a deeply-engrained sense of fatalism and death. Sorrow and homage for the dead is expressed once a year; grief is sustained through the night. The darkness of the cemetery is pierced by a procession of candles, and these candles are placed on the tomb along with an offering of food and flowers. Each family prays and talks to their dead, whose presence is as sure as their own.

"...the chromos of the Day of the Dead that one finds in the houses of the country people: a procession of mourners, carrying lighted candles and palms; sorrow on some faces, resignation on others.

"How that picture stamps itself on the imagination of the children on the day itself when the dead are given offerings of what is consumed by the living. It becomes a caravan winding through dreams."

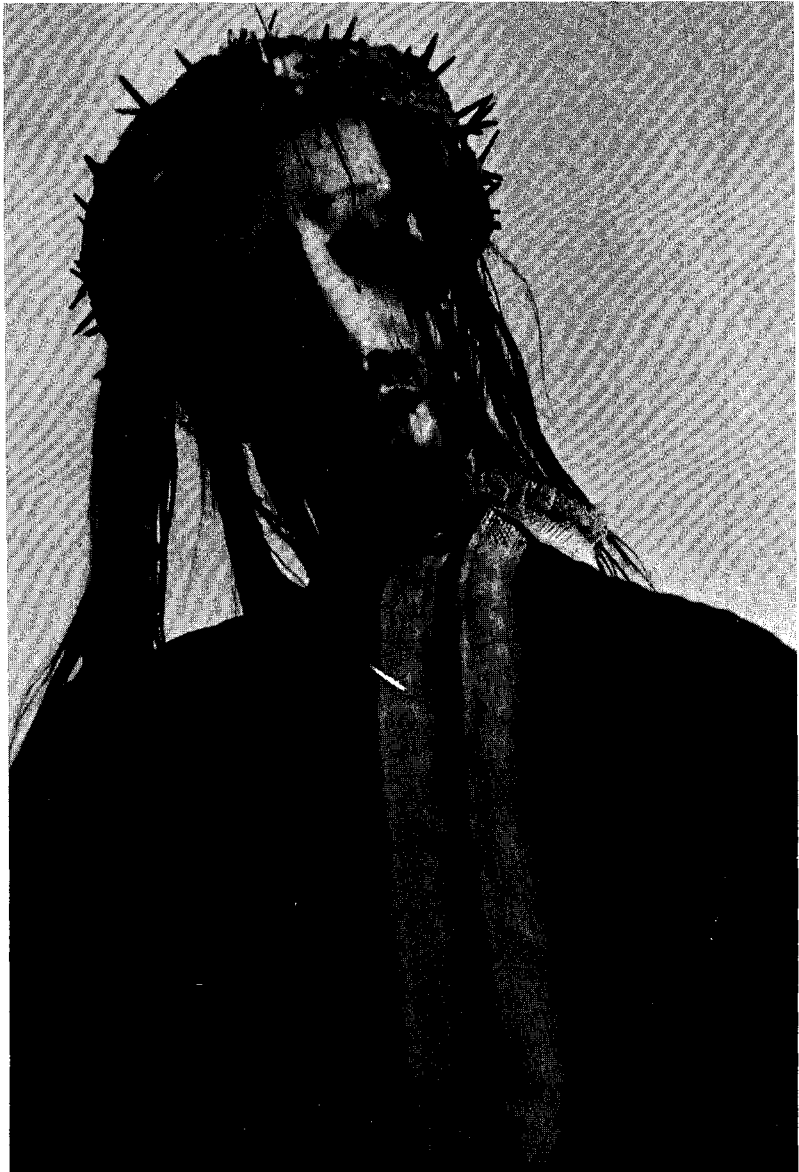
Guadalupe is Tonantzin. The dead are given the offerings of the idols, and the procession is imbued with "the spell of folk tales." Paganism and Catholicism have been indissolubly fused by the Indian.

This was easily done because the religion of the conqueror and the religion of the conquered bore many resemblances. Both believed in visual representations of their holy ones. The number of saints not only rivaled the number of idols but also paralleled them in their specific jurisdictions. The lives of both hierarchies of priests were characterized by celibacy, penance and learning. Catholic and Aztec babies were baptized. Catholic and Aztec adults fasted and confessed. A belief in the divine creation of the world and the virgin birth of the chief god was shared by both.

Physically, the two were united by placing the church over the site of the temple and the idol behind the altar; the priest sanctioned the first and the Indian sneaked the second. The beliefs of both were surrounded by a great deal of pageantry and mysticism, and the pagan offerings of flowers and foods received the approval of the priests as well as the fiesta revelry. Christianity became not the trunk but the grafted branch of the Indian religion.

Even the most holy of Christian symbols could not escape untainted from pagan analogies. The cross was in the New World before the Spaniard, and when created by the Indian for the Catholic churchyard, it was no longer pure in meaning nor in appearance.

RIGHT. The Cristo
in the nave of San
Agustín Acolman.



Using the churchyard cross of San Agustín Acolman as an example, Elizabeth W. Weismann in her book, Mexico in Sculpture, defines the Indian spirit which changed the Spanish cross. The objects of the Crucifixion are carved into the surface of the stone cross and are distributed in a design covering the whole surface, reminiscent of pre-Hispanic art. St. Veronica's cloth becomes the face at the crossing of the beams. The nails are driven into the arms of the cross itself. It bleeds. It hovers between an idol and a symbol.

Probably emanating from the south where religion was more profound, the cross came to represent an abstract concept in the Indian society. It was a difficult concept, receiving deep meditation from the sages and superficial recognition from the commoners.

For the ancient Indian society the cross represented the four corners of the world and the four quarters of the year—all time, all space merged into one symbol—a metaphysical concept that could only be captured by the intuition.

Such a powerful concept, permeating the religion and, therefore, the life of the Indian people, could not help but make its mark. It destroyed the importance of precise distance and precise time. Verb tenses and measurements were meaningless.

T.S. Eliot in "Burnt Norton" has captured a concept of time synonymous with that of the Indians: "Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past." The Old World philosophers long contemplated the nature of time, and finally the European cultures agreed on Time as a river, ever flowing on; the scope of man's time is microscopic—the minute that just ticked past is already dead and gone, the present is but here and now, and the future does not yet exist.

For the Indian, time was not a river but an ocean, deep and shifting, but in all its aspect all around him. His life was significant not only for the small compass of his own existence but for all time and space.

The profundity of the cross concept has been lost, but the cultural lag persists in the Indian outlook toward time and space. We imports to the New World are always hurrying, governed by the clock and the mile. We must measure everything down to its most minute part. But to the Indian, the distance to the next place is only "más allá", a little further, although it may be just around the curve or a day's journey onward. In Mexico, one almost gives up asking distances of the humble people.

And there is the familiar concept of "mañana". When that term is used on Monday, the Indian does not necessarily mean Tuesday, because there are an endless number of mañanas. It is quite normal for the Anglo-Saxon or modernized Mexican to criticize this indefiniteness on the part of the Indian. But it is fundamental to the Indian mentality, a philosophy of life that has come down through the centuries.

Though its esoteric meaning has been lost, the cross continues as a potent symbol, used in augury and sorcery, erected at a ford or cross-road or village entrance to guard against evil spirits..

Most important of the four directions are East and West, the former because it is the direction of life and the latter, of death. A cycle of fear, augury and revenge is recounted in El Indio. An Indian has noticed fresh dirt in his yard. Suspicious, he dug down and discovered "three figures of cua-amatl, wood-paper, all pierced with thorns. Besides that, he had also found three eggs painted black and three stalks of marigold, the flower of the dead."

Knowing that he had an enemy who would like to bring death to him,

his wife and son, the man went to a witch doctor of great fame who agreed to turn the curse back on the enemy and his family.

"The witch doctor took the three punctured figures and slowly pulled out the thorns that had caused so much pain to their living originals. He put them in a little pile, and they all sighed with satisfaction as when an aching tooth is removed. They were even more satisfied when he stopped up the wounds of the dolls with the wax shed in tears by the candles that represented the...lives of the family."

After a prolonged ceremony by the witch doctor, he and the two men of the family went to the top of a "solitary peak open to all the winds", and there the witch doctor "gave the earth food and drink. The aguardiente was sprinkled like dew, and the eatables were laid reverently on a rock. He stationed the two men to the east, and the three candles consecrated to the enemies to the west: for the first, light, sun and life; for the others, night, the grave of the sun, and death."

Augury, superstition and paganism increase with the distance from the urban centers. Penetrating into the distance is also penetrating into time. The pattern of life of the villagers becomes that of their pre-Hispanic ancestors. Especially if the direction is south into the States of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche and Yucatán, the isolation is severe and the way of life is out of time past.

Here are the Lacandones, the Zoques and the Huaves who depend on fishing, hunting and the gods for their existence. The bite of a fly brings blindness, and whole villages live in a darkness caused by this insect. The bite of a snake means death, and the jaguars rule the mountains and jungles---supernatural and death-defying, according to the local people. The conquistadores still exist in the minds of these people, and the old ones tell tales of the flight from the white man and of the humans who turned themselves into animals to escape the Spaniards' cruelty and who still roam through the chasms and wilderness. The fast-moving traffic, the bustling modernity of the capital's Paseo de la Reforma is incomprehensible to imaginations which are prolific in their creation of baby-faced jaguars and man-eating apparitions.

In their isolation, many Indian groups continue to speak an indigenous language. Those more cosmopolitan often speak Spanish as well but hold to their own language among their kind. For instance, one hears much Zapotec spoken on the streets of the state capital of Oaxaca and, even more, in the surrounding villages.

A common language is critical in the building of a nation, and Mexico's problem is further complicated by the fact that the Indian languages are often as different one from the other as Russian, English and Chinese. They have, however, saturated the Mexican language.

According to the late Mexican scholar, Frank Tannenbaum, two-thirds of the Mexican place names and one-half of the national language is of Indian origin. He points out that even legal terminology has been

"Indianized" and that the proceedings of the Supreme Court cannot hold to pure Spanish.

In his book, Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread, Tannenbaum said: "To the three million pure Indians it is necessary to add at least an equal number of the rural population who, if not Indian, live at an Indian cultural level. There are, thus, perhaps five to six million people whose food habits, tool equipment, family and social organization, basic attitudes, and notions about the world are Indian rather than European."

Roads, communications, government programs, national politics and other modernizing processes are gradually breaking down these folk cultures and integrating them into the nation of Mexico. The time lag, however, persists among many Mexican Indians and affects the progress of the country, particularly in matters of agriculture and rural conditions.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Frances M. Foland".

Frances M. Foland

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Photos: FMF

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