

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-11: Cristobal and Marta

Santiago, Colima  
Mexico, and  
Plainfield, Vermont  
23 March, 1973

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Four years ago, a Dutchman named Christinus Dekker took a few months off from his work analyzing the language of St. John's Gospel to visit his eldest daughter in the United States and tour Central America. Knowing that he would be passing through Mexico, he contacted the sister of his late friend Wolfgang, who had died in Mexico four years before. Christinus and Wolfgang had become friends when they were members of the same resistance group in Holland during World War II. After the war, Christinus had remained in Europe as a concert performer on the viola d'amore and a linguist specializing in Biblical texts. Wolfgang had travelled the world writing tourism books, then settled in Mexico to study Mayan dialects and teach at the University in Merida. Wolfgang's sister asked Christinus to find out what he could about the last ten years of her brother's life. He said he would, and in that connection arrived in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, in the early summer of 1969, expecting to spend about three days. He is still there.

At about that time, the Mayan Indians in the mountains around San Cristobal watched the spring dry season stretch days and then weeks beyond its ordinary limit. The sprouting corn withered and died before the summer rains at last began. In the fall, the harvest was negligible. It marked the start of a "starvation year."

As soon as the shortage of corn seemed to be threatening the life of her two-month-old son, Margarita Gomez Santis left her husband and returned with the baby to her father's village. The husband denounced her to the

police of the municipality, took another wife, and demanded the return of his son. The baby was given to the father and his new wife. She was young and inexperienced, and the little boy died.

At that point, Margarita Gomez Santis gave herself up to starvation. She refused even what food her father's family could spare her. Some Protestant missionaries working nearby took her in and got her to eat again. Now she set out alone for the town of San Cristobal, determined there to change her life. She later told Christinus Dekker: "I said to myself, 'In town I will either die in a car accident, because I am blind, or I will find a doctor.'"

Marta, as her friends now call her, was born 70 per cent blind. According to her godfather, a health-worker in a neighboring village, she inherited cataracts. With 30 per cent vision she lived a nearly normal life. Then, at age twelve, some ashes from the kitchen fire blew up into her eyes. She went without treatment, and continued using her eyes as before. A month after the accident, one eye stopped seeing. Two months later, Marta experienced severe pain in the other eye for several days. When the pain ceased, she was 95 per cent blind.

The population of Marta's municipio, Orxhuc (ohs-CHOOK), is estimated at 20,000. Of these, about 2,000 are reported blind. As many as two-thirds are infected, though not necessarily blinded as yet, with trachoma. A blind child is a burden to a family like Marta's that depends on its children to work for the common welfare. A blind child cannot do his fair share, and, further, must be given another child as a guide.

So when Marta was 15 and the man asked her father for Marta as his wife, Marta's father consented. The suitor had already abused his first wife, was known to be lazy, but Marta's father was a poor man with a large family. For the good of Marta and the rest of his family, he accepted the man's bid. I asked Cristobal-- as Christinus is called in Mexico-- what the man paid Marta's father for her.

"It was a cheap marriage," he said.

"How cheap?"

"A bottle of gin," he answered, his eyes downcast.

"Her first bride price," I said.

"Yes." He smiled.

"There was another bride price later on," I said.

"Yes," he said, and laughed quietly. "Yes."

Soon after he arrived in San Cristobal, struck by the beauty of the people and the land, Cristobal began making felt-pen sketches. These impressed Jose Weber, who was then writing children's texts for the Indians of the area. Weber asked Cristobal to illustrate them. He agreed. One morning he was on his way across town to sketch a Lacandon child staying at the house of a Danish linguist.

"I saw an Indian-dressed woman crossing the street, standing against the sidewalk. There was no traffic. I saw at some distance that she was a blind woman, and without company, so I went to her and asked her where she wanted to be brought. I thought she would have a home, or some friends. And then she spoke, in long, long sentences, you see. In Tzeltal, which I did not understand. But two words in it I understood, which were doctor and hospital."

He went with her directly to the health center, then to the eye doctor. It was her first day in town, and by using the only two words of Spanish she knew beyond forms of greeting, she had made contact with someone who would admit of the possibility that she might regain her vision. She was then 18. For the preceding six years she had made use of the shred of sight she still had in her left eye-- about five per cent capacity, and only in the far left edge of her field of vision. In dim light, by turning her head to the right and using that bit of peripheral vision, she could see crude silhouettes. These, combined with sounds, gave her orientation. In bright light the silhouettes were blurred and useless. She says, "The moon is my friend, but the sun is against me."

The doctor took Marta into his clinic for several days of tests. On the fifth day Marta "ran away," the doctor reported. Cristobal took her back to her hamlet, Tolbilja. With him he brought incredible news from the doctor: in two months there would be a new clinic with new, advanced instruments. The doctor would first cure Marta, then all the other blind and near-blind of the village.

Three weeks later Cristobal took Marta out of the hamlet and back to town. The doctor said she needed to become accustomed to town life before he could treat her. He did not want her running away. That was January, more than four months after the drastically poor harvest. On his first visit to Tolbilja, Cristobal remembers, he could not stay for more than a day. There was no food for extras. Now when he came to take Marta to town, the people were glad to see Marta leave. Every person out of the village was another person saved. Already the very young and the very old were growing ill. By June, when the dry season peaked and the dysentery began, those with least resistance died quickly. Cristobal and others made attempts to help, not entirely in vain. In Marta's village, an American physician that Cristobal met among the tourists in San Cristobal checked the dysentery epidemic and kept the deaths to 32, about four per cent of the population. But at that time the state and federal aid programs for Indians were ineffectual; most villages had no help. On the average, slightly less than ten per cent died.

On his next visit to Tolbilja with Marta, Cristobal told me, "I took corn to them, so that they would have corn at least." He left the two big sacks near the road and walked down to the village by the footpath, a half-hour's distance. "We came back with a horse to pick it up, and came through the village with the corn. And the villagers said 'That is a gift to Marta's father.'

"Now they are so poor that they cannot imagine that someone gives a present! So what is that corn for? So, it was a bride price, and before I knew it, I was married." He laughs, runs his hand back through his long, gray hair. His eyes twinkle behind his eyeglasses. He looks bashful. "I had paid the bride price."

Was there a ceremony? How did he know that he had got himself married?

"Slowly, slowly, I learned it by the reaction of Marta to me in her family. You know. When we went another time, Marta was very content, gay and happy. And she was very close to me in her family circle, always sat near me at meals around the kitchen-fire. She was belonging to me in her whole attitude. And that is how. Because there still was not that much language contact." Cristobal's native language is Dutch. With Marta he

speaks Spanish, which he has taught her. He also speaks Tzeltal, which she has taught him, though not much, and his native Dutch, and good English.

If it occurred to Cristobal to annul the "marriage" and return Marta to her family, he did not do it. Among the Tzeltales, once a bride-price has been paid, a woman is returned to her father only if she is found not to be virtuous.

The instruments that the doctor had promised would cure Marta and her people never materialized. The doctor said it would be mañana, made complicated excuses. Cristobal talks freely and precisely about all that has happened since he met Marta, except about the eye doctor. When I ask about that he begins to speak haltingly in a soft, low voice, trying words and rejecting them, as if it is a problem with his English. He sighs and stares out the window. The eye doctor misled him, cruelly, and he misled the people of Tolbilja--especially Marta.

"But the villagers never blamed me for these speeches," he says clearly, looking right at me. "Because they knew, they are accustomed to this kind of process. 'You did not know, because you are a foreigner, but we know. So we do not blame you.' It is a typical situation. And it's very-- very--" he slaps his knee and says with a tinge of anger, "lastima."

When he saw that the local eye doctor would not help, Cristobal took Marta to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital. There another doctor operated on the totally blind right eye. At the time, the particulars of her history--that she was only partially blind at birth, then further blinded by accident--were not known to Cristobal. After the operation, the doctor concluded that she must have been blind from birth, and that she was incurable.

"A few hours later, she made her decision and said to me, 'In my village, the blind have a child to guide them. That is custom. When the child is four years old, it can guide. If I am to remain blind, then I want a child. You have good eyes. A child of yours will have good eyes.'"

Then that right eye began to improve. At first it merely gave evidence that it could function. It focussed and gave her some pain. Then gradually she began to see through it. At one point, Cristobal remembers, "she put a thread through a needle by herself, saying 'That I always did by myself

when I was a child.'" Now, two years after the operation, she cooks and keeps house virtually unassisted for herself, her husband Cristobal, and their 1½-year-old son Julio Cristobal Dekker Gomez, a bright, strong-willed Dutch-Indian with sandy hair, creamy, fawn-colored skin, and big, brown eyes. Marta will undergo another operation on the left eye in Europe.

The rains came in time the next year. As the survivors of the starvation year recovered, Cristobal and an English agronomist named David Jarvis and a Tzeltal agricultural field-agent named Sebastian Pul began taking measures to help the people of Oxchuc defend themselves against the ravages of the next such year. Dysentery strikes these upland villages every spring, just when the water sources are beginning to go dry. The first project Cristobal undertook was to improve the existing water sources so that there would be water as late into the dry season as possible. The water source he chose to work on was a cave where water dripped into a small holding tank installed years ago by the federal Indian agency. Cristobal proposed to carve out two collection pools inside the cave, enlarge the tank, and install washbasins for the women. The people of Cristobal's home-town in Holland were now contributing money to a fund to assist in Cristobal's work. They would pay for the materials. Labor would be provided by the villagers, who would be paid in food rations from the International Food Assistance. But the villagers themselves were hanging back. Cristobal had other ways in mind to improve life among the people of Tolbilja: introducing potatoes, new strains of corn, and goats to give milk to fight off tuberculosis. But for all of this he had to wait for the villagers to, as he puts it, "open."

Cristobal was patient. He received the funds from Holland, then raised more for his work from a town in West Germany. They gave him the proceeds of a Christmas bazaar. He visited the village, kept talking of the work they might do to increase the capacity of the cave and the period of its usefulness, and waited for some indication that the villagers would work with him.

Besides the cave, there are two ordinary water-holes near Tolbilja. One day during this period, while some women were gathered at one of the water-holes chatting and working as usual, a huge stone fell into their midst.

You can still see where the corner of one of the cement washbasins was knocked off by the falling rock. No one can remember that ever having happened before. Then, later the same week, another huge rock fell into the other water-hole. One woman was nearly struck by it.

"And then they said," according to Cristobal, "'It is clear that we had better listen to the gringos who want to help us.' They accepted it as a sign from heaven."

That was just a month after the dysentery. "They had all been so impressed by that situation (the epidemic), and then-- whoosh, this, as a last push. Give another interpretation how these stones came down than the one they give! Ya! It's so, so--"

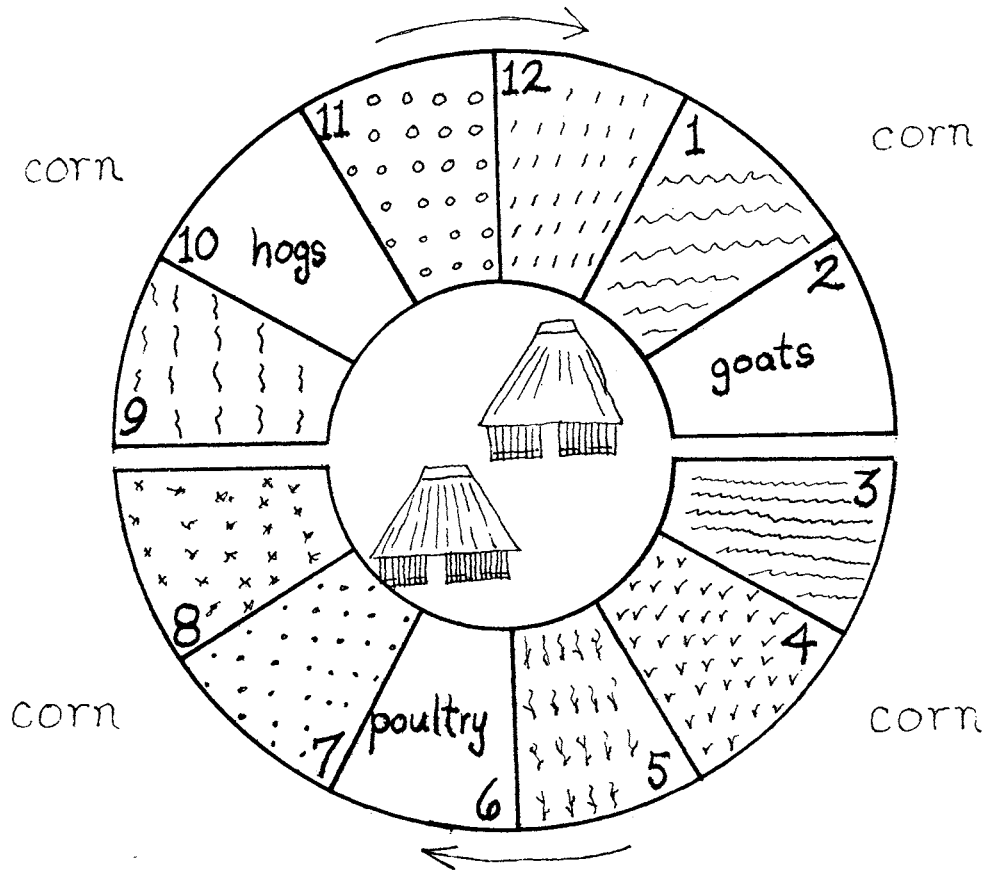
"So perfect?"

"Ya, ya. Perfect."

Since then, the work has gone ahead nicely. In early 1971, village laborers completed the new collection pools, holding tank, pipes, and washbasins. The period of the annual water shortage has been reduced to just six weeks at the very end of the dry season, when the water level has dropped so low that nothing drips into the cave. To tide the village through these six weeks, a water-cart and team of oxen were bought with money from the Dutch supporters. Then a road was constructed from the village to the main road through the municipality. Now when the water-holes and the cave have gone dry, water is transported from a distant river. The 800 people of Marta's village and about 1200 others in the area always have water.

As Cristobal sees it, the Indians of Oxchuc, indeed throughout Latin America, need not suffer in the years when the rain comes late. He and Sebastian Pul have found at least one corn hybrid that will bear fruit in October even if planted six weeks later than the usual planting time. That means that in June of a bad year, when the seedlings of corn planted in April have died, an emergency crop can be sown when the rains finally begin, a crop of Hybrid Corn 503. It is not perfectly suited to high-altitude conditions. It is most productive up to 3600 feet. Marta's village is at 5400 feet. But it does produce corn. With the corn now used, everything depends on the single crop planted in April.

Besides the corn hybrid, Cristobal wants to introduce the villagers to an ingenious system of gardening and stock-raising called, in Spanish, a reloj (a clock).



This combination of night-corrals and vegetable gardens grouped around the family living quarters provides for the production of more, and more varied, animal and vegetable food than the people of the Chiapas mountains currently enjoy. In the schematic example above, sections (2), (6), and (10) are in use as night-corrals. Every fourth month of the year, the animals are rotated to the next of the three corrals in, naturally, a clockwise direction. In the course of the year, the fertilizing waste of all three animal groups has been added to the soil of these three sections. At the end of the year, the crops and animals are all rotated one section clockwise. Thus if this year carrots are growing in



section (3), onions in (4), lettuce in (5), and (6) is used as a night corral, then next year the carrots will move to section (4), onions to (5), lettuce to (6), and (3)-- which has been under cultivation for three straight years-- will become a night corral and "rest" for a year. Its accumulated vegetable compost will mix with animal wastes. By the end of the year it will be ready for planting again.

The logic by which one decides which crop to plant in the various sections is simple: in the section just vacated by the animals (for example, sections (1), (5), and (9) in the sketch ), plant crops that need strong animal fertilizer. In the sections vacated a year ago, plant what needs a mixture of animal fertilizer and compost, provided by the remains of whatever was planted there last year. In the remaining three, plant what grows well with just compost.

Most families already raise some chicken, a few have hogs, but nobody keeps goats. Some grow crops other than the traditional corn, beans, and squashes, but rotation and fertilization are haphazard. Cristobal's goal now is to promote the education of Marta's people in the principles and techniques of reloj farming, supply them with materials, seeds, and the first goats, and see that what gets started at Tolbilja spreads to other villages and municipalities.

Cristobal envisions the establishment of popular academies among the Tzeltales like those he taught music in after the war at home. They provide adult education in small sessions taught by members of the community. Already at work in the Tzeltal region are enough trained Mexicans and Americans to disseminate the necessary information about new crops, stock animals, agricultural techniques, sanitary and health practices, etc. Some are employees of the federal Indian agency (Instituto Nacional Indigenista), some work for the Office of Indigenous Affairs of the State of Chiapas, and some are Protestant missionaries associated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics, an arm of the Wycliffe Bible Translators of Fullerton, California. Cristobal intends to weld a coalition of these people to instruct Marta's people. It is likely to be another test of his patience.

In July Cristobal and Marta and the, by then, two children will leave Mexico for Holland. By then perhaps the adult education program will have been set in motion. Cristobal is a man of action. And David Jarvis will still be

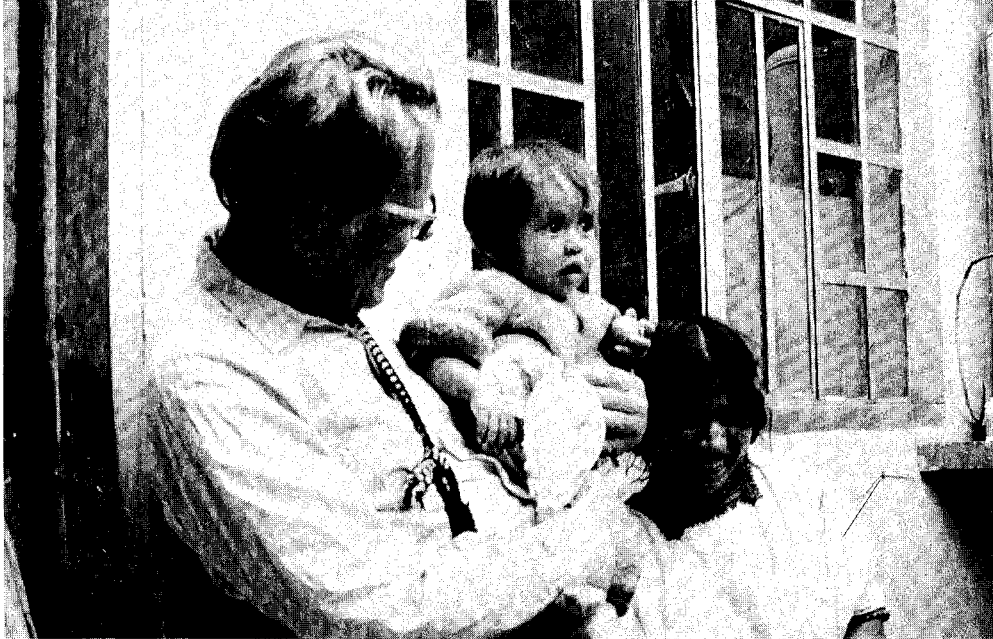
there, and Sebastian Pul, and hundreds of Tzeltales who have seen that what Cristobal says can happen, can happen. They will carry on the work.

Cristobal says he is leaving the decision about where he and his family will settle— Europe or Mexico— until his son has reached school age, and until Marta has experienced life abroad. He is going back to what he thinks of as his work. As a "free scientist" affiliated with the University of Bonn, he painstakingly sifts through the Gospel of St. John, using some linguistic tests and his own ear for Greek to determine which words are the work of the earliest of the several authors of the Gospel. Eventually his culled version will be published by Cambridge University as a part of their New Testament Studies.

I have met a lot of non-Indians working to help Indians. Cristobal Dekker is good at it. He has made a difference to a whole community quickly and with very little money. He does not talk or worry about the pitfalls supposedly associated with the role of a helper. He does not hesitate out of fear of being paternalistic, engendering dependency, or contributing to the erosion of the indigenous culture. I can see a persuasive parallel between his work and the impact of the Conquistadors: a European bourgeois marries an Indian, fathers mestizos, introduces new technology, food plants, and animals, and expands the Indians' universe beyond their villages, beyond the Chiapas plateau, to the distant Dutch village where he will take his wife. Cristobal is in his mid-fifties, Marta barely 20. Their children are sui generis, Dutch-Tzeltales. What will their lives be?

I can sit back and theorize, speculate about the implications of Cristobal's adventure. But that just seems to justify my own reluctance so far to get involved.

Cristobal does not see it as an adventure. It is the way he lives. Someone needs help crossing the street. He helps her. People are starving. He brings them corn. He acts. By acting without agonizing he has saved Indian lives, restored Marta's sight, and taken significant steps towards eliminating a monstrous anachronism of Mayan life— periodic starvation.



Cristobal Dekker with his wife Margarita and son Cristobal Julio Dekker Gomez at their house in the town of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas.

I asked Cristobal how someone could help him and Mar<sup>ta</sup>'s people. Although this was not his first suggestion, one can send a check to him at

Calle 16 de Septiembre, #41  
 San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas  
 Mexico.

It should be made out to Cristobal Dekker, Tzeltal-Maya Fund. When Cristobal goes to Holland, David Jarvis will administer the fund. And I predict that Cristobal will soon be back.

There is a need for more than money, says Cristobal. "I do not like the role of coming to people for money, money, money. You know? People are tired. What is needed is people, people that have two or three years' time. Retired people, for example, who are still strong, who have an interest in Mayan culture. They can do something by living here in town and going to a Mayan village, as I did, just three or four days every month, and speaking with them about the solutions to their problems. As you have seen, with 50,000 pesos (U.S. \$4,000) we can do for 800 people a program that solves their problem. But you cannot do it if the people do not cooperate. They must do the

work. Therefore there is a need for people, and a long, long patience, and talking with them."

"Does my patience have to be so great that I can wait until stones fall?" I ask.

He smiles. "The stones have to fall, in some way. You speak, then wait for an answer from them. It will not be stones every time."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Woodward A. Wickham".

Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on April 3, 1973