

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Worlds Apart in Chenalhó

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

I spent much of the spring alone among the Pedrano Indians of upland Chiapas, Mexico. As time passed and the people and place grew more familiar, my sense of separateness did not abate. I got to know what lies beyond the 2,000-foot ridges that rise to the east and west of the village of Chenalhó, and what Pedranos say when they talk with strangers, but I never got comfortable. The Pedrano universe seemed so circumscribed, ordered, and static that I could never really inhabit it.

The municipio (equivalent to our county) of Chenalhó consists mostly of rugged limestone and volcanic mountains reaching 7,000 feet in several places, interrupted by sinks and river gorges at about 5,000 feet. Twenty-four miles north to south, and an average of eight miles east to west, the municipio is bounded on three sides by other Indian municipios where the inhabitants, like the Pedranos, speak local dialects of the Mayance language Tzotzil. On the fourth side, in the north, where the land descends to "hot country," Chenalhó borders Pantelhó, a mixed Indian-ladino municipio.

Pedranos travel their territory on foot, the men in sandals, the women and children barefoot. Footpaths connect the more than 100 scattered hamlets (parajes) to one another and to the only village, the municipal center, called Chenalhó like the municipio as a whole. They rarely ride the few horses and mules they have, reserving them to carry loads a man cannot handle alone. A hundred years ago, Indians were forced to carry ladinos on their backs along mountain trails to and from the nearest city, San Cristóbal de las Casas. That practice has been outlawed, but Pedranos still carry what seem to me inhumane burdens over mean terrain. A Pedrano more than 70 years old and less than five feet tall may carry 100 pounds of corn for six hours across three mountain ridges to arrive before dawn at the Sunday market in the municipal center. His wife may carry 60 pounds, their grandchildren all they can stand. I admire Pedrano strength and endurance. To the Pedranos themselves, of course, their physical feats are unremarkable, part of their ordinary life. But having lived in a world of physical ease I know I could not long tolerate the physical demands of Pedrano life.

Although more and more Pedranos are travelling outside the cluster of Indian municipios of which Chenalhó is the northernmost, for the majority the world beyond a three-days' walk is known only by hearsay. When Pedranos asked me where I lived, I said I was staying in the cabecera (municipal center). Then they would ask me where my own home was. I would say I lived in the United States.

"Is that very far?" they would ask. Two days by plane, two weeks by car, 8,000 kilometers, as far as you can walk in a year-- whatever I answered sounded absurd, silenced the people I was talking with, and left me feeling lost. We live in different geographies.

Modern man is infiltrating Mayan Chiapas little by little, but a bearded gringo unconnected to the Church still does not fit any existing Pedrano categories. Outsiders come from the "wilderness," the region beyond that which the Holy Earth set aside for Pedranos to inhabit protected. Strangers are dangerous. They represent unknown alternatives. The people of Chenalhó work singlemindedly at sustaining themselves and their society. They get enough corn and beans from the land to support themselves with only a narrow margin of excess. This they accomplish through unremitting physical labor and religious observances that leave no time for purely intellectual or artistic activities. It was aesthetically gratifying for me to see how neatly the social, economic, political, and religious practices of these people combine to preserve the society. At the same time, in contrast to their apparently purposeful pattern of life, my independent, relatively leisurely lifestyle among them seemed as anomalous as maize farming in Manhattan.

No Pedrano lives alone as I did. The labor that sustains life is shared between men and women. They cannot survive apart. The last morning I was in Chenalhó, I visited Mariano and his family in the paraje of Bachteklum, high atop the ridge east of the cabecera. I saw Mariano's wife Veronica hoeing alongside him as I approached one of their three milpas (cornfields) 100 yards from their family's cluster of huts. Mariano said his wife helps him weed the fields only when he is alone, that is, when none of his male cousins and in-laws, uncles and brothers, can help.

Later, as I sat sipping from a gourd of posol (ground corn mixed with water), Mariano's father-in-law and mother-in-law together scraped the hard, dry kernels from ears of black, blue, and yellow corn. Women help the men weed and harvest, and men help women clean the cobs, but planting the maize is exclusively men's work, and all things related to cooking and serving it are women's. (Just across the border in northwestern Guatemala I came across a tribe of related Mayans who allot the work of cultivation to the women and girls, and the domestic work of

cooking to the men. The division of work is opposite but at least equally strict.) Pedranos reserved certain questions until they felt they knew me well enough to ask them. How much money I had, how much rent I paid, and where I came from they would ask without hesitation. One of the touchier ones was who cooked my tortillas for me. When I said that I did, they looked embarrassed. In time I came to be embarrassed to admit it.

Religious rules govern the treatment of maize, which provides 80% of a Pedrano's nourishment and comprises, with beans, the sacred food offered the gods in rituals of healing and propitiation. X'ob, the soul of maize, is the maiden daughter of the Lord of the Mountains, whose domain includes the rains and animal life. To mistreat his daughter by spilling corn, storing it carelessly, or piercing a kernel to test the maturity of an ear on the stalk angers the Lord of the Mountains. Apparently he does not like to see men cooking maize, either.

Mariano's wife
Veronica,
their daughter,
sitting,
and a neice
carrying her
younger brother.



I asked Mariano what a Pedrano would do about food if he lived alone. He did not really answer my questions of this sort, perhaps because he does not think in such hypotheticals. In any case, he said that when a man is alone he carries tor-tillas or masa (corn dough to be mixed with water to make posol) prepared and packed for him by his wife, mother, or sister. Since a man lives with his family, there is always a woman to cook for him.

The larger a man's family, the richer he is. Available manpower determines the number and size of milpas he can plant, weed, and harvest. More children create the need for more corn, of course, but in families with many children there is an economy of scale such that they accumulate a greater surplus per family member than do smaller families. In 1960 the average size of Pedrano families was 5.5.*

Some Pedranos hire themselves out for cash or corn as laborers for Indians in certain neighboring municipios, and Pedranos occasionally employ Indians from certain other municipios to work Pedrano fields, but such cash work accounts for only a small share of the labor performed each season. Pedranos almost never do wage-work for one another. The tribe does not support stratification of labor, only division of labor within the family, and exchange of labor among ritual kinsmen (of which, more in the next newsletter).

The customs surrounding courtship and marriage show how strongly the value of manpower influences social relationships in this subsistence society. The father of the bride-to-be throughout his negotiations with the suitor's parents and later with the prospective son-in-law seeks to gain from them goods and labor equal in value to what he has spent in feeding, clothing, and training his daughter. These economic considerations affect the pairing of mates, the course of their courtship, and the length of time they live under the bride's father's roof once they are married.

Boys and girls of different families have virtually no contact with each other. When a boy begins looking for a wife, usually in his sixteenth year, he may spy on girls at a water-hole or during the Sunday market when their parents bring them to the cabecera, but his choice is primarily shaped by what his elders have heard and what they recommend. Mariano said that parents want their sons to choose a girl who has been closely guarded by her family. A girl known to have had relations with her father or an in-law is usually passed over and must settle for a widower. It is rare that a girl has had relations with a man outside her own family, since girls rarely leave the company of their families. Of the respectable girls a boy may choose from, parents favor the one known for her skill and industry in a woman's functions within the family production unit: cooking, weaving, and tending small animals.

* C. Guiteras-Holmes, Perils of the Soul, New York, 1961.

The parents of the boy first visit the girl's family bearing gifts of fruit and aguardiente (cane liquor). Usually the girl's parents refuse the gifts and say their daughter would not make a suitable wife for any man. Mariano said his parents visited the house of his prospective in-laws four times, were refused admittance all but the last, but left the fruit by the door. Eventually the girl's parents give in, if they think the suitor can pay a good price, but if they accept an offer too early they disgrace their daughter.

Once her parents accept the suitor's family and gifts, the girl is considered betrothed. In the next two visits, the boy and his family bring more gifts. As of the second of these visits, the two children are considered married, but the boy does not move to his father-in-law's house until about two weeks later. At that time, the new husband brings with him hundreds of pounds of corn, beans, and other, rarer foods. (A family may save for several seasons to afford a good bride and still have to borrow to close the deal.) For three weeks the boy works with his father-in-law in the fields,

Mariano with
his wife and
daughter in his
cornfield.





not talking with or touching his bride during that time. Finally the girl's father takes the son-in-law to pray with him to the Catholic saints and the Holy Earth in the Chapel of Santa Cruz. According to Guiteras-Holmes, they pray that the couple will be protected against the anger and envy of disappointed suitors. Now, many weeks after the first proposal, the marriage is consummated. But the young couple still do not move back to the family compound of the husband's father. For at least a year, son-in-law works father-in-law's milpas. Then the father-in-law releases the couple to return to reside, probably permanently, with the husband's family. The bride's father has recovered his investment, and the new husband, by his labor and gifts, has gained possession of his wife as if from birth.

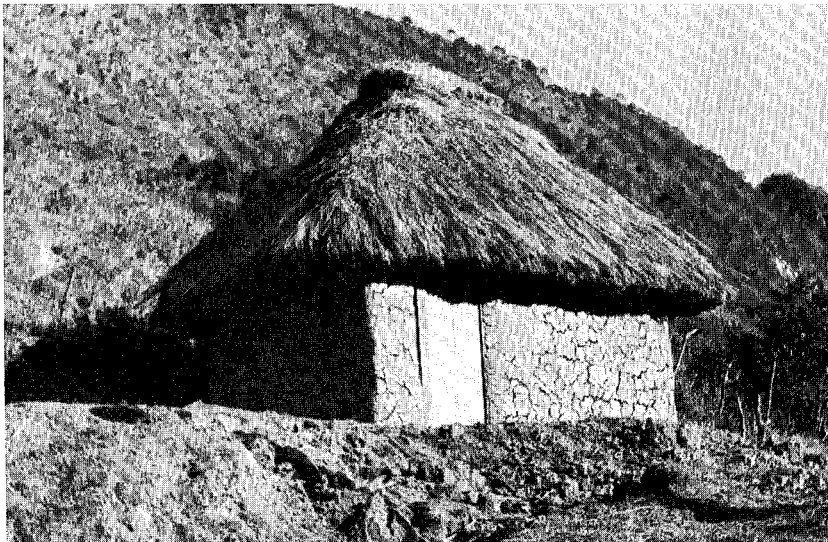
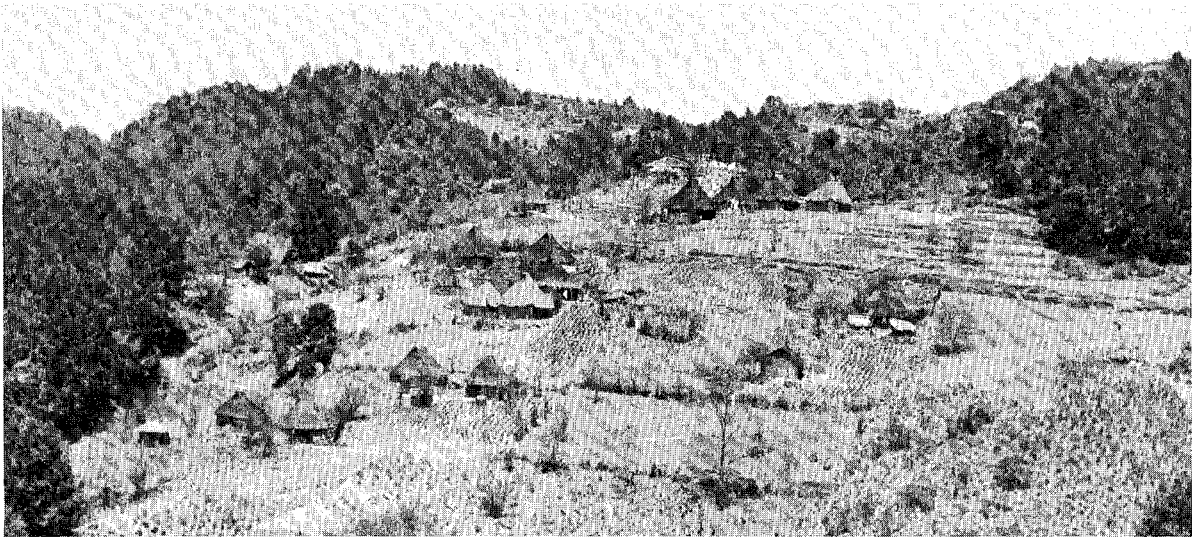
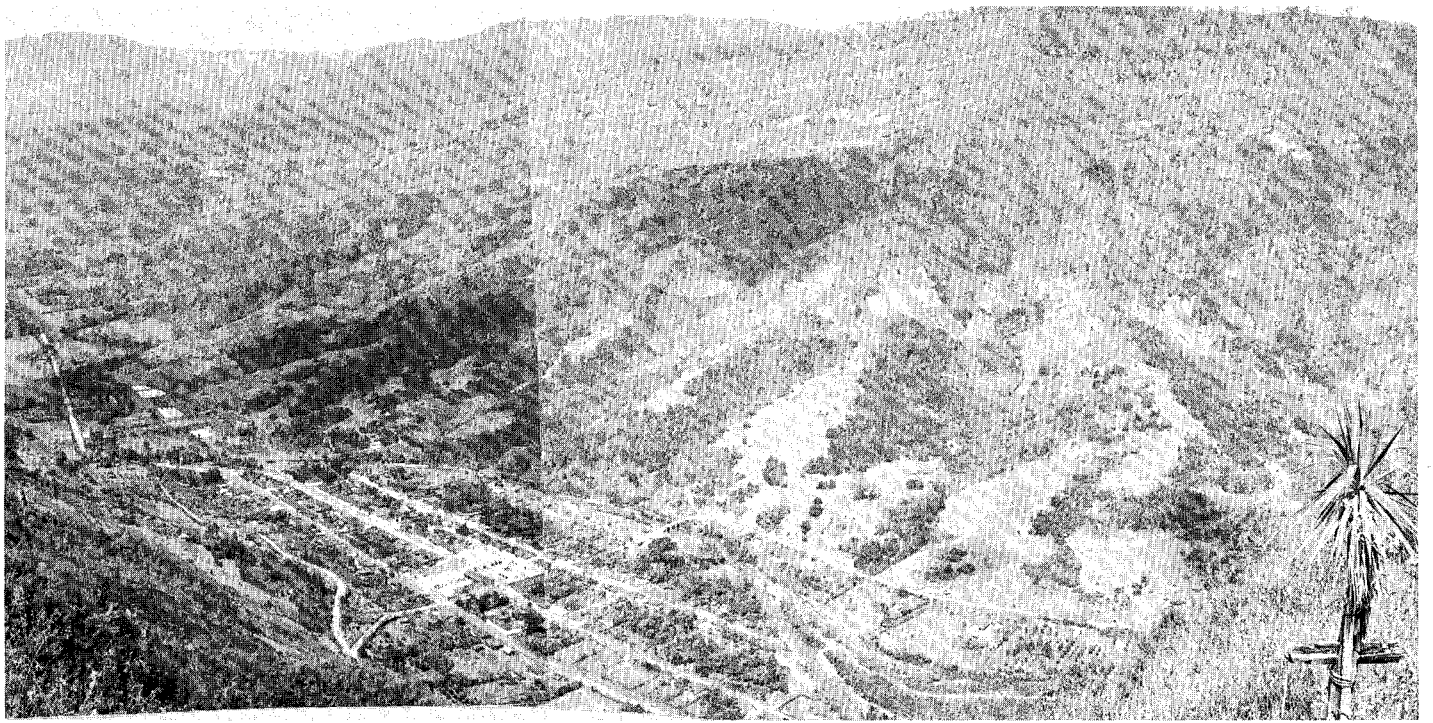
Children are necessary to the family's attainment of security against hunger and a degree of prestige in the community.

Perhaps this is why Pedrano custom trains mothers to guard their children with such a vengeance, why Pedrano beliefs emphasize the vulnerability of children's souls to misfortune. Mariano explained some of that to me following a related incident through which he and I first met.

I had been in Chenalhó only a few hours after an afternoon's ride in an open truck over 20 miles of pitted mountain road from San Cristóbal. Upon arriving in the cabecera I had found the French missionary priest who for six years has ministered to the ladinos and Pedranos, and given shelter to occasional tourists and anthropologists that strand themselves in the village. Now it was evening. I walked out of the padre's quarters near the Church of San Pedro, across the plaza, and down a dirt lane towards the footbridge across the river that borders the village on the west.



Mariano's father-in-law and mother-in-law removing maize from the cob. The Pedrana woman's skirt is deep blue, worn with a scarlet sash, both hand-woven by Indian women of a neighboring municipio.



Most of the residents of the cabecera are ladinos, Spanish-speaking and western-dressed, merchants settled in this frontier town to profit from trade with the indios, and government employees stationed there to carry out education and health programs. As it was now night, the ladinos had closed their shutters and doors. Most of the Pedranos living in the municipal center at any time are only temporary residents, men with families staying there only for the year in which they are holding one of the 50-odd civil and religious offices-- called cargos. These cargoholders live in borrowed houses along the main road into town, care for the plaster saints, the church and chapel, and the spiritual and political affairs of the municipio. By this hour the officials had drawn their families around the fire and closed their doors.

The man who stopped me was a Pedrano, but not a cargoholder. He and his family were living in the center for a few days so that he could earn money working on the road gang. He was drunk, and lurched as he came toward me, but he spoke clearly enough in Spanish for me to understand.

"Mister, mister, go away! Please! You scare my little girl. She is sick. You will scare her to death!"

He was leaning on my chest with both hands, looking up at me and yelling. I said nothing, just wanted to be back with the padre talking about the water problem. Then it was that Mariano arrived out of the darkness, a sober, clear-eyed, smiling Pedrano about my age. He stepped between us and faced the man, speaking to him in Tzotzil. Then the man began asking me to forgive him, and Mariano apologized for him. I asked him what he had said, and he explained:

"I told him not to bother you because you are a brother of the padre."

The only white men with long beards that most Pedranos have seen are the santos in the church, life-size plaster statues of Christ, Saint Peter, etc. I told Mariano I was not a brother (i.e. member of the same monastic order) of the padre, that I was not a priest at all, but he did not really accept that. From that time on, when I introduced myself to Pedranos, one of them would often say to the others that I was a brother of the padre.

"No, just good friends," I say, but they seem to go on assigning that identity to me. Even Mariano still treats me like a Catholic celebrity.

TOP, LEFT: The cabecera (municipal center) of Chenalhó and the mountain ridge to the west. The decorated wooden cross in the right foreground marks a sacred spot along the path up the eastern slope. They are common along paths and near waterholes. MIDDLE: A paraje (hamlet) southwest of the cabecera. BOTTOM: My first house, overlooking the municipal center. Its construction is representative of houses throughout highland Chiapas except in cabeceras, where brick walls and tile roofs appear.

The father's fear that I would scare his daughter to death illustrates Pedrano parents' preoccupation that death may come to their children at any moment. According to Mariano, strangers frighten children and thus endanger their lives. The soul of a child misses the Earth it recently left. If it is released by fright, a fall, or sickness, it flees back to its source. The elaborate rituals performed to retrieve a fugitive soul are expensive and not always successful.

Pedrano parents have reason rooted in history for fearing that their children will be taken from them. From the Conquest until early in this century, Indian children were stolen from native villages by the Spanish and their descendants, to be raised as good Catholic field hands and domestic servants. Miguel Lopez Comate, the elder who helped me settle in Chenalhó, says mothers still think ladinos in San Cristobal steal Indian children.

Today it is more often disease that suddenly takes children. One Sunday I talked with a boy of 18 who had walked seven hours the night before to be in the cabecera by the time the padre finished the 8:00 A.M. mass. He had come with his young wife to stock up on medicine to protect what remained of his family. I talked to him as he stood in line waiting his turn to talk with the padre, who each Sunday morning dispenses advice, pills, bandages, injectibles, and syringes to Pedranos who cannot afford even the reduced prices at the government clinic. A month before, the boy told me, his mother and younger brothers, 14 and 7, had all died in the space of 10 days from the effects of diarrhea. The padre said nothing to the boy as he handed him some tablets, but later told me the boy should have known enough to come for medicine as soon as the illness began. He said the boy was in training to become an enfermero (health worker).

Pedranos believe children sicken and die not from invisible animals in their drinking water but from malice or anger among those close to them, or from chance meetings with the powers of darkness. Mothers with infants never let me near them. In preparation for the festival of Santa Cruz on May 3, and under the direction of the cargoholders appointed to care for that Saint and the Chapel of Santa Cruz, a small group of Pedranos and their wives spent the prior Wednesday decorating the chapel and dressing the Holy Cross kept in a glass case behind the altar.

While the men cut crepe paper and palm fronds by the light of the front door, their wives chatted and nursed babies in the dark end of the chapel. Votive candles burned down to little wax puddles on the stone floor around them. I helped the men where I could, steadying ladders and crimping crepe paper. Comate had brought an armload of polyethylene sheets in various pastel colors, and some styrofoam angels with sequined felt skirts. As we stood around discussing how the materials should be used (along with pine boughs, wild orchids, and palm leaves), I felt as if we were decorating for the spring prom.

Then a Chamula Indian arrived outside the chapel with a big olla full of chicha, the local "beer," made by chewing sugar cane, spitting it into a clay jug, and letting it ferment mixed with water. The saliva of the chewing process supposedly facilitates fermentation and gives good chicha its distinctive flavor. The neighboring Chamulas make and sell most of the chicha and aguardiente consumed by the Pedranos. When all of us in the front of the chapel had drunk some, we began passing it back to the women. I took two gourds of it and picked my way to the back of the chapel where some had not yet been served. The women turned their faces slightly away from me and followed what I was doing out of the corners of their eyes. I was used to that.



I saw a baby not more than a week old lying naked and asleep in his mother's lap. His skin was soft orange in the candlelight. I smiled at the mother. She looked back without reacting. I moved a little closer, stopped, and crouched a few feet away, obviously admiring the baby. The whole group of women stopped talking and watched. Suddenly the mother came to life, stood up, stuck the baby under one end of her shawl, and with the other end swept the floor around her. She was gathering up any bits of the baby's soul that might have stayed behind in the commotion. She moved deep into the corner and I went back to the men.



I do not assume that to a Pedrano his universe seems circumscribed, economically constrained by the demands of subsistence, or socially rigid. Those are my views and feelings from outside. A people's universe must necessarily feel spacious enough to them, just as a people's language naturally changes to accommodate their needs. In fact, what is to me the most striking condition of Pedrano life-- their scant margin of protection against starvation-- they accept as a blessing. Any annual excess, which in my universe seems like no more than a man can expect as his share of the earth's bounty, Pedranos receive with prayers of thanksgiving. More than that, as a society they return the greater part of any surplus to the gods who begrudged it to them in the first place. They devote it to financing the religious and civil officeholders in the cargosystem, whose responsibility it is to assure the orderly continuation of Pedrano society through the maintenance of good relations with the pagan and Catholic divinities. My next newsletter discusses the cargosystem and its place in Pedrano life.

Sincerely,

Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on October 3, 1972.