

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-9

Antonio Vasquez, Curandero of Chenalhó, Chiapas

El Vergel
Oaxaca, Mexico
13 December, 1972

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The newsletter that accompanies this one is my translation from the Spanish of an interview I had with Antonio Vasquez, a Tzotzil Indian curandero (healer), about one month ago. In this introductory newsletter, I want to tell you how I came to know him, how he lives, what he looks like, and what he seems to represent within the changing world of his own village, San Pedro Chenalhó, Chiapas.

You can learn something about where you fit in by noticing what seat you are assigned on the daily bus from Chenalhó to San Cristóbal de las Casas. The first two places, just behind the driver, go to members of the driver's family or to his close friends. In the next six or eight places you find schoolteachers riding the first few miles out to their isolated schools, sometimes accompanied by their wives and children; Chenalhó merchants on their way to town for supplies; teenagers visiting San Cristóbal purely out of desire to escape the harsh tedium of a small, frontier village; and non-descriptors like me. All these people but one are ladinos (non-Indian Mexicans). Although the assignment of seats within this ladino block seems to reflect a refined sense of the social hierarchy, the only discriminating principle of seat-assignment I can be certain of is that all the Indians must sit behind all the ladinos. I suspect the ticket-issuing agent has many more delicate decisions to make, within the ladino block and, perhaps, among the Indians. His mannered, intense checking and cross-checking remind me of a defrauding bank-clerk juggling figures under pressure.

The categories "ladino" and "Indian" are not perfectly mutually exclusive, but in general the established ladinos accept as ladino any Indian who speaks fluent Spanish in his dealings with non-Indians, has exchanged his native dress for Western, and lives apart from his native family. Indians accept as Indian anyone who speaks the native idiom as his mother tongue, retains native dress at least for fiestas, and maintains loyal contact with his family and home hamlet. Established ladinos-- and these include direct descendants of the Spanish colonials, people of mixed Spanish-Indian descent (the majority of ladinos), and those of pure Indian blood whose forebears turned ladino two or more generations ago-- speak approvingly of Indians that turn ladino. The Indians are often less approving, though some later envy the convert who has, by Indian standards, made himself rich. The unofficial and, until recently, official policy of Mexican ladinos towards Indians is to advance the process of conversion.

One man who nicely illustrates the difficulty of defining ladinos and Indians is the President of the municipality of Chenalhó. Until he became President, he dressed and lived as a Pedrano, an Indian of Chenalho. But when he was elected President (technically elected, though really selected before the election), he began to dress Western and live in a ladino-style house in the municipal village. On the days of major fiestas, he dresses as a Pedrano again. That position between two worlds satisfies his people, the Pedranos, who chose him in part because of his fluent Spanish and passing familiarity with the ladino world. They recognize the importance of the President's acceptability in the outside world, and know that his ladino aspects comfort the municipality's ladino minority, who would rather be dealt with by a near-ladino than a puro indigena. The President, I note, sits in that fuzzy row of seats between the ladino section in the front and the Indian section behind.

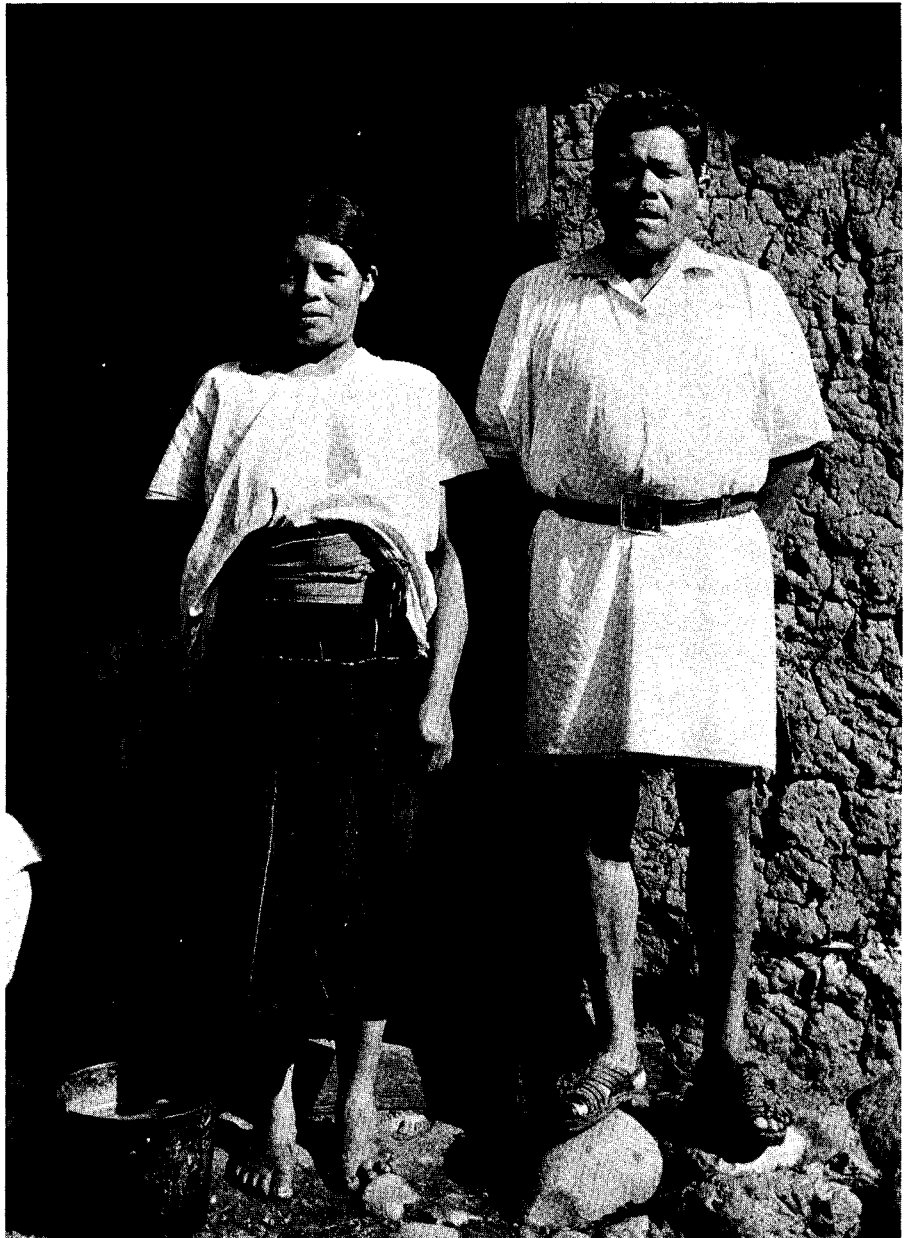
I first noticed Antonio Vasquez when he sat down across the aisle from me and a seat ahead on a trip in to San Cristóbal. He had been given a seat in the first row. He sits perfectly erect, hands on knees, new sandals squarely on the floor in front of him. His black hair is combed with a little grease straight back from his high forehead in even, smooth waves. His Pedrano tunic is hand woven, ironed, and spotlessly white, cinched at the waist with a handsome, wide leather belt. The bottom edge of the tunic reaches to a point just three inches above the bottom edge of his white Pedrano shorts, which in turn end just two inches above his knees. On his lap lies his black wool Pedrano chamarra (something like a poncho), and over his shoulder he carries a finely tooled leather bag. He greets ladinos and Indians in Spanish and Tzotzil respectively as they board, but otherwise keeps to himself, looks straight ahead down the road, an unobstructed view. Occasionally he tugs at his tunic-bottom to cover his exposed thighs, a motion Pedrano teenage boys often go through, or runs a pocket comb through his hair. His hands and feet are clean and smooth, nails trimmed and pink. Most Pedrano feet are blackened and cracked from the fields, nails worn away or indistinguishable from the surrounding grime. The skin of his face is a rich, dark cafe au lait, with coppery blushes from sunburn at the cheekbones. He looks about 45, healthy, barrel-chested, his small black eyes clear and bright. His physical bearing would set him apart from other Pedranos even if he sat among them.

But he usually sits apart. The Sunday market in the central plaza of the village affords Pedranos from all the outlying hamlets a chance to exchange not just goods, but also gossip, jokes, marriage offers, threats, and, especially, liquor. One Sunday morning early last spring, I saw the perfectly groomed Pedrano from the bus sitting with his wife under an archway off to the side of the marketplace. They were not buying or selling, or really even watching. They were just present. By noon they had gone.

Later in the day, I was walking along the river that skirts the village, keeping my distance from the marketplace and the paths leading from it. I wanted to avoid encounters with drunken Indians. As I passed the last in a series of one-room, dirt-floor brick houses along a lane that ends at the river, I looked in and saw the Pedrano from the front of the bus. I wished him good afternoon and waited a moment. He got up from the little wooden chair he was sitting on just inside the doorway and asked me in. His

voice was strong, and he made a sweeping motion of welcome with his left hand. I went in.

To the left of center in the windowless room is a hearth, a wood fire built on the floor, with two pots suspended over it, partly burned sticks of pine radiating from the gray ashes in the middle, and implements for cooking tortillas scattered at the edges. To the right, a low wooden table under an arch of pine boughs and waxy pink-flowered vines. On the table, some candles partly burned and now extinguished, two red-clay incense burners, also unlit, and a crudely inlaid wooden box in a nest of brown cloth. To the right of the door, a young man less than twenty years old lying pale and still but awake on a straw mat, covered with two blankets. To the left of the door, in the opposite corner, Antonio Vasquez's wife has taken the baby son from her breast, covered herself and him, and lain down on her side on a high bed of canvas stretched between poles, the baby with her. She is the only Pedrano woman I have seen acting as if public nursing were immodest. Antonio Vasquez and I introduce ourselves. He gives me a little wooden chair, and we begin to talk.



Antonio Vasquez and
his wife
outside the door of their
house in Chenalhó.

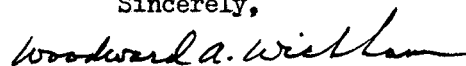
Most of what he told me then and in our subsequent talks you will discover in the interview. I will add the following. Antonio Vasquez rarely drinks. He considers liquor unhealthy. He has not held office within the all-important cargo-system of the Pedrano community, a hierarchy to which most Pedrano men aspire, and he does not expect to do so. He owns two hectares (about five acres) of cornfield, but his work is entirely cash work-- healing. To work his fields he hires other Pedranos and pays them in corn or cash. Without the advantage of the work he provides them, he explained, these Pedranos would not be able to live. In all these characteristics, Antonio Vasquez is an unorthodox Pedrano. Although we have not discussed the subject, I assume he is relatively rich. That distinguishes him from most Pedranos, and his earning his money without manual labor distinguishes him from virtually all of them. With me he has been gracious, enthusiastic, polite, and extremely discrete in his references to other Pedranos. He does not ask me about myself or my work, although he seems interested.

Early last month I saw Antonio Vasquez in the marketplace after my absence of several months from Chenalhó. He greeted me with a handshake and clap on the back-- the only Pedrano to use this ladino form of greeting (abrazo) with me. Then he went back to his place with his wife under the archway at the far edge of the market activity. I went to his house later that day to talk with him. As I approached it, a Pedrano lurched out the door and vomited in what would have been my path. I looked in past him and saw that there were a dozen or so inside, mostly women and children. Someone was chanting. Antonio came out looking harried, but pulled himself together quickly. We arranged for him to stop by my room in San Cristóbal the next Tuesday when he came to town for an appointment. He seemed delighted by the plan. It was then that we recorded the interview.

The festivity in his house that Sunday, like the decorated altar inside his house, the candles, and the incense, were part of the rituals incumbent upon the cargo-holder who this past year has been sharing Antonio Vasquez's house with him. Every Wednesday and Sunday, prayers and rites are performed to the saint whose relics are kept in the inlaid box and whose propitiation is the responsibility of Antonio's housemate during the year he holds office. It seems, then, that although Antonio Vasquez is not himself interested in holding office, he is not so isolated or alienated that his house should be considered unsuitable for serious religious functions.

The aspect of Antonio Vasquez's experience about which he was least informative is his relations with the rest of the Pedrano community. I asked my friend Comate a little about the curandero, but the old man was surprised I knew anything at all about him, and acted as if he did not want to talk to me about him. So I do not ask other Pedranos about Antonio Vasquez. I have certain hunches about his position in both the ladino and Pedrano worlds. As I talk more with him, if he wants to tell me about this, he will. He likes to talk.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on January 11, 1973