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GUATEMALA. SOME OF ITS TOPONYMIC PROBLEMS

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The countries within the northern part of the Central American isthmus do not belong any more to the unknown parts of the New World. Since its incorporation into the modern world economy with the resulting structural change in its economic production, they have come out of its centuries old isolation in which they were submerged during the Colonial period, calling the attention of scholars due to its important location. In relative contrast to above statement is its scientific investigation which until quite recent time has started to attract travellers, investigators and experts, although not in the same number as for other continental regions.

Isolated investigations related to modern geographical problems require - above all - extensive and trustworthy cartographic material and a better scientific knowledge of the surrounding medium, as without same any work would be incomplete and to a great extent hypothetic. In recent years and in both directions work has been started within scientific rigor as to work in this sense is an urgent requirement of utmost importance, imposed by science towards a better understanding of our country and thus to obtain the maximum utilization of its vast natural resources for collective benefit within a future-minded planning and in complete agreement with the present requirements. It is a known fact that in order to understand the present, we must study the past and apply the experiences thus gained so as to be able to plan adequate and wisely towards the future.

We find ourselves - by comparison - at the day of the Genesis, in which the light starts to separate itself from darkness; in which thanks to the modern advance which science has put at our disposal, when the flights to the unknown are a reality, we penetrate into the real knowledge of what surrounds us and procure its best exploitation in benefit of the community. An immense perspective of work extends itself before us scientists, may we be called geographers, historians or what else, in an undefined future. It is not the time to fall asleep in the languid and placid admiration of this poor and small system, insignificant and sterile, which some precursors - at cost of an effort whose beauty and personal value we will never discuss - have built on a niggard base of a determinism which we will not rate here.

There is something better than to tarry in it: to study and work within the scope of natural sciences, taking advantage of the result of investigations as well as of the valuable working material offered us by a modern cartography - more perfect and detailed - which has acquired scientific category, incorporating even data obtained from remote sensors.

We should not limit ourselves any more to a more or less literary description of a country, nor the cold enumeration of the names of its cities, hydrography, soil, subsoil and so forth, or even simple statistics. We must covet to have more than just a catalogue of geographical names or localized data: to investigate itemize, explain them and advise as to its best and proficient exploitation and utilization. Only thus the maximum profit of the sciences of Nature and Man can be achieved in the crossroads of which we find ourselves and put them for the use of all, in order to obtain the aggrandizement of a country by means of its social, cultural and economic development.

It is a known fact that the Republic of Guatemala is located almost in the geographical centre of the American continent, between the 13°44' to 18°30' parallels north and 87°30' to 92°13' meridians west of Greenwich. It has an extension of approximately 131,800 kilometres, including our territory of Belice.

The most northerly of the Central American Republics, Guatemala - rich in unexploited natural resources - bounds to the north and west with Mexico; to the east with the Atlantic Ocean, the Republics of Honduras and El Salvador and to the south with the Pacific Ocean; country which a century ago was thus described by August Dollfus and Eugène de Mont-Serrat on occasion of their scientific expedition:

"Unissant deux vastes continents, ouvrant ses ports sur deux océans, réalise en quelque sorte l'antique et belle idée du centre du globe ... Cette contrée privilégiée semble appelée à concentrer un jour sur elle la majeure partie des intérêts du globe autant peut-être par sa position unique au monde que par ses remarquables allures topographiques, qui condensent sur son espace tous les climats et toutes les productions".

Lying between both tropics the temperature is as varied as the soil surface, but without touching in any of them the extremes of cold or heat. The yearly seasons scarcely differentiate one from another, knowing commonly only two: verano (summer) or dry season from November to April, and invierno (winter) or rainy season from May to October. The common apothegm attributing Guatemala an eternal spring is not completely hyperbolic.

The dominant feature of the physical geography of Guatemala is its mountain system, which gives the country a matchless beauty with its high plateaus, lofty peaks, marvellous lakes and picturesque shores.

The Cuchumatanes mountains (in Mam and Quiché with the same meaning: congregation or reunion by force. From the root cuchu = reunion or congregation, form of the verb cuchuj = to reunite, from which in turn derives the passive form cuchutajinac, molotajinac = reunited or congregated; and from matán = adverbial mood which expresses by force, as if the mountains would have been united by a superior force), have their principal seat in the departments of Huehuetenango and Quiché; they are the highest massive elevation of Central America, as the Xémal (Maya word: wooden stick to go across; in Mam it would derive from tsmal = horsehair) peak rises to approximately 3,800 meters above sea level.

As far as the northern part of the isthmus is concerned, the geological evolution of Central America reveals the decided volcanic influence in relation with the structure and morphologic relief of the earth's surface in vast extensions adjacent to the Pacific Ocean from the Latter Mesozoic to our days. Consequently, the territory of Guatemala is comprised within the great seismic zone which forms part of what has been termed as the fire circle of the Pacific.

Over thirty-five main recognized volcanoes settle their huge masses in Guatemala. All of them emerge aligned on top of the mountain range which runs parallel to the Pacific coast along an extension of some 260 kilometers; that is to say, from the border of Mexico near which is the Tajumulco which with its 4,200 meters above sea level is the highest elevation in Central America, to El Salvador, forming the volcanic axis which is invariably at a mean distance of 70 to 80 kilometers from the Pacific shore. There are no traces of recent volcanic formations north of this axis, in the approximately 350 kilometers in which our country extends itself in said direction to the limits of the department of Petén and its boundary with Mexico.

The orographic system of the country determines clearly two hydrographic regions: that of the streams flowing into the Pacific and the rivers which shed their waters in the Atlantic Ocean. This latter one divides itself into other two: the hydrographic region of the Gulf of Mexico and of the Gulf of Honduras. The rivers flowing into the Pacific distinguish themselves in having a rather reduced length, while

the others are generally less impetuous at their origin and more calm at the final part of their course, allowing partly navigation with shallow crafts. Among the main lakes, those of Atitlán, 126 sq. km. (place of much water; from the Mexican atl = water and tlan = place); Amatitlán, 15 sq. km. (Mexican word: place of letters, as the Indians used the fiber and bark of the amati (ficus) tree for their hieroglyphs; Izabal, 590 sq. km., the largest one in the country, and Petén Itzá, 99 sq. km. (The Maya called petenes the islands within the lake; itzá was one of their tribes).

Essentially, Guatemala is an agricultural country as its economy centers mainly on coffee, cotton, bananas and essential oils. However, there exist also many industries - some of them with large capital investment - established in recent years.

The country is crossed from border to border by modern highways, some of them partially still under construction. There are 7,053 kilometers of roads in service: 1,293 km. international; 2,286 km. national and 2,256 km. departmental routes, as well as 1,218 km. of third category roads. 1,357 of paved roads are included in the above total. The International Railways of Central America link with Mexico and El Salvador. The main airlines of the world have connexions in the country, and the National Aviation Company (AVIATECA) with regularly scheduled flights to some countries of Central America, Mexico and the United States, renders an efficient service of passengers and cargo.

Data of the VII General Census of 1964 (13-26 April) gives Guatemala 4,278,341 inhabitants: 2,167,479 (50.66%) men and 2,110,862 (49.34%) women. The 85,000 inhabitants of Belice (1957 data) must be added. Essentially, the population of the country is a rural civilization, as the 1964 Census gives for it a total of 2,840,917, of which 1,464,964 (51.57%) were men and 1,375,953 (48.43%) women, while the urban areas gave a total of 1,437,424: 702,515 (48.87%) men and 734,909 (51.13%) women. According to the same census, the total of dwellings in the Republic was 840,945, of which 273,555 (32.53%) were urban and 567,390 (67.47%) rural. The Constitution prescribes that the Republic is divided into departamentos and they in turn in municipios. Not including Belice there are 22 departamentos and 326 municipios. As for populated places, there exist 28 ciudades (cities), 29 villas (villages), 268 pueblos (towns) and around 6,000 aldeas and caseríos (hamlets and lesser category), not to mention the numberless parajes (areas or spots).

The National Constituent Assembly of Guatemala abolished slavery in the year of 1823, the first American country to do it. Even if in the country it is common to find two kinds of people, ladinos or non Indians and indígenas or Indians, there exists very little physical difference between one and the others. Generally those referred to as indígenas or indios have as familiar language one of the Indian languages spoken, dress in typical costumes and practice some characteristic customs. Ladinos are those who speak Spanish as their customary language.

It is difficult that there should exist in Guatemala one town in which there would not live an Indian, in the same manner as there do not exist Indian towns in which there are not, at least, a few ladinos. Nevertheless, the Indian population is concentrated mainly in the mountains to the northwest and west, at the piedmont towards the southwest and in the northern central zone of the country. There exist also some small Indian regions, disseminated in the ladino area. Among them, the eastern pocomam in Jalapa; the chortís in Chiquimula and in Zacapa, as well as many small communities speaking kekchí, lacandón, mopán, chol, yucateco and other minority languages.

The Indian forms part of the economy and national life same as the ladino, even if individually as well as collectively he does not move within a sense of national economy and sometimes not even of a regional one, but only with consciousness of community economy and - above all - that of the family. His work should not be minimized; we could not subsist without them. In any case and despite the lack of coordination in the economic activities, the Indians form part of the economic life of Guatemala and to a good extent sustain it.

In the General Introduction to his textbook Latin America Preston E. James, Professor of Geography, Syracuse University, tells that two men were standing on a tropical hillside overlooking the Caribbean Sea. One was a United States engineer, the other a Latin American. A formerly uninhabited swamp had been cleared and drained; rows of flourishing trees marked the newly created plantation and in the distance were the neat, white houses of a worker's village built in accordance with the most modern plans for tropical housing. The engineer was justified in the pride he showed while explaining that the development had required a large capital investment in previously unproductive land, and could not have been carried out without a high degree of technical skill. The Latin American, after some hesitation, replied slowly and thoughtfully: Sí es bueno - pero no es nuestro (Yes, it is good, but it is not ours).

This little event which typifies one of the most difficult of the problems being faced today in Latin America, may seem a protest as passionate as barren of the conservative medium against progress. However, the profound significance of the brief, spontaneous and unconscious sentence of the Latin American did not escape the comprehensive spirit of geographer James. It should not be forgotten that a considerable part of the population is formed by aborigines of the continent, rich in secular traditions and wisdom and that since the first years of the sixteenth century the Latin element was added to this aboriginal trunk which, in the medly of the different races, has formed the base to establish new forms of living together, unattainable in other parts.

Each of the currents assisting in order to form the present population has contributed its patrimony of ancestral customs, remote traditions and old cultures which amalgamated with the aboriginals and over which the latinity and christianity professed by our forefathers, one of our most precious heritages, extended itself like a protective robe.

It is thus how Latin America has become one of the most genuine expressions of this great continent, because here the Indians survive, either in their primitive form or mingled with the other races which contributed to form the countries. Not so in other regions, where after extinction of the Indian or aboriginal tribes an own way of living has been forced upon, consequence of determinant historical happenings which have not worked in the same sense in said regions, with the resulting formation of peculiar characteristics which, at least, cannot but fix its specific features in the structure of existence, where today great changes in its basic traditions are taking place due to the requirements imposed upon by a modern technological society.

Farther on than investigations of the geographer, historian or ethnologist; even farther on than the disquisitions of the philosopher and the studies of a sociologist and psicologist, there must be found a synthetic definition of this world designated with the common apothegm of New and divided into so many artificial barriers, in order to explain why a population of native Indians and other successive immigrant races maintain a common way of reasoning and feeling, proclaiming proudly at the same time the own Latin origin.

It is true that after the Spanish Conquest the language and body of laws influenced the less enlightened classes. Culture and religion influenced the classes which considered themselves in higher standing, and the struggle for independence consolidated

this sentiment. This perhaps can help explain the development and prosperity attained in its time. There should also be admitted, notwithstanding the lack of understanding unchained by some swords of the conquerors and whips of the encomenderos (persons who were given grants on land, Indians and their produce) covetous to accumulate wealth, that a sort of natural analogy has existed between the aborigines, the adventurers impelled by greediness and the mass of immigrants driven by the necessity to establish themselves in the new lands.

This agglutination which has united different countries and given them a common element amidst divisions and political sways has deep and undiscovered roots. The origin of the inhabitants, the historical vicissitudes, the soil on which we live, the climate which conditions us and the languages we speak, are other as many elements which help to understand this continent in progressive evolution, where countries are still being formed, and which are a mixture and synthesis of diverse races.

In fertile fields toil generations of farmers who constitute the most authentic expression of the soul of this old world. It is in the rural population where, same as in other parts of the world, the spirit of this continent still in its formative stage must be sought, as well as the common feeling which united those living in the most diverse latitudes and in the most distant places, in sometimes completely different ambiantal conditions and, relatively, nearer or more distant from the centres which we have come to designate as civilized.

This is Latin America in which we live: dense in forests, crossed by barren plains, sprinkled with prairies, with great riches guarded in its entrails, curled by mountainous and volcanic pendants and with high snowed peaks, unstinted in its riches with which it compensates the weariness of the industrious.

For any study we have to resort above all to Human Geography, as only the relation between man and its ambient can contribute to solve problems, some of whose aspects evade the most thorough analyses. Those devoted to this scientific discipline must refer also to the geographical names, as all toponyms tell us their connexion to Cultural Geography and other related sciences. They serve for the knowledge of what we read and listed and to understand them, we must mention linguistic and geography, as they are linguistic characteristics applied to geographical ones. They cover a wide field and are at the same time so numerous, dispersed and interlaced, that generalization is made difficult.



The definitions of the proper names formed by one or more words which express and delimit an area as an individual geographic entity or characteristic has more than one meaning, and the range of synonyms is known as the bedeutungsfeld.

The work in Guatemala is diffculted not only due to the intense and thorough study which must of course be carried out of the Spanish names, but also of those pertaining to any of the forty three Indian groups of the country. Sometimes investigations must go back to still existing documents of the first part of the sixteenth century so as to trace and establish the changes which geographical names have underwent, as well as to ascertain the arbitrary manner in which some of them have been able to implant themselves. Most are difficult and fictional and do not resist a severe etymological analysis. To this, it must be added that our people make constantly a great use of an enormous amount of diminutives.

If we arrive at the stage of being able to understand the terms used, and if we agree upon a series of geographical names which should designate the indicative elements of the kind or entity without any ambiguity, we will have achieved a forward step in seeking a more clear communication of our thoughts.

As far as Spanish prosody is concerned, when applying it to the geographical names, we should not forget that same as Italian and Portuguese, it offers many difficulties not known by neighbouring languages. French, for instance, ignores our restlessness of etymological accentuation, as it charges almost always the accent on the last syllable; sometimes due to elimination of all what followed to the original inflection or tonic, and some other times advancing the accent. Regarding English prosody, same is even more capricious than Spanish, and even the English pronunciation does not keep the slightest resemblance to writing. English grammar does not know also the written accent, which is a serious inconvenience in its geographical names.

All this must be borne in mind when carrying out the inventory of toponymical names, which should result in more stability in the nomenclature of each linguistic zone and in obtaining a greater degree of uniformity trying to maintain the rules of prosody and ortography, even if of course it will not be possible to follow rigidly

any one. There will be always forms contrary to the etymology but consecrated by use, which is also nothing new and was already set forth two thousand years ago by Horace in his Ars Poetica Epistle: "Multa renascendur quae iam caecidere, cadetque; Quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus/Quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi", which in a free translation means that many words which died will be born again, and not few that are now common will die, if usage wants it so; the judge, arbiter and norm of language.

In Guatemala, analysis of many geographical terms tell us their genealogy, mutations and life, as words - same as everything else which is alive - are subject to evolution. There are terms which possess a long history. By means of the name we can also find the most suggestive characteristic of the region it designates, as it is a known fact that the Indians, whose geographical names have been kept, searched always for the most colourful phrase and expressing it, formed the rich and euphonious word to designate the places through which they passed.

On the other hand the Franciscan Friar Gerónimo de Mendieta who finished in Mexico in 1596 his Historia Eclesiástica Indiana (Indian Ecclesiastical History) and mastered the Mexican language with great elegance and thoroughness, cautions us in our search for etymologies; statement which (in a free translation which follows) we must always bear in mind when dealing with the subject:

"And I can truly assert that Mexican is no less graceful and curious as Latin, and I even believe that it is more artistic in composition and derivation of words and in metaphors, knowledge and use of which has been lost and the common speech corrupts more every day, because we Spaniards speak it commonly in the same way as Negroes and other slaves recently brought from Africa speak our language. And the same Indians adopt our way of speech and forget the one used by their parents, grandfathers and ancestors. And same happens here with our Spanish language, which we have halfway corrupt with words which stuck to ours when we conquered the Islands and other words which were taken here over from the Mexican language. And thus we can say that of these languages and customs and persons of different Nations, in this land a mixture or chimera has been made, which has been no small hindrance for the good Christianity of these new people. May God help out the best He can".

It seems that the Spaniards obtained the same result in those of their colonies which were in prolonged contact with the aborigines.

When analysing the geographical names of Guatemala, it must also be borne in mind that since the time of Spanish domination many places either kept their original Indian designations; that some were translated into Spanish, or had put before them the surname of the saint under whose appellation they were placed. It is also a verified fact that many Conquerors or their descendants named the towns they established after their patron saints adding their own surname in recollection of the place in Spain where they came from, or for any historical happening. Of course, due to the natural evolution of the geographical names, many have changed or become shortened.

The extent of philological investigations in Guatemala which the author was forced to carry out when writing the manuscript of the Geographical Dictionary, can be best illustrated with two or three examples taken at random: the word Quiché, which designates one of the Departamentos of the country, was first mentioned in the Popol Vuh, the Indian mythological manuscript telling of the creation of the world also referred to as the Sacred Book - which is its literal translation - and supposedly written down shortly after the Spanish Conquest in 1524, and as copied during the first lustrum of the eighteenth century by the dominican priest and excellent linguist Francisco Ximénez in the town of Chichicastenango. The document starts, copying the original classical quiché orthography: Are u xe oher tzih varal Quiche u bi. - Are = demonstrative pronoun; u xe = its origin; oher tzih = old histories, words; varal = here, in this place; u bi = its name. This is the beginning of the old histories in this place called Quiché.

The Polochic river, which flows into lake Izabal in the northeastern region of Guatemala, was firstly mentioned by Hernan Cortés in his letter to Charles V dated September 3, 1526 as Apolochic. In the pocomchi language of the region: Polo = from palau, means lake or sea; chic = it is already. It is already a lake or sea, which applies to the width of the river as it flows into the large Izabal lake.

The author deemed also proper that geographical Indian names should appear on the maps with their exact pronunciation for very obvious reasons for which there is no need here to go into detail. Speaking among other languages also quiché, he also knows that the Maya even if on the threshold of phonetic writing, used hieroglyphs or ideographic writing in which the signs or characters do not contain a picture or design of the idea, but a symbol of same. The characters employed in this writing system generally have lost all resemblance with the images of the ideas they represent, and scarcely are something more than conventional symbols.

In order to latinize the quiché language, around the middle of the sixteenth century a Franciscan priest, Francisco de la Parra, invented five characters with which he was able to give Indian quiché words the proper way of writing and which were used for centuries when setting down the Catechisms, Doctrines and all kinds of documents utilizing the roman system. Thus, knowing the author that during the sixteenth century the letter h was pronounced aspirated like the modern Spanish j or the English h, but that now in Spanish h lacks any sound, Indian words using h were normalized changing h to j: ohar (old) became ojar; hun (one) jun, and so forth. This simplifies not only spelling, but any person using the maps issued by the Instituto Geográfico Nacional, the official mapping agency of Guatemala, can thus be sure that they will pronounce rightly the Indian geographical names.

Another problem encountered and a very serious one were the etymologies. For instance, in Quiché, a common name for some places is xolbé (xol = crossing; bé: road), but xol also means murderer. Of course, being on or near a crossroad, the first meaning is the proper one. The city of Quezaltenango is mentioned by said name already by the conqueror Pedro de Alvarado in his letter dated April 11, 1524, to Hernán Cortés. It derives its name from the Mexican Quetzalli = now Quetzal, the national bird of Guatemala (Pharomacrus Moccino de la Llave) and tenanco = place, although its ancient quiché name Xelajú still persists and is also widely used (Xe = beneath; lajú, from lajuj = ten). The priest Fernando Antonio Dávila in his study about the region of Quezaltenango, wrote around the third decade of the past century that the name of the town meant under or beneath the ten, which is absolutely exact as volcanoes and domes in number of ten surround the second largest city of the Republic of Guatemala located in the Western highlands, at 2,357 meters above sea level. Contrary to this, and in an etymology that was not accepted by the author, the chronicler Fuentes y Guzmán towards the end of the seventeenth century stated in his Recordación Florida that the city environments were divided into ten sections or separate governments. Even if erroneously repeated by some later chroniclers this would imply - knowing the set-up of Indian armies during the time of the Conquest - that each captain led a group or xiquipil which means 8,000 or a total of 80,000 warriors, which is an excessive number not only for Quezaltenango or Xelajú but for any Indian town in the second decade of the sixteenth century. Besides, in Quiché there is no known proper term to proclaim the idea of government and when the Indians wanted to express said concept, they did not employ one voice but many which - in some manner - conveyed the equivalent meaning. This, to illustrate how careful one must proceed with the etymologies,

What would for instance also happen if somebody not versed in the Indian Quiché language, when mentioning the Popol Vuh would say that popol comes from the word polic, which means to throw away, and that this name was given because the book must have been found cast away someplace? Or that monography (from the Greek monos and graphein) in the Spanish language is a hybridism, as it would be derived from the Spanish word mono = monkey (atteles) and the Greek word description, thus meaning correctly description of the monkeys? Or that the correct etymology of the Spanish word palomar (dovecot; in Guatemala used also to designate a shack where many poor families live promiscuously) should be palo = wooden stick; mar = ocean, sea, thus meaning stick, or tree from the Ocean? . . . .

As previously mentioned, as far as our Spanish speaking American countries are concerned it is a known fact that the diffusion of the Spanish language resulted in the insecurity in the transcription of words proceeding from European languages. The situation became more complicated with the confusion arising as words changed with the way they were written. To this must be added the barbarisms born from popular or dialect corruptions; metaplasms or changes not authorized by correct usage; the aphaeresis or omission of one or more initial letters of a word; the syncope or omission of internal letters; the adoption of essentially Indian names, as well as the difficulty which represents reproduction of foreign words which have become part of our geographical names.

In Guatemala it is a curious phenomenon that a country which became independent in 1821, boasting overabundant own life still conserves to a great degree the old language of the captains who conquered it in 1524. And this not due to a spirit of worship to its elders nor much less due to devotion to the traditional and old - which for sure is not the trend of the Latin American countries - but because after the great epopee of the Conquest of America, the Spaniards imposed an unalterable peace which lasted three centuries and its mighty voice had a prolonged resonance giving to many of the phrases and terms an even greater firmness or steadfastness than in their own country of origin. If the Conquest made the personal activity soared without hindrance nor forms, evolving rapidly a civilization on American soil and bequeathing with it the rich language of Castile, the colonial system debased the energies and stagnated even the language which afterwards had to follow a sinuous course.

The Spaniards had not only to populate America, but even furnish their homes with table service, furniture and the thousands of household goods which form part of civilization, the names of which were bequeathed to us. And as they stumbled constantly upon many new objects they gave them either new names or the same ones by which they were already known in the aboriginal languages of this continent as recorded by many of the conquerors, those courageous chieftains who not only clutched the sword, but also wrote chronicles, reports and the history. And as some spoke Arabic which they had learned during the Moorish wars, it was not strange that they took from this language many words to name objects or places they saw for the first time in the American continent.

Summarizing, the study of the structures, origins and transformations of geographical names, as difficult and exhaustive as it is, can be also one of the most important tasks in which we are engaged.

Geneva, September 4, 1967