

THE CONQUEST TRADITION OF CENTRAL AMERICA

by Richard N. Adams

Between 1979 and 1984, the government of Guatemala added a particularly tragic chapter to this century's chronicle of "civilized" brutality. In the name of quelling a leftist insurgency movement in the northern departments of the nation, the successive military regimes of General Lucas García and General Ríos Montt directed a campaign of mass terror against the nation's Indian population—a campaign so bloody that it recalled the worst atrocities of the 16th-century Spanish *conquistadores*. Paramilitary death squads targeted dissenters, real or imagined, while the army destroyed more than 400 villages, in some cases killing all of their inhabitants. Amnesty International described this holocaust as a "government policy of political murder." The death toll ran into the tens of thousands—by some estimates as high as 80,000—while two to four times that number of Indians fled to neighboring Mexico.

At roughly the same time, in nearby Nicaragua, another conflict between a national government and a large Indian population erupted—but with a far different outcome. Shortly after taking power in 1979, the Sandinista *comandantes*

began to cast their eyes upon the coastal lands of eastern Nicaragua as a frontier for development; they regarded the some 80,000 Miskito Indians who inhabited this sweltering lowland as a vast proletariat, long exploited by rapacious foreign "capitalists," beginning with English buccaneers and loggers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Sandinistas assumed that these Indians—a mixed-race people, in fact, thanks to their intermingling with black slaves whom a shipwreck had deposited on the coast in the 1640s—would go along with their plans for land reform and even tolerate relocation when necessary.

The Miskito, however, had other ideas.



Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the first Spaniard to cross the Panamanian isthmus (in 1513), is shown here unleashing his hounds upon a group of hapless Indians.

Prizing their semi-isolation from the rest of the country, they cherished a tradition of relative independence from Managua. Far from embracing the Sandinista cause, the Indians felt threatened by it. Distrust and misunderstanding only intensified as the Miskito question became an issue in the Nicaraguan civil war. During the early and mid-1980s, as many as 20,000 Miskito fled to Honduras. Some joined the anti-Sandinista "contras." But the Sandinistas, rather than launching a bloody crusade, began negotiations with the Miskito and other coastal Indians. By 1989, Managua had granted the Miskito a measure of local autonomy and agreed to guarantee their rights in the national constitution.

To a large extent, of course, these two episodes are bound up with contemporary national politics. One reason Guatemala's generals pursued their anti-guerrilla campaign so aggressively was to rid the northern departments of Indians who might make claims on the oil reserves recently discovered there. The Miskito controversy was aggravated by power struggles within the ruling Sandinista party, specifically by the increasing domination of the junta by the Marxist Daniel Ortega.

But these episodes—and particularly their resolutions—are also rooted in Central American history, in a long tradition of government-Indian relations that first took shape during the 16th century, when the Spanish conquered this narrow strip of the New World. This history alone explains why the conquest tradition survived in one part of Central America while it largely disappeared in the other. It is a story shaped not only by differences among the conquerors and their successors but also by differ-

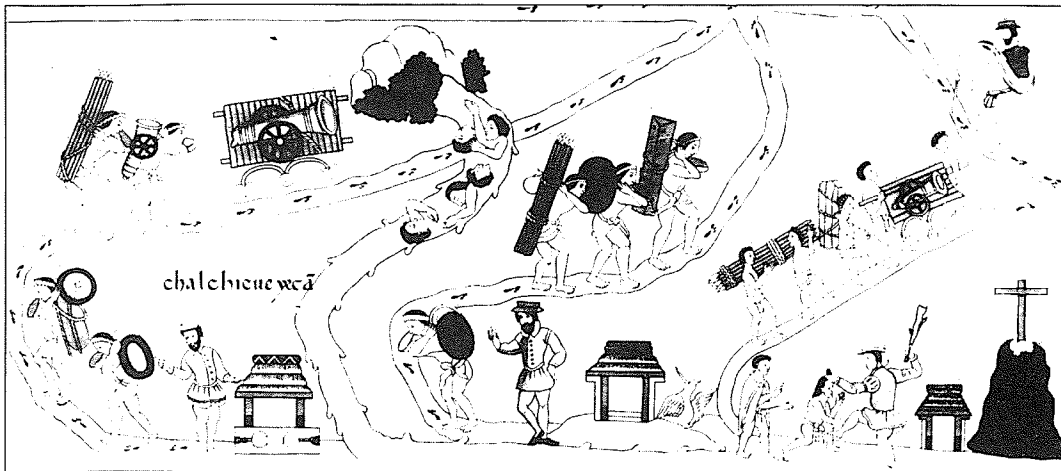
ences between the northern and southeastern Indian cultures.

In the north, the Spanish conquerors who marched down from Mexico encountered a complex assortment of "high cultures," principally the Indian kingdoms of, or related to, the Maya. The land of the "high cultures," called Mesoamerica by archaeologists, extended from central Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula into that part of the upper Central American isthmus that today includes Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, and western portions of Nicaragua and Honduras.

The societies that flourished here tended to be large, concentrated, and highly organized. Most had clearly delineated social classes—nobles, artisans, merchants, plebes, and slaves—and were run by strong central governments. In addition to creating markets and extensive trade networks, the Maya-related peoples possessed a hieroglyphic form of writing and were highly accomplished in art, astronomy, mathematics, and architecture. Bishop Diego de Landa, an early Spanish missionary, remarked on the "grandeur and the beauty" of Mayan buildings, "for they are so many in number and so are the parts of the country where they are found, and so well built in their fashion that it fills one with astonishment."

But Mesoamerica is only one part of Central America. To the southeast, below an imaginary line that begins at the Península de Nicoya on Costa Rica's uppermost coast and runs northward on a somewhat irregular course to the Atlantic Ocean at Puerto Cortés in Honduras, lie three-fourths of Nicaragua, half of Hondu-

*Richard N. Adams is director of the Institute for Latin American Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. Born in Ann Arbor, Mich., he received an A.B. from the University of Michigan (1947), and an M.A. (1949) and Ph.D. (1951) from Yale University. He is the author of a number of books dealing with Central and South America, including *A Community in the Andes* (1959) and *Crucifixion by Power, Essays in the National Social Structure of Guatemala, 1944-66* (1970).*



Indians were forced to serve as human "mules" throughout Spanish-dominated Central America, often transporting goods from ships on one coast to those waiting on the other.

ras, all of Panama, and all but a tiny wedge of northwestern Costa Rica. In this southeastern portion of the isthmus, the Spanish came upon very different kinds of Indian societies—an assortment of tribes, chiefdoms, and confederations.

The societies of the southeastern Indians—including the Cuna, the Guaymí, and the Sumo—were not only smaller* but far less socially evolved than those of the north. Their cultural accomplishments—weaving, basketry, and simple forms of home construction—could not begin to match the achievements of the “high cultures.” Unlike the more sophisticated maize farmers of Mesoamerica, the southeastern Indians subsisted on simple slash-and-burn farming or by hunting, gathering, and fishing. Their diversity and scattered living patterns could not have stood in bolder contrast to the concentrated and highly organized societies of the north.

Of course, the Spanish knew nothing about such differences when they arrived on the threshold of the region in 1501. Settling mainly on the Panamanian coast

around the Gulf of Darién, they had little contact with the people who inhabited the volcano-dotted highlands or the steamier plains and forests of the lowlands. The first serious expedition into the interior was not mounted until 1513, when Vasco Núñez de Balboa made his way across the Panamanian isthmus to the Pacific Ocean and claimed all of its waters, and the shores they lapped, for the Spanish crown.

Six years later, in 1519, Balboa was beheaded for treason and replaced as Spanish commander in Panama by his rival, Pedro Arias de Ávila, known in the New World as Pedrarias Dávila. He led or directed expeditions north into what is now Honduras and Nicaragua, finding gold in the latter and killing all Indians he could not press into service as slaves. His brutality—exceptional even by the standards of his day—is one major reason the Indian populations came close to extinction in the south.

But well before Pedrarias's death in 1531, Hernán Cortés in Mexico heard tales about gold and silver in Honduras. Although still consolidating his conquest of Mexico (1519–21), he sent two expeditions south, one led by Pedro de Alvarado in 1523. A cunning and ruthless commander,

*Scholars estimate that there were up to 13 million Indians in Central America at the beginning of the 16th century, with the greatest populations concentrated in Mesoamerica.

Alvarado came to be as closely identified with the subjugation of Mesoamerica as Pedrarias was with that of the southeast. In 1523, taking advantage of a tribal war in the Guatemalan highlands to enlist Indian allies, he conquered the Maya-related Quiché Indians and shortly thereafter founded the city of Santiago de los Caballeros (now known as Antigua) as his administrative center. He then defeated the Pipiles of El Salvador and marched into Honduras, encountering fierce Indian resistance and, on occasion, Pedrarias's men.

In the north as in the south, the Spanish conquest represented the triumph of the few over the many. Pedro de Alvarado's 420 *conquistadores*, even with Indian allies, were greatly outnumbered in most battles; on one occasion, reputedly, they faced an Indian force of 200,000 men. But for Alvarado, as for other Spaniards, the advantages of muskets, armor, horses, and divide-and-conquer diplomacy proved decisive. "There were so many Indians that they killed," ran a Quiché account of a major battle with Alvarado, "that they made a river of blood; that is why it was given the name of Quiquel [blood], because all the water became blood and also the day became red on account of the great bloodshed that day."

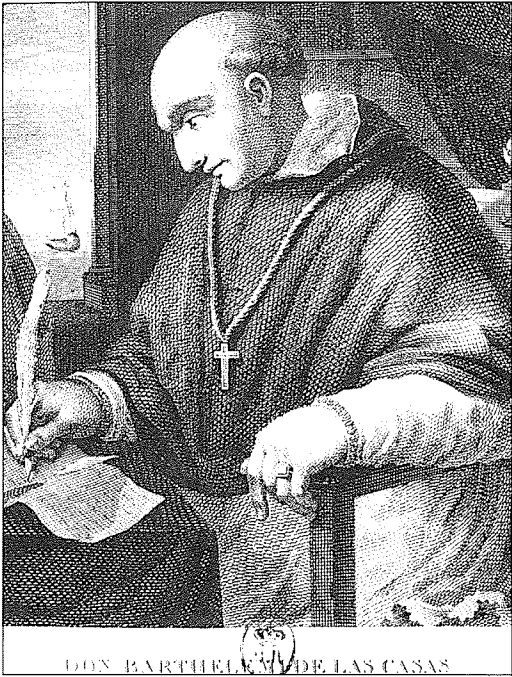
More devastating even than gunpowder, scholars believe, were the white man's diseases. Smallpox, measles, yellow fever, typhus, and a variety of new viruses in some cases marched ahead of the conquering armies, laying waste to native villages before a shot was fired. But muskets and viruses were not the only killers. Forced labor—both physically taxing and psychologically demoralizing—also took its toll. Slavery was particularly hard on the southeastern Indians, who were completely unaccustomed to the rigors of "disciplined" labor. The shock of enslavement—including literal branding under Pedrarias—was se-

vere. Many Indians were uprooted from their villages and sent as far off as Peru to work the Spanish mines. Many succumbed to the alien climates or harsh working conditions. Others met their deaths in Panama transporting Spanish cargo across the isthmus, the overland stage in the shipment of plunder from Peru to Spain. Between 1500 and 1700, the Indian populations of the southeast, smaller than those of Mesoamerica to begin with, fell sharply: by about 93 percent in Panama, 98 percent in Costa Rica, and 95 percent in conquered Nicaragua (compared with about 80 percent in Guatemala).

In Mesoamerica, by contrast, many Indians were already familiar with the conditions of enforced servitude. Slaves and plebes had for centuries served their kings, tilling the fields and building such ceremonial centers as Utatlán and Zaculeu in the Guatemala highlands. (Archaeologists have identified at least 116 such centers, which once boasted great pyramids, palaces, and observatories.) The Spanish, taking advantage of the existing system, simply stepped in as the new lords.

The conquerors of Mesoamerica—models of gentleness none—at least in principle observed certain restrictions that the crown and Cortés had put on slavery: They enslaved only Indian combatants or former Indian slaves. And shortly after Cortés became governor and captain-general of New Spain (Mexico and most of Central America) in 1522, most of his subalterns adopted the medieval Spanish system of labor called the *encomienda* and abandoned outright enslavement.

Under the *encomienda*, a colonist was awarded land and Indian labor in return for his pledge to protect and Christianize his charges. The converted Indians, in turn, were obliged to pay a tribute, part of which went to the crown and part to their *enco-*



DON BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

menderos. The Indians were also expected to provide a certain amount of labor to the colonial leaders. Some worked on the haciendas or on public projects in colonial towns like Santiago de Guatemala or Gracias in Honduras, while others, despite royal ordinances, were forced to labor in mines or serve as human pack-horses. A goodly number of Christianized Indians ended up being resettled in villages, or *pueblos*, where they enjoyed limited self-government. Their leaders, or *caciques*, formed native councils, responsible for internal order, the allocation of work and services, and the collection of tribute. But Spanish civil authorities retained ultimate authority over the tribute system, and all activities remained under the watchful eyes of the missionary priests.

In fact, from the earliest days of the conquest, secular and religious authority were virtually indistinguishable throughout the Spanish empire. When news of Columbus's discovery reached the Spanish court in 1493, Pope Alexander VI gave the Spanish

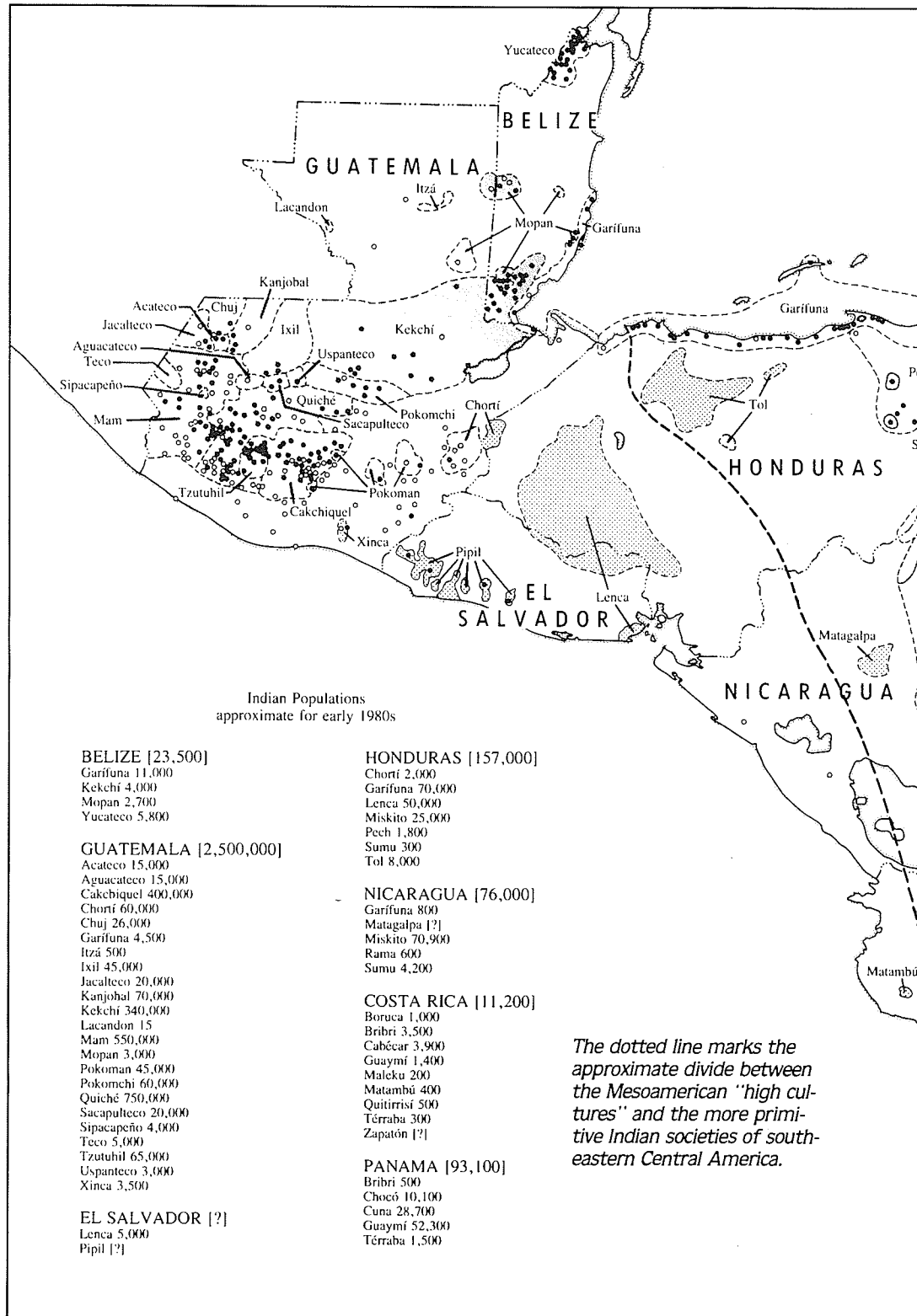
monarchs title to most of the new land*—and, with it, the duty to convert the pagans. But despite the closeness of church and government, the two often disagreed over the treatment of Indians. Dominican and Jesuit missionaries were generally protective of the Indians, viewing them as no different from any other of God's creatures. The Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas traveled throughout Central America, denouncing the Spanish for their mistreatment of the Indians. Local civil authorities, however, and many regular clergy, argued that Indians had no inherent rights, much less civilization; coercive labor, they held, was the best means of Christianizing these less-than-human creatures.

The conflict was partially resolved in 1542, when Charles I (1519–56) issued the New Laws and sent a forceful administrator, Alonso López de Cerrato, to Santiago to enforce them. Intended to protect Indians from the worst abuses of coercive labor, the laws forbade outright slavery, eliminated many of the *encomiendas*, and placed Indians under the direct jurisdiction of the crown. But the crown did not abolish the tribute obligations of the Christianized Indians, which remained a mainstay of the colonial economy until 1811.

Even as their treatment was regularized, the Indians continued to decline in numbers. Throughout Central America, but particularly in the southeast, miscegenation hastened the disappearance of pure-blooded Indians. Out of this other "conquest" came mixed-blood *mestizos*, or *ladinos*, who by the 17th century formed a distinct class of wage laborers, small farmers, artisans, merchants, and peddlers. With time, of course, *ladinos* came to disdain the poor, pure-blooded Indians as much as the pure-blooded creoles disdained the *ladinos*.

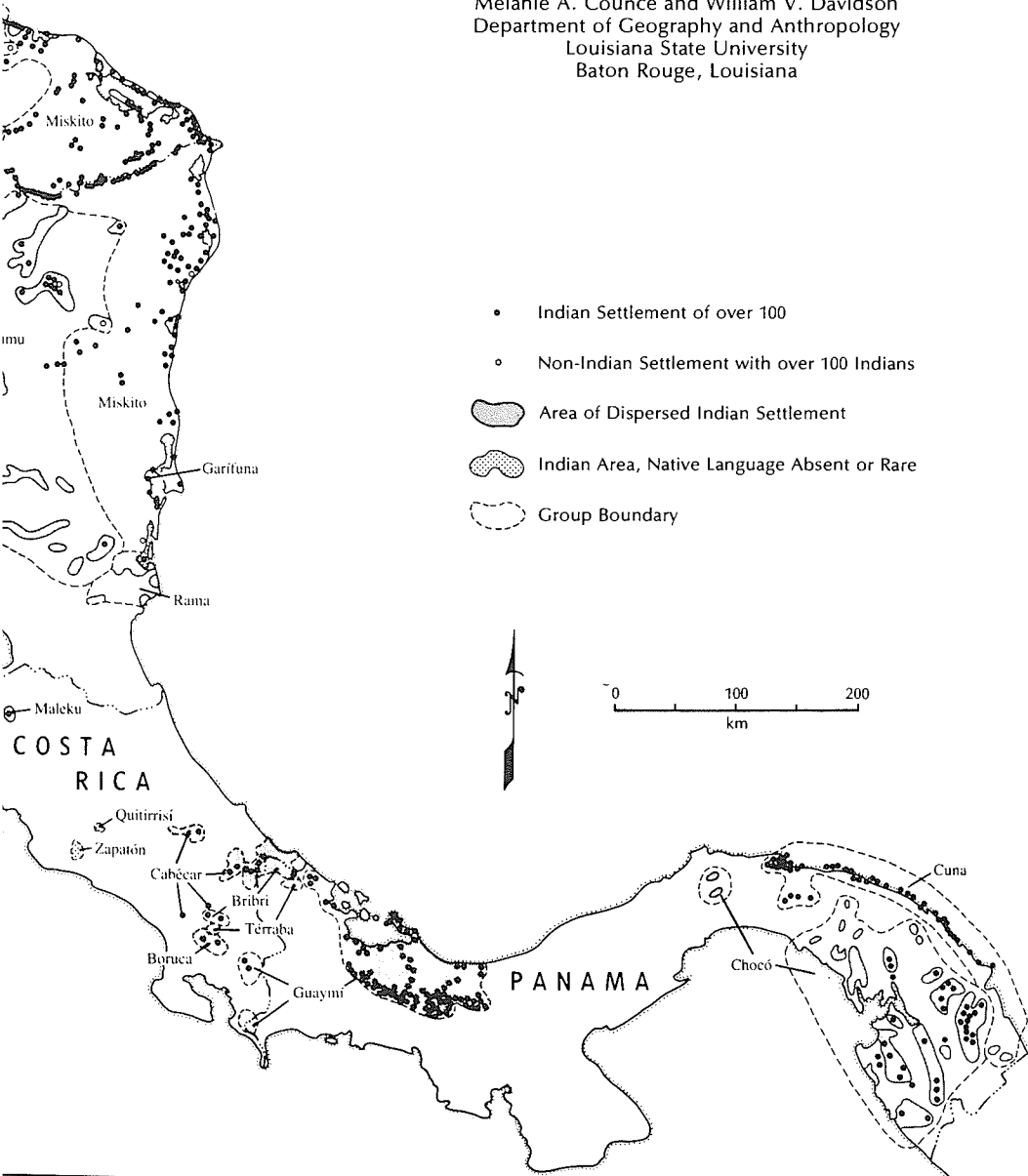
*The same papal edict of 1493 gave Portugal a part of the New World—what amounted to the eastern portion of present-day Brazil.

THE INDIAN QUESTION



INDIANS OF CENTRAL AMERICA 1980s

Compiled by
Melanie A. Counce and William V. Davidson
Department of Geography and Anthropology
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, Louisiana



But in the southeast, because there were few Indians, and because those who survived lived far from Spanish settlements, there was relatively less fear of the Indians—and less imagined need to keep the “savages” down. Not unrelated to this low level of conflict was the declining importance of Indians to the regional economy. By the end of the 16th century, in much of Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica, labor was provided mostly by the growing *mestizo* population.

Things were different in most of Mesoamerica. There the Indians remained vital to the colonial (and post-colonial) economy. *Repartimientos* (forced labor drafts), debt peonage, and sharecropping kept Indians captive on the haciendas long after the *encomiendas* were curtailed. Life was not much better in the *pueblos*. “The demands for [Indian] produce and labor were constant,” observed the historian Murdo MacLeod—so constant, in fact, that many Indians chose peonage on the haciendas over the supposed freedom of the *pueblos*.

Largely because the Indians were so vital to the Mesoamerican economy, the creoles and *ladinos* believed that they needed periodic reminders of their low status: Such treatment understandably reinforced the fears of the Indians, who kept alive their hope of eventual liberation in rituals such as the “Dance of the Conquest” or even in outright rebellion. One notable uprising was staged by Indians in the Chiapas and Guatemalan highlands in 1712. Colonial authorities retaliated with wholesale executions and forced resettlements, meeting terror with counter-terror in what was becoming clearly defined as the conquest tradition of Mesoamerica.

Indian labor, whether scarce (as in most of the southeast) or abundant (as in most of Mesoamerica), failed to bring great pros-

perity to the Spanish colonies in Central America. Gold and silver mining in Honduras produced disappointing yields, and Spain’s tight control of the colonial trade kept down the prices of the colony’s cocoa and indigo exports. The Kingdom of Guatemala, which had acquired de facto autonomy from New Spain in the mid-16th century (and which encompassed all of Central America except Panama), remained a particularly impoverished backwater of the Spanish empire. Spain’s new Bourbon monarchs, starting with Philip V in 1700, tried to open up trade within the empire, but their efforts did little good for the Central American colony.

The Bourbons’ attempt to assert stronger royal control did, however, have one lasting effect on the Kingdom of Guatemala. It reduced the autonomy that locally born landlords—the creole elite—had acquired through their domination of town councils. Seeing their power stripped by representatives of the imperial court in Santiago de Guatemala, discontented creoles became receptive to the independence movement that began to stir throughout the empire in the late 18th century.

In 1821, Central America allowed itself to be annexed to Mexico in order to win independence from Spain; two years later the union with Mexico dissolved. But before Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica declared themselves independent republics, they tried briefly to live together as the United Provinces of Central America. (Panama, part of Colombia, became independent only in 1903, and Belize remained a British colony until 1981.) The federation was effectively dead by 1838, but one ironic consequence of the liberal experiment was that the Indians were left worse off than they had been before independence: The crown’s protection—slight though it had been—was no longer available to them. As the historian

Héctor Pérez-Brignoli has shown, the new ruling classes of Central America, whether bourgeois, oligarchical, or aristocratic, failed to forge "a new collaboration and consensus to replace the crumbling colonial paternalism. Control rested therefore exclusively on exploitation, violence, and terror."

In the specific case of state-Indian relations, however, Pérez-Brignoli's description holds far more for the Mesoamerican region than for the southeast. One finds many examples of a more benign state of government-Indian affairs in the southeast well before the resolution of the Sandinista-Miskito conflict during the 1980s.

Shortly after Panama gained independence from Colombia in 1903, for instance, the new government ran into trouble with its largest Indian tribe, the Cuna. These proud Indians lived mainly on, or just off, the northeast coast of the country, but some lived along the sensitive border with Colombia—and many retained a fondness for their former rulers. The Panamanian government naturally wanted to win over these Indians; its strategy was assimilation. But when the Cuna resisted, the government committed a costly error: It sent policemen to the Cuna's islands, charging them with the impossible task of eradicating the Indians' folkways and customs. That proved to be too much for the Cuna traditionalists, many of whom had won the friendship and support of American ethnologists and missionaries. During the festival of Carnival in 1925, the Cuna rebelled, killing some 30 policemen, Panamanians, and acculturated Indians.

But the government response was remarkably tempered. Partly in response to the urgings of U.S. officials, the government decided to negotiate. The two sides worked out an agreement that allowed the Cuna control over a portion of their traditional homeland, including the offshore islands

and a ribbon of mainland territory. The Indian reserve, or *comarca*, of San Blas has been respected by all subsequent Panamanian governments. Today, some 35,000 Cuna enjoy great autonomy, even as they participate in national politics.

But if the *comarca* typified the Indian policies of the southeastern states—and even influenced the arrangement that the Sandinistas later worked out with the Miskito—the conquest tradition remains very much alive in Guatemala and El Salvador. The Indian populations there are still very large; in Guatemala not only large (maybe even half of the eight million population) but also recognizable. Clearly, though, the price of retaining a distinct Indian identity has been high. It has often provoked the government campaigns of terror, and it has made it easy for the government to identify the "enemy" once those campaigns were under way.

The situation in El Salvador is quite different. According to a 1989 estimate, there may be around 500,000 Indians in that country of 5.4 million. But they are close to being an invisible people, most of them having abandoned their distinctive native dress and customs under pressure from the dominant creole culture. Their assimilation, however, is only a different response to the conquest tradition.

The plight of El Salvador's Indians had been terrible ever since the conquest, but it reached a low point during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the country's coffee-based economy collapsed. In January 1932, shortly after the military overthrow of a progressive president, Arturo Araujo, a band of Indians armed with machetes swooped down on a cluster of landlords and storekeepers in southwestern El Salvador, hacking about 35 of them to death and looting their homes and stores. Among the leaders of the uprising was



An early 20th-century photograph of group of Cuna Indians on the island of El Tigri. The nose ring was but one of the native customs the Panamanian government tried to eradicate.

Augustin Farabundo Martí, a communist whose renown lives on in the name of El Salvador's contemporary revolutionary organization, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). General Maximiliano Hernandez, the usurper, responded to the Indian revolt with an organized reign of terror. According to eyewitnesses, soldiers rounded up anyone who looked or dressed like an Indian, women and children included, and conducted mass executions. The death toll reached 30,000 according to some estimates. For years after, in radio broadcasts and newspaper articles, *ladino* commentators spoke of the need to exterminate all of the country's Indians so that insurrections such as that of 1932 would not be repeated.

The Indians took the hint. No further massacres were needed. Instead, the Indians have become an indistinguishable part of El Salvador's vast laboring population. To be sure, the country has experienced repeated bouts of terrorism and civil strife since 1979, including street fighting in the capital between the army and FMLN guerrillas in late 1989. But the government no longer responds by singling out the Indians. Can one safely conclude that the mentality of the conquest tradition has run its course in El Salvador? Not at all. The forces of reaction now direct terror at all of the laboring poor. The indiscriminate shelling of the poorer neighborhoods of San Salvador in the most recent uprising shows that the conquest mentality lives on, despite the

relative invisibility of the much dreaded *Indios*.

The situation of the Indians in Guatemala, meanwhile, has become increasingly complicated. Twenty years ago, anthropologists claimed that the Indians were being rapidly assimilated into the dominant *ladino* culture. In some important ways, they were wrong. Government policies, for one thing, reinforced Indian separateness. As recently as 1984, the Guatemalan army brought thousands of displaced Indians into newly formed communities—"model towns." Replicating the system used by colonial Spain, the army found these settlements easier to keep under surveillance than the scattered hamlets the Indians formerly inhabited. As in the past, Indians were expected to serve for no compensation. They were forced into unarmed militias to patrol the countryside and to monitor guerrilla activities. When not on patrol, the Indian men and boys would join their families in scratching out a meager existence, farming in nearby fields or performing menial labor for *ladinos* in neighboring communities.

That is part of the story of Guatemala's Indians—many still oppressed, some even terrorized. Another part, equally valid, also disproves the prediction

of assimilation, but in a way that holds out some hope for the future of the Indians. Indeed, according to this story, Indian fortunes are already on the rise in some of Guatemala's rural departments—those, in particular, that the earlier insurgency bypassed. In village after village, Indians are starting small agribusinesses, accumulating capital, even buying back land that they had earlier sold to the *ladinos*. They are effectively creating a new Indian economy—one that harnesses Indian labor and resources rather than leaving them open to *ladino* exploitation.

It is, of course, all to the good that the Indians of Guatemala are beginning to show confidence and pride in their own native identity. Further economic strength and independence will only bolster these. But self-respect is not enough to bring an end to the dismal record of state-Indian relations in the Mesoamerican states of Central America. That will require the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador—with the encouragement of their biggest backer, the United States—to follow the example of their neighbors in the southeast and take steps to reduce the inequalities, the threat of violence, and the perpetuation of fear. It will require, in other words, that the elites of these nations finally abandon the time-worn ways of the conquest tradition.