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The Study of Change in Traditional Communities

Any attempt to deal with terms as wide-ranging as "Indian" or "peasant," or as amorphous as "community" in an assessment of change in Latin America requires one to establish certain bounds within which he expects to operate. This is particularly true in a cursory report where the need to be brief may produce statements so general in character that they lose relevance in their application.

The primary focus of this paper is upon the type of traditional peasant community found in Mesoamerica and that sector of the Andes from Bolivia northward to Colombia. This focus is intended to exclude those with Afro-affinities such as the peasants of northeastern Brazil. The more primitive Indian groups have been considered elsewhere and furthermore do not easily fit within the context of the term "community" as it is employed in this presentation.

More difficult is the task of establishing those criteria by which communities can be circumscribed for the purpose at hand. Since there is a desire to stress change within the context of a nucleated settlement without placing an exclusive emphasis upon agriculture, the "community" has been arbitrarily equated in terms of villas (villages) and pueblos (towns). This would generally include an "urban" population ranging from about one to eight thousand in number.¹ Most communities in this range exist as recognizable nuclei of inhabitants within which a number of service functions are performed. Although there is a tendency to do so, one should not arbitrarily exclude the *finca*, the *hacienda*, the *ejido*, or other instituted forms of nucleated rural settlements when they otherwise meet an established criteria for community status. In terms of our consideration of peasant communities, this is of particular concern where a highly traditional form of life style persists although transplanted into the realm of a sophisticated commercial venture.

Finally, it should be noted that frequent illustrations are drawn from the region with which the author is most familiar. This is not to imply that experiences in one area of Latin America are applicable elsewhere, but rather to suggest that, in terms of the general deficiency of knowledge concerning the process of change in traditional communities, one is ill-advised to translate his findings beyond the

realm of his narrow experiences.

Trends in the study of traditional communities

The study of inhabitants, within the context of traditional communities, dates from the decade of the 1920's. The beginning of this effort and its evolution as a field of study has been reported upon by Howard Cline (1952) and has more recently been summarized by Charles Wagley (1964). For over three decades the dominance of the anthropologist has been so great as to convey the impression that this type of study was the patrimony of his discipline.² Members of the other social sciences have been notable in their lack of contributions. During this period geography was only marginally represented in the works of Brand (1951), McBryde (1947), and Stanislawski (1950), all of the "California school."

The earlier "community" studies tended to consist of the compilation of extensive arrays of factual data, the nature of which were largely influenced by the inclination of the investigator. The 1950's were marked by an increasing tendency in these studies to examine the "community" in its totality and to relate its role within the matrix of national affairs. This was heralded to some degree by the restudy of Tepoztlán by Lewis (1951) published early in the decade. Nevertheless, there continued to appear a series of highly descriptive studies whose values were, to varying degrees, inventorional in character.

The rapid growth of urbanization in Latin America since mid-century has drawn increasing attention from the academic community. Morse (1965) has performed a valuable service in tracing the character of recent research on the subject. An examination of his extensive bibliography alludes to studies on slums and squatter settlements, urban housing and public services, grid plans and the spatial structure of cities, migration and social stratification, the nature of primacy and role of industrialization, and political and historical perspectives of urban growth. In all of this there are two particularly striking omissions. One of these is the virtual absence of reference to studies on smaller traditional and rural-oriented urban communities; the second is the virtual absence of geographers as contributors to this general body of knowledge. More recently, the Commission Geography of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History³ (1968; 1969), the United Nations (1967; 1968), the Inter-American Development Bank (1969), and other agencies and individuals have made further contributions to the study of urbanization in Latin America.⁴ But these efforts have been focused upon the

processes of urbanization as it relates to rapidly modernizing cityscapes rather than upon the more slowly evolving traditional townscapes.

During the more recent period geographers have contributed significantly to the study of urban centers and the processes of urbanization. But this focus has been less directed to developing than developed areas and, in the case of the former, Latin America appears to be least well represented in the literature.⁵ Dissertations produced by geographers in the 1960's tend to reflect an increasing tendency to study the larger and more modern Latin American urban center or, failing this, focus upon the studies of the rural landscape and its more dispersed population. Again, studies of the patterns and processes of change which transpire in traditional peasant "communities" appear to lie in the backwash of other directions of geographical endeavor, at least in Latin America.

The need for, and the impediments of, research

The discipline of geography is apparently not alone in its neglect of the smaller traditional urban community. Reynolds (1968) states that "the mainstream of development economics has until now avoided peasant communities, leaving this fascinating terrain to the economic anthropologist and sociologist." Kling (1964) refers to the fact "the study of political systems in villages and cities has leapt forward in the United States in the past decade" but that derived techniques and theories have essentially yet to be applied in Latin America (and certainly not to traditional "communities"). Although anthropologists have long nurtured the study of traditional "communities," Strickon (1966) stresses the urgent need for descriptive studies in this area so as to provide for a better understanding of "the impact of massive social change."

Why must there be an absence of a major thrust in this area of investigation by those in the social sciences? In certain disciplines there is obviously a lack of tradition which has been born out of concomitant want of interest. This is manifested by a non-emphasis in the type of training necessary to become involved in this phase of "urban" investigation. Stated somewhat differently, it may be that current vogues in academic training are less applicable to the study of traditional societies.

The possibility also exists that the attention of scholars has been diverted to what are assumed to be more pressing needs of the Latin American society. In this, it is not unlikely that the needs of a populace are translated more tangibly within the

framework of a larger urban center or across the greater expanse of an impoverished rural landscape than it is within the confines of a small and traditional hamlet or village.

In all probability, however, the lack of data and their unreliability are primary deterrents to the study of the traditional "community." By virtue of their cultural status these settlements continue to be the centers of handicraft and cottage industries. Large numbers of artisans may be employed in the production of pottery, fabrics, millstones, tiles, candles, rustic furniture, blankets, and bakery products as well as other commodities. The total product is significant; yet these contributions remain largely unreported in the national censuses. Although not village centered the making of a product such as charcoal may frequently be an important activity for villagers. Its production and consumption passes unrecorded. The clandestine production of alcohol which is an important economic mainstay in many traditional communities is understandably also not reported in censuses; in fact, it is infrequently mentioned in village studies as an economic fact of life. The failure to report upon these activities means that the role of these products in the system of national exchange is also largely ignored.

Aside from the general deficiency in statistical data pertaining to village economies, there remains the task of properly assessing the production of their allied agricultural sectors. here too the problem is fraught with many uncertainties, but there exists a considerable body of agricultural data and, granted certain conditions, the agricultural output can probably be more easily gauged than can the output of village craft industries. Under these circumstances it is understandable that research efforts are more likely to be directed to larger urban centers where there exists a body of statistical data predicated upon the measurable functions of a more modern economic system, or to an agricultural setting where there exists at least a rudimentary fund of information.

The problem of data collection

The earlier studies of village communities frequently undertook the gathering of a wide array of social, political, and economic data. Illustrative of this is Brand's study of Quiroga (1951) which was admittedly an effort to amass data largely descriptive in character. Here as in other early works the craft industries and products of the market place are accounted for in detail. The origin of raw materials are specified, processes of production are painstakingly recorded, the destination of goods are alluded to, markets are mapped, stalls are pinpointed,

products are described in detail, prices are recorded with exactness, and vendors are sometimes enumerated; but, virtually without exception, there is provided no data on the volume of commerce, there is no quantitative assessment of merchandise exchange, and no attempt is made to gauge the dimension of consumption. In this sense the market place, an important institution in many traditional villages, is rarely assessed in terms of its function as site of exchange. To point out these deficiencies is not to demean the efforts of earlier scholars but rather to pose the problems which defied resolution then as they do today.

The difficulty involved in establishing patterns of production and consumption within a traditional community can be expressed in many ways. The dispersion of production, the irregularity of output, and what appears to be a totally disorganized character of assemblage of raw materials, and production and distribution of goods tend to defy the accumulation of reliable data on cottage industries. The traditional market place offers comparable problems. How many are in attendance at weekly markets? What volume of incoming local products are purchased for local consumption? Of those products brought in by itinerant merchants, what share is packed for re-transport to other markets? To what degree are service functions of the community supported by the weekly market? Are the market functions of growing or lessening importance to the community? Is the market equally well attended at all times of the year? These questions, as well as many others required to provide for a better understanding of the economic function of the market place, were never adequately explored by earlier investigators. Although the market place comprises a most important niche in the economy of peasant communities, its complexity continues to defy a meaningful analysis of its role. Since relevant data does not exist, there is furthermore no basis for the analysis of comparable data in time sequences.

The accumulation of data may be further complicated by the absence of definitive administrative boundaries; this is commonplace in traditional societies. Records of vital statistics may be gathered on the basis of one set of administrative units; population data may be predicated upon another set of units which, in turn, may differ from those utilized for the accumulation of agricultural statistics. Aside from this, the problem tends to be compounded by the utilization of census enumerators who are totally unprepared for the task.

The lack of commonly accepted corporate limits and the failure to establish a more meaningful concept of what constitutes an urbanized settlement prostitutes

any attempt at comparative urban analysis. In many Guatemalan "communities," local inhabitants frequently have no perception of "urban" limits. Signs designating "urban" limits to a town may suggest boundaries which are adhered to by neither the officials of the community nor governmental agencies in the national capital. A reliable estimate of the urban population may be further complicated by the fact that the boundaries of barrios frequently extend considerable distances beyond the limits of agglomerated housing incorporating large numbers of widely dispersed rural dwellers. For these reasons the enumeration of an urban population, as we might conceive of it, is not necessarily forthcoming in the statistical compilations on a traditional settlement.

With the lack of meaningful records of the flow of traffic or products, with the uncertain accumulation of data on cottage industries or agricultural production or inhabitants, with the vagueness of boundaries to serve as units for the collection of data, one can hardly fault early compilers of data in traditional villages for their lack of enterprise in this regard. In more modern times it is not surprising that those with quantitative inclinations show small inclination to test their wares in the muddy waters of these traditional swamps.

Provided the inadequacy of data and the inattention with which smaller traditional "communities" are regarded, there arises the question as to whether or not they merit more consideration. In Guatemala "urbanized" settlements ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants serve as the *cabeceras* of 95 *municipios*. These ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 in population serve another 77, and from 5,000 to 8,000 an additional 20. A total of 305 of 322 *municipios* are governed by a *cabecera* with a population of less than 8,000 inhabitants, a very high proportion of which may be classified within the context of "traditional communities." As Wolf (1966) has noted, traditional communities such as these "connect the (rural) peasant household with the economic system of the nation."

Questions obviously need to be asked concerning the symbiotic relationship between the *cabeceras* and their rural hinterlands, but one may be certain that in peasant settlements in Guatemala as well as elsewhere these traditional communities are centers from which change emanates and the furthermore act as the organizers of the rural scene. Prices are set and goods are exchanged here. These centers also lend support to the religious and political organization of their rural inhabitants. The educational system is managed from the *cabecera* and is frequently located only within that locale. This may be the case with other social

services such as dispensaries or medical centers. Consequently, the flexibility of the rural populace in response to the demands of the outside world has to be measured in terms of the resistance with which these forces are met within the nucleated traditional community. Given the dominance of these centers as is indicated in Guatemala, it is difficult to deny their importance, much less their relevance, in the overall panorama of national life.

We need to provide criteria by which traditional communities can be distinguished functionally, and by which changes in the functions of towns over a period of time can be recognized. This involves a concern with the relevance of changing conditions upon the centers of exchange. Experiments with techniques of central-place study, possibly developed elsewhere, would be of utility in this matter. In Guatemala, there are the dominantly traditional Indian communities to the west of Guatemala City as opposed to dominantly traditional Ladino communities to the east of the capital city. The latter, which have been essentially ignored, would appear to be in marked contrast to the former in terms of function and process of change, but this has yet to be established in absolute terms.

Studies of specialized economic activities within single traditional communities of Guatemala do exist. However, economic functions related to quantitative aspects of production and exchange are, as indicated previously, lacking. Neither have these specialized functions been considered in terms of competing communities, competing products, or the national economy. In Guatemala, there are a number of traditional communities whose economic survival is predicated upon the production of *tinajas* (clay water jugs). The installation of new water systems, the substitution of large tin cans, and the meteoric adaptation of gaudily-hued plastic *tinaias* cannot help but play a significant role in future production, in the translocation of lines of distribution, and in the economic well-being of the communities concerned. This type of threat is inherent in virtually every traditional community characterized by a specialized activity, of which there are many.

The distributional pattern and function of traditional communities is inextricably related to networks of transportation. The modernization of the modes of transportation, therefore, is capable of exerting radical changes on both the distributional pattern and function of these centers. Railroads and more recently highways in Guatemala have transformed centers of mule-based trade from

prosperous to poor times. Posadas stand empty, saddlemakers turn to the making of leather shoes, blacksmiths serve a declining trade, and the suppliers of feed and forage are replaced by gasoline attendants and garage mechanics who, because of the nature of the mode of transportation, no longer find residence in the smaller traditional communities a prerequisite to providing the service required for the newer mode of transportation. We have not only a need for better methods of analysis of transportation networks but also of the effects which they exercise in the spatial redistribution of economic activity. It has frequently been cited that the modernization of a transportation system improves the competitive advantage of larger urban centers at the expense of smaller communities. In a number of intermediate-sized communities in western Guatemala a number of once thriving village activities have suffered as a consequence of improved access to larger nearby metropolitan centers. By the same token, however, improved access to smaller and more traditionally oriented communities has initiated in these the creation of competitive markets and service activities to the detriment of intermediate-sized villages. Thus the improvement of transportation may effect a temporary improvement in the competitive position of a smaller community at the expense of a larger. It thus becomes apparent that the competitive advantage may work in both directions at the same time and that this may vary as to product and service provided as well as to the stage of evolution in the process of economic development.

In the study of traditional "communities" there are a host of problems to which theoretical models might be applied, but the problem is not necessarily in the application of the models but rather in the accumulation of data to provide the information required for sophisticated research designs. Methods of sampling need to be evolved and tested within the framework of study of traditional settlement. Only when this has been satisfactorily resolved will it be possible to study traditional communities in Latin America within a comparative and theoretical framework. This obviously implies that data should not be collected for the sole purpose of fitting a pre-conceived theory.

Although it is not likely that rural oriented traditional communities will carry the attention of a significant number of geographers in the near future, this area has much to offer as a challenge in research. It is an area which demands painstaking field work but it is an area in which geographers are uniquely qualified to work. The type of efforts made by geographers in the past must be enhanced by innovative methodology which will permit scholars to obtain more efficiently the

data required so as to avoid the quagmire of making data accumulation the end product of their research efforts. An attempt for the geographer to establish joint research efforts in cooperation with allied disciplines, as well as enlisting the support of agencies and scholars in the nation within which the investigation is to be undertaken, may provide avenues through which field work in traditional communities can be facilitated. In this respect the practicality of the undertaking becomes of paramount importance in attracting the interest of the host nation. It is to be hoped that aspiring scholars would not take on this type of work in the hopes of finishing the job so as to move on to something else, for the great value in the study of these traditional units lies in the long-term verification of the processes of change.

Notes

1. Terms used as applicable for this range of "urban" population vary. An illustration of this is Marshal Wolfe (1966) who, on the basis of other experiences establishes the *aldea* (village) and *pueblo* (town) as urban units incorporating respectively 1,000 to 2,500 and 2,500 to 10,000 inhabitants. For a further elaboration of this problem see Kingsley Davis (1969).
2. These efforts are represented by Gamio (1922), Redfield (1930), Beals (1946), Foster (1948), Parsons (1936; 1945), Tax (1953), Wagley (1941; 1949), and many others.
3. This organization has been particularly involved in providing translations of materials in English applicable to urban research in Latin America.
4. See particularly Beyer (1967), Beckinsdale and Houston (1969), Breese (1969), Durand and Pelaez (1969), Fox and Robinson (1969), and Wingo (1969).
5. See Ginsberg (1966).

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