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The Persistence of Cultural Autarchy

The persistence of cultural minorities in a number of Latin American countries offers a challenge worthy of investigation by geographers. Indigenous (Amerindian) and transplanted (African) groups form significant national minorities and local majorities in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Chile, along the Caribbean rim of Central America, in the Guiana littoral and through the islands of the Antilles. These groups participate marginally in the economy, politics and social life of various nations. Of a different cultural tradition, they are set apart by barriers of language, social institutions, and cultural practices and prejudices. In several Latin American nations cultural minorities cling to a heritage that, although subject to increasing pressure from exposure to new ideas and values, still remains. This cultural sovereignty is testimony to the strong bonds that tie individuals together in discrete culture areas.

Research traditions

Geographers have long been interested in the indigenous cultures of the Americas. Examination of the geographic literature on Latin America reveals numerous studies of Indian groups and other minority cultures (Parsons, 1964). Largely ecological in nature, historical in perspective and local in scope, these studies provide a wealth of detailed information about specific groups and have eased the interpretation of broad cultural patterns. More recently geographers have focused on a new set of concerns. A growing number of researchers are interested in development problems, often in the areas of economic, transportation and urban geography. While the development theme and the indigenous culture theme are two approaches to Latin America which reflect a general disciplinary cleavage, they also focus on two extremes in Latin America: the threat of modernization characterized by the processes of urbanization and acculturation on one hand, and the tenacity of tradition in minority cultures on the other.

These two research thrusts are not mutually exclusive. Some scholars are aware

of the diminution of the traditional culture group and some seem caught up in its preservation; they view the approach of the new, urban society as a dark and foreboding evil. Other scholars see indigenous cultures as obstacles to modernization and search for ways of accelerating the breakdown of traditional societies. Both have correctly interpreted the present situation, for traditional groups are indeed changing, and have lost their relative strength compared with urbanizing societies. Traditional groups, however, are still present and thriving, often under the very conditions expected to lead to cultural breakdown and integration.

Geography and the Cultural Interface

What is emerging as a clear and potentially exciting area for geographic investigation is the interface between cultural groups functioning within national units. Recently geographers have begun to look at various kinds of spatial phenomenon as systems (Ackerman, 1965; Borchert, 1967). A systems approach offers a means of operationalizing, research problems that arise out of concern for the cultural interface. Basic to this concern is an examination of functional relationships as they focus on processes of cultural interaction. Necessary for treatment of these problems is a recognition that cultural systems exist and have a spatial dimension.

The geographer may define a cultural system as the living space in which members of a particular cultural group move, retain their values and traditions, and do not experience any penalties. This space is linked together by such factors as the common goals, traditions, and ethos that impart cultural cohesion to a group and set it apart from other groups. The linkages may be highly personal or institutional, formal or informal; consequently, they elude precise definition. Frequently a native language is a major means of tying a cultural group together and excluding other non-speakers from that cultural group. Language then acts to both integrate and separate cultural groups because it restricts the flow of information among them.

A national cultural system can be identified within the political limits of many Latin American states. This national cultural system is Iberian in character and institutions. Its constituents identify with the nation-state, and participate in political, economic and social institutions recognized as legitimate by the nation-state. The geographic limits within which this group can function without

restraint while retaining its values are the territorial limits of the country. Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Cuba are examples of countries with a single national cultural system in which virtually the total population participates.

In other countries, the national cultural system does not include all of the inhabitants. In these cases, subsystems represent a minority of the population. These subsystems are not integrated into the national system because they are ignored by the adherents of the national system and because they are distinct in their components.

Suggested themes of investigation

It appears, in theory, that many of the countries of Latin America contain different cultural systems which appear to be mutually exclusive. If geographers are interested in pursuing the interaction between the traditional and developing systems, they can isolate four themes within the problem. First, it is necessary to identify the elements of the national culture which have a geographic significance. Secondly, the geographer should treat the minority culture on a similar basis with the majority culture, recognizing its geographically significant cultural elements and spatial limits. Third, a logical outgrowth of these themes is investigation of the effect of the influences of national cultures on minority cultures. The national and minority systems share occupancy of an area, but they pursue different spatial arrangements within it. Researchers investigating the mutual interactions of national and minority culture systems are drawn closer to identification of the interface between the two cultures. Fourth among the avenues of research open to geographers, and one that recognizes the changing nature of culture, is the investigation of the spatial consequences of the acculturation process as it pertains to the abandonment of one set of values by members moving from one system into another. The acculturation process involves changes in the migrants themselves; and may reflect a capacity for feedback of information to the source area resulting in a change in the minority culture system.

National cultural systems

Guatemala, with its sizable (traditional) Indian population and large (developing) Ladino population, may serve as a laboratory for identification and analysis of national and minority cultures in Latin America. Although the national cultural system is defined as territorially coterminous with the national political

boundaries, there are some indications that minorities operate in the system. This is true even though national agencies such as the Church, military forces, the judiciary, and political administration attempt to impose a national culture on Guatemala. These national agencies are formalized expressions of the cultural system; they are found in clusters at nodal points within the network of national institutions. The system is hierarchical, focusing on Guatemala City, but a network of linkages is maintained for purposes of serving institutionalized elements of the national culture. Status of communities is based on the presence or absence of national functions; indeed in Guatemala they are the basis for, distinguishing between urban and rural settlements. Possession of the national culture is characteristic of the Ladino; moreover, it is the Ladino who staffs the national institutions.

Further research is needed to identify that proportion of Guatemalan people who participate in national culture. The number who respond with "Yo soy Guatemalteco" when asked their identity is a fair indication of adherence to a national culture. The use of Spanish among the Guatemalan population may serve as a surrogate for the identity question. Admittedly, these measures are crude, but they can be useful in defining the cultural components of national systems.

Minority cultural systems

The traditional Indian cultural minority of Guatemala offers much more of a research challenge, for we do not know whether the indigenous institutions are equal in importance to the national institutions. In our search for answers we are indeed fortunate in having a wealth of data to draw upon, not only from our discipline, but especially from the works of anthropologists (McBryde, 1944; Colby and von den Berghe, 1969). Many monographs are useful in defining nodes, linkages and hierarchies in the indigenous system. These studies give us a general outline of the distribution of the prevalent cultural systems and the spatial distribution of their unique cultural characteristics, especially language, dress, housing styles, or field patterns.

Research in Guatemala would lead geographers to believe that its minority culture is much more spatially circumscribed than is its national culture. Distribution of the minority group, or groups, covers less than the national territory, is highly regionalized and is located away from the national focus of

political, economic and social activity. Within this limited area the *indigen* is free to pursue activities according to the constraints of his minority culture, not the national culture. Venturing outside of his local area is motivated by some specific reward, usually economic or religious. Indians of the Guatemalan Western Highlands, for example, migrate seasonally to the South Coast as laborers on cotton estates, go to the towns and cities as itinerant merchants, or make pilgrimages in large groups. One such group migration occurs annually to Esquipulas (Horst, 1967); it may be that migration in groups protects cultural values. The individual who leaves the geographic margins of his home area to colonize another area soon finds that rejection of his old culture and acceptance of new ways is his only avenue to success or even survival in the alien environment.

The Western Highlands of Guatemala has been cited as a distinct minority culture area. Here a large segment of the population speaks native languages, wears distinctive dress, and subscribes to certain specific values as expressed in livelihood patterns reaching beyond local subsistence. Little is known how these societies function spatially, even though market centers and trade patterns pre-date Iberian colonization and an economic system of circulation and regional specializations currently exist (McBryde, 1944).

Contacts outside the minority cultural space

The fourth theme open for examination by geographers is the acculturation role played by urban places. Urban places, nodal points of the national system, act as the catchment basins for migrants from the minority cultural systems. Here, within the domain of another system, contact is taking place -- the contact that permits an individual to move from the local to the national system. It seems safe to assume that there is no movement in the opposite direction. Assimilation of indigenous inhabitants is proceeding actively in all of the Latin American countries; in most it has meant an absolute and relative decline in the numbers of the native cultural group. While in the previous theme the emphasis was on examining the viability of the native culture under the imposition of linkages to the national system, here the effort is to examine what effect, if any, results from the movement of individuals from indigenous groups to the national culture. It should be understood that change is a corollary of the traditionalists' decision to migrate. Or does their change in location hide persistence of certain traits and patterns in a new context? What portion of his native culture does the Indian

bring to the city? Do indigenous migrants cluster in the city? Is this of geographic significance? Urban geographers concerned with problems of social behavior could, and should, probe many of these questions. Other social scientists have recently begun to probe into the role of cities in national integration and cultural breakdown (Breese, 1969),

Area sharing systems

Geographers should be interested in the problems raised by the disparities as well as structural similarities between national and minority cultural groups. New research approaches are worthy of consideration in examining these cultural problems. Do the existing systems of exchange provide for information flows that reinforce the systems? Are some locations of national majorities or minorities more important than others? How does the system maintain itself? All of these are highly relevant questions if we are to understand cultural cohesion in the distinctive regions of Guatemala.

Once the elements of the majority and minority cultural systems of Guatemala have been identified it is possible to proceed to the question of locating the points of convergence or contact of the two systems. It quickly becomes apparent that the systems share common space and that the possibilities of contact at certain places are high. Such possibilities of contact can be seen by placing a road map over a distribution map of an indigenous cultural group. The road pattern exists to serve the national cultural group by linking nodes that fulfill national functions, but it does not always function properly to achieve these ends. Western Guatemala is crisscrossed by a very fine road network, most of the Indian population in this region lives within a few hours road journey to the city, and many places that were important Indian market centers are now linked into a national accessibility system, but these places still function as predominantly Indian market centers and from the visual evidence a large share of the goods exchanged in these markets reach there by traditional means over ancient routes. What is known about the impact of the national road network on the native culture? Certainly it provides for flows of goods, people and ideas from the outside, but how does it affect the local culture? Cannot the same roads which are instruments of linking an isolated area into the national system provide means of tightening the cultural cohesion of local groups? Markets and roads are just two of the points of contact that need further investigation.

Conclusion

The framework suggested in this report provides a common research focus for geographers with highly specialized skills and interests. While cultural contact has long been a theme of scholarly investigation it becomes a more crucial topic as increased awareness involves individuals in global achievements and ideologies (Wagner and Mikesell, 1963). In a time of increasing nationalism, regionalism, and strong cultural integrity, the need for investigation of similarities and differences in the cultural organization of space is paramount. Although the cultural minorities of Latin America are not yet clamoring for a greater voice in their respective countries, recent North American experiences indicate that we should not rule out this possibility.

The questions raised here should arouse the interest of geographers concerned with economic and behavioral phenomena. Transportation geographers recently have used graph theory in examining the structure of transportation networks, but their efforts have focused on the complex, modern exchange systems where a data base exists (Gauthier, 1968). Certainly there is room for collaborative efforts to examine the functions of these networks in other contexts. For the behaviorist a wide range of questions present themselves. What are the choices for circulation within his own cultural system available to the indigenous inhabitant? How does he express preference for one location over another?

This paper is offered not as a survey of accomplishments, but to suggest some topics of common interest to geographers dealing with human problems resulting from the confrontation of dissimilar cultures. The author hopes that by raising these questions he will generate investigations by Latin Americanist colleagues steeped in the traditions of cultural geography as well as those with other systematic interests.

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