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## Bitter Legacy

### In Central America, Centuries of Racism Still Haunt the Indians

Badly Educated, They Stand  
On Lowest Social Rung,  
Suffer as Political Pawns

Biggest Obstacle: Language

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COBAN, Guatemala—Seldom are the differences between two cultures so graphically demonstrated as at the "Daughter of the King" national Indian beauty pageant held in this drowsy mountain town each summer.

While the contestants—84 shy, teen-aged Indian girls—parade down the runway in the same colorful garb their pre-Columbian ancestors wore, the panel of judges—none Indian—log in their votes on an Apple computer. And, as the contestants dance a slow-motion, barefoot jig to primitive tinkling music played on homemade marimbas and drums, television cameramen jockey for position near the stage.

Through it all, the spectators—many of them Nikon-toting Europeans, Americans, foreign diplomats and members of Guatemala's non-Indian social elite—giggle and cheer at the most outlandish costumes. Their favorite contestant tonight comes from a town known for its tobacco. She sheepishly shuffles up the runway, nervously puffing on a cigar the whole way.

But as her pensive expression reveals, the contest is a bewildering experience for the Indian participants. Even though the pageant is part of a national Folklore Festival celebrating the artistic and cultural contributions of Guatemala's 4.5 million native Indians, it is dominated by non-Indians—called Ladinos here—who organized it. Indeed, few Indians other than contestants' families could afford the \$3 admission.

#### Demeaning 'Recognition'

"Even when we try to publicly recognize the Indians' role in our history, we still treat them as objects of a commercialized folklore, or worse, as ornaments for our dominating Western culture," says an official of Guatemala's Ministry of Education. In that sense, he calls the pageant "yet another example of the Ladinos' continuing racist exploitation" of Indians.

All over Central America, indigenous people, as they prefer to be called, still feel vestiges of the racial domination that European conquerors imposed nearly 500 years ago. Descended from Indian civilizations predating Columbus and from Africans shipped in as slaves, they occupy the lowest

Moreover, several indigenous groups, especially in Guatemala and Nicaragua, have become unwilling pawns in the political violence sweeping the region. They have been uprooted and even slaughtered by governments trying to flush out armed rebels. So far, no one contends that the violence is racially inspired. Still, their plight illustrates how the exploitative, unquestionably racist practices of the past helped create the ingrained social and economic inequities that, perhaps more than anything else, now are spawning insurrection.

#### Vast Differences

"Indians here are like the Croats in Yugoslavia and the Catalonians and Basques in Spain, and we know after all these years that we can't neglect their cultural personality," says Edgar Ponce, a politically moderate member of Guatemala's Council of State, a legislative body that only last year admitted its first Indian members. "But the special problem here is that, unlike in those countries, the two cultures are so completely different that it is difficult, if not impossible, to integrate and reconcile the two."

Nowhere in Central America are those inequities and differences more apparent than in Guatemala, mainly because 60% of its population is Indian. (Elsewhere in Central America, indigenous groups make up no more than 10% of any country's population.) Recognizable by their colorful, intricately woven clothing, Indians can be seen all over the country, though most of them live in the picturesque but barely arable midsection. There, most of them eke out a living farming tiny, mountainside plots.

The Ladinos, in contrast, live in the larger towns, hold higher-paying jobs, wear Western attire and speak only Spanish. They usually stay in school longer than Indians, who often are put to work by age six. (Not that Indians have many educational opportunities; only 50% of Guatemalan Indian children have access to an elementary-school education, and only 1% of those ever go to high school, according to government statistics.)

#### Few Physical Distinctions

Interestingly, centuries of intermarriage among Indians, Europeans and mixed-blood mestizos have blurred physical distinctions; all of them tend to have dark eyes and swarthy complexions. In fact, many who pass for Ladinos are full-blooded Indians who have discarded their Indian language, clothing and customs. But physical similarity hasn't wiped out discrimination by Ladinos, Indians say.

"Racism is expressed in subtle ways here, unlike in South Africa or the United States, where skin pigmentation makes it easy to differentiate," says an Indian schoolteacher, who, like most Guatemalan Indians, is afraid to be identified. He adds: "It is still humiliating. Ladinos laugh at our names, they refuse to call us 'sir,' and they won't hire us or rent us a home if we wear our traditional clothes. At the university,

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they will call us their 'little Indians.' And they even laugh at the way we talk."

Language probably is the biggest obstacle to bringing the Ladinos and the Indians closer together in Central America. In Guatemala alone, there are 22 distinct Indian languages that fall into four general linguistic groups. Consequently, according to a language specialist at the Ministry of Education, "many of the Indians can't even communicate with each other." And although most Indians know enough Spanish to conduct simple business transactions, most can't read or write it or hold much of a conversation.

Lately, the Guatemalan government has been experimenting with bilingual programs designed to teach elementary students both in Spanish and in their Indian dialects. But so far, only 50,000 students have benefited, and, as the education official says, "There isn't the budget, the teachers or the bilingual materials to teach everyone."

Moreover, Indians often resist attempts to teach them Spanish. "They realize that to lose their language is to lose their culture," says a Roman Catholic priest who has worked in Guatemala for 30 years. "It has been so difficult for them, and yet they have managed to preserve that culture despite so many 'well-intentioned' attempts to change them."

It is no wonder Indians are suspicious of Ladino help. Historians estimate that Spanish conquerors in the 16th and 17th centuries killed millions of Indians in Central America in one of the worst known cases of genocide in history.

#### Political Changes

But little by little, necessity is forcing Indians to adopt Western ways, if only to feed their families. And political necessity has compelled Guatemalan authorities to invite Indians to participate in the national government for the first time. "The government recognizes that the group that wins the favor of the Indians can control the country, and they don't want the leftists to win the Indians first," the Indian teacher says.

Consequently, 20 of the 60 delegates and deputies to the Council of State are Indians. Political parties, especially the moderate ones, are trying to build "political consciousness" in Indian communities that have never held elections. Leftist rebels also are courting the Indians.

Meanwhile, Indians in remote areas of Guatemala have more pressing worries than learning about politics. During the past 18 months, government troops fighting leftist rebels have killed at least 10,000 Indians, church groups contend. Another 30,000 have fled to refugee camps in Mexico, and some estimate that as many as one million Indians have been uprooted from their homes.

#### Miskitos' Problems

Similar disasters have battered other indigenous groups in Central America, most notably the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua. A primitive people that live in the swampy lowlands of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, the Miskitos are descendants of South American Indians that moved north 750 years ago. Even before the Spaniards arrived, they were oppressed by other more advanced

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Today, the Miskitos, who number only about 70,000, are caught in the cross fire of Nicaragua's anti-Sandinista counterrevolution. The U.S. and Honduras both have accused Nicaragua of trying to exterminate the Miskitos, some of whom are fighting with "contra" forces hoping to overthrow the Sandinistas. Both countries point to the 10,000 Miskito refugees in camps in Honduras as proof.

The Sandinista government, in turn, accuses the contras of using the Miskitos as cannon fodder and of manipulating their plight for propaganda purposes. The Sandinistas have retaliated by relocating 8,500 Miskitos from their villages near the Honduran border to new villages farther from the frontier—a traumatic move that Nicaragua defends as necessary.

The Miskitos themselves are divided in their attitudes toward the combatants. "The contras in Honduras sent the Miskitos to die when there weren't the conditions in place for a national war, and the Sandinistas have betrayed us, moved us and killed us," says Brooklyn Rivera, an exiled Miskito who now leads another group of anti-Sandinista Miskitos in Costa Rica.

## Blacks in Nicaragua

Elsewhere in Nicaragua and Central America, racial divisions aren't so acute, mainly because centuries of intermarriage have brought different ethnic groups into close contact. In Nicaragua, for example, most blacks don't feel discriminated against. "Everybody's cool here because we're all Nicaraguans," says Steve Hunter, an English-speaking black raised on the Atlantic Coast and now living in Managua. His brother recently married a Ladino.

In El Salvador and Honduras, some 90% of the population is mestizo, and so racial tensions are minimal. But there, the wealthy class is dominated by "pure" European descendants who usually prefer to marry "white" natives of other countries rather than "marry down" into the mestizos.

In Costa Rica, which has long considered itself a little slice of Europe in Central America, Indians never were plentiful, and now they constitute only 3% of the population, while "whites" make up more than 50%. Despite the relative scarcity of Indians and blacks, Costa Rica has always been viewed as the most racist country in the region—a reputation long justified by its own laws. Before 1948, Caribbean blacks, even those born in Costa Rica, weren't granted citizenship, and as recently as the 1960s, they couldn't live in San Jose, the capital. Though such laws have been repealed and blacks have made inroads into business and

politics, most remain in muggy, rusty-roofed towns along the Atlantic Coast.

"The whites finally realized their official discrimination was absurd in a democratic country, especially when there are so few of us," says Fernando Hay, a black boat-builder from Limon, Costa Rica's largest port. "It is mainly education that's responsible for the change in attitudes," he says, "but it is also because many young blacks like my son have married whites. It makes us accept each other better."

For the Indians of Guatemala and the Miskitos of Nicaragua, however, the path to social acceptance and self-respect seems to stretch far into the horizon, and it involves forsaking, at least for a while, their own culture. In fact, many Indians who have "made it" in the Ladino world have had to leave their homelands before they could become proud of their heritage.

"It wasn't until I went to medical school in Mexico that I stopped being ashamed of being an Indian," says a 39-year-old doctor from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. "It is a depressing thought, but now that I'm back, I can see that going abroad was the only thing that cured me."