

Some Premodernist Thoughts on the Mayan Population in Guatemala

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1. Mayan Power and Population Figures

In terms of their treatment in society since the conquest it is not surprising that some spokespersons for the Mayan Indians of Guatemala have taken the position that the national censuses are not only inaccurate, but overtly controlled so as to prejudice the situation of the Indian. Cojtí Cuxil has asserted that,

"En la sociedad colonial Guatemalteca, los Censos Oficiales de Población no son actividades políticamente neutrales sino operaciones sesgadas para concretar la política del colonialismo ladino: eliminar al indígena."¹

"Estos requerimientos del colonialismo ladino para con los Censos de Población, conllevan diferentes manipulaciones que se concretizan en diferentes momentos de un Censo. Entre estas manipulaciones mencionaremos dos: el sistema de definición e identificación del indígena que se da antes y durante la realización de Censo, y las manipulaciones de cifras logradas por presiones políticas de uno u otro gobierno."²

Leopoldo Tzian argues in a similar vein:

"En la práctica interna del país se ha desconocido la existencia de la cultura Maya (la misma situación para los Pueblos Garifuna y Xinca) por lo mismo ha existido poco interés de cuantificar realmente a la población India."³

While these assertions have the ring of truth, the position they represent has led to a broad rejection of the products of the national censuses by some indigenous intellectuals because population figures are relevant to the acquisition and exercise of political power. This is most obvious in mob actions, in the market place, and in democratic elections where numbers of people can be hoped to have an effect. Since Guatemala has been making a serious effort to operate as a democracy, the question of Mayan population numbers has become a serious issue. It is reasonable to assume that the more Maya there are, the better their basis will be for achieving the political power that they do not currently enjoy.

¹ Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, Configuración del pensamiento político del pueblo maya (2da. parte). (Guatemala Cholsamaj-Spem, 1995, p. 92

² Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, Configuración del pensamiento político del pueblo maya (2da. parte). (Guatemala Cholsamaj-Spem, 1995, p. 94.

³ Leopoldo Tzian, Mayas y Ladinos en Cifras: el Caso de Guatemala, (Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 1994), p. 31.

There is no doubt that the Maya compose a very large segment of the Guatemalan population. The problem is that the only data on population numbers stem from the national censuses, and these censuses have shown a consistent decline in the Mayan percentage since 1921. Mayan scholars have taken exception to these figures⁴. They argue that the censuses are no good is because they have consistently stated that the Maya numbers are lower than they actually are. The most detailed argument⁵ asserts that the real level is 60%, only slightly lower than the figure of 70% that held at the end of the colonial era⁶. The reason for this, the argument continues, is that the assimilationist policy of the Liberal government of the 19th and 20th Centuries led the census takers to reduce the number of Indians to make it appear that they were disappearing as a segment of the total population.

In the present paper I will argue that while the Guatemalan censuses are full of errors, the reasons for them are probably considerably more complex than can be explained the simple exercise of ethnic bias.

2. The Problem of Undercounting of Indians

There is no question that the Indians have consistently been undercounted, but it is equally true that the entire Guatemalan population has been undercounted. The proposition that these errors or failures were part of a political plan to reduce the number of Indians is not well substantiated. Given the amount and kind of errors, a far more likely explanation (with one exception) is the general incompetence in census taking rather than political manipulation. The census bureau was never well funded. Even with plans to take censuses well advanced, apparently funds were withdrawn from the censuses planned for 1930, 1960 and in 1940, all the census taking was done *ad honorum*. No census since 1950 has been carried out in the year for which it was planned. There is no evidence that census takers received much if any training. Even when the census data was collected little funding remained for tabulation and publication.

Jorge Arias goes into considerable detail on the conditions that lead one to assume that the censuses results are going to be defective but little in his findings suggest how ethnic biases may have intentionally led to played a role in these counts⁷. There is one explicit case of the

⁴ This is a summary of the arguments in Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, Configuración del pensamiento político del pueblo maya (2da. parte), Guatemala Cholsamaj-Spem, 1995 and Leopoldo Tzian, Mayas y Ladinos en Cifras: el Caso de Guatemala, Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 1994.

⁵ Leopoldo Tzian, Mayas y Ladinos en Cifras: el Caso de Guatemala, Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 1994, pp. 41-42

⁶ W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, "Conquista y población: demografía histórica de los mayas de Guatemala," in Luis Rosero Bixby, Anne Pebley, and Alicia Bermúdez Méndez, De los Mayas a la planificación familiar: Demografía del Istmo, San José: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 1997, pp. 15-17

⁷ See his "Demografía," Tomo V, pp.137-152 (1996), and "Demografía," Tomo IV, pp. 195-212 (1997) in Jorge Luján Muñoz, editor, Historia General de Guatemala, (Guatemala: Asociación Aigos del País) .

is not entirely clean, Table 1 suggests a negative correlation between the percentage of Indians and the level of inflation of figures for these departments.

In this case the charge of census figures served to reduce the relative numbers of Indians. There is a problem in this interpretation if we take seriously the rationale for the for the 300,000 military reserve. We know that Justo Rufino Barrios explicitly preferred Ladino troops to Indian, and tried to promote the development of an all-Ladino army¹⁰. Ubico, in contrast, was famous for promoting Indian military reserve from the distinctive Indian municipios, using the indigenous dress as a military uniform. The biased inflation of non-Indian Departments would seem to be counter to this preference, but perhaps the issue was simply to get the total over three million.

There was, indeed, a more material problem with the charge of intentionally reducing the count of Indians. Until 1944, there was an increasing demand for forced labor to work on export crops, road construction, and the army. The government went to great pains to make lists of individuals liable to the forced labor laws, and there was no desire to undercount. Indians were an especially important labor source because they were likely to be landless, poor, and linguistically unable to defend themselves. Also, they comprised the vast majority of potential labor in two-thirds of the country. During the Ubico years the Censos de Vialidad for the Department of San Marcos, show fairly consistently that 60% or more of adults males were wage laborers, compared with only 20% to 30% being independent agriculturists.¹¹ Contrary to their assimilationist ideology, it was not to the advantage of the Liberals to undercount the numbers of Indians; their economy depended on a large Indian labor force, and daily ethnic interrelations were designed to keeping Indians in their place as Indians, to inhibit acculturation and "racial passing," but not to reduce their numbers.

Forced labor ended with the Revolution of 1944, and it may be argued that with it ended the need keep a strict count of the available labor force. If an ethnically-biased undercounting were to appear, it would now have been more plausible. John Early's classic study of ethnic figures based on the censuses and vital statistics of 1950 1964, and 1973¹² does show a consistent undercounting of Indians in these censuses. However, once again it is not clear that the undercounting was due more to ethnic bias since Early also finds much more pronounced

coincidence between this figure and Arias' estimate of 2.3 to 24 million may be coincidental, but it also may be that Arias' found no changes in these other departments because few were made.

¹⁰ Richard N. Adams, "Etnicidad en el ejército de la Guatemala liberal (1870-1915)." FLACSO Guatemala, Debate 30, Guatemala., 1995. También en Historia General de Guatemala, tomo V., pp. 207-226, (1996).

¹¹ AGCA, Ministerio de Gobernación for the years 1933, 1934, 1936, 1938, 1944.

¹² I am not ignoring the painstaking work of Erwin Rolando Dias, Andrew Colliver, and that of the other international demographers who have wrestled with Guatemalan materials, but they have not addressed the use of vital statistics and census ethnic data to analyse the course of Indian population change lower than at the national level.

Year	Indian Percentages			Rural Percentages		
	Census	Early	Difference	Census	Early	Difference
1950	53.65%	56.16%	2.51%	75.00%	83.20%	8.20%
1964	42.19%	50.37%	8.18%	66.40%	79.70%	13.30%
1973	43.80%	47.95%	4.15%	63.60%	76.60%	13.00%

Table 2. Early's Calculations of Undercounting in Indian and Rural Populations in Guatemalan Censuses of 1950, 1964, and 1973¹³

undercounting in the rural population (Table 2). There is no question that census taking among Guatemalan rural populations presents greater obstacles than among urban peoples. There is also little question that by far the greater number of Indians are rural dwellers. Unless one wants to argue that there is a census bias against rural peoples, it is more reasonable to argue that counting rural peoples is difficult rather than that census takers hate Indians.

3. The Creation of Politically Correct Population Figure

Año Censal	Ref.	Total	Población Indígena	No Indígena	Porcentaje Indígena
1778	A	430,859	387,951	42,908	90.04%
1778	L	355,000	248,500	106,500	70.00%
1820	L	595,000	416,000	179,000	69.92%
1870	L	1,080,000	756,000	324,000	70.00%
1880	A	1,224,602	844,744	379,858	68.98%
1893	C	1,364,678	882,733	481,945	64.68%
1893	A	1,501,145			
1921	C	2,004,900	1,299,927	704,973	64.84%
1940	A	2,400,000			55.64%
1950	C	2,790,868	1,491,725	1,299,143	53.45%
1950	E	2,889,229	1,611,928	1,258,344	55.79%
1964	C	4,287,997	1,808,942	2,479,055	42.19%
1964	E	4,339,204	2,185,679	2,153,525	50.37%
1973	C	5,160,221	2,260,024	2,900,197	43.80%
1973	E	5,589,543	2,680,178	2,909,365	47.95%
1973	Ck	5,728,092			
1981	C	6,054,227	2,536,523	3,517,704	41.90%
1994	C	8,321,067	3,554,756	4,766,311	42.72%

Table 3. Indian and Total Populations by Censuses, Guatemala 1787 a 1994¹⁴

¹³ John D. Early, The Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: The Guatemalan Population, Boca Raton: University Presses of Florida, 1982, pp. 31, 46.

So far as these data go, it is far from clear that the censuses were manipulated with the intention of reducing the numbers of Indians. Irrespective of what position one may take on this question, the issue of advancing politically acceptable population figures poses a different question. Over the past decade it has become increasingly popular in the public media to state that Indian population of the country is considerably higher than the census figures with which we have been dealing. A recent example (among many) is the figure of 55% given in the study on Democracia en Guatemala, by the international organization, IDEA¹⁵.

Since we all accept that written history is a kind of myth, it may not be taken amiss if I say that a myth has been created over recent years that Maya population numbers have been intentionally suppressed in order to make it appear that they were fewer than they actually were, and that they were biologically disappearing. The first of these charges is serious and will be taken up in the following. The second charge--that the censuses are trying to make it appear than the Maya are disappearing--is demonstrably without merit. Table 1 shows that the national censuses since the first complete one in 1893 have consistently showed a steady increase in the Indian population. This is an increase that presumably began in the 16th Century, after the diseases borne by the conquest decimated the Indian population.

By way of example of how this myth has appeared, I want to use the 1994 work of Leopoldo Tzian because it goes into more detail than most other such efforts. It must also be noted that the 1994 census results were not available when he prepared his study. Tzian argues that for various reasons, mainly colonialist, the census figures are not reliable. Instead, the count should be made on "criterios socioculturales, lingüísticos, antropológicas y políticos." He then cites in order of increasingly high percentages eleven published sources proposing Indian

¹⁵ Table is taken from Richard N. Adams, "Un siglo de geografía étnica en Guatemala, 1893 to 1994," Revista USAC, No 2-96, pp. 7-60. Guatemala, 1996, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, pp. 12-14; ("A Century of Ethnic Geography, Guatemala 1893 - 1994," Yale Latin American Studies, No.1, , 1998, pp. 166-169.) [A]: Data for 1893-1973 total populations from Jorge Arias, "Historia censal de Guatemala," reprinted in Jorge Luján Muñoz, Economía de Guatemala, 1750-1940, Antología de Lecturas y Materiales, Tomo 1, Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos, Facultad de Humanidades. 1980. Pp. 171-180. [C] Censos nacionales. [Ck] Juan Chackiel, "Guatemala: evaluación del censo de 1973 y proyección de la población por sexo y edad, 1950-2000." Publicación 1021, Serie A. CELADE, San José, C.R. 1976. [E] John D. Early, The Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: The Guatemalan Population. (Boca Raton: University Presses of Florida, 1982) Table 3.1. 1950; figure probably from Zulma C. Camisa, Las estadísticas demográficas y la mortalidad en Guatemala hacia 1950 y 1964. (CELADE, serie AS, No. 2, San José, 1969). [L]: W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, "Conquista y población; La demografía histórica de los Mayas de Guatemala," (ms. 1995). [L2]: W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, Demography and Empire: A Guide to the Population History of Spanish Central America, 1500-1821. (Boulder. Westview Press, 1995) Table 2. I have omitted from consideration here CELADE's Guatemala, Estimaciones y Proyecciones de Población 1950-2025, Fascículo F/GUAT. 1, , San José, C.R., Enero 1985, as its figures are far too out of line with the 1994 census.

¹⁵ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Democracia en Guatemala: La Misión de un Pueblo Enteró, Stockholm, 1998, p. 101. IDEA gives no source for this figure, but does footnote the census percentages for Indians in 1964, 1973, 1981, and 1994.

percentages ranging from 40% to as high as 80%. He then notes that the "central tendency" in these figures is around 61%, which he accepts as working figure¹⁶. Tzian does not mention that none of the eleven sources claims or cites any empirical data to support their assertions.

The problem with these figures and those from many other contemporary sources is that none of them are based on empirical data. The only actual counts of the Indian population available are those of the censuses of Instituto Nacional de Estadística. There is ample evidence that they are defective. If one wanted to take the time, one could surely show some consistent errors from one to another. One error for which we have consistent evidence is undercounting. Table 3 shows an historical range of figures, and specifically compares census figures with corrections by Jorge Arias and John Early. Early particularly provides data not only for the undercounting of Indians, but also the over counting of non-Indians. I suspect that some of the over counting in 1950 may reflect a tendency on the part of some Indians of the era to seek ladinización. I have no explanation at all for the exaggerated discrepancy Early finds in 1964.

A major source of some of the problems, as argued by some of the Maya, was the use of census takers' judgments and definitions for identifying Indians. While there is no doubt that the definitions used by the censuses were defective, it is also the case that until 1994, there was no generally agreed upon way to define Indians. The question was usually handled in terms of cultural items about which there was almost always some disagreement. This was not solved until the 1994 census introducing the use of identity, self identification, as the criterion. In that year 42.3% reported themselves as being "indígena." This differed little from the percentages of 1964, 1973, and 1981, all censuses in which the decision of ethnic definition was made "objectively". The result was that the claims that Indian percentages should be higher were neither confirmed nor quieted.

The importance of the 1994 figure is not that it clearly confirms a specific level of Indian percentage in the population, but that it suggests that the level is clearly lower than those popularly assumed. In support of this, it should be recalled that Early's corrected census figures showed a consistent decline over the three censuses he examined. Table 4 compares the census figures and Early's figures extended to 1981 and 1994. It suggests that if the decline in Indian percentages reported by Early continued at the rate he calculated between 1964 and 1973 (.27% per year), the 1994 figure would be similar to that reported in the 1994 census.

I want it to be clear that I do not accept this simple projection as valid, but only that it is suggestive. An additional and important consideration in 1994 was that there may still have been many reluctant to admit to being Indian because of recent history of Indian slaughter. There is suggestive evidence for this in the 1994 data collected on language speaking. Of the individuals

¹⁶ Leopoldo Tzian, Mayas y Ladinos en Cifras: el Caso de Guatemala, Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 1994, pp. 41-47.

self-identified Indians, 7.33% gave no data on language speaking, compared with 3.07% of the non-Indians. Of the former, the lack of reporting was much higher among women than men and was particularly evident in the northwest. The failure to give language data may well be

	Census Indian Percentage	Early's Indian Percentage	Projections from Early's Figures
1950	53.65%	56.16%	
1964	42.19%	50.37%	
1973	43.80%	47.95%	
1981	41.90%		45.80%
1994	42.20%		41.82%

Table 4. Indian Percentages According to the Censuses and Early's Corrections and Projections Therefrom

indicative of a more extensive reluctance to give identity data. A clearly more important dynamic in the long term is that the evidence is fairly strong that the Mayan population has reached a level of natural increase that is greater than the non-Indian population¹⁷. My guess is that this should have been felt by the decade of the 1970s, and if so, its effect should have been felt in 1994 census figures.

My concern with the use of arbitrary figures for the Indian population is not to challenge the Mayan political project. It is absolutely important that the Maya achieve their rightful place in a democratic Guatemala. The question is whether the simplistic rejection of census data and the substitution of fictitious figures is a good way to do this. Disinformation can effect the political process, and it has been used for hegemonic advantage for years. If this is an intentional case of anti-hegemonic disinformation, then so be it. My own prejudice is that the size of the Indian population will eventually be felt in the electoral process when Mayan votes are forthcoming to promote Mayan interests. Thus far claiming that 60% of the population is Maya has not yet yielded anything like a serious Mayan vote or representation in Congress.

Second, arbitrary population figures must lead to formulating policies on unreal conditions; such policies may not only be more difficult to implement, but may produce unwanted results. Is it reasonable, for example, to base a serious political or social program on the series of projections that Tzian makes using his figure of 61% for Indian percentage of the

¹⁷ John D. Early, The Demographic Structure and Evolution of a Peasant System: The Guatemalan Population, Boca Raton: University Presses of Florida, 1982, pp. 95; Richard N. Adams, "Un siglo de geografía étnica en Guatemala, 1893 to 1994," Revista USAC, No 2-96, pp. 7-60. Guatemala, 1996, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, pp. 12-14; ("A Century of Ethnic Geography, Guatemala 1893 - 1994," Yale Latin American Studies, No.1, , 1998, pp. 166-169.)

total?¹⁸ How many teachers should be trained? How many literacy programs should be projected? Does disinformation help to get programs set up where they ought to be?

Third, while the immediate political issues may loom large in the view of Mayan leaders, over the long run they will want to know what is really happening. The imposition of fictitious data makes the useful measurement of progress or regression impossible. I would be the first to support a serious effort to both reconstruct historical figures and to seek more reliable censuses in the future. But neither of these will be achieved by false claims.

I guess that for me the use of arbitrary figures for population analysis is too post modernistic for comfort. The information may be politically comfortable, but it is scientifically misleading. The averaging of opinions of eleven authorities whose major sources are probably each other does not constitute a replicable datum¹⁹. Post modernism is a mode of thinking that denies the significance and possibility of scientific efforts to reach the truth. In the last analysis, I must simply cast my lot with the premodernists. I prefer to try science because while we know that it is, at best, hypothetical, we also have some confidence that it is trying to find truth.

¹⁸ Leopoldo Tzian, Mayas y Ladinos en Cifras: el Caso de Guatemala, Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 1994, pp. 41-47.

¹⁹ "In the sciences, even questionable examples of research fraud are harshly punished; were suspicion is enough for funding to be cut off... No such mechanisms exist in the humanities. Why not? Because of the obvious: since much of what humanists call research does not lead to results that are replicable, peer review, as a criteria of reliability, is weaker in the humanities than in the sciences. Given the importance of interpretation in historical and literary scholarship, scholars in the humanities are in a position where they can explain away deliberate and even systematic distortions." (James Drake, "The naming disease; how Jakobson's essay on aphasia initiated postmodernist deceits," Times Literary Supplement, September 4, 1998, p.14.)

	1940 Published			1940 Real	1940	1940	1940	1940 Combined	1950	1950	
	Number	Indian	Indian %	Number	Inflation	Pub+Real	Real->Pub	Increase to 1950	Number	Indian	
						Combined					
100 GUATEMALA	319197	64272	20.1%	*		200416		38.2%	441085	80807	18.3%
200 EL PROGRESO	65302	10494	16.1%	46432	18870	46432	41%	2.7%	47678	4321	9.1%
300 SACATEPEQUEZ	83024	45534	54.8%	*		83024		-27.8%	59975	30722	51.2%
400 CHIMALTENANG	177123	153388	86.6%	107881	69242	107881	64%	13.4%	122310	94774	77.5%
500 ESCUINTLA	176280	33277	18.9%	89264	87016	89264	97%	38.7%	123809	19628	15.9%
600 SANTA ROSA	169774	17829	10.5%	97693	72081	97693	74%	12.4%	109812	10450	9.5%
700 SOLOLA	86625	80799	93.3%	*		86625		-4.3%	82869	77750	93.8%
800 TOTONICAPAN	92292	88678	96.1%	91233	1059	91233	1%	9.0%	99434	96054	96.6%
900 QUETZALTENANG	233655	163153	69.8%	183134	50521	183134	28%	0.2%	183588	124756	68.0%
### SUCHITEPEQUEZ	182162	121796	66.9%	106527	75635	106527	71%	17.5%	125196	84359	67.4%
### RETALHULEU	69974	39410	56.3%	*		69974		-5.6%	66066	34040	51.5%
### SAN MARCOS	204208	150767	73.8%	*		204208		12.6%	230039	165964	72.1%
### HUEHUETENANG	176480	134993	76.5%	*		176480		12.7%	198872	146127	73.5%
### QUICHE	158662	134475	84.8%	*		158662		10.2%	174882	146398	83.7%
### BAJA VERAPAZ	96182	58059	60.4%	62610	33572	62610	54%	6.1%	66432	38927	58.6%
### ALTA VERAPAZ	282562	265229	93.9%	190562	92000	190562	48%	-0.9%	188758	176231	93.4%
### PETEN	11475	3702	32.3%	10482	993	10482	9%	51.7%	15897	4466	28.1%
### IZABAL	83153	15832	19.0%	35396	47757	35396	135%	55.9%	55191	8109	14.7%
### ZACAPA	145797	45068	30.9%	66097	79700	66097	121%	5.2%	69533	13140	18.9%
### CHIQUIMULA	144011	87873	61.0%	100611	43400	100611	43%	12.2%	112837	80096	71.0%
### JALAPA	124855	61842	49.5%	62654	62201	62654	99%	19.9%	75091	37897	50.5%
### JUTIAPA	200416	44418	22.2%	110611	89805	110611	81%	25.5%	138768	26709	19.2%

Total (Real)	3283209	1820888		1361187					3E+06	1501725	
Total(Real +Publ]				2361664				18.1%			

		Correlation	r
Correlations	E & I	-0.50	0.25
	J & H	-0.18	0.03
	F & I	-0.20	0.04
	E & G	-0.09	0.01
	I & N	-0.52	0.27