

PN-ABI-651

ISA 72614

THE INDIANS OF EL SALVADOR

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Cultural Survival

December 1989

Introduction:¹

With more than 5 million people compressed into a territory of approximately 22,000 sq. kms., El Salvador has the highest population density in Latin America. It is also an extremely poor country. In the mid-1970s, according to a study of the Agency for International Development, 83.5% of the rural population was living below the poverty line (Daines 1977). 70.7% of the total number of farms were under two hectares in size, while at the other end of the scale, close to 50% of the agricultural land was concentrated in approximately 1% of the farm exploitations. But these statistics give only part of the picture. In a country with scarce land to begin with, the number of landless peasants has grown exponentially in recent years, from 11.8% of the total rural population in 1950 to 40.9% in 1975 (Burke 1976:480); and the landless, several studies have shown, earn the lowest annual income of all social groups, including

¹ Concepción Clará de Guevara and I spent several weeks carrying out fieldwork among Indian communities during October 1988. No one knows the indigenous people of El Salvador better than she, and no one could have been a better companion in the field.

I thank Richard N. Adams, Dominique Irvine, Christopher Lutz, James Officer, and Sally Yudelman for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

those with no more than one hectare of land (Deere and Diskin 1984:4). In the 1970s, over 70% of the rural population was considered mal- or undernourished; the rate of illiteracy in the countryside was over 60%, and the majority of the population was without basic services of any kind.

Conditions among the poor grew increasingly more difficult through the 1970s. Tensions built with strikes and protests, outbreaks of violence, and the formation of militant groups on the left. The Salvadorean government met these popular expressions of dissent with escalating repression, and as the heat rose on all sides the battle lines were being drawn. Then, on October 15, 1979, a group of young army officers overthrew the military government of General Humberto Romero and attempted to set a course toward reform.

Their goal was not achieved. Instead, El Salvador began dragging itself through a period of painful and seemingly unending civil war. In the ten years that have passed since the coup, more than 70,000 Salvadoreans have lost their lives in the violence, and the end is not yet in sight. The country's infrastructure has been reduced to rubble, and despite massive infusions of financial assistance from the United States the economy is gutted. Unemployment in some sectors reaches over 65%, and the poverty that had been on the rise in the 1970s has now become so acute that hundreds of thousands of Salvadoreans have fled their country in order to survive. Theft and violent crime of all types have grown apace with the breakdown of

authority and the upsurge of need. Successive governments have failed to provide leadership, and it is hard to believe that alternatives from the rebel side offer anything better. And so it goes, as El Salvador continues what appears to be a relentless march toward complete chaos.

El Salvador's Invisible Indians:

In this context of economic depression and civil disorder, discussion of the plight of El Salvador's Indian population might seem irrelevant, especially when it is first necessary to establish that Indians do in fact exist in that country. Most residents of the capital city of San Salvador hold that there are no longer any Indians around; and foreigners are invariably told that indigenous culture has been abandoned, except, perhaps, for a few extremely threadbare and insignificant pockets in remote rural areas. There is a general sense among students of Central America that the indigenous population of El Salvador has long since fallen victim to acculturation and disappeared: all we are left with today is a mixed, or mestizo, blend of the Indian and the Spaniard. Among the spate of books appearing over the last 10 years, Indians are mentioned almost exclusively in an historical context (especially in reference to the well-known matanza of 1932); and today's rural population is frequently referred to collectively as campesinos and dealt with as if

ethnic groupings simply did not exist (see Montgomery 1982; Montes 1988; Gettleman et al 1981; Kincaid 1987).²

With the notable exception of ethnographic work done by two Salvadorean anthropologists, Alejandro Marroquín and Concepción Clará de Guevara, virtually nothing has been written describing who the indigenous people of El Salvador are, where they live, and what their current situation is.³ Few foreign anthropologists have shown interest in carrying out field studies of any sort in El Salvador; and of those who have, even fewer have concerned themselves with the local indigenous population.⁴ Neighboring Guatemala, with more than 4 million Indians divided up among some 22 distinct Mayan language groups, has siphoned off all of the attention of anthropologists -- who, like tourists, are drawn to exotic peoples.

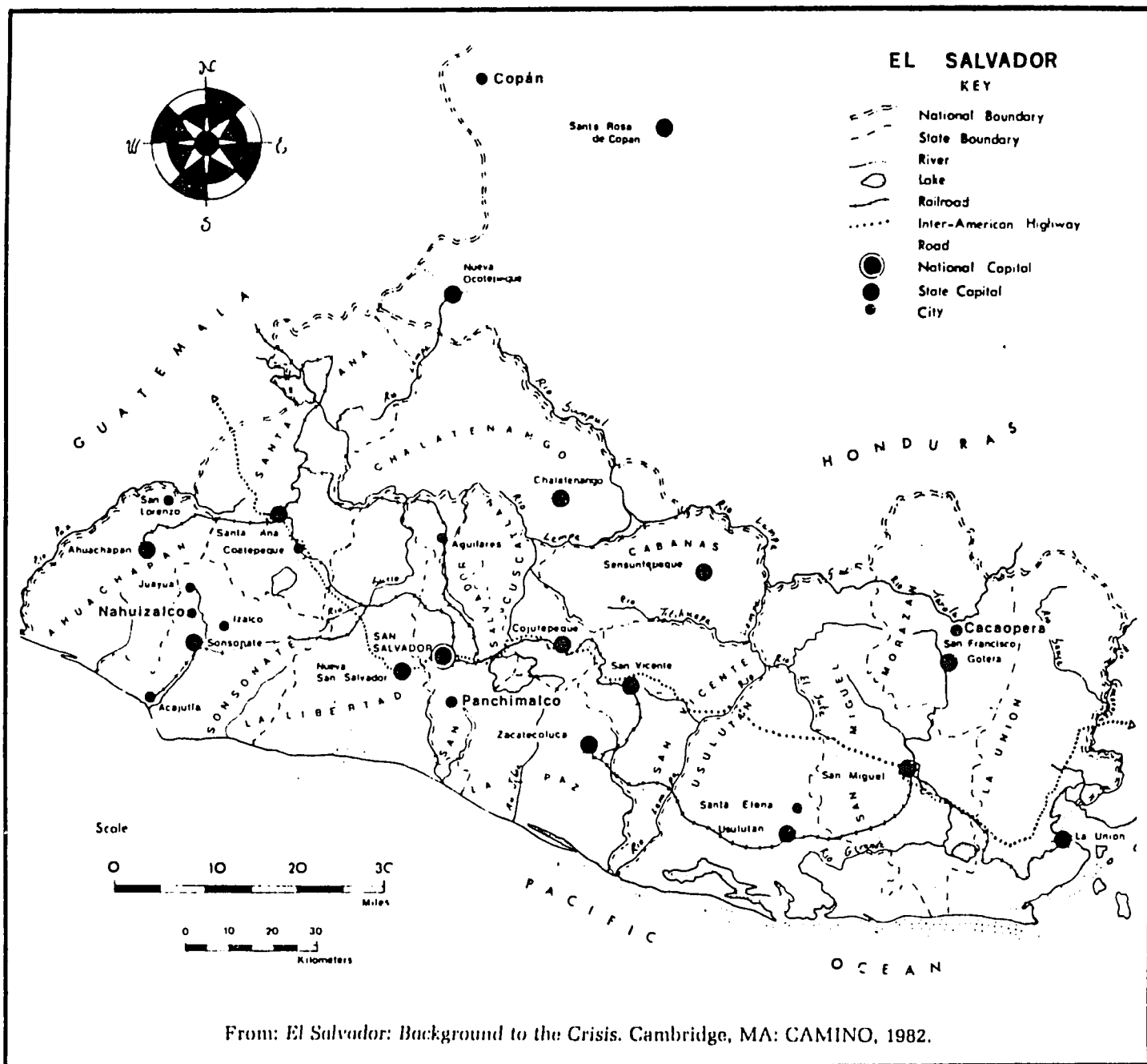
²The State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1987 tells us, for example: "El Salvador is ethnically homogeneous, and few ethnic Indians remain. There is no official discrimination against Indians..."(1988:487). Precisely what "official" discrimination might be is not explained.

³ Marroquín wrote two book-length studies of Indian communities, Panchimalco (1959) and San Pedro Nonualco (1964), and summarized a lifetime of research into and thought on the Indians in El Salvador in an insightful essay entitled "El Problema Indígena en El Salvador" (1975). Clará de Guevara, a student of Marroquín's, produced a thickly textured cultural survey of El Salvador's most thoroughly Indian region under the title Exploración Etnográfica: Departamento de Sonsonate (1975).

⁴The North American anthropologist Richard Adams spent just over a month in El Salvador doing survey work on the native peoples of Central America in the early 1950s (Adams 1957); this represents the most ambitious work done by an outside anthropologist to date.

Yet despite this avoidance by anthropologists, coupled with "an environment of tacit or open negation of their existence" (Marroquín 1975:747), Indians do indeed exist in El Salvador, and in considerable numbers. Just a short distance from San Salvador, one finds areas in which people identify themselves and are identified by those around them as naturales or indios; and the non-Indians surrounding them are called ladinos.⁵ Large concentrations of Indians are found in the western departments of Sonsonate, La Libertad, Ahuachapán, and (to a lesser extent) Santa Ana; in Sonsonate, the towns of Nahuizalco and Izalco have a markedly Indian stamp to them, and the bulk of the population in rural settlements, or cantones, throughout the western region is made up of indigenous people. Sizeable Indian populations are also found in the south-central department of La Paz, and in the northeastern section of the departments of Morazán and La Unión. One of the best known Indian communities in the country is the municipality of Panchimalco, just a short distance from San Salvador. (See map 1 of El Salvador on page 6.)

⁵Marroquín distinguishes between mestizo and ladino. During the colonial period, ladinos were those who lived inside Indian communities, while mestizos were settled in their own towns and villages. In this sense, the ladino only exists in relation to the Indian. Another term used to signify racially mixed people in Indian areas was mulato. The Indians in western El Salvador still use this term to refer to ladinos in a depreciatory manner (Marroquín 1959:155-159).



MAP 1

While no reliable statistical information exists on the number of indigenous people in El Salvador -- the last census taking Indians into the count was in 1930, and even then the figures were wildly underreported⁶ -- Marroquín estimated in 1975 that they made up approximately 10 percent of the Salvadorean population (Marroquín 1975). If this estimate is used today, out of a total population of slightly over 5 million people, there are about 500,000 Indians in El Salvador.

The historical record gives a clearer notion of the demographic trend among El Salvador's Indians. According to census data from the years 1796-1798, out of a total population of 161,035 there were 83,010 Indians, representing 51.6 percent of the population (Barón Castro 1942:253). The census of 1807 counted 71,175 Indians out of a total of 160,549 (Marroquín 1975:754). By 1940, according to Barón Castro, the percentage of Indians in the Salvadorean population had dropped to 20%; yet at that time their absolute numbers had increased dramatically, topping 375,000 (Barón Castro 1942:558). In the early 1950s, Adams noted that "there are something under 400,000 people that could be classified as Indian" (1957:493). And because the category of "Indian" in El Salvador is largely a closed ethnic grouping, almost on the order of a caste, it is certain that their absolute numbers have increased since the 1940s, while

⁶ Adams (1957:487) noted that the 1930 census, published in 1942, recorded only 5.6% of the population as Indian. Evidence Adams gathered in the field indicated that the Indian population was considerably larger.

their percentage of the total has most likely decreased.

How is it that such a large ethnic population can go undetected? How is it that El Salvador's Indians have become invisible, in the sense used by Ralph Ellison in his novel about the invisible black man in United States society? Perhaps the most remarkable thing is that in a country which is tiny -- having a land surface of slightly less than 22,000 sq. kms -- with dense concentrations of indigenous people living in towns and rural areas located within one hour by car from the capital, their existence can be flatly denied. Most certainly, people in the capital know that poor people live in these areas. But the fact that they are Indians is often ignored altogether. This brings up the question of ethnicity: how is "Indian" defined in El Salvador?

Insight into this matter is best gained by surveying the history of El Salvador's Indians from the time of the Spanish Conquest up to the present.

Historical Perspective:

During the first millenium AD, the western end of El Salvador was a minor outpost of Mayan civilization, which had its major centers in highland Guatemala and in the region surrounding Copán, just across the present-day Honduran-Salvadorean border. However, between approximately A.D. 900 and A.D. 1350, the Mayans

inhabiting the western two-thirds of El Salvador were displaced by Nahuatl-speaking peoples who arrived in a series of migrations from Central Mexico (Fowler 1989:32-49). It was these people, called Pipiles⁷, who were conquered by the Spaniards when they moved their armies into the area in the early years of the 16th century. The eastern third of the territory now designated El Salvador, bounded by the Lenca River to the west, was inhabited by a heterogeneous collection of Lenca, Jinca, Pokomam, Chortí, and Matagalpa peoples (White 1973:21; Fowler 1989:32-49).

The Spaniards settled most heavily in the western end of the country, which was a traditional center for cacao and balsam (another area of cacao production was in the far northeast corner of El Salvador). At least initially, the new lords left the Indian cultivation systems in place, having recognized that the Indian social order and technologies were better suited to many crops of the region, especially the delicate cacao plants. With the Indians as producers, the Spaniards concentrated on collecting and selling the products, and in this way rapidly incorporated the Indians into the new social and political order.

While Guatemala offered remote highland strongholds where the Indians could live in isolation and maintain their cultural traditions, El Salvador had no areas into which they could escape. As a consequence, Indians and Spaniards were thrown together from the beginning. The Indians became an integral part

⁷The term "Pipil" comes from the Nahuatl pipiltin: "children" or "nobles" (Fowler 1989:3). In El Salvador, Nahuatl is called Nahuat.

of the colonial economic and social system, first as cultivators for Spanish markets and later as indentured peons on the plantation estates that spread across the rich volcanic soils of the highland zone. Large numbers of these people lost their ethnic affiliations and soon became members of the growing mestizo peasant class. However, many of those living outside the estates retained their Indian identity, yet were relegated to marginal lands and the beginnings of what was to become a long tradition of chronic poverty. Racial mestizaje was initiated early and has stretched across the entire country, to the point where today the observer is likely to be confronted by light-skinned people with curly hair and thick lips who are considered Indians, as well as people with markedly Indian features who are classed as mestizos.⁸

At the end of the 16th century, cacao production in western El Salvador "was greater than that from any other part of America" (Browning 1971:57; also see Fowler 1989:165). The same general area of the country simultaneously became famous for its balsam, and was known throughout the hemisphere as "the Balsam

⁸Clará de Guevara (1975a:15) notes that while there are no truly "white" people among the Indian population, "among the ladinos one finds people with features that in the region are considered Indian: dark skin, fine and dark hair, mongoloid eyes, flat nose, low forehead, and short stature."

To confuse matters, there is a group of people living in the eastern end of the department of Chalatenango, in northern El Salvador, popularly referred to as "white Indians" (indios cheles). These people are relatively racially unmixed descendants of Spanish settlers who have been producing indigo with primitive methods for centuries, and have "assimilated the indigenous customs...such as type of work, economy, religion, social life, etc." (Clará de Guevara 1975b:775-776).

Coast"⁹ Although these two products today have insignificant commercial value, they left a special stamp on the lives of the indigenous people of the region. Because the Spaniards allowed the Indians to pursue their customary agricultural systems, much of the traditional social and political structure remained intact. The lands were protected by Spanish decree from cattle ranching and, according to Browning, "the native communities... enjoyed a degree of economic independence that was unique in the colony" (Browning 1971:65) This treatment had long-lasting effects:

Even after the disappearance of cocoa, the relative independence of these villages and their ability to conserve their traditional economic and social structures is a theme that recurs throughout the subsequent changes in land use and settlement. By the mid-19th century, these communities still retained their own language, their customary forms of land tenure, and willingness to resist changes introduced by the national government to a much greater extent than most other villages in the country at that time (Ibid.).

⁹Balsam (Myroxylon balsamum) is a small tree (maximum height 20 meters) whose sap is used as medicine, primarily for respiratory ailments and skin diseases. It has also been used as a base for perfumes, a medicine to improve circulation of the blood, to cure indigestion and flatulence, to expel kidney stones, to eliminate wrinkles and facial blotches, and to soothe hemorrhoids (Fowler 1989:90-91). In El Salvador, the trees are concentrated in the areas of Sonsonate and La Libertad -- the region denominated the "Costa del Bálsamo." Once the major producer of balsam in Central America, El Salvador's production dropped steeply during the colonial period, primarily through overexploitation (the most effective extraction process involved lighting a fire at the base of the tree and collecting the sap that exuded [Fowler 1989:91-92]). In 1922, however, El Salvador exported 52,651 kilograms of Balsam (Calderón and Standley 1944:152).

Other parts of Salvadorean territory were settled and exploited by the Spaniards in a very different manner, with special and altogether tragic consequences for the Indian population. Toward the end of the 16th century, indigo plantations began spreading across much of the central and northern region, and east of the Lempa River (Clará de Guevara 1975b:773-774). Indigo had been cultivated by the Indians before the Conquest, but the Spaniards built it into a full-scale commercial venture. Beyond this, it soon became evident that the new system comprised a completely different type of operation from cacao. Production was controlled entirely by the Spanish overlords. Large tracts of land were cleared to plant the indigo bush, whose leaves were harvested after a period of about three years. At this point, the land was left in fallow, while other plots were re-planted and nurtured to maturity in what amounted to a staggered shifting plantation scheme. All processing of the leaves for its blue dye was done in large stone basins built on the estates. Indigo cultivation had intensive labor requirements, for which the Spaniards recruited vigorously and often without scruples. Nearby Indian communities were broken up and villagers were shipped to the plantations to satisfy the heavy labor demands, and the extraction mills were unsanitary to the extreme. A visiting priest made the following observations about the indigo exploitations in 1636:

I have seen large Indian villages...
practically destroyed after indigo mills have
been erected near them. For most Indians
that enter the mills will soon sicken as a

result of the forced work and the effect of the piles of rotting indigo they make. I speak from experience as at various times I have confessed great numbers of fever-stricken Indians and have been there when they carry them from the mills for burial...as most of these wretches have been forced to abandon their homes and plots of maize, many of their wives and children die also. In particular this is true of this province of San Salvador where there are so many indigo mills, and all of these built close to Indian villages (quoted in Browning 1971:73).

The Indians had no resistance against many of the diseases brought by the foreigners, and died in droves wherever they came into contact with the Spaniards. During the decades following the conquest, epidemics of diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis spread like brush fires throughout the region, at times leaving entire sections of countryside empty of people. Early tribute lists mirror the loss of life, showing a precipitous decline in the number of villages between 1550 and 1590: during this period the official number of villages in the eastern part of El Salvador was reduced from 70 to 52, and the estimated total population plummeted from about 30,000 to 8,300 (Browning 1971:43). Spanish reports of the time complain of the decrease in tribute payments because of the disappearance of the Indians. Spanning the entire colonial period, in fact, epidemics of various kinds continued, cutting the indigenous population by as much as 80 percent in some areas. Those Indians who managed to survive these ravages were too broken and demoralized to raise resistance to Spanish

imperialism. They were either absorbed into the ever expanding estates or they fled into the backlands to avoid paying increasingly burdensome tribute.

During the period stretching up to the end of the 18th century, Indian communities virtually disappeared across the northern section of the country (where cattle farming was widespread), in the east, and all along the coastal plain. The number of uprooted and unattached people drifting about the country increased. "They do not wish to be known one from the other for they wander about freely," said a contemporary observer, "...and if they commit a crime in their village, by moving to some other part they avoid investigation; ...in the haciendas and sugar mills there are many that say they do not know where they come from or where they belong, nor do they wish to say" (quoted in Browning 19/1:120-121). However, Indian communities kept a foothold across the central plateau, with the heaviest concentration in the departments of Sonsonate, Ahuachapán, and San Salvador, and up through the northeast corner of the country. It will be noted that much of this zone has an altitude of more than 500 meters, and is relatively free from malaria and yellow fever and other diseases that took a heavy toll on the native population in other sections of the country.

As the estates of the Spaniards spread across the landscape, the Indians consistently lost ground. Indian communities in the early years of the colony all had extensive communal lands -- called ejidos and tierras comunales, although the distinction

between the two types was often not clear -- that served as their economic base, and consequently held the communities together as coherent wholes. While the Indians' control over their lands was slipping throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, it was after Independence that they were dealt their most severe blow. El Salvador's leaders were searching for ways to diversify away from indigo, the country's primary source of income. They chose coffee as an alternative. Introduced in the 1840s, it spread rapidly across the rich volcanic ridges of the central highlands. By the turn of the century, indigo had virtually disappeared as an export crop and in its place sat coffee. By 1930, coffee represented more than 90% of El Salvador's total exports.

This had only been made possible by a radical change in the country's land tenure system. The communal holdings of the Indians, which made up approximately 25% of the country's land surface at the time, came under attack. In the best liberal tradition, it was argued in an official decree that

the existence of lands under the ownership of the Comunidades impedes agricultural development, obstructs the circulation of wealth, and weakens family bonds and the independence of the individual. Their existence is contrary to the economic and social principles that the Republic has accepted (quoted in Browning 1971:205).

Communal lands were abolished by government edict in 1881, and within the next few years the last vestiges of the Indian tenure systems were dismantled. The encroachment of outsiders, especially the hacienda owners in the coffee areas, was rapid.

Indians in the communities were allowed to continue using their lands for subsistence, but this did not allow them to secure title. By contrast, those who planted permanent cash crops such as coffee, cacao, and rubber were able to gain ownership; it was predominantly the estate owners who took advantage of this provision. The Indians who had lived in relatively cohesive communities in the western highlands of Sonsonate, Ahuachapán, Santa Ana, and San Salvador were suddenly open to a massive infiltration of outsiders, and in the space of a few decades large areas of the region were blanketed with coffee plantations, which persist to this day (also see Davis 1988 for an analysis on the spread of coffee in El Salvador).

These developments gave rise to still another mass expulsion of Indians from their lands. Those who were more fortunate, perhaps, became indentured laborers on the estates that had swallowed up their holdings. However, while the shrinking Indian population took refuge in its remote communities, the majority of the subsistence cultivators were transformed into dispossessed, landless peasants who became unattached and unknown within their own society. They had no legal rights, no cultural connections to their communities, and no particular allegiances. As they severed their ties with the past, they lost their Indian roots and became acculturated peasants, or mestizos. None of this occurred with the willing participation of either Indians or the swelling class of mestizo and Ladino peasants. Labor unrest and conflict grew in frequency, to the point where in 1889 the

government saw the need to create a force of rural mounted police to keep order throughout the western highlands, where the transformation in land tenure and use had been the most radical. Several years later the rural police force was expanded and permanently settled in the area.

The worldwide economic depression starting in 1929 had a ruinous effect on El Salvador's agricultural economy, which by this time had become overwhelmingly dependent upon coffee. Pressures built until, in January 1932, the market suddenly collapsed altogether and the harvest was left to rot on the bushes. The rural population across the central plateau found itself without a means to make a living.

Discontent came to a head rapidly in the Sonsonate area, where the groundwork for revolt had been well laid. Since the late 1920s, militant communist organizers and labor leaders had been active in the countryside, especially among the Indian communities, lecturing farmers about economics, history, and politics, and passing out propaganda. When the bottom fell out of the economy, the agitators succeeded in convincing the Indians to rise up and attack Ladino landholders and shopkeepers. The ensuing violence, which took the form of armed rebellion and random looting, was carried out over a period of 72 hours by several thousand Indians armed with machetes. During this time, approximately 35 Ladinos met their death (Anderson 1971:145).

The rampage was of short duration. Troops from the capital made a swift appearance and easily recaptured the territory

occupied by the rag-tag force of Indians. Then the reprisals began. According to several vivid eyewitness accounts (Dalton 1972; Anderson 1971; MacNaught 1932, cited in Davis 1988), the army began by rounding up those people directly involved in the conflict, and then went after all who possessed Indian racial features and dressed in "Indian" clothes. The soldiers lined up the captives, shot them, and dumped their bodies in mass graves.

Although estimates on the number of people killed at this time differ from about 15,000 to 50,000, it is clear that the massacre was thorough. Men, women, and children were included, and the consequences for the Indian population were devastating. The natural hatred -- and fear -- held by the Ladinos toward Indians was given free expression, and this was combined with the dreaded stamp of communism to create the ideological image of "the communist Indian." "The fight to defend the reigning order," notes Marroquín (1975:750), "was saturated with the anticommunist slogans that came to bear on the Indian problem: Indian and communism became the same thing." For decades thereafter, the Indians of El Salvador went underground, denying their existence to the outside world and hiding their identity. In 1975, Marroquín commented on the "profound distrust" and "even hostility" of the Ladino toward the Indian:

At the present time, 43 years later, this closed political attitude is starting to disappear and already people speak with liberty about the Indian and his problems, although the indigenist tendency is principally toward archaeology (1975:751).

Marroquín, who doggedly fought to better the condition of the Salvadorean Indian and persisted in speaking out on abuses, was himself forced into exile three times during his life. In the 1960s he made his final exit, spending his last years as chief of anthropological research at the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano in Mexico.

What Is an "Indian" in El Salvador?

How does one identify an Indian in El Salvador today? What separates an Indian from a Ladino? On the surface, the Indians of El Salvador are difficult to distinguish from the non-Indians surrounding them. The usual ethnic markers -- language, physical type, dress -- are not as starkly on display as is the case with the indigenous peoples of neighboring Guatemala. For example, virtually all of El Salvador's Indians were bilingual Spanish speakers by the turn of the 19th century, and today there remains no more than a handful of old people with a partial knowledge of an Indian language. In the early 1970s, Campbell found only two villages, both in Sonsonate, where an appreciable number of Nahuatl speakers remained: Cuisnahuat, with between 40 and 50 native speakers, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán, with about 20-25. All were adults, and the children showed little interest in

learning to speak the language (1975c:833).¹⁰ Native dress has disappeared except for a few older women in rural villages who wear tattered huipil blouses and wrap-around skirts -- and these are imported from Guatemala. With the exception of the cofradías and the religious ceremonies they entail, the Indians have very little to distinguish them from the rest of the population.

Beyond this, there is little obvious coherence to the Indian community, even where indigenous people make up the bulk of the population. They live in what is perhaps best described as semi-isolation. They are marginal inhabitants of the cities and towns, and form the disadvantaged majorities in the rural zones. While they may make up most of the inhabitants of an area, they are invariably isolated from ownership of the land, political power, and the economic base of the community. They have no voice. They are physically present yet insubstantial, like wraiths.

Yet all Salvadoreans in the "Indian" areas of the country have a clear sense of who is Indian and who is Ladino. In October 1988 the Salvadorean anthropologist Concepción Clará de Guevara and I traveled to rural areas in Morazán, San Salvador, Ahuachapán, and Sonsonate, where we pursued the question, among

¹⁰ Maxwell (1982:18) claims that the number of Nahuat speakers is much higher. She was involved with a survey that "revealed that about one in ten households in the departments of Sonsonate, Ahuachapan, and La Libertad has at least one person who could speak Nahuat; of those households with a Nahuat speaker, most had two fluent speakers...." Neither Campbell (personal communication 1989) nor Clará de Guevara (personal communication 1989) nor I agree with these figures.

other things, of what it was to be an Indian in El Salvador. In interviews with Indians and Ladinos, individuals and in groups, we were given a remarkably consistent picture of the character of the two ethnic groups. The following discussion of Salvadorean ethnicity combines these observations with information from written sources.¹¹

Skin Color: This characteristic was often mentioned first, although it was qualified slightly when we pointed out that there are light Indians and dark Ladinos. In fact, the Indians tend to be darker, in part because of race, but to a large extent because they do manual labor in the sun. Indians often said that the Ladinos were "people who are somewhat white."

Poverty and hard work: The Indians are poor, the Ladinos are rich; and "the Ladino, even if he doesn't have money, has pride." The Indian is the beast of burden who does all of the hard work; the Ladino does not work outside in the sun. "The Ladino has no strength...they call us Indians because we spend our lives working...the Ladino works in a nice office...the Ladino eats well, dresses well, sleeps well...the Ladino cannot work in the fields, he would end up in the hospital...the Ladino is avaricious." In the 1950s, Marroquín found that the Indians in Panchimalco defined Ladinos as "all of those who own stores"

¹¹ Unless otherwise stated, all of the quotes in this section come from interviews with Indians.

(1959:163).

Poverty and manual labor have become such strong identifying characteristics of the Indian, in his own eyes, that those who become educated, become professionals, and earn a decent salary are often seen as having crossed over into the ranks of the Ladino. They are often termed "independent." One Indian, speaking of someone who was a teacher, said: "Yes, he is an Indian, but because of his profession he feels who-knows-what..." In reality, Indians who become merchants or teachers have most of their professional dealings with Ladinos, and their direct contact with the Indian community often diminishes.

The relative economic situation of the Indian is reflected in his material goods. "The Indian lives in a straw house...the household implements of the Indian are gourds and clay pots...the implements of the Ladino are something else, they are modern: aluminum, china, plastic, pewter...the Ladino has expensive clothes, things in fashion, fancy..." The Indian has always been on the bottom of the economic ladder in El Salvador; with the present economic crisis, he is being pushed even farther down. In several areas we visited in Sonsonate, the people can no longer afford straw and stick houses; they are now roofing their houses with thin sheets of plastic.

Language: While a few people still speak Nahuat in the Sonsonate area -- where native speakers are commonly referred to as "hicks" (bayuncos) -- all of the Indians now speak Spanish as their

native language. However, language is an important indicator of ethnicity because Indians speak Spanish differently from Ladinos. The Indian uses certain words and expressions, and has a distinct intonation to his speech. According to Clará de Guevara:

they call Spanish "Castilla" and the majority speaks it very peculiarly, as much for the accent as the way in which they use pronouns, gender, articles, (and) sentence construction; and besides they utilize some words from archaic Spanish that was spoken during the colonial period, they deform some words in current use, or insert words in Nahuat (1975a:97).

Indians made it clear that "you can always tell an Indian when he opens his mouth," because "the Indian does not have the vocabulary the Ladino has." As one man put it, "the Indian doesn't know how to speak, while the other (the Ladino) can."

Most certainly, one corollary of this is that the Indian lacks formal education. We visited several rural areas where no more than a tiny handful of children were enrolled in the first levels of primary school. Again, the economic situation of the Indian precludes sending his children to school, for they must have uniforms, shoes, and notebooks, and pay an initial enrollment fee (which amounts to no more than several dollars, but is still beyond their means).

Self-worth: The Indian is the object of spite by the Ladino population. A visitor in 1807 commented that "drunkenness, thievery, idleness, laziness and lewdness are the characteristic

vices of this species."¹² Today, the negative image continues in full bloom. The Ladino in Panchimalco sees Indians as "given to vice, lazy, lustful, addicted overly to drink, neglectful of their obligations, inclined to theft, deceitful, hypocritical, and crafty" (Marroquín 1957:162). "The Indian is discriminated against," writes Marroquín, "and it is thought that he is almost at the level of the irrational animals" (1975:750). A few Ladinos profess pity for the Indian:

Some Ladinos, the most generous ones, say that the Indian is like a child who must be treated with kindness but without taking an eye off him, because if he is left alone, then he will misbehave and ruin that which he has been given charge of (Marroquín 1957:162).

Expressions such as No sea tan indio! ("Don't act like an Indian!") and Se le salió el indio! ("The Indian came out of him!") are commonly used to describe irrational, violent, or just plain repellent behavior.

Over the centuries, the Indians of El Salvador have internalized this negative stereotype to the point where they believe themselves to be inferior beings. Several Indians noted that when the Ladino greets people, he stands forward and looks them in the eye; the Indian "rolls up in a ball" and feels ashamed. "We Indians have no merit (as human beings)...the

¹²The visitor was the intendente Antonio Gutiérrez y Ulloa, who wrote a detailed report entitled Estado General de la Provincia de San Salvador: en el Reino de Guatemala correspondiente al año 1807.

Indian is very humble, very pitiable...we don't have civilization, we don't have the resources to civilize ourselves...the Indians are the worst, they are the ones who spend their lives working...we Indians are nobodies, we are not good people, we are just workers..." These statements were invariably made without emotion -- as if they were simply facts of nature.

Marroquin relates a poignant story of a young girl he interviewed in Panchimalco as part of his study of the community. She was dressed in "western" clothes, was shod in high-heeled shoes, wore lipstick, and had her hair done in a beauty salon. Based on the way she behaved and the standard of living she exhibited, Marroquin assumed she was a ladina.

We asked her who in Panchimalco were the Indians and who were the Ladinos; upon hearing our question, she turned red with shame, lowering her head, and after stammering several times answered in the following manner: "Are we perhaps not all Salvadoreans?" What had happened was that the young woman belonged to a social class considered to be inferior, the social class of the Indians: she had been born "in a valley" and living in Panchimalco for the past three years meant for her an improvement in her social position and she felt ashamed to admit that she was a pancha (Indian) (1957:165).

Religion: In one area, the Indian feels superior to the Ladino: he is "closer to God." It is generally believed that the Ladino is "without faith." He practices a "social religion" in which he

goes to church on Sunday, mainly because he feels he has to, "but he doesn't understand the words of the bible." Many Ladinos concur.

The management of cofradías, or religious brotherhoods, is a responsibility of Indians in communities throughout El Salvador. It is the purpose of these brotherhoods to keep up maintenance on the local church, and to carry out all of the religious ceremonies during the course of the year (see Marroquín 1959; Clará de Guevara 1975). In the "Indian" town of Panchimalco, the yearly round of religious ceremonies is presently a joint effort of Ladinos and Indians: the Ladinos provide the financing, and the Indians carry out the ceremonies. Indian religious leaders note that "the Ladinos don't know how to carry off the rituals, so we help them out."

The future of Indian Identity in El Salvador:

Given the extremely negative status of Indian identity in El Salvador, it is not surprising that many Indians attempt to leave it behind and submerge themselves in the "Salvadorean" national character. The sad fact is that it is difficult if not impossible to be a respected citizen and an Indian at the same time. Even with education and a profession, or with a substantial measure of material wealth, an Indian is still regarded as an Indian in his own community. To make a completely

clean break it is necessary to leave one's birthplace. It requires that those crossing over sever their roots and transplant themselves to a town or, preferably, a city. Just to amass money is not enough to escape the ethnic label: one must literally flee.

In Nahuizalco we spoke to an Indian who was born in the town and is presently a teacher at the local school. His parents had sold off some of their land to get their children through the first years of school, and then used the proceeds from a small store to see them through to graduation at the secondary level. Since becoming a teacher, he has had to steel himself psychologically against attacks from Ladino colleagues and community leaders, who still regard him as "a simple Indian" and frequently say things like "How are you going to pay attention to that indio?" He said that the Ladinos make every effort to catch errors made by Indian teachers and hold them up for public display; and it is common for the Indian community, when it sees one of its kind making a break for freedom, to bring him down with rumors and slander. In this way, several Indian teachers have been disgraced and exiled to remote rural schools. Despite the fact that he is relatively wealthy and lives in a comfortable house near the center of town, he still feels the bite of discrimination. "At bottom," he said with a shake of the head, "the Ladino does not accept the Indian." In his view, the only way to escape the slights and insults is to move to the city, where one is not known as an Indian. "No one is a prophet in his

own land," he said.

Marroquín noted the same phenomenon in Panchimalco in the 1950s:

The Indian families know that even when they arrive at the summit of economic prosperity, they will always be looked down upon by the Ladinos and their children will not have better opportunities to progress socially; thus, to give their children the coveted opportunities, the family emigrates from Panchimalco to an urban center where ethnic opposition does not exist, and where they can live with greater social space. In Panchimalco we were informed of the existence of several families that had among their members doctors, priests, and dentists, but they had left the community years before and established themselves in cities such as Sonsonate, Santa Ana, and San Salvador, where they presently occupy high social positions (1959:188).

The majority of El Salvador's Indians are rural, poor, and without the means to improve their condition through education or change of residence to an urban center. Employment opportunities in the cities are scarce, and travel farther afield can only be undertaken by those with cash in hand. Few Indians are found, for example, among the hundreds of thousands who have fled the country to find a better life in the United States. Instead, they are trapped in the poverty of their communities, unable to move out and unable to shake their identity as despised Indians.

One alternative would be to improve the image of Indians in El Salvador as a way of strengthening their sense of self-worth. A small effort in this direction was begun in 1986 with a bilingual education program managed by the Ministry of Culture

and Communications, with the sponsorship of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano in Mexico. Called **Ma timanauika nauataketsalis** ("Let's salvage the Nahuat language"), 30 basic language lessons have been worked out with assistance from linguists from central Mexico¹³ for use in 9 primary schools in the Sonsonate area. Thus far, practice classes have been given in the 1st and 2nd grades of schools in Nahuizalco, Izalco, Santa Catarina Masahuat, and Santo Domingo de Guzmán. According to official pronouncements, Nahuat "is linked as a vital element to our most pure cultural identity; therefore, its revival is an obligatory action that we, as government and authentic Salvadoreans, must undertake." Unfortunately, none of the teachers in the schools know how to speak the language, and there is no policy of bringing in native speakers. Many of the parents of both Indians and Ladinos say that it represents a backward slide: why can't the children instead learn English, so they can find a job? One Indian teacher we spoke with concluded that the bulk of the interest in the program has thus far come from certain Ladinos, not Indians.

Most of the Salvadorean government's work with Indians over the years has been in "safe" areas such as dance, folklore, religious ceremonies, and medicinal plants. In a discussion of the "indigenist action" begun by the Vice-Ministry of Culture,

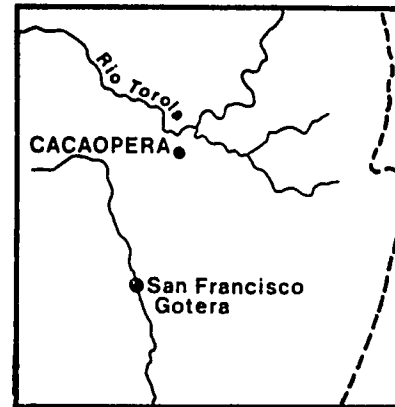
¹³Nahua (Nahuat in El Salvador) was the language of the core area of the Mexica (Aztec) empire at the time of the conquest, and is still spoken by close to one million people in central Mexico. Western El Salvador was settled by colonists from this region at some time before the arrival of the Spaniards.

Youth and Sports in 1975, this tendency is clear: "Programs of cultural and artistic promotion were developed, and even if they did not have any direct effect on the indigenous population, they did make manifest the importance of cultural values as essential elements of national identity and the need to study, preserve, and promote them" (Ministerio de Cultura y Comunicaciones 1985:4). The present Ministry of Culture and Communications' attempt to teach Nahuat also falls in this category; although it may have some positive effect on the self-image of the people of Sonsonate, it does not begin to confront the core issues of Indian existence in the country. In the popular mind, mention of Indians often signals an interest in archaeology, which seldom makes any links with present-day native populations, and is largely a non-Indian pastime. In fact, a large part of the archaeological excavating in El Salvador over the past 30 years has been carried out by North Americans.

The Situation of Indians in Contemporary El Salvador:

The Indians of El Salvador today are almost entirely rural. While some live in provincial towns, they have a marginal existence there and their roots are firmly planted in the outlying settlements of the countryside. Although the Indians are farmers, they are generally without land and earn a large portion of their meagre livelihood from wage labor. They are

invariably poor, illiterate, and without opportunities to better their standard of living. They are bound together in poverty, and also through religious brotherhoods called cofradías or mayordomías. Yet while there are common themes, there is also considerable variety, as the indigenous population has been shaped by special historical circumstances in different geographical areas. The following capsule descriptions of three Indian communities -- Cacaopera in the northeastern department of Morazán, Panchimalco in the department of San Salvador, and Nahuizalco in Sonsonate -- are meant to give a sense of the texture of life for Indian peoples in contemporary El Salvador.

Cacaopera

Map 2

The municipio of Cacaopera is located 12 kilometers to the north of San Francisco Gotera, in the Department of Morazán (see map 2). The terrain is rugged, consisting of volcanic hills and escarpments cut through by the Río Torola, the acknowledged border of guerrilla-dominated territory to the north. The town of Cacaopera is situated on an irregular series of hills a few minutes' walk to the south of the river, which can be seen running in a jagged line through a valley below from east to west. The region is eminently rural. Estimates based on the 1971 census place the 1986 population of the municipality at 20,863; 1,843 people lived in the town, with 19,015 spread throughout the rural cantones, the majority being found in Junquillo, Agua Blanca, Cuachipilín, Calavera, and Estancia, to the north of the town.¹⁴ However, these estimates are curiously unrealistic;

¹⁴Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, July 1, 1986.

they are oblivious to the fact that Cacaopera is located squarely in the middle of a war zone. With the start of violence in the region in the early 1980s, the flow of rural families fleeing both sides of the conflict has drastically depopulated the rural zones and swollen the number of inhabitants residing in the town center. A local estimate recently put the urban population at more than 5,000.

The municipio of Cacaopera holds an isolated pocket of descendants of Indians who, at some point in the pre-Hispanic era, apparently migrated to the area from the northern reaches of Honduras or Nicaragua. Their language, now referred to simply as Cacaopera, is extinct. In the mid-1970s, the linguist Lyle Campbell found several older men who knew "a few words and fixed phrases," but none were native speakers. Cacaopera was closely related to Matagalpa, a language spoken in Nicaragua until about 100 years ago, and is part of the Misumalpán family, which also includes Miskito and Sumu (Campbell 1975a, 1975b). Beyond the linguistic evidence, the physical appearance of the people of Cacaopera is notably distinct from that of the surrounding descendants of Lenca peoples. Nothing is known of the circumstances surrounding the founding of this tiny outpost of "foreign" Indians.

Before 1980, the population of the area north of the Torola river was predominantly Indian; Adams calculates that in 1950 approximately 200 Indians lived in the town, while as many as 6,000 could be found living in dispersed settlements throughout

the rural area (Adams 1957:486).¹⁵ A few Ladinos, who generally had larger landholdings, were interspersed throughout the cantones. A small number of the Indian families were attached to Ladino farms, and the poorest rented small plots each year for milpa production. The majority, however, had rights of possession on small pieces of land they planted with subsistence crops and henequen, which they used for fiber to weave jarcia artifacts (hammocks, bags, rope, saddle belts, etc.) for sale in the town; several Indian families we spoke with had formerly controlled as many as 25-30 manzanas. Virtually all of the Indians in the cantones were jarcia artesans, as well as seasonal wage laborers on farms within the region. Each Friday (market day), they brought their fiber artifacts for sale in town, where they were bought by Ladino intermediaries (toponeros) and taken for resale in San Miguel, the largest city in eastern El Salvador. If the Indian population of the cantones was generally poor -- living in pole and stick houses with straw thatch roofs, lacking education¹⁶ and the most basic health services -- at least they had land, a few animals, and a relative abundance of

¹⁵Adams also says that up until 1936 most of the posts in the municipal government were occupied by Indians, including the position of Mayor. After this, however, ladinos began to move in to town in larger numbers and the Indians were left with little more than religious responsibilities (Adams 1957:495-6).

¹⁶ In a group interview with 18 men and 12 women, only a couple of the men had received education beyond the 3rd grade; a few more had reached the 1st grade, and out of the entire group only 2 said that they could read, "with difficulty." None of the women present had received any schooling.

food.

This situation changed drastically with the outbreak of violence in the late 1970s. The guerrilla staked out the northern part of the department of Morazán; despite numerous attempts by the Salvadorean military, it has remained in rebel hands. The people living in this so-called "liberated" zone found themselves caught in the crossfire. There was simply no middle ground. Those not allied to the guerrilla could not survive in the area, and those tied to the guerrilla were dealt with severely by troops who periodically patrolled through the cantones on search-and-destroy missions. While some inhabitants of the northern zone stayed and made accommodations with the guerrilla -- an arrangement which radically changed their way of life -- the majority elected to leave. According to Indian refugees in the town, the Ladinos were the first to evacuate; then, within the space of a year, the majority of the other families in the region picked up and left. Most did so under cover of night, slipping out with nothing more than what they could carry. Of course, this meant that they had to abandon their lands, their livestock, and their crops. All of the henequen they used for weaving fiber artifacts, which grew in abundance throughout the area, was lost to them at this time.

A few of the Ladino refugees from the cantones took up residence with relatives in Cacaopera, but most continued on south into the protection of the military garrison of San Francisco Gotera or journeyed directly to San Miguel. The Indian

refugees, however, lacked the means to travel beyond the immediate area and had to take what they could find in the town. Some stayed with friends and relatives, while others camped out at the Church, the town hall, or the Casa de la Cultura (run by the Ministerio de Cultura y Comunicaciones); a handful of families had enough money, at least initially, to pay between 10 and 15 Colones per month for rented quarters. The refugees were eventually assigned to camp areas on the outskirts of town, and in 1983 food and building materials for crude housing were provided by the Red Cross and World Relief. Thus far, four camps have been set up, two of which -- La Crucita and El Campo -- are populated predominantly by Ladinos; the camps of San José and El Calvario, which have a combined total of 110 families, are filled almost entirely with Indians.

Conditions in the San José camp, which we visited in October of 1988, are deplorable.¹⁷ Entire families of 7-8 people are living in 3 m x 6 m dirt-floored shacks fashioned from sticks and sheets of corrugated iron roofing. Pinched together in tight lines along a treeless slope on the edge of town, the shacks have no windows and are filled with hot, stagnant air. The only furniture consists of fiber hammocks and small tables and benches made of odd pieces of cast-off lumber. The entire camp is serviced by three latrines which are full to overflowing and give

¹⁷According to the people in the camp, the Red Cross had brought food and clothes for them, and World Relief had donated the building materials for the shacks, along with some food.

off an overpowering stench. There is no water supply in the camp, and the refugees are forced to buy their drinking water; to bathe and wash their clothes they must journey to the river. Illness, especially among the children, is endemic, yet health services consist of a doctor who visits the area once a week and charges 2 Colones for medical consultation. Even with diagnosis, no one in the camps has money to pay for medicines prescribed. When they lived in the cantones, they had relied heavily on traditional plant medicines, but their supply is now cut off. Education is likewise out of reach for the children of the camp dwellers. They lack the money to cover all the expenses involved (uniforms, shoes, pencils, notebooks, the 10 Colones "social fee"), and besides, they need the children to add to the family income.

Packed together as they are -- "one on top of the other," as a resident put it -- the camp dwellers have no open ground to plant crops. A few of the men are renting several tareas¹⁸ to plant corn and beans, for an average of 6 Colones per tarea; none of them is renting more than half a manzana of land. However, the rented land they are being offered is marginal and unproductive, and they have no access to credit to buy fertilizer.¹⁹ Even the dried corn plants after the harvest,

¹⁸One manzana (roughly 0.7 hectare) contains 16 tareas.

¹⁹For a brief time, some of the men managed to secure credit from the Catholic Church, but this was minimal and didn't go very far.

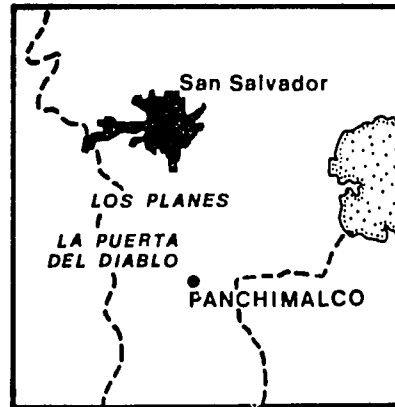
which are traditionally used as animal fodder, and wood cut when land is cleared, which would normally be taken for firewood, must be turned over to the landowner.

Without their land, the refugees are forced to buy practically everything they need: food, water, firewood, and the henequen for fiber products. All of the Indian men we spoke with work as jornaleros, in agriculture or wherever employment is available. In the past, groups of men journeyed seasonally to the cotton fields along the coastal plain and to the west-central region to pick coffee, but this has largely come to a halt due to the civil war -- Morazán is a prominent "zone of conflict" -- and the countrywide economic depression in the agrarian sector. These days, they must find work within the immediate compass of Cacaopera. Although the official minimum daily wage is 15 Colones (\$3), they consider 7 Colones a "good" fee, and the usual rate is closer to 4 or 5 Colones. Everybody has had to fall back on production of fiber products to make ends meet. However, whereas they had formerly had access to abundant supplies of henequen, they are now obliged to buy it from sources in San Miguel. Because they sell everything to Ladino intermediaries, their income is minimal at best. Everyone in the family, including old people, children, and men and women without work, is enlisted for weaving, and the only way they can consider that they are turning a profit is by not factoring in their labor. As one woman put it, at least it gives them something to do with their time.

In the midst of all these hardships, the Indian population of the municipality is heavily involved in religious affairs, carried out through a religious brotherhood called the mayordomía. The mayordomía, which is made up solely of Indians, serves two primary functions: to organize the yearly round of religious festivals, and to keep up maintenance on the town church, which dates from the first part of the 18th century. Within the mayordomía, which is broken down into sections according to cantones and barrios within the town, is a hierarchy of leadership, including: mayordomos, who are each responsible for celebrations surrounding a particular saint; the wives of the mayordomos, called tenanzas; and assistants called mandados, autores, and misilanes. Each mayordomo calculates the cost of the ceremony he is charged with and, in conjunction with his assistants, makes the necessary arrangements to carry it out. The activities of the mayordomía are the sole domain of the Indians, who, one way or another, manage to scrape up money to purchase food, candles, water, firewood, liquor, flowers, and fireworks, and cover all expenses required for the festivals. The Ladino population of Cacaopera never contributes to these ceremonies, and their participation in the festivities is minimal.

This religious hierarchy is the only Indian organization of any importance that still exists in Cacaopera. Since the Colonial period the mayordomía has been concerned with the religious character of the area, although it has run parallel to,

rather than in collaboration with, the town priest (who, according to members of the mayordomía, is presently disdainful of "the customs" of the Indians). Much of the folklore of the region -- dances such as "Los Negritos" and "Los Emplumados," arrangements for ritual food, and ceremonial dress -- has been preserved through the mayordomías. Because it has a solely religious function, it is tolerated by the civil and military authorities.

Panchimalco

Map 3

Panchimalco is a rustic, distinctly Indian municipio located a scant 16 kilometers from the bustling metropolis of San Salvador (see map 3). The contrast between the two population centers is striking. In a detailed study of the area done in the 1950s, Marroquín noted that the traveler to Panchimalco "feels himself moving backward in time, for all practical purposes, and he finds himself facing a cultural horizon that belongs to the 19th century" (1959:13). This comment still holds today. The town and its 16 cantones are spread across 103 square kilometers of heavily furrowed and fractured ridges and valleys sloping sharply south toward the Pacific Ocean, which can be seen in the distance on a clear day.

The town proper consists of a core of tile-roofed wattle-and-daub houses set along cobbled streets laid out in an elongated grid pattern, giving way toward the periphery to a

mixture containing pole and thatch houses. The very center is dominated by a massive church complex dating from the 17th century. The adobe church -- which has been depicted frequently by artists over the years -- faces an ancient, twisted ceiba tree that offers shade to the participants in Panchimalco's numerous religious ceremonies. On the northwest rim of the valley, the town is overlooked by a narrow cleavage in the mountains, called La Puerta del Diablo, or "the Devil's Gate." With its panoramic view, this has traditionally been a favorite spot for tourists, especially young couples in search of clear sky and romantic inspiration. During the early 1980s, when violence was intensifying throughout the rural areas, the Devil's Gate became well-known as a preferred dumping ground for the bodies of people killed in different parts of the country by death squads.

At the time of the Conquest, Panchimalco was an agrarian settlement of dispersed households. Under Spanish rule, it was officially accorded the status of a town (pueblo) in 1611, and in 1879 re-cast as a slightly larger administrative unit, the villa (Marroquín 1957:35-36). Population density was low through the 18th century, with a total of 2,197 people registered in the census of 1770; all of the inhabitants were Indian. However, the insular quality of Panchimalco was disappearing by 1807, when a report on the general state of the province of San Salvador noted that the population was composed of 2,624 Indians and 12 Ladinos

(Ibid.:19).²⁰ Since that time, the number of inhabitants has increased steadily, as has the Ladino population of the town. In 1957, the population had reached 12,213; 2,503 resided in the town, while 9,710 lived dispersed in the rural areas among the cantones (Ibid.:66). Marroquín estimated that roughly 30% of the town was Ladino; virtually no Ladinos were to be found in the rural zones of the municipio, and they invariably "occupied higher economic positions" than the Indians around them. This same general pattern continues, although the population has increased almost three-fold, to an estimated 30,891 by 1986 (5,237 in the town, 25,654 distributed among the cantones).²¹

Throughout the colonial period, and up until the 1880s, the Indians practiced a tradition of collective farming on pieces of land controlled by the community. According to Marroquín:

The Mayor called all of the workers, indicating to them the day in which field clearing was to take place, to burn the plots, and after this operation was finished he would tell each farmer which plot he was to work by himself. Those who failed to show up to take part in the collective works were condemned to receive fifty blows with a stick in the public plaza, and besides, they ran the risk of not being given a plot to cultivate (Ibid.:107).

Then in 1881, when communal Indian territory was abolished throughout El Salvador, the community-owned lands in Panchimalco

²⁰ Antonio Gutiérrez y Ulloa, Estado General de la Provincia de San Salvador: en el Reino de Guatemala correspondiente al año 1807.

²¹Dirección Nacional de Estadística y Censo, July 1, 1986.

were broken up into individual plots and the process of concentration of land in the hands of a minority of landholders began in earnest. By 1950, a mere 20 farmers -- all Ladino -- controlled over 75% of the land; of these, two large landholders had 47.7% of the land. An estimated 85% of the population was landless, and gained its living primarily from wage labor (Ibid.:112-3, 168).

In fact, for decades the economy of Panchimalco has been overwhelmingly dependent upon wage labor, a large part of which is carried out in neighboring San Salvador. In the 1950s, Marroquín concluded that "the proximity to the capital city has been of little benefit to Panchimalco," and went on to list a series of "disadvantages of grave character" that the metropolis had brought to the town. He laments the loss of Panchimalco's communal lands in the 19th century, "which gave a death blow to the ancient communal life," and the disappearance of the region's agricultural base. In its place, he believed, the economy had become deformed by serving the needs of San Salvador; the men were frequently tainted by vice in the urban setting, while some of the young girls, "pulled by the agitated beat of capital city life, end their days in centers of prostitution." The municipality, at the same time, remained a sinkhole of extreme poverty and misery. It was caught in "a cultural backwardness that keeps Panchimalco living in an historical era that has a rhythm of development that is one hundred years behind that of the capital" (Ibid.:268-9).

Although Marroquín's description of Panchimalco's moral and economic state is perhaps a bit on the florid side, it is not altogether off the mark. Poverty is still a defining characteristic of life there, and the daily flow of wage laborers, as regular as the tides, has continued into present times despite the disruption of the past decade. Each morning, literally hundreds of men and women journey by bus up the steep slope from the town, and then down into the bowels of the city, where the men are absorbed in a variety of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs and the women work principally as maids.²² In the other major Indian areas of El Salvador, the vast majority of the rural population makes its living from agriculture, picking up seasonal work on coffee, sugar cane, and cotton estates. This sector has been hit hard by the current economic depression, and access to work on the estates has been drastically curtailed. The result has been that the Indians, who are almost entirely rural proletarians, have suffered more than any other group in the country. In Panchimalco, by contrast, the people working in the capital have managed to hold on to their employment, and as a result the town is, if not prospering, at least keeping its head above water through difficult times.

Before 1980, numerous men traditionally supplemented their wage income by growing subsistence crops on small plots of rented

²²In the 1950s, Marroquín found that more than 90% of the men over the age of 18 were wage laborers (jornaleros), and most of these worked in San Salvador. Out of 653 women working outside their homes, 627 were employed as maids (Ibid.:93)

land. Each year before the planting season, they made contracts with landowners to clear and plant pieces of land, usually not more than a fraction of a manzana; after the harvest they moved off, and the following year generally took a different, "rested" (and more fertile) plot for the same planting sequence. As in other Indian areas throughout El Salvador, this system was thrown into disarray with the agrarian reform of 1980. At that time, according to Decree 207 of the reform, all renters were to take possession of the plots they were currently farming, and would be given the option of purchasing them.

In Panchimalco, things did not follow this official script. Lacking power or recourse to legal means, the Indians were generally tossed off the land by the larger landholders from whom they had been renting, and that was the end of the matter. In some cases, owners have continued renting small plots of land to docile farmers who are willing to sign special agreements that no claims will be made on the land. However, most landowners have simply stopped renting to anyone. One man we spoke with pointed to the vacant hills surrounding the village, and said: "Our poverty was softened considerably in the past when we rented tareas from the rich people. Now, none of those hills are planted. They don't want to give them to us, because they are afraid we will take them from them." The result, of course, is that production of subsistence crops in the municipality, together with the diet of the poorest segments of the population, has declined precipitously since the reforms were instituted.

In keeping with all of the other Indian regions of El Salvador, the Ladino/Indian split is evident along social, economic, political, and cultural lines. The Ladinos occupy the best houses in the center of town, while the Indians are spread out along the margins and are found throughout the cantones. The Ladinos own most of the land in the surrounding hills. They are the merchants in town, and the political power is in their hands.²³ By contrast, the economic underclass is composed almost entirely of Indians. Beneath this profile runs a thick undercurrent of ethnic discrimination. According to Marroquín:

The difference in economic status necessarily engenders a corresponding ideology of racist tendency. The Ladino, consciously or unconsciously, aspires to defend his privileged position in the middle of the Indian community, and for this reason he uses every means available: he requires the support of the authorities and the priests; he is hostile towards those Indians who oppose the triumph of his economic ambitions or who dispute the privileges of the Ladinos; finally, he elaborates theories that tend to malign the Indians and exalt the Ladinos (Ibid.:162).

The only area of life in Panchimalco in which the Indian is not inferior to the Ladino is religion. The cofradía system evolved during the period of Spanish colonial rule and has managed to maintain its integrity into the 20th century up through the last two tumultuous decades. Marroquín noted in the 1950s that

²³From time to time over the last few decades, Panchimalco has had Indian mayors. However, they have clearly been figureheads, easily manipulated by the ladino population.

"religious life in Panchimalco constitutes one of the most important chapters in the community" (Ibid.:241). At the same time, he believed that the cofradías were losing their force and cohesion, being victim to attempts by the Catholic Church to liquidate them. While antagonisms between the Church and the Indian religious leaders have continued to the present -- the Indians consider the Church building to belong to them rather than to the priests, and believe that, as one Indian leader put it, "the (current) priest doesn't understand our customs" -- it can be argued that the indigenous religious system is stronger today than in Marroquín's time.

Panchimalco has 15 cofradías, each one of which has responsibilities for the ceremonies surrounding a particular saint. Each cofradía has a mayordomo, together with assorted other officials, and all of their activities are overseen by the leader of the Indian religious community, the teta. The cofradías operate independently of the Church and the municipal government, although they must coordinate with both through the teta. The cofradía leaders use the saints from the church for their processions, and the priest is relied upon for the mass. The town mayor, on the other hand, effects a "supervision" of the money utilized by the cofradías for the ceremonies, and passes official judgement on the degree to which everything has unfolded in orderly fashion.

Whereas virtually all of the cofradías in El Salvador are either exclusively Indian or Ladino rather than of mixed

composition, in Panchimalco Ladinos have been chosen as mayordomos for major ceremonies within the traditionally Indian cofradías over the last few years. The Ladino who is now mayor served a term as a mayordomo in 1987; one of his sisters was a mayordomo several years back, and another was chosen to preside over the El Dulce Nombre de Jesús ceremony in January of 1989; and there are a number of Ladino families that take regular part in the cofradía ceremonies every year. But while Ladinos participate in the cofradías, they do so within a framework dictated absolutely by the Indians.

This unique arrangement apparently meets the needs of both groups, and has contributed to a certain strengthening of the cofradía system. The Indians are the acknowledged masters of the intricacies of religious festival -- they know the sequences of events, the necessary inventory, procedures, costumes, dances, etiquette -- and they feel obliged to carry them out, although they are dirt poor. The Ladinos, on the other hand, have neither the knowledge nor the experience to orchestrate the religious festivals, yet they do have cash to cover a large part of the substantial expenses involved.²⁴ The ingredients of the festivals are numerous and everything must be paid for: the music (the musicians are Ladinos), the mass (the priest, they say,

²⁴The indigenous community has traditionally paid for the ceremonies with a cooperative quota system called the crianza. However, with sharply declining incomes over the last several decades, and especially with the present economic crisis, the activities of the cofradías had been deteriorating to the point where some thought they would soon disappear.

overcharges for his services), food and drink, fireworks, arrangements for the altars, cars for the processions, and a variety of miscellaneous items. Both parties want the ceremonies to take place. They want them done correctly and elaborately. For the Indians, religion is a crucial part of their lives -- as the teta said to us, "we practice the ceremonies because, you know, they are sacred" -- and the festivities involve valued social interaction, together with food and drink and a good time. For the Ladinos, there is considerable prestige involved in assuming the post of mayordomo for important ceremonies, which are now being visited by more and more outsiders from the capital, including politicians and people of influence. Without this arrangement, it is likely that the cofradías in Panchimalco would have become considerably diluted, especially in the grip of the present economic depression.

Outside the sphere of religion, there are no organizations among the Indian population. Some of the workers in San Salvador have become members of labor unions in the capital, but none of those working in Panchimalco, either in the town or on the rural estates, belong to any group that could assist them in defending their rights.

Nahuizalco

Map 4

The municipio of Nahuizalco consists of 54 sq. kms. of rugged volcanic land set in the heart of what remains of the Indian region of western El Salvador, in the department of Sonsonate (see map 4). The economy is agricultural and the population is overwhelmingly rural. According to estimates based on the 1971 census, in 1986 the municipio of Nahuizalco as a whole had 39,492 residents; only 8,999 were living in the city of Nahuizalco, while just over 30,000 were spread throughout the 15 rural cantones.²⁵ Coffee is the most important cash crop in the region, with some cattle raising mixed in; the majority of the rural population does wage labor on agricultural estates and practices subsistence farming on rented land.

Little is known about Nahuizalco in pre-Hispanic times, or even through the first two centuries of the colonial period. It

²⁵Dirección Nacional de Estadística y Censo, 1 July, 1986.

appears to have been a significant center for traditional culture from early times, and in conjunction with neighboring Izalco has retained a thoroughly Indian character into the present. In 1770, don Pedro Cortez y Larraz made a pastoral visit to the town and was disturbed by the extent to which the Indians had held on to their "customs":

...the people walk about so shamefully naked, that I had barely begun to enter the village, when I was shocked into closing my eyes, and I sent for the Mayor so he would pass out clothes and oblige people to clothe themselves. Nakedness is of such proportions that women wear only a cotton cloth wrapped around their waist; and the girls and boys who are already grown: nothing, and the men no more than a piece of cloth (quoted in Clará de Guevara 1975a:68).

In 1858, Nahuizalco was accorded the status of villa, and in 1955 was officially lifted to the category of "city" (ciudad) -- despite the fact that the urban population was, and still remains, minuscule.

Today, the nucleus of the town is laid out on a generally flat plain in a regular grid pattern covering some 20 blocks. At the center is a parish church dating from colonial times facing an open marketplace, a small plaza with cement walkways and a few ornamental bushes, and a row of municipal government offices. The buildings in the town center are primarily of tile-roofed adobe construction, with a few of the newest made of cement. The owners are almost entirely Ladinos, mixed together with a tiny minority of "comfortable" Indians. The Ladinos are the owners of

the stores, restaurants, carpentry and mechanic shops, and they are the leaders in the local city government and people of influence in town affairs.

Toward the periphery of this "urban" zone the land becomes more irregular, chopped up by gullies and ravines and small hills. It is here that the Indians live in houses erected on small lots criss-crossed with a profusion of foot trails. Most of these houses are built of straw thatch and poles, or of wattle-and-daub and adobe. All of the houses have dirt floors; most are without windows and consist of a single interior room where all activities -- cooking, working, sleeping, receiving guests, bedding livestock -- take place. A large portion of the Indian population of the town lacks basic services such as potable water, electricity, and even latrines.

The bulk of the population in the rural zone is Indian; in several of the cantones we visited all of the residents were Indian. The lands once held in common have now all disappeared, with the partial exception of two plots, of 15 and 30 manzanas, that now belong to the municipality.²⁶ Over the years virtually all of the land used for subsistence farming has been lost. We were told that many families have sold off what remained of their properties to put their children through school; some have fallen victim to debt and have had their properties taken away, while

²⁶"Sabanita," of 15 manzanas, and "La Sabana Grande," 30 manzanas in size, were, in the early 1970s, being rented out to poor farmers of the region for the minimal fee of 0.75 Colon. Local artisans also gathered tule fiber for their weaving on this land (Clará de Guevara 1975a:72).

others run afoul of alcohol and sell off their plots to finance their habit. With population increase, many families have divided up their land among sons to the point where nothing more than space for a house has remained. While a few Indians still own small plots of land, most must rent parcels to cultivate subsistence crops. Rural families maintain a tenuous existence by combining economic strategies: the men pick up wage labor on agricultural estates when they can, and grow corn, sorghum, and beans on rented plots; the women and children make fiber crafts and sell fruit, vegetables, and patio livestock throughout the cantones.

With the recent violence and disruption of the economy, the people in the area are desperate. Many of the sugar cane and coffee estates that formerly gave employment on a seasonal basis are now re-organized with cooperatives that have closed the gates to the large flow of outsiders, which had been the rule in the past. Wage labor is hard to come by, and so is rental land. Throughout the cantones there is land sitting idle. It is largely in the possession of Ladinos who had formerly rented it out by the tarea to the hordes of Indian farmers; but ever since Decree 207 was passed in 1980 the owners have been reluctant to allow any of the renters to use it, for fear that they will claim it as their property. Rather than taking the risk, they have either turned the land into cattle pasture or allowed it to lie fallow. The result is that the Indians of the Nahuizalco area are without land on which they might plant subsistence crops, and

also severely restricted in their access to agricultural wage labor.

The economic desperation of the people is evident in numerous ways. Whereas many of the Indians used to have houses of straw thatch and poles, a significant number of the houses now being built throughout the rural cantones and along the periphery of the town have roofs of thin plastic sheets. The people themselves are uniformly skeletal in appearance; during the days I spent in the rural zone of Sonsonate I did not run across a single corpulent, or even full-bodied, Indian.

In the cantón of Pushtán I came across a woman with a bundle of tule fiber for making straw mats (petates), which are the main craft item of the area. Some people have patios planted with tule, but she did not. She had bought the bundle for 90 Colones and said she would be able to make 12 mats from it. She could then sell the mats to an intermediary in town for 10 Colones each, for a total of 120 Colones, or 30 Colones profit. She knew that taking into account her labor she was not making any money. "I make the mats," she said, "so I can pass time."

Education is also an area where the extreme poverty of the Indian population has taken a heavy toll. At present, there are some cantones where no children are attending school, and I would estimate that more than 90% of the families I saw in the rural area around Nahuizalco are unable to send their children to school. On the one hand, they now need the children to help contribute to economic survival. Beyond this, however, education

by itself is expensive. The Indians cannot buy notebooks and pencils, pay for the mandatory shoes and uniforms, or cover the "entrance fee" of 10 Colones and the "social quota" of 12 Colones. In one of the cantones I spoke to several women with teenage daughters who were in the 1st grade (one was 13, the other was 16), but they didn't think they could continue beyond this point. The adults know that education is the one opportunity they have of breaking their children out of the poverty in which they are caught. This knowledge, coupled with the inability to send their children to school, contributes to despair. They themselves are starving, they cannot feed their children, and they cannot help them to attain a more comfortable future.

As in other parts of the country, the Indians are organized only in the sphere of religion, where they have charge of the cofradías associated with various patron saints. Nahuizalco has a total of 22 cofradías and the religious cycle is covered with widespread participation in both rural and urban areas.

According to Clará de Guevara (1975a: 69):

Religion constitutes one of the most important aspects of life in this community, especially among the indigenous population. It might be said that for the naturales, religion is the axis around which a large part of their activities revolve.

Unlike Panchimalco, however, there has always been a strict division of Ladinos and Indians in every area of life, including

religion. In the past, there were several all-Ladino cofradías, but most of these have been abandoned over time and only one remains. It is notable that while the Ladino cofradía is dedicated to the Virgin of El Rosario, the Indians have their own cofradía for the same virgin. Beyond this, all of the cofradías in the municipio belong to the Indians.²⁷

The Indians of Nahuizalco also have a tradition of religious pilgrimages that take them to religious centers in the department of Sonsonate as well as to towns and cities in other parts of the country. These trips are organized through the cofradías:

Each pilgrimage has its "Pilgrimage Mayordomo," who is in charge of organizing the trip and coordinating with the mayordomo of the cofradía of the place, to make all of the arrangements for taking care of the travellers. The pilgrims always take along a "Niño" (a small image of the saint they are celebrating) and his respective alms (Clará de Guevara 1975a:77).

The pilgrimages are reciprocal; periodically the cofradías of Nahuizalco receive groups journeying from different parts of the country to celebrate local saints.

²⁷ See Clará de Guevara 1975a, photographs following pg. 101. These photographs show the Indians of Nahuizalco celebrating patron saint festivals.

The Stirrings of Indian Consciousness in the Midst of Difficult Times:

It is somewhat surprising to find that in present-day El Salvador -- a country being shredded by a vicious civil war -- the Indian population itself has begun to emerge from hiding and identify itself as Indian. This is not universal, by any means, and it still possesses a weak pulse; but it is evident, and has been combined, in several isolated cases, with attempts to recover some of the Indian traditions and improve socioeconomic conditions in the communities. In the early 1980s, the Asociación Nacional Indígena Salvadoreña (ANIS) appeared among the ranks of peasant organizations jostling for land in the context of the government's agrarian reform program. The Catholic Church, despite opposition from conservative elements within the Church itself, has initiated modest community development activities with Indian leaders from rural areas in Sonsonate. And Indian people everywhere have become less reticent about admitting their ethnicity. Even in the mid-1970s, none of this would have been possible.

The search for land:

At present, there is only one Indian community in all of El Salvador that retains communal lands as a holdover from colonial times. This is Santo Domingo de Guzmán, a small village in

Sonsonate. Although it has a Ladino mayor, and virtually all of the agricultural land surrounding the village is in the hands of Ladinos, the Indian community that forms the core of the population has managed to hold on to 12 manzanas of land within the township boundaries; and this land is supplemented by another tiny area used for gathering clay for making pottery tortilla-cooking griddles (comales), which are a main source of income for the community. In 1987, just before the planting season for corn, Indian leaders divided the 12 manzanas of land up among 125 farmers judged to be the most needy in town.

The surprising thing is that although this is all that remains of the communal land base that was once huge and all-important to the Indian economy, the communities themselves still exist, although with some qualification. Marroquin comments in the conclusion of his sensitive essay on the Salvadorean Indian: "We have deliberately used the word 'community' in the foregoing observations; in its place we should have put 'community in the process of disintegration,' because since the communal lands and the ejidos were liquidated by law, the indigenous communities have been disappearing one after the other" (1975:762).

With their communal lands gone, many Indians had held on to small individual holdings until the last 30 or 40 years. With population increase and the need to divide their already tiny parcels up among their children, coupled with the gradual accumulation of land in the hands of Ladinos, most Indians had been reduced to being subsistence farmers on rented plots by the

time the agrarian reform laws were passed in 1980. Decree 207 (Phase III of the agrarian reform) stated that everyone renting plots of 10 manzanas or less could file claims and gain ownership of that land (Diskin 1982, 1989; Strasma 1989). The decree was seen by its designers as "self-implementing": upon hearing about the existence of the law over the radio, all of the small tenants and sharecroppers throughout the country would simply take possession of the property they had been farming. Paperwork for the definitive title would then follow an easy course.

Of course, Decree 207 did not unfold as it was written on paper (Chapin 1980b). Many small renters were simply tossed off their rental plots as soon as the law was announced. The more timid and powerless refrained from even filing claims -- and it is in this category that large numbers of Indians found themselves. In areas we visited, from Morazán in the northeast to the western department of Sonsonate, we came across Indians who had been unable, for one reason or another, to claim land they had been farming. Beyond this, few of them have been able to rent any land since the reform was passed because landholders are afraid renters will file petitions against them and take what they are utilizing. Now, whatever land is not cultivated by the owner is either left fallow or used as cattle pasture. The landless are excluded altogether.

The Indians have similarly been excluded from many of the benefits of Phase I of the agrarian reform. During the first week of March 1980 a combined force of army recruits and

officials of the Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria (ISTA) peacefully "intervened" and expropriated approximately 230 estates of 500 hectares or more and set up what were supposed to be peasant-run cooperatives on them (Chapin 1980a). Virtually all of the families included in the cooperatives were living at the time as permanent tenants (colonos) on the estates; few of these people were Indians. Traditionally, this permanent work force was supplemented by hordes of migrant laborers during the height of the harvest season. In the western departments of Santa Ana, Ahuachapán, Sonsonate, and La Libertad, the work force for the coffee harvest was made up of a large percentage of Indians from communities throughout the region; and Indians from as far away as Cacaopera in Morazán made the journey to find work.

When the cooperatives were formed on the large coffee, sugar cane, and cotton estates the gates were suddenly closed to the bulk of the migrant workers. Those who had been fortunate enough to be included in the cooperatives during the first round were afraid the seasonal laborers would also claim membership, and in this way bloat the roster and effectively dilute the benefits, which were meager to begin with, for everyone. Beyond this, the faltering economy has left the cooperatives without money to contract the large numbers of outside laborers the old hacienda patrones had formerly brought in each year.

Before 1980 the Indians constituted the Salvadorean underclass -- the "poorest of the poor," in the language of development agencies -- and they were in no position to take

advantage of the benefits offered by the agrarian reform. Not only have they been excluded from the reform; it is clear that they have had their traditional access of small plots of land for subsistence farming as well as seasonal labor on the estates almost entirely blocked. In short, their poverty has worsened significantly over the last decade.²⁸

ANIS, land acquisition, and political conflict:

In the late 1960s, the Asociación Nacional Indígena Salvadoreña (ANIS) emerged quietly in Sonsonate under the leadership of an Indian "cacique" named Adrián Esquino Lizco (Asociación Nacional Indígena Salvadoreña 1983). In the early 1980s, ANIS came to a certain prominence within the context of the decade's political and social unrest, and has since become the self-proclaimed voice of Salvadorean Indians in the hemisphere. Principal among ANIS's campaigns has been its attempt to restore, on a modest scale, communal lands to Indian communities in the region of Sonsonate. In 1977 -- three years before the agrarian reform was initiated -- ANIS worked through the Caja de Crédito to obtain a loan it used to purchase a 75-manzana chunk of land for the community of San Ramón; since then, utilizing the same arrangement, several hundred manzanas of farm

²⁸Panchimalco has fared relatively well through the current crisis because it has not relied heavily on seasonal labor in the agricultural sector, but rather on wage labor in the capital.

land have been secured for other communities in the region. ANIS uses its legal status to obtain the credit to buy the land, and the community assumes the debt and becomes responsible for paying back the Caja de Crédito.

The land acquisition process has not been without problems. In 1983, a Ladino landholder in the area of Las Hojas wanted to cut an access road through the finca Santa Julia, a 96 manzana piece of land that had been purchased by a group of about 20 families who worked with ANIS. The Indian owners refused. Then, early in the morning on February 22, several truckloads of soldiers arrived at the cantón. They were accompanied by Indians from the area who had been in conflict with the Santa Julia group over land. These Indians directed the soldiers to specific houses, where they seized 74 men and carted them off. Later that day, most of their bodies were found along the banks of the Cuilapa River, a short distance from the village.

Similar -- if less drastic -- confrontations have occurred in some of the other communities ANIS has worked with, and periodic battles with the government have plagued its central organization. Much of the difficulty has come from the infighting inherent in the present political climate of El Salvador. In order to survive, ANIS has had to seek allies. Thus, ANIS became actively involved in setting up the Unidad Popular Democrática (UPD), an umbrella confederation made up largely of workers' unions and peasant federations, that threw itself behind the Christian Democrats in the 1984 elections.

When the conditions outlined in a 12-point "social pact" were ignored by the new government, ANIS (together with some of its allies) began speaking out, and eventually joined the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (UNTS), which leans toward the left end of the political spectrum. At this point, in March 1986, troops occupied ANIS's central office for several days and installed a group of former ANIS officials that were more in line with government policy, no doubt because they were receiving money for their efforts. During the next two years there were two parallel groups called ANIS: one was referred to as the "government ANIS," while the other was the "legitimate ANIS." Documentation for the titles to community lands was lost in the confusion, and the present status of the loans with the Caja de Crédito is murky at best.²⁹ Finally, a recent ruling of the Supreme Court invalidated the claims of the pretenders and legal title and their office were restored to the original, "legitimate" ANIS.

ANIS officials claim that the organization has a total membership of 76,000, of which 20,000 carry identification cards, pay 13.50 Colones in yearly dues, and are considered "active" members. This figure is certainly far too high. ANIS has rudimentary administrative capabilities, few cash resources, and links to communities even in the nearby Sonsonate countryside are

²⁹Added to this, the extreme poverty of the communities makes it difficult for them to pay the Caja de Crédito; and the general civil disruption in El Salvador has led to widespread delinquency on credit in the agricultural sector.

spotty and in some cases antagonistic. The organization has been ringed with controversy since the beginning. It has shifted alliances and seemingly crossed ideological lines with such frequency that cries of opportunism have been raised, and it has been accused of everything from communist leanings to alliances with the extreme right. Whatever the truth is in these allegations, ANIS must be judged within the context of contemporary El Salvador, where deals are constantly being cut and re-cut, peasant and urban worker groups are forever maneuvering for advantage, and survival is a difficult and risky game. In this light, ANIS is hardly any more soiled than many of the other groups surrounding it.

On the positive side, ANIS has been instrumental in publicizing abuses against Indians throughout the country, and has been active in confronting military and civilian officials directly to spring incarcerated Indians from jail. It has taken the lead in promoting Indian identity at the national level, and has hosted several inter-American congresses of indigenous peoples since 1978. The simple fact that ANIS has survived in the face of such terrible odds is in itself remarkable.

The Pastoral Indígena in Sonsonate:

There is only one effort to support community development initiatives among Indian communities in El Salvador. Supported by the Catholic Church out of San Antonio del Monte in Sonsonate, it consists of a small group of men from various cantones organized around what is termed the "Pastoral Indígena." The objective of the Pastoral is to promote small-scale community development projects such as chicken raising, housing, potable water systems and agriculture among the people of the communities. The promoters in this program are largely illiterate and lack even the most rudimentary experience with development work. What has been done thus far is extremely modest and entirely non-political -- although ultra-conservative elements within the Catholic Church itself recently came out with a paid advertisement in a national newspaper in which they accuse the priest who sponsors the Pastoral of "poisoning the souls of the Salvadorean peasants and Indians."³⁰ Even small, politically neutral efforts to assist the Indians of El Salvador to lift their standard of living to a level above the poverty line seem to meet strong opposition.

³⁰This accusation appeared in a two-page open letter to none other than the Pope himself, and was signed by the Movimiento Tradicional Católico. The letter was published in the conservative newspaper El Diario de Hoy on 17 October 1988. It accused scores of priests of siding with "the communist terrorists that plant chaos and destruction in our fatherland." Among those accused were Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas and the "modernist Jesuits" at the Catholic University.

Conclusion

In El Salvador, there is a large population of people who consider themselves, and are considered by those around them, to be Indians. These people have been stripped of practically everything they once had: they have lost their lands, much of their native culture, their language, their autonomy, and even their sense of self-worth. As expressed in the vocabulary of anthropology, they are heavily -- even thoroughly -- "acculturated," and for this reason they are generally missed, unnoticed, and invisible to those who have had no direct contact with them. Yet there they are, and as their numbers grow so does their poverty.

Marroquín was the first to see that the Salvadorean Indian could not be defined by the usual set of ethnic markers -- native language, dress, aboriginal customs, and so forth. Rather, the Indian in El Salvador can only be defined as a

historically conditioned socio-economic category made up of descendents of the first peoples in America, who by means of the Spanish conquest were reduced to conditions of acute exploitation, misery, oppression and social injustice, conditions that, in essence, are maintained in their descendents (Marroquín 1975:752).

Indeed, it may be argued that the Salvadorean Indians' collective sense that they have been victims of injustice and crushing exploitation over the centuries since the arrival of the Spaniards is the main glue that holds them together as an ethnic

group. In the present crisis, the miserable situation of the Indians has reached an extreme that has left them without many of the meagre sources of income they had formerly relied upon. Neither the government nor any private assistance groups have programs to benefit them, and the few weak attempts by the Indians to help themselves have come to nothing. The sad truth is that all they have ever had to keep despair at bay is each other and the conviction that they are "closer to God."

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