

ETHNOGENESIS AND ETHNOHISTORY:
SOCIOCULTURAL EMERGENCE IN THE BOLIVIAN ORIENTE¹

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THE DESCRIPTION and analysis of changes in sociocultural systems has been a major focus of interest to anthropologists in recent years. The frame of reference is usually "a society" whose members share "a culture," and the concern is with new forms and relations within the society and/or the culture. Analyses and interpretations are often phrased in terms of "process" or "dynamics." Descriptions of instances of change are immensely numerous and diverse, and a coherent body of theory has not yet emerged from the different orientations and conclusions of students working in this field.

The romantic view of hypothetically pure aboriginal cultures as tightly knit and perfectly functioning systems died hard in the Americas. Perhaps it is as much a reflection of implicit assumptions as it is a telling commentary on our time, that most situations of cultural change are portrayed as involving extreme disruption or disintegration of a small or dependent group in the face of intrusive forces from another, dominant, sociocultural system. Probably no society or culture is static, however "homogeneous," "isolated," or "tradition-oriented" a people may be — and, obviously, these are relative terms which never literally characterize any group. We should recognize that a variety of forces operate to bring about change, even within the most "folk-like" system, although our attention has been directed often to more spectacular, more rapid, or more politically sensitive situations of "acculturation," or "intersocietal contact and culture transfer."

I submit that the process of the formation of sociocultural systems is no less important than that of their deformation, or degeneration, although it has received relatively little attention among American anthropologists. Whether we speak of "ethnogenesis," "sociocultural emergence," or what-have-you, it

¹ Documentary research in a variety of historical sources in Bolivia and the United States was made possible by a summer stipend awarded by Brown University in 1962. Earlier ethnographic work was conducted under the auspices of the Henry L. and Grace Doherty Charitable Foundation, Inc.

seems just as valid and important to deal with integration, realignment, reformulation, and other adjustive developments, as to remain preoccupied with disintegration, deculturation, "culture loss," and so forth. Let me briefly describe how the Camba have come to constitute a new sociocultural system — a problem of historical significance in itself, but one which may also have some relevance for similar studies in other areas.

The Camba are a mestizo people, descendants of colonial Spaniards and local Indians, whose physical and cultural characteristics reflect both sides of their ancestry. Numbering about 80 000, they occupy an area of alternating jungle and prairie which stretches north from the city of Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia. At approximately the geographic center of the continent, enormous distances and natural barriers effectively isolated them from any regular contact with other centers of population until a decade ago.

The several Indian tribes who occupied this region in prehistoric times based their subsistence on hunting and gathering, occasionally supplemented by primitive agriculture. The Chiquitano, Chiriguano, Guarayú, Tapieté, and others who displaced the aboriginal Chané late in the fifteenth century, were seminomadic groups with cultures corresponding approximately to the generic "Amazon" or "Tropical Forest" types.

Colonization progressed slowly throughout the Bolivian Oriente, and even today remains incomplete. Beginning in 1522, a series of exploratory expeditions crossed the area from the east. Spanish and Portuguese soldiers of fortune bent on finding the legendary El Dorado had no designs on the unspectacular Indians whom they found scattered across the pampa and through the jungle early in the sixteenth century. Military conquest of what is now the Camba region was not even attempted until 1557, when Nuflo de Chavez sought to establish a new base of operations between Asunción and the supposed El Dorado. This settlement was to become the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, now the point of articulation between the Camba and broader systems of political and economic activity.

The relation of Spaniards to Indians during the early years of contact in eastern Bolivia was unlike that in most of the New World. The problem of administration was far more complex in this region than in the more densely populated areas of Latin America, such as Peru and Mexico. There was no pre-existing complex bureaucratic structure in which the Spaniards could simply usurp the dominant positions of native leaders; on the contrary, control had to be local and personal. The *encomienda* system which worked efficiently throughout most of hispanic America was ill-suited to the peculiar conditions which colonists encountered when they began to settle the region. In the absence of large sedentary villages and political federation, it was only with difficulty and through the occasional use of force or bribes that conquistadors were able to establish settlements where Indians were brought together to furnish them with food, labor, and women. The Laws of the Indies were not adapted to such a situation in which the native economy yielded no significant surplus

beyond subsistence. Payment of normal tribute to the crown was waived, and Spaniards and Indians were in a relationship nearer symbiosis than exploitation.

Encomenderos were required to remain in the area, and many of them took native women as wives and concubines. Spanish soldiers were rarely sent to the region as replacements, and fewer, if any, women ventured from the Continent to the frontier outposts. Under such conditions, racial mixture was rapid, as was acculturation. The sons and daughters of the original conquistadors were already mestizos, and were reared in a context of modified Spanish culture. Native laborers, servants, and wives retained some native ways, as in agricultural techniques, food preparation, and so forth, so that Spanish culture began to undergo change during the earliest years of colonization. As mestization increased, the number of encomienda Indians decreased and control became more direct and personal, resulting in accelerated reciprocal acculturation.

Isolated from the governmental centers by distance, natural barriers, and by Indian tribes who were often hostile, the inland areas of South America generally remained poor and undeveloped. The plains of eastern Bolivia continued to be a neglected frontier which contributed little to the crown and received less in return. Even during the republican period, the population remained scattered on isolated fincas which were autonomous and virtually self-sufficient. Towns developed only slowly as administrative and commercial centers.

"Camba" is the term which is used by the residents of this region in referring to themselves, and it is used by people in other parts of the country in referring to them. Its denotation is more social than geographic, however, for a person from another region who settles there but who does not participate in the social system and retains his alien way of life does not become a Camba.

It is true, nevertheless, that Indians from surrounding tribes are able to join Camba society, and this they do by gradually assuming the dress, language, and other aspects of Camba culture, and taking on normal Camba roles. The fact that large numbers of them have recently "become" Camba is convincingly demonstrated in the village of Buenavista, where the Camba campesinos of today are the children of Churapa Indians described by Nordenskiöld² as living there at the beginning of this century; their Chiquitoan language is no longer used, although a few older members of the community still know it.

"Camba" then is unequivocally a societal name — it designates a group of people who have a sense of common identification, speak a characteristic dialect, participate in an integrated social system, and share a culture no less distinctive than those of many so-called Indian "tribes" in North America.³ It is unfor-

² Erland Nordenskiöld, *Indianer und Weisse in Nordostbolivien*, Stuttgart, 1922; pp. 21-29.

³ Fuller ethnographic and historical data are available in my *Camba: A Study of Land and Society in Eastern Bolivia*, Ph. D. dissertation, Yale University, 1959. I have recently discussed in some detail the development of this use of the term in "Los Cambas: Un Pueblo Emergente," in: Antonio Velasco Franco (ed.), *Album Conmemorativo del IV Centenario de Santa Cruz de la Sierra*, Buenos Aires, 1961; pp. 165-169.

fortunate that the designation "Camba" has been listed as interchangeable with "Chiriguano" in at least two recent linguistic surveys of Latin America.⁴ Our usage here conforms to that which is current throughout eastern Bolivia and much of the rest of the country.

We have already mentioned the sense of group identity which the term carries. Concerning language, the dialect of Spanish which is spoken in the area is sufficiently different from that of other Bolivians to be universally distinguished as *castellano camba*. Morphemic as well as phonemic patterns are peculiar, and much of the lexicon is derived from local indigenous languages.

The social system also is significantly unlike those of surrounding and other historically related societies. The Camba recognize two classes which are virtually castes, with appreciable subcultural differences between them. The isolated household, usually comprising only a nuclear family, is the basic unit in social and economic activities, and commonlaw marriage is so unstable that even this group may change frequently. Neither locality groups, religious activities, nor voluntary associations appreciably foster social solidarity, and relations with representatives of other societies are infrequent and variable.

The folklore, medical practices, materiel, and other aspects of culture reflect a variety of influences, but the way in which they relate to each other is no less unique than that of contemporary Navaho, Iroquois, or Seminole culture.

The Camba, then, constitute a society whose members share a culture, although I have been unable to discover any use of this term as an ethnic designation more than a century ago. We seem to be dealing here with an instance of sociocultural emergence, a phenomenon which American ethnographers and historians tend to ignore, although it is perhaps the stock in trade of many archeologists.

In a certain sense, every sociocultural system is emerging — we don't live in the same world in which our grandfathers did, nor, in fact, is this the same world it was yesterday. It is not the purpose of this discussion to attempt to resolve the classic problem of "the ethnographic present." Swanton grappled with the question of ethnic identity over time⁵ long before the word *ethnohistory* came into the language of even a few anthropologists, and, as far as I can tell, we all still leave open the question as to what delimits a tribe.

We often refer to "syncretism" in characterizing emergence of new forms and relations in a specific aspect of culture, but we must sometimes attend to the collective or cumulative results of syncretism in several aspects of culture. To be sure, we are often told of "emergent [or emerging] nations," but we

⁴ John A. Mason, "The Language of South American Indians," in: Julian H. Steward (ed.), *Handbook of South American Indians*, Vol. 6, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143, Washington, 1950; p. 238. Also, Norman A. McQuown, "The Indigenous Languages of Latin America," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 57, 1955; p. 519.

⁵ E. g., John R. Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 43, Washington, 1911; and, *Indians of the Southeastern United States*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 137, Washington, 1946.

know sadly that these new political entities all too often dramatically do violence to the very sociocultural systems with which we are most concerned.

Soviet ethnographers and historians are concerned with "ethnogenesis,"⁶ as are American archeologists, although members of the latter group conscientiously decline to speak in terms of "origins." It seems highly unlikely that the Camba situation is unique in the New World, and I submit that we may gain new insights into the nature of society and culture if we seek to discern and analyze similar historical developments in other areas.

Among the questions which might be relevant in such connection are the following. Are there specific aspects of what Foster calls the "conquest culture"⁷ which tend regularly to displace those of the subordinate group? How may we identify — or, for that matter, characterize — what the first S.S.R.C. Summer Seminar on Acculturation called the "degree of openness" of a sociocultural system that will undergo such drastic "replacive" or "fusional acceptance" as a complete change in identity?⁸ What is the minimum time period in which such a change can be effected? Is there a discernible regularity in the sequence of processes of change in such situations? And, finally, do such new systems emerge also in what the second S.S.R.C. Summer Seminar on Acculturation, following Linton, called "non-directed"⁹ contact situations? If so, a whole new set of questions may be pertinent.

In short, the study of sociocultural emergence would seem an especially fruitful field for the analysis of systemic processes.

⁶ See, e. g., Henry N. Michael (ed.), *Studies in Siberian Ethnogenesis*, Arctic Institute of North America, Anthropology of the North, Translations from Russian Sources, Vol. 2, Toronto, 1962.

⁷ George M. Foster, *Culture and Conquest: America's Spanish Heritage*, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 27, New York, 1960.

⁸ Social Science Research Council, "Acculturation: An Exploratory Formulation," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 56, 1954; pp. 973-1002.

⁹ Edward H. Spicer (ed.), *Perspectives in American Indian Culture Change*, Chicago, 1961.