

Guadalupanismo en Guatemala: culto mariano y subalternidad étnica
Arturo Taracena Arriola

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RESEÑA

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Since the mid-nineteenth century, non-indigenous parents from Guatemala City and Antigua have sought the favor of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12th by dressing their children up as “inditos” (*disfrazan de inditos*). In his new book, Arturo Taracena demonstrates how the image of thousands of non-indigenous children masquerading as “inditos” is a stirring symbol of Guatemala’s piercing ethnic and racial divisions. One of Latin America’s most emblematic religious icons, the Virgin of Guadalupe is not only saturated with religious and cultural symbolism, but also reveals the political and cultural processes through which national and ethnic identities are mobilized, contested and re-imagined. While in late colonial Mexico the Virgin was a bearer of a proto-nationalism that united and integrated the *castas* into a common project against the Spanish empire, in striking contrast Taracena demonstrates how the cult of the Virgin symbolized “*la lógica segregadora*” of Guatemalan nationalism that divided the population into bipolar indigenous and non-indigenous sectors. Taracena explores the Virgin of Guadalupe’s unique historical trajectory in Guatemala through eleven chapters that cover the appropriation of the religious cult from its Mexican roots in the mid-eighteenth century until the late twentieth-century processes of globalization and transnational migration that produced counter-hegemonic forms of *Guadalupanismo*.

From the moment when the Guatemalan Archbishop Francos y Monry emitted an edict in 1790 declaring December 12th a day of celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the author illustrates how the tradition of *Guadalupanismo* reinforced, rather than challenged, Guatemala’s bipolar ethnic divisions. Even as independence movements burst forth in Mexico united, in part, around the image of the Virgin, Guatemalan church officials reinforced the division between the two republics by asserting that only Spaniards and ladinos had “*la obligación grave*” to attend the religious celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The indigenous population, on the other hand, was excluded “*para poderse dedicar en lo restante del día a sus ocupaciones y trabajos*” (pp .41-42). While others have emphasized that the glaring differences between independence movements in Mexico and Guatemala arose from the latter’s particular social and economic

characteristics as a colonial backwater, Taracena suggests that the nation's divergent attitudes towards the cult arose primarily from elite ideology. In Guatemala, non-indigenous elites proposed a "*degeneración histórica*" thesis which played down the ills of conquest by comparing it with the decay of indigenous society prior to defeat. In contrast to the Aztecs and the Incas, the Maya civilization had fallen prior to conquest and the contemporary *K'iche*, *Kaqhikel*, *Mam*, *Q'eqchi'*, and other Mayas had not conserved the splendor of the civilization and as result were not worthy of being recognized as representatives of Guatemalan antiquity. This thesis remained highly influential through the period of independence and justified the subordination and exclusion of the vast majority of the population from the nation. In contrast to Mexico, Guatemalans thus emphasized the peninsular origins of the Virgin over its indigenous roots in the apparition of the Virgin to the Indian Juan Diego.

Over the course of the late eighteenth century, the cult of Guadalupe became increasingly associated with non-indigenous sectors of the population. Taracena provides detailed evidence demonstrating the ethnic character of the Virgin by examining the geographical diffusion of *cofradías*, altars and paintings dedicated to the Virgin into primarily Ladino regions of the country. The growing use of the name Guadalupe in matrimonial records by the Creole elite between 1730 and 1860 in the central valley, and the absence of corresponding use amongst the indigenous population, further suggests an apparent lack of indigenous identification with the Virgin. The *K'aqchikel* town of San Juan Comalapa is, according to the author, the exception that proves the rule. In 1810 at the moment of the Mexican insurrection led by Hidalgo, the indigenous principal Bartolomé Chunay of San Juan Compala shouted "*Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe*" and then erected an *ermita* dedicated to the "*María Santísima de Guadalupe*". The *ermita*, according to historian Edgar Esquit, continued to hold cultural significance throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Guatemalan tribute to the Virgin of Guadalupe took on greater significance by the mid-nineteenth century, stimulated in part by a global Catholic resurgence of Marian cults and a Papal edict that decreed the Virgin of Guadalupe as the patroness of Mexico. It is here that Taracena provides the richest historical exploration of *Guadalupanismo* as it emerged in the tradition "*Juandiegos and Marías*". The tradition of disguising non-indigenous children in indigenous clothing emerged alongside the Conservative regime (1839-1871) and the deepening of the practice of what the author calls "*ciudadanía diferenciada*". The imagination of indigenous peoples as secondary citizens who required the tutelage of the state to achieve civilization found expression in the symbolic transference that happened when non-indigenous children were disguised in indigenous clothing to demonstrate religious devotion and receive their parents' protection. These non-indigenous public performances thus both expressed and reproduced the cultural distance between indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalans. The author emphasizes that, until the latter half of the twentieth century, the religious tradition was practiced by the non-indigenous elite and middle classes of Guatemala City and Antigua. These characteristics coupled with a growing population of ladinoizing Mayas in these urban centers might, however, provide suggestive evidence that the celebrations on December 12th played a role not only in producing a "bipolar" ethnic division of the nation, but also in defining more subtle, but equally important, interior frontiers within non-indigenous classes. Might these celebrations perform distinctions

between those who were “whiter” and “less-white”, between those whose distance from Indian-ness could be affirmed through indigenous dress, and those whose fragile claims to whiteness could be threatened by an unconvincing disguise?

Drawing on a rich photographic archive, Taracena explores the varieties and transformations in the style and form indigenous disguise over the early twentieth century. Taracena argues that the practice of disguising children as “*inditos*” on the Day of Guadalupe was not an act of cross-dressing associated with temporarily adopting the identity of the other, but rather one of disguising for the exclusive purpose of obtaining the Virgin’s favor. The disguises of *Juandiegos* and *Marías* often included markers that affirmed European origin like painted-on European style mustaches, lipstick, eye shadow, and skin powder, which the author attributes to pictorial representations of Juan Diego. While the dress of Europeanized *Juandiegos* and *Marías* may have derived from official representations, the embodied performances of Europeanized-indigeneity might have allowed for both the psychic desires of cross-dressing and the stated purpose of obtaining the Marian’s favor. By the 1920s young women imported the fashion of “*indias bonitas*” from Mexico, where it formed part of a populist celebration of Mexican identity. In Guatemala, the fashion of “*indias bonitas*” enabled young non-indigenous women to participate in the festivities of Guadalupe fostering a more carnivalesque exoticism. The author explores how these transgressions became a source of political satire, only to be later appropriated by the state as part of Ladina beauty pageants. Yet the author stops short of examining how the appropriation of indigenous female sexuality by non-indigenous women transgressed gender and racial norms, and why these transgressions spoke to national politics.

In the final chapter, the author offers a fascinating examination of the appropriation of the cult of Guadalupe as a counter-hegemonic symbol by marginalized social sectors in the wake of armed conflict, transnational migration and globalization. The religious icon has been mobilized by these actors as the patroness of lands granted to returned refugees, as part of a transnational “latino” culture produced through migration to the United States, as the protector of youth gang members and as a reclamation of African roots amongst Garifunas. These counter-hegemonic appropriations of the Virgin of Guadalupe highlight histories of violence and ethnic and social marginalization that fissure Guatemalan society. As Charles Hale has also demonstrated in *Más Que un Indio* (2006), the tradition of “*Juandiegos and Marías*” has itself become a source of debate about inter-ethnic relations.

Guadalupanismo en Guatemala is an important contribution that reflects and develops the principal findings of a multivolume, collaborative study, *Etnicidad, estado y nación* (2002) produced by a research team and headed by Taracena. *Etnicidad, estado y nación*, a synthetic study of the modern period, examines how the state’s legal apparatus after independence combined with particular ideologies of race and nation to create a segregationist state and a nation defined by bipolar ethnic relations. In *Guadalupanismo en Guatemala*, the author develops these anterior findings through this fascinating case study based on a variety of sources ranging from records of pastoral visits, to newspapers and photographs. By attending to questions of geographical diffusion, the author also rightly highlights the importance of region to the study of race and nation. While the focus on ladino nationalism in Guatemala is a much welcome contribution, this approach has

allowed less space for the multiple, fractured and ambivalent meanings of race and nation as well as the mobile identities that confound a bipolar ethnic division. What we now await is an analysis of how the discourses and actions of subaltern and elite actors, like those in San Juan Compala, are not so much exceptions, but windows into these shifting and contested imaginations of race and nation. As other historians, such as Edgar Esquit and Greg Grandin, have demonstrated at least some indigenous elites, perhaps including Bartolomé Chunay, appropriated discourses on race and civilization during the late-nineteenth century to articulate alternative national projects. These cross-ethnic dialogues and the spaces of negotiation they engendered may help us to understand the role of a variety of intermediaries in the production of Guatemala's exclusionary state. The revealing dialogue between Guatemalan and Mexican traditions of Guadalupe established by Taracena is an excellent example of the value of comparative analysis, one that could serve as a fruitful model for future study. This book will be of significance not only to students of Mexico and Guatemala, but also to a range of Latin American scholars interested in questions of race, nation and religious culture.