

THE INDIAN PEOPLES OF MIDDLE AMERICA TODAY

IN contrast to the United States, where Indians form an infinitesimal part of the population in the urban, industrial and agricultural regions, and where almost all of them have been segregated on reservations, Indian blood characterizes the major part of the people of several republics of Middle and South America. In both Mexico and Guatemala, Indian blood is in the decided majority, and few natives of old families lack any.

In the great, arid, thinly populated sections of northern Mexico the Indian tribal associations and languages have been lost together with all local native indigenous culture, but the peon has a large percentage of Indian blood. In the western mountains, however, the Yaqui, Tarahumar, Tepehuan, Huichol, Cora, and other less-known groups still preserve their ancient customs and languages, not greatly affected by modern ways. And in populous agricultural southern Mexico, the great Indian nations, Aztec, Zapotec, Tarascan, Huastec, Mixtec, Otomi, Mixe, and many others number their people by thousands, by tens and even hundreds of thousands. Economically their life has changed but little since pre-Cortesian days, but most of the esoteric knowledge, which was mainly confined to the priestly class, has disappeared. They still produce or manufacture most of the products used or consumed locally, and every area is practically self-sufficient, importing almost nothing from outside. Markets, held on different days in different villages, permit the exchange of wares which are specialties of certain villages. Textiles, pottery and lacquered trays are the products most often purchased by tourists, and in the larger centers work in silver and feather mosaic preserves others of the arts of the aborigines. In Yucatan hundreds of thousands of pure-blood Mayas still speak the old language, and every Yucatan planter speaks Maya as a second language.

In highland Guatemala the Quiché, Kekchí, Cakchiquel and dozens of other peoples of Mayan linguistic affiliations live practically as did their ancestors five hundred years ago. Under a veneer of Christianity they still preserve many of their old religious beliefs and rites and the elements of the old calendrical system. All knowledge

of the hieroglyphs, however, has disappeared. Delicate weaving and embroidery are done, and each village has its own characteristic costume by which its natives may be identified. (Figure 39)

From Honduras to the Panama Canal most of the tribal affiliations and languages have been lost, though there is more or less Indian blood in the general population. This is especially true of the highland region and the Pacific Coast, except for a few isolated remnants of tribes. In the forests of the Atlantic slope, however, some of the Indian groups have preserved their primitive lives, customs and languages fairly well, though many of them are much mixed now with Negro blood, and also with Carib Indians who were deported from the West Indies in 1797.

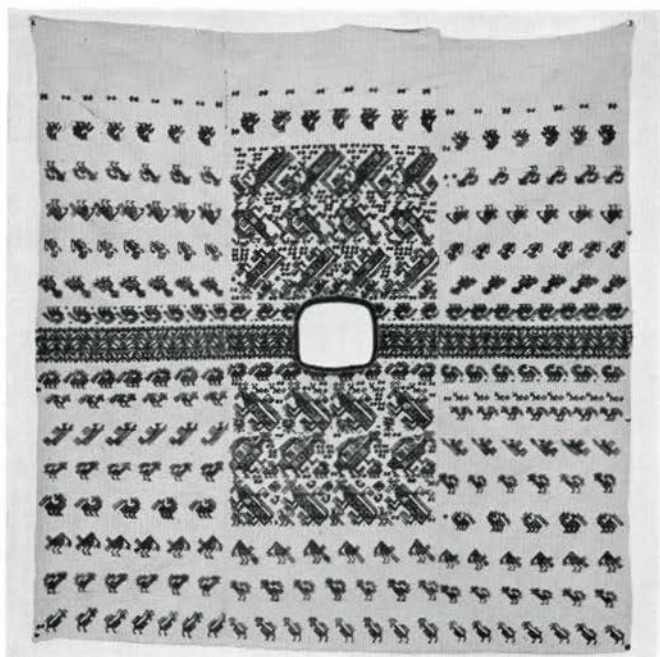


Figure 39. Guatemala textile: Woman's modern embroidered huipil or blouse for dress occasions. San Pedro Sacatepequez, Guatemala