The Potter and The Farmer
The Fate of Two Innovators in a Maya Village

By RUBEN E. REINA

Chinuautla is a small Maya town of approximately 1500 people, descendents of the Pokomam-speaking group which once occupied large portions of the southwestern part of the Guatemalan highlands. Today only a few thousand of these people are living in a handful of villages surrounded by Spanish and other Maya-speaking people.

The Chinuanutses are located only seven miles from Guatemala City. They have been not only in close association with the urban center, using the city markets since the Spanish developed this area, but have also accepted a few non-Indian families as residents of the village. These non-Indian families are known as ladinos.

When one enters the deep, narrow valley where the Chinuanutses live, one encounters an atmosphere of great simplicity. Only a few men and women are to be found in the village streets after the very early hours of the day. Their economic activities of charcoal making and agriculture keep most of the men in the fields outside the village for the entire day. The women are left behind to care for the home and children and to make clay water jars, kneading the clay, forming the vessels, and firing them.

In recent years because of a shortage of land and perhaps a slight increase in the population of the community, young men temporarily have been forced to earn a living in Guatemala City as unskilled labor or to seek land along the Pacific coastal regions. Those who work in the city commute daily on foot, by bicycle, or by bus, while those who journey to the coast make the trip only once a week. But each looks forward to the time when he may purchase or inherit land on which he will be able to carry on the traditional method of making a living. The women, on the other hand, have not been forced to change their profession or hire themselves out in the city. The demand for pottery in the southwestern highland areas of the nation is large, the supply of clay in the community is excellent, and pottery making carries the status of womanhood.

It is important to view Chinuanutses historically and to find that since the Conquest the basic aspects of their life have remained unchanged despite the nearby urban development. Chinuanutses resided in this valley even before the coming of the Spaniards under Don Pedro de Alvarado in 1526 and without a doubt they were an active group during the Maya Classical period. In 1768, the archbishop, Pedro Cortez y Larranz gave his first impressions of the people who lived along the river which cuts across Chinuautla today: They were working with clay, producing beautiful water jars without a wheel, and cultivating milpa (corn fields); but he found them savage, "without God, without a king, and without laws . . . inhabiting the bank of the river, hidden and difficult to find."

Although during the last four hundred years the Chinuanutses have been directly exposed to Spanish ways, have seen the birth of the nation in 1821, and have participated in some of the political revolutions, they still hold to many of the traditional ways of their ancestors while at the same time adjusting their religious forms and political organizations to the requirements imposed by the National Guatemalan Government. They have learned Spanish as their lengua franca, but they have maintained Pokomam as their household language. It is in the context of this language that their deepest emotion and thinking takes place. They feel deeply that the town itself is the setting for the entire Indian life. They were born here, and it is here that they must marry, die, and be buried. This feeling largely supports the permanency with virtually complete absence of emigration. The sentiment lends a philosophical touch to the image and concept of pueblo (community). The community, through the religious and political organizations, is able to control the traditions which govern the individual from the cradle to the grave—and, it is believed, even beyond.

Although one's first impression of Chinuautla is that life there is very simple, this is not so. The
A Chinantleco family. Over ninety-five per cent of the population is of the Pokomam-speaking Maya group. Those in this group are known as naturales or Indians. They are distinguished from non-Indians by their clothing, language, skills, physical features and general living practices.

The mayor of the town, in the year 1953, permitted me to reside and move among "his people" freely. He was an Indian mayor, elected according to the rules set forth in the new democratic constitution of 1945. And the inhabitants of the town respected his decision. It was only after many failures to reach the people informally that I began to suspect there was more to the organization of the community than I had known and that behind the apparent simplicity there was a complex social mechanism so intricate that the attempt to obtain a clear description and explanation was not only time-consuming but psychologically exhausting for the informant. The most frequent answer to my questions about the nature of the organization and the ritual was, "We do this because it is the custom, es costumbre." This has become a useful formula for answering inquiries from outsiders, especially aliens who at one time demanded from the Indians the adoption of Spanish ways.

I was interested in the function and description of the community culture and in the study of cultural change and cultural persistence as affected by the proximity of the village to an urban center and by the influence of the nation on the community. In the midst of learning the elements of the tradition and how Chinantlecos see them related, I could not escape asking myself several questions: How does it feel to be born and to live in this type of community and tradition? To what extent, within this apparent homogeneity, might an individual be allowed to be different or an innovator? Cases of individuals who were behaving out of the ordinary, and the reaction of the community toward them might give an insight into both the nature of the culture and the Chinantleco as an individual.
Water jars (tinajas) are produced by every woman. Learning this craft begins very early in the life of a girl. Each one learns to build the jar in three basic steps, as shown in the picture, by the coil method, without the potter's wheel. After the jar is formed and the surface is polished with a black pebble, firing takes place. This is indeed a crucial point, because a miscalculation may cause the loss of more than the usual five to ten per cent. Each Chimanateca, by means of the tump line, takes her wares, up to one hundred pounds, to the Guatemala City markets. There she is met by merchants from the western region of the Guatemala Highlands, middle-income, and other customers. A Chimanateca is seldom accompanied by her husband and is, therefore, in full control of her business. Girls soon learn the method of transaction from their mothers. An average size tinaja sells from twenty to forty-five cents according to its quality and the season of the year. The prices range from one to two dollars for the size accompanying the old lady in the picture.
During my first visit to Chinaruta in 1953, I was received and introduced to the town by the man in this picture. At that time he held the position of mayor of the municipio (county). To him I owe much of my basic knowledge of the Chinarutecos' traditions. He is a mature, stable, and wise man who undertook the governing of the village and municipio for a few years after the new, democratic constitution was put into effect in 1944. As mayor, he was an excellent liaison between the Chinarutecos and the officials at the national level.

JESUS AND DOLORES
1953, 1955: The Indian Woman Artist

During my first visit to Chinaruta in 1953, a very old lady was willing to explain to me, a stranger, the intricacies of pottery making, a woman's skill. At the time, she was training Dolores, her twelve-year-old orphan granddaughter, in the steps for the preparation of the clay and for forming the pieces of pottery. This woman was, in most ways, identical to the rest of the women in town. She dressed in the huipil and Indian skirt, did not wear shoes, and she spoke both Pokomam and Spanish. She was different in one way, however, for instead of making the traditional water jars, she made very artistic and attractive animal figures, using the same coil technique. The figures were rubbed and polished with a round pebble, and frequently painted with a white liquid clay substance and then fired in the open. This woman had no difficulty in selling her products in the Guatemala City markets, and, like everyone else, she took them weekly during the dry season. Contrary to economic laws of supply and demand when production was at its peak in the dry season and demand was high, prices were also at their highest. She met the urban middlewomen with poise and security, demonstrating to her granddaughter the proper way of handling the aggressive buyers. By 1955, the granddaughter, who was now 14 years of age, had moved to another corner of the courtyard and was working alone. She was now old enough for marriage and it was not long before she received a proposal. The grandmother accepted several baskets of food from the family who sent the go-between to bargain for the wedding. Both families looked forward with much anticipation to the marriage. The mother of the boy, a widow, owned much land and hoped that the girl would come to live with them. For this reason long bargaining was necessary. She was especially anxious to keep her son at home because of the great economic advantage of having him work her land. And to have a daughter-in-law who could produce pottery would strengthen the economic position of the household. But Dolores' grandmother was also a widow and wanted to bring the boy to live with her. This latter alternative was not very likely, however, because of the grandmother's precarious economic condition. Nevertheless, she was willing to try in the hope that the boy's mother would not be able to meet her bride price, Everything moved favorably toward the marriage and the boy's baptismal godparents were asked to serve as godparents in the wedding, and they accepted. Both sets of parents and siblings agreed at the time that Dolores was a hard working potter and that she could produce good water jars, as did other women, and that the boy, Jesus, was a good agricultural worker. In the excitement of the arrangements the boy's mother was not concerned with Dolores' artistic inclinations. It was assumed that after the wedding she would continue with the pattern of work established in the boy's household.

1955: The Agricultural Innovator

I had an opportunity to meet the prospective groom, Jesus, who became one of my best informants in 1955. My interest was first aroused because he was the only person in Chinaruta cultivating unusual varieties of vegetables. Furthermore, he was a very articulate individual in both Pokomam and Spanish. He had learned to grow vegetables in the Chinese pattern while working for a Chinese horticulturist in Guatemala City. His father had arranged this work for him. After the father's death, the boy returned to his community and took an important role in the household. With much enthusiasm he developed a Chinese garden on his father's land at the outskirts of the town. A nearby mountain supplied water for irrigation during the six dry months of the year, so that in combination with the rainy season he had a full agricultural year. It became a very profitable business. Buyers in the market were quick to take any amount of vegetables at any time. His mother and older sister marketed his produce in a very quiet manner. They placed the vegetables in large baskets wrapped in white cloth, frequently walking to town and returning by bus. Jesus also grew a patch of corn (milpa) in the traditional way in order to train his younger brother.

Soon it became well known that Jesus was engaged in a profitable business and he and his mother became suspicious of the people's interest in watching them. "It was evindia," Jesus said. Someone was practicing evindia (magical tricks) in order to ruin them. They were concerned because Jesus' father, they believed, had been bewitched by an unscrupulous neighbor and specialists in the art of evindia explained that the economic prosperity of this family was carefully watched by neighboring neighbors.

The community learned about the arrangement for the marriage of Dolores, who was doing rather well economically, with Jesus. It became public knowledge when the godparents were elected, and in this sense many more outsiders became involved with the arrangements for the wedding. The couple had now come to the public eye and there was much speculation about them. Advice and gossip began to filter to Jesus' mother and to Dolores' grandmother. The community was watching the economic activities of Dolores and Jesus and speculating on the work of these innovators and on their reliability as human beings.
The grandmother, now deceased, who taught her
granddaughter the art of forming miniature
vessels... In 1935, Dolores was already producing
elegant small items with the help of her grand-
mother; her artistic development through the years
is seen in these vessels and figurines, including
two she made for me of a Chihuahua woman
carrying a pottery vessel and a Chihuahua man
with the net of charcoal supported by the tump
line, and in the platter which I asked her to make
but on which the ornamentation was her own
idea. Later in her life, Dolores stopped
producing such things.
1956: The Marriage Plans Fall

In the year 1955, both Dolores and Jesus knew that their respective parents were negotiating their marriage. They watched each other from a distance, receiving messages through younger sisters. On a few occasions Jesus and Dolores alone while she was drawing water from the well, when they had an opportunity for a few words. Jesus anxiously awaited the conclusion of the bargaining. It would permit him to talk to her face to face in her courtyard, as he brought a bundle of wood to her home every weekend. There was excitement at the prospect. As is the custom, he bought her wedding dress with veil and chair, while Dolores was saving to buy the dark blue suit for him.

Although Dolores’ grandmother died before the wedding date, her aunt continued the negotiations. Dolores proceeded to work even harder and to create new figures of animals and angels. The finest products were statues in miniature of a Chichimeco man and woman, made to order. In the meantime, Jesus’ mother had consulted a zahorin (diviner) from Guatemala City who had advised her to reconsider the character of Dolores, that there trouble in the future with this girl as a daughter-in-law, and that she might not be a congenial person to bring to her household. The diviner offered to remove the bad elements for $25.00, but the boy’s mother began to waver in the marriage plans. This caused some embarrassment to the girl’s aunt when she dropped the negotiations. Dolores herself was upset and did not want to renew negotiations, and the two families were, therefore, back to the point they had been when arrangements had begun. Gossip had affected the social standing of the boy’s family to the extent that the mother decided to forfeit the $150.00 she had spent on presents given to Dolores’ grandmother.

Dolores continued through the years 1956–58 in her artistic work, proving to be very interesting clay pieces. In the meantime, she had two more proposals of marriage. The initial stages progressed well, but both proposals failed. This convinced Jesus and his mother that the zahorin had been right. Because of the three failures, Dolores’ aunt became very much concerned that her niece might not find a good man, for with each case her desirability had lessened. People began to think that perhaps she was not a good prospect for marriage, and perhaps she was not capable of controlling the general had aspects of human nature.

At the time of these events, their meaning was not clear. Whatever was obstructing Dolores in her plans for marriage was indeed subtle. The usual reply to the question, “Why is this happening to this girl?” was, “Asi es la vida” (That is life).

On the other hand, as the months went by, Jesus was becoming losing; his reputation was now not good and he took advantage of the situation to enjoy life accordingly, but his mother applied pressure. She complained; she married a married woman who wanted to leave her own husband in order to live with Jesus; and she threatened to take the land away from him. Thereafter, she was unable to arrange another wedding. She made several proposals through the go-between, but each time they met with failure. Jesus was working well in the production of vegetables on his father’s land, and he was also very active religiously. Gossip, however, indicated that he was not yet, for some reason, a reliable Chichimeco. It was difficult to find the exact combination of factors that had triggered his failures in the marriage proposals. Later he became very ill with tuberculosis and spent several months in the hospital in Guatemala City, and this event, not considered a random occurrence, affected the course of his life. He was to become more conservative.

1958: Dolores and Jesus Abandon Their Skills

Three years had passed since the initial proposals for marriage had been made for Jesus and Dolores. In 1958, I revisited Chimaltac once more, and went to the court of Dolores’s aunt to see what new terms she had produced. The aunt, aging now, showed me her own things. They were the same miniature animals made once by her deceased mother. Asking for Dole’s figurines, I was told there were none. She was working inside the hut, producing large water jars. The workmanship was excellent. She was a skillful potter. The aunt remarked that Dolores had abandoned the creation of figurines. I offered to pay well for a few special pieces, but Dolores refused to make them, regardless of price. I also visited Jesus’ home. It was a Sunday morning during the rainy season, and I found the entire family there. We talked in general, and Jesus explained that he had abandoned the production of vegetables, and was now producing only maize and black beans. The mother stated that it was a good arrangement. We made calculations of his earnings, and found them to be less than in the previous year. His mother appeared to be concerned with her son’s future. Many things had troubled her, particularly the public accusation that her marriageable son had misbehaved with the daughter of an important man in town. The son had agreed to marry the girl, but the mother had strongly opposed the arrangement. A son was born to wedlock and Jesus paid for the midwife, but the marriage did not take place, perhaps because the illegitimate child was stillborn.

1960: Two Weddings

Upon revisiting Chimaltac in 1960, I learned that Dolores had married and was residing with her husband’s parents. The aunt said that it was a very pleasant and good arrangement. It seemed more than a coincidence that as soon as Dolores abandoned the artistic activity and proceeded in the traditional ways of pottery making, she had a good marriage proposal with an acceptable bride price. She was now even taking her own load of pottery into the city in the most traditional manner: walking, carrying the pots by means of a bundle. I visited her in the new setting, and there I found her making a water jar. She said she had no intention of returning to the making of figurines. “What a pity,” I said, “because you can make the best figurines.” But she shrugged her shoulders and dismissed the subject.

In the household of Jesus’ mother I found an additional member. She was a young girl, and at first Jesus classified her as his sister, in an attempt to conceal the fact that she was his common law wife, even though both sets of parents had agreed to the arrangement. It was significant that Jesus had abandoned his artistic activity. He had converted his piece of land into a milpa, and had no intention of returning to his vegetable farming, or even of learning how to make charcoal. Over a period of seven years Jesus had forgotten some of the acquired city ways and interests and had become less skilled as a bilinguist. His espanish was rusty, there were more grammatical errors, and he had difficulty in reading the newspaper headlines. Altogether, he had become a more conservative adult and had aged rapidly.

On Jesus wedding day, the ritual was elaborate and the procedures most conservative. His godmother of baptism became the godmother of the wedding, a relative acted as substitute for the godfather of Jesus, who had since died but who nevertheless thus became the godfather of the wedding. At the conclusion of the wedding day, the substitute godfather led the procession to his home... After exchanging ceremonial greetings, the groom led the procession to the godmother’s home. Here, the third woman in the picture, the tatabahin (counterpart of the religious man, the tatabalin) left for her home, accompanied by her assistant. The groom was then followed by the bride through the streets of the town. This was their first walk alone.

In a period of seven years the potential artistic potter and the intrepid horticulturist had returned to their original background to become
totally indistinguishable from other Chinautlecos. Jesus' common law wife proved to be a good woman, bearing him a son and producing good pottery. Therefore, a wedding was in order, and I had the opportunity to witness it in the summer of 1962.

The drama and excitement for the two innovators of the village had passed. The period of innovation had lasted only a short time; the artistic clay objects and the Chinese-style garden had not been accepted as things which an individual member of this type of community could do. They had caused the innovators to be considered unreliable. The ethnographic knowledge of the community and the specific actions of members of the village toward these two individuals during this period provided the necessary background and insight for understanding the relationship of the tradition or culture to the individual.

Once I recognized it, this sequence of events seemed rather typical. Other individuals, with less success, had attempted modification at some period of their lives. These biographical events give significant clues in the relationship of culture change and the individual among 20th century peasants of Guatemala.

As I have stated elsewhere, Chinautlecos consider themselves professional milperos, charcoal makers, and potters, and total deviation from this norm seems to bring personal distress and social embarrassment. The cases of Dolores and Jesus did not seem unusual, at first, inasmuch as they used the same basic elements in their work, following the same rhythm of life at home and in the market as everyone else. I had not viewed the final product as symbolic of personality deviations. The activities of both persons were quietly observed and proved to be significant in terms of the primary events in the life cycle of both individuals, particularly when marriage was considered as a fulfillment of the laws of life. One of the dominant assumptions among Chinautlecos is that human nature is intrinsically bad and if the person does not recognize the available traditions and does not possess the will to organize his life by controlling his drives, his reputation will be severely affected. “Life here is very hard anyway, and why should one get even deeper by not being careful in the selection of a mate.”

Jesus’ manhood at first could not be questioned because he was fortunate in having good land, which gave him the dignity of a man; but he was different in that he was less concerned with the central element which supports life, that of the production of maize and charcoal. His action, once well established, became a paradox to the people. He had good land and a good chance to produce large quantities of maize. A person may be excused if he does not have sufficient land, and in order to survive undertakes another occupation for a period, hoping that his destino may soon change and he can soon reenter the rhythm of life proper for a Chinautleco. But one who purposely undertakes a variation from the norm must expect to pay the consequences. Parents of young boys often become concerned when their sons take employment in the city, and are anxious when there is no alternative in sight.

In conclusion, life in a community like Chinautla is such that it does not foster the growth of individual skills or interests. The artist and the innovator in Chinautla easily succumb under the natural weight of tradition. It is possible that when Dolores becomes old, like her grandmother, having the courage to face the community and having less to lose, she will return to the old enterprise of which she is indeed very capable. Jesus, however, will not return to his horticultural activities. Change of this order would cause a man too much embarrassment.

In a biography of a Chinautleco, one finds a clear statement of how he perceives himself. The informant stated, “We live like God wants us to... we were born without shoes and we are the Indians here... One knows what one is and this is all.” The mother of Jesus recognized the horticultural activity as a good enterprise, but understood that it could not be continued because of the people’s reaction. So with resignation she says now, “Asi es la vida, muy dura... That is life, very hard.”

SUGGESTED READING


Chinautla, a Guatemalan Indian Community: A Study in the Relationship of Community Culture and National Change, Tulane University Mari Pub. 24, 1960.


Each Walks Alone (a complete study of Chinautla—in press).