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ANTHROPOLOGICAL NEEDS AND POSSIBILITIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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In evaluating the present status of anthropological knowledge concerning Central America it is impossible not to repeat the fact that the present corpus of material is utterly uneven and inadequate.¹ This deplorable and, in considerable part, unnecessary condition cannot be overemphasized. There is little advantage to be gained in lamenting the large amount of cultural materials in the area that have been lost forever through the ravages of time, looting, and indifference in recording. It is of more value to point out that there still remains in the region a great amount of such materials that can be revealed and integrated whenever Central American anthropology is made the subject of coordinated and persistent research. Since the region is not only scientifically important in its own right, but also holds the key to much of our potential understanding of adjacent cultures of both North and South America, it is desirable that the reasons for the present sorry state of anthropological knowledge in Central America be analyzed and the condition remedied so far and so soon as may be possible.

A review of the foregoing articles will show that one of the greatest obstacles to integration in regard to any study of native Central American civilization is the extreme unevenness of the anthropological and historical data. If, as is the case in only a very few instances, an adequate archeological sequence has been established, it is usually found that the historic, ethnological, and linguistic materials² available at present are confused and inadequate. Where history is most specific, or ethnology fairly adequate, it will often be found that the only available prehistoric data consist of speculations based on selected art objects dug up by looters and collectors. Finally, any attempt to correlate the products of men's hands and minds with the human beings who created them, whether in prehistoric or historic times, meets with complete failure at the start, for practically no anthropometric material on either the living or the dead is now available. It can fairly be asked, therefore, whether this sad state of affairs

¹ For other analyses, see Kroeber, 1939, p. 109, and Strong, 1940, pp. 377-385.

² The deplorable and misleading condition of historical linguistic studies in Central America has been stressed elsewhere; see Strong, *op. cit.*, and Kroeber, 1940, pp. 463-470.

is entirely due to the impossibility of gathering such data because of its nonexistence or destruction, or whether the scientist may not be equally to blame for not securing much that is still available while there is time.

In regard to the historic approach to Central American problems it seems highly probable that much archive material is extant which has not yet been utilized. It is significant that every new archeological advance, as at Coclé, has drawn forth considerable amounts of historical data previously unknown or unappreciated. This lack of knowledge or appreciation of obscure but available historical documents particularly marks most modern North American investigators who, with a few shining exceptions, are not very familiar with such materials. Since the ordinary field archeologist or ethnologist can hardly be expected to be also a competent archival historian, this points up another issue. That is the fact that there is a great need for up-to-date compilations and revisions of such historic materials. Those available for Central America go back several generations to Squier, Bancroft, Brinton, and others, and even these are too little used by modern field men. Lothrop's brief summary (1926 b) of the ethnography of Costa Rica and Nicaragua at the time of the Conquest and Beals' similar ethnography of northern México (1932), based largely on the sources used by Bancroft in his somewhat hit-or-miss compilations, are shining exceptions. Beals' work is invaluable on the ethnographic level and, as archeology commences in that region, will be equally important in that regard. It is essential, not only for anthropology but also for history and the social sciences in Central America, that the continuity of the human record in this area be presented in the most complete form possible. Here the work of anthropologist, historian, and sociologist blends and each is dependent on the other. It would appear that no such unity of effort has yet been achieved.

In regard to ethnology, this lack is well illustrated by the fact that in the previous articles information from the 16th and early 17th centuries, the period of first contact, has barely been touched upon except in the area lying between the Panamá Canal and southern Nicaragua. Most of the information on the extremely important Meso-American tribes was brought to light by Squier, with some additions by Lothrop. Additional searches will undoubtedly reveal additional information. Modern studies are very few and often out of date and incomplete. We are forced still to rely on Gabb (1875), Pinart (1885), et al. for southeastern Costa Rica, and on Conzemius (1932, etc.) for the *Mosquito* and *Sumo*. The descriptions of various tribes in Nicaragua and Honduras are, perforce, based on Squier's researches (1858, etc.). Additions to such data may be found in a number of other descriptions, all of which are incomplete and sometimes not to be trusted. The principal problem of the moment is to obtain sound information concerning both the ancient and modern inhabitants of the region. Before satisfactory interpretations for any

anthropological purpose can be made, experienced investigators must be sent into the region and given the opportunity to work out the details which we must have.

One of the most perplexing of the ethnographic problems is the full understanding of modern Indian culture and also the presumably indigenous culture traits which are found in the modern, outwardly Spanish, civilizations. Early European descriptions provide glimpses of highly organized indigenous civilizations. In some cases, such as in Panamá and Costa Rica, it is possible to block out several important phases of the evolution of present-day culture. Similarly, certain features of the Hispanization of the Meso-American tribes and, to a lesser extent, some of the peoples in the interior of Honduras and Nicaragua are known. For example, Stone's discussion of the *Lenca* (p. 61) emphasizes the intermediate position which this large and important group has occupied for a lengthy period. These people were in direct contact with the highly developed *Maya* civilization and with the curious combination of advanced and "primitive" cultures which appears to be characteristic of peoples to the south. The history of the tribes in the Caribbean Lowland can hardly be written. In this region the impact of European cultures has apparently had the most unfortunate results, for here there are indications of sometimes extreme degeneration. Even so, it is certain that they have not always been such; in fact, it is possible that civilizations of a high order, well adapted to life in the Tropical Forest, once existed. Adequate archeology is essential here as elsewhere.

The significance of the foregoing remarks ranges over a wide field. From a purely anthropological point of view there is interest in culture history and in purely theoretical studies of culture development under conditions which prevailed. In addition, such anthropological data are essential to the solution of modern political, social, economic, and geographic problems. The expansion of transportation facilities, the improvement of communication, and the development of natural resources have brought or very soon will bring the modern world into intimate contact with even the most conservative and isolated groups of Central American Indians. The effect of this upon these people and other less conservative groups will be most profound. Anthropological studies which provide not only analyses of present conditions but of the events which led up to these are essential. Surveys of the incomplete data suggest, for example, that the background and point of view of people whose culture is rooted in South America is vastly different from those of Meso-American tradition. Further, the different environments of various sections of Central America condition the human existence in various ways. It is essential to understand the relationship between different kinds of aboriginal culture as well as the modern cultures descended from them and the several environments.

A final note is concerned with the European background. The Spanish, English, and other nations which imposed their culture upon aboriginal Central America utilized various approaches. In addition, these approaches varied through the years. In tracing the evolution of culture from the time of the Conquest to the present, the character of the relationship between the European and the aborigine is of great significance. There are no Indian groups in existence, so far as known, that have not experienced the consequences of the impact of European culture. The social organization has been modified, religious concepts have changed, and many features connected with technology and economics have been adapted to the changing conditions. The character of this change and its effect upon ideas of people differed with the particular history of each region. Knowledge of this is fundamental to an understanding of the present-day culture, be it in an isolated Indian village or in the largest of the Central American cities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beals, 1932; Conzemius, 1932, etc.; Gabb, 1875; Kroeber, 1939, 1940; Lothrop, 1926 b; Pinart, 1885; Squier, 1858, etc.; Strong, 1940.