The Colonization of Guatemala

By Christopher Minster, About.com Guide

Directions: Read and highlight the following article and make notes in the side columns. Also, complete the vocabulary piece on the back. We are going to use this as the basis of a discussion on Friday.

Introduction:
The lands of present-day Guatemala were a special case for the Spanish who conquered and colonized them. Although there was no powerful central culture to deal with, such as the Incas in Peru or the Aztecs in Mexico, Guatemala was still home to the remnants of the Maya, a mighty civilization that had risen and fallen centuries before. These remnants fought hard to keep their culture, forcing the Spanish to come up with new ways to gain control over the people.

Before the Conquest:
The Maya Civilization peaked around 800 A.D. and fell into decline shortly thereafter. It was a collection of powerful city-states who warred and traded with one another, and it stretched from Southern Mexico to Belize and Honduras. The Maya were builders, astronomers and philosophers and theirs was a rich culture. By the time the Spanish arrived, the Maya had degenerated (dwindled) into a number of small fortified kingdoms, the strongest of which were the K’iche and Kaqchiquel in Central Guatemala.

The Conquest:
The conquest of the Maya was led by Pedro de Alvarado, one of Hernan Cortes’ top men and a veteran of the conquest of Mexico. Alvarado led less than 500 Spanish and a number of Mexican native allies into the region. He made an ally of the Kaqchiquel and warred upon the K’iche, who he defeated in 1524. His abuses of the Kaqchiquel caused them to turn on him, and he spent until 1527 stamping out various rebellions. With the two strongest kingdoms out of the way, the other, smaller ones were isolated and destroyed as well.

The Verapaz Experiment:
One region still held out: the cloudy, misty north-central highlands of modern-day Guatemala. In the early 1530s, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican friar, proposed an experiment: he would pacify the natives with Christianity, not violence. Along with two other friars, Las Casas set off and did, in fact, manage to bring Christianity to the region. The place became known as Verapaz, or “true peace,” a name it carries to this day. Unfortunately, once the region was brought under Spanish control, unscrupulous (immoral) colonists raided it for slaves and land, undoing just about everything Las Casas had accomplished.

Encomiendas:
Conquistadores and other important Spaniards were often awarded encomiendas, large tracts of land complete with native towns and villages. The Spaniards were supposed to be responsible for the religious education of the natives, who in return would work the land. In reality, the encomienda system became little more than an excuse for legalized slavery, as the natives were expected to work with little reward for their efforts. By the seventeenth century, the encomienda system was gone, but much damage had already been done.
Native Culture:

After the conquest, the natives were expected to give up on their culture and embrace Spanish rule and Christianity. Although the Inquisition was forbidden to burn native heretics (someone who opposes the Catholic faith) at the stake, punishments could still be very severe. In Guatemala, however, many aspects of native religion survived by going underground, and today some natives practice an odd mish-mash of Catholic and traditional faith. A good example is Maximón, a native spirit that was sort-of Christianized.

The Colonial World Today:

The city of Antigua is full of colonial history, and there are many cathedrals, convents and other buildings that have survived since the colonial times. The towns of Todos Santos Cuchumatán and Chichicastenango are known for their blending of Christian and native religions in their churches. You can even visit Maximón in various towns, mostly in the Lake Atitlán region. It is said that he looks with favor on offerings of cigars and alcohol!

Vocabulary

Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas

encomienda

Spanish Inquisition (look it up)

Maximón

6 – G4.4.1 Identify factors that contribute to conflict and cooperation between and among cultural groups (control/use of natural resources, power, wealth, and cultural diversity).

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http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/coloniallatinamerica/p/guatecolon.htm