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NOTES ON NEGROES IN GUATEMALA DURING THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The introduction of Negroes into Guatemala commenced with the year of the conquest of that country by the Spaniards in 1524, when there came several Negro slaves with the *conquistadores* from Mexico. It seems that they soon increased in numbers, for among the decrees of the *conquistador*, Pedro de Alvarado, there is one which prohibits the selling of gunpowder to Indians and Negroes. The number of African slaves brought to Guatemala had, however, always remained relatively a very limited one, for as the Spaniards had plenty of cheap hands by means of a system of indentured labor forced upon the numerous Indian population, the importation of slaves evidently did not pay them well. It seems safe to say, that their total number never amounted to ten thousand.

The most copious, though still very sparse notices of them I have run across, are those given by Thomas Gage, an English Catholic educated in Spain, who, in the twenties and thirties of the seventeenth century, lived as a priest in the then city of Guatemala, nowadays called Antigua, and in some Indian villages not far from there.¹ One of the places where Thomas Gage observed a somewhat considerable population of Negroes was the so-called Costa del Sur, or Southern Coast, the hot land between the Andes and the Pacific, to the south of the capital. They were worked there on the indigo plantations and large cattle *haciendas*. The Negroes impressed Thomas Gage as the only courageous people in Guatemala while the Spanish Mestizos and Indians seemed to him to be very cowardly.

This writer said that if Guatemala was powerful with

¹ Gage published in 1648 in London an account of his residence and voyages; I have only a French version of his work at hand, printed in Amsterdam, in 1721. The passages cited are re-translated from that language and, therefore, will not agree word for word with the original text.

respect to its people, for she was not in arms nor resources, then she was so merely by virtue of a class of desperate Negroes, who were slaves living on the indigo plantations. Though they had no arms but a machete, which was their small lance used for chasing the wild cattle (nowadays, that name is given to a long and broad, sword-like knife), they were so desperate that they often caused fear to the very city of Guatemala and had made their masters tremble. "There are among them," said he, "those who have no fear to brave a wild bull, furious though he be, and to attach themselves to the crocodiles in the rivers, until they have killed them and brought them to the bank."²

In reading these lines, one cannot help from remembering the classical description Alexander Von Humboldt gives of the Negro boatmen of the river Dagua, in the actual republic of Colombia. The inimitable skill and unsurpassable bravery Humboldt saw them display in the midst of the ferocious currents and loud-pouring rapids of that river caused him to exclaim: "Every movement of the paddle is a wonder, and every Negro a god!" A nice monument to the fame of indomitable bravery the Negroes manifested in past times in Guatemala exists still in a saying often heard by travelers: "*Esos son negros!*" "Those are Negroes," an exclamation which means: "Those are desperate men, who do not care for anything." One could also hear the saying: "*Esto es obra de negros,*" or "that is a work of Negroes," the meaning being that it was work for bold men with iron nerves.

Another expression brings out the fact that the Negroes were considered, or forced to be, very hard workers. "*Trabaja como un negro,*" or "he works like a Negro," signified doing "the most arduous labor." That the lot of the slaves was often a bitter one, though, because of the less greedy Spanish character, without doubt generally a less hard one than in North America, is shown by the fact that Guatemala had her "*Cimarrones*" just as Jamaica, and Guiana, had their Maroons.

² Gage's "Voyages," Part 3, Chapter II.

The Spanish word "*cimarron*" signifies indiscriminately a runaway head of cattle or horses, that had become wild, or a runaway slave. The fugitive Negroes of Guatemala had their chief stronghold in the inaccessible mountain woods of the Sierra de las Minas, which lies near the Atlantic coast between the Golfo Dulce and the valley of the river Motagua. The Golfo Dulce, which is now abandoned because of lack of sufficient depth for the big vessels of to-day, was at that time the port of entry for the whole of Guatemala. From it a bridle-path ran over the Sierra de las Minas to the valley of the Motagua and further on to the capital. In speaking of this path over the mountain, Gage remarks: "What the Spaniards fear most until they get out of these mountains, are two or three hundred Negroes, Cimarrones, who for the bad treatment they received have fled from Guatemala and from other places, running away from their masters in order to resort to these woods; there they live with their wives and children and increase in numbers every year, so that the entire force of Guatemala City and its environments is not capable to subdue them."

They very often came out of the woods to attack those who drove teams of mules, and took from them wine, salt, clothes and arms to the quantity they needed. They never did any harm to the mule drivers nor to their slaves. On the contrary, the slaves amused themselves with the Cimarrones, because they were of the same color and in the same condition of servitude, and not seldom availed themselves of the opportunity to follow their example, and united with them to obtain liberty, though obliged to live in the woods and mountains.

Their arms were arrows and bows, which they carried only for the purpose of defending themselves against attacks of the Spaniards; for they did not harm those who passed by peacefully and who let them have a part of the provisions they carried. They often declared that their principal reason for resorting to these mountains was to be ready to join the English or Dutch, if these some day appeared in the Gulf, for they well knew that these, unlike the Spaniards, would let them live in peace.

Among the most remarkable facts learned by Thomas Gage in Guatemala is the story of a Negro freedman who had accumulated great wealth. This Negro lived in Agua Caliente, an Indian village, on the road to Guatemala City, or Antigua, where the natives had obtained considerable quantities of gold from some spot in the mountains only known to them. The Spaniards, not content with an annual tribute paid them by the Indians, endeavored in vain to force the natives to show them the mine, and because they refused killed them, thus gaining no knowledge of the mine for which they were still searching in vain in the times of Thomas Gage. "In that place of Agua Caliente," continues Gage, "there is a Negro who lives and receives very well the travelers who call upon him. His wealth consists in cattle, sheep, and goats, and he furnishes the city of Guatemala and the environments with the best cheese to be found in the country. But it is believed that his wealth does not come so much from the produce of his farm and his cattle and cheese, but from that hidden treasure which is believed known to him. He, therefore, has been summoned to the Royal Audience in Guatemala, but he has always denied to have any knowledge of it."

He had been suspected because he had formerly been a slave and had secured his liberty by means of a considerable sum. After that, he had bought his farm and much of the surrounding land and had considerably increased his original holdings. To his inquisitors he replied that, "when young and still a slave he had a kind master who suffered him to do what he pleased, and that by economy he had accumulated where-with to buy his liberty and afterwards a little house to live in; and God had given His blessing to that and let him have the means for increasing his funds."

Another one of Gage's accounts discloses the abuses common among the slave-holders under Spanish rule, and the silliness of the belief that the masters for their own benefit would treat their human property well. This account refers to one Juan Palomeque, a rich landowner and promoter of mule-transport, who lived in Gage's par-

ish of Mexico, near the actual capital of Guatemala. He was believed to be worth six hundred thousand ducats, about 1,400,000 dollars. He owned about a hundred Negroes, men, women, and children, but was so stingy that, to avoid the expense of decent house-keeping, he never lived in the city, though he had several houses there. Instead, he lived in a straw-hut and feasted on hard, black bread and on *tasajo*, or thin strips of salt beef dried in the sun.

He was so cruel to his Negroes, that, when one of them behaved badly, he would whip him almost to death. He had among others a slave named Macaco, "on behalf of whom," said Gage, "I often pleaded, but in vain. At times he hung him by the hands and beat him until he had his back entirely covered with blood, and in that state, the skin being entirely torn to pieces, in order to heal up the slave's sores the master poured hot fat over them. Moreover, he had marked him with a hot iron face, hands, arms, back, belly, and legs, so that this poor slave got tired to live and intended several times to suicide himself; but I prevented him from doing so every time by remonstrances I made him."

Juan Palomeque was so sensual and voluptuous that he constantly abused the wives of his slaves as he liked, and even when he saw in the city some girl or woman of that class whom he wanted, and she was not attracted to him, he would call upon her master or mistress and buy her, "giving much more than she had cost; afterwards he boasted that he would break down her pride in one year of slavery." "In my times," said Gage, "he killed two Indians on the road to the Gulf, but by means of his money he got so easily out of that affair as if he had killed but a dog." As Gage does not tell anything of a prosecution for the crimes against the Negro, no actual law seems to have been violated.³

The descendants of the ancient slaves have so completely

³ It seems proper to add here, that three years after Guatemala had declared her independence of Spain, she abrogated slavery by decree of April 17, 1824. Thereby she got, by the way, into difficulties with Great Britain, which as late as in 1840 demanded the extradition of slaves run away from the adjacent British territory of Balize. Guatemala was by men-of-war sent to her coast forced to do so, though that was contrary to her constitution.

become mixed up with Spanish-Indian blood that, making exception of the valley of the Motagua River, they have practically disappeared as a race. In 1796, their number was considerably increased by the so-called Caribs, whom the English deported from the Island of St. Vincent and set ashore in Guatemala. They live now on the Atlantic coast, also on that of Honduras and Nicaragua, and are estimated to total about 20,000. They are Zambos, but the African blood seems to prevail.⁴

A MULATTO CORSAIR OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

When on his return voyage to England, sailing down the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica, Thomas Gage's ship was intercepted by two corsairs under the Dutch flag, one of them being a man-of-war. The struggle of the Netherlands for freedom against Spain had not then come to a close. The Dutch commander was a character, of whose strange experiences Gage gives an interesting account. Much to the surprise of the traveler the captain who had caught them was a mulatto named Diaguillo, who was born and brought up at Habana (Cuba), where his mother was still living. Having been maltreated by the Governor of Campeche in whose service he had been, this mulatto in a fit of utter desperation threw himself into a boat and ventured into the sea, where he met with some Dutch ships on watch for a prize. He swam to and went aboard one of these vessels, hoping to find better treatment than among his country-men. He offered himself to the Dutch and promised to serve them loyally against those of his nation who had maltreated him. Afterwards he proved himself so loyal and reliable to the Dutch, that he won much fame among them. He was married to a girl of their nation and later made captain of a vessel under that brave and noble Dutchman, whom the Spaniards dreaded much and whom they named Pie de Palo, or Wooden-leg.

⁴ Within the last decades, some Negroes have been brought over, from the United States, to the banana plantations of United Fruit Co., near the Atlantic coast, and occasionally, though very seldom, one meets with a black newcomer from Jamaica, Barbadoes, or other West Indian islands.

“That famous mulatto,” said Gage, “was he who boarded our frigate with his soldiers. I lost four thousand pesos wealth in pearls and jewelry and about three thousand in ready money. I had still other things with me, viz., a bed, some books, pictures painted on copper, and clothes, and I asked that Mulatto captain to let me keep them. He donated me them liberally, out of consideration for my vocation, and said I must take patience, for he was not allowed to dispose in other way of my pearls and my money; moreover, he used the proverb: If fortune to-day is on my side, to-morrow it will be on yours, and what I have won to-day, that I may lose to-morrow. . . . He also ordered to give me back some single and double pistoles, out of generosity and respect to my garb. . . .”

“After having searched their prize,” continued the traveler, “Captain and soldiers thought of refreshing themselves on the provisions we had on board; the generous captain had a luxurious dinner and invited me to be his guest, and knowing that I was going to Habana, he drank the health of his mother and asked me to go to see her and give her his kindest regards, saying that for her sake he had treated me as kindly as was in his power. He told us, moreover, when still at table, that for my sake he would give us back our ship, so that we could get back to land, and that I might find some other and safer way to continue my voyage to Spain. . . . Everything taken away from the ship save my belongings, which captain Diaguillo ordered to let me out of a generosity not often to be found with a corsair, he bade us fare-well thanking us for the good luck we had procured him.”

Thomas Gage reached Habana in safety and called upon the mother of the Corsair, but does not say how he found her.

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