

THE CAUSES OF THE PHYSICAL DEGENERACY OF
MEXICAN INDIANS AFTER THE SPANISH CONQUEST
AS SET FORTH BY MEXICAN INFORMANTS IN 1580¹.

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In the year 1577 King Philip II of Spain issued a decree to all Spanish officials in the New World ordering them to obtain and send him answers to a questionnaire consisting of fifty searching inquiries, intended to elicit information which would "facilitate the good government and ennoblement" of "the Indies."

One of these questions (No. 5) is as follows:

"State whether the district is inhabited by many or few Indians and whether in former times it had a greater or lesser population; the causes for the increase or diminution and whether the inhabitants live in regular towns permanently or not.

State also what is the character and condition of their intelligence, inclinations and modes of life; also whether different languages are spoken throughout the whole province or whether they have one which is spoken by all."

Another question (No. 15) also partly deals with the same matters.

The reports sent in 1580 to the King, drawn up by the governors, mayors and other officials of eight towns, in answer to both questions, throw a new light upon the increased mortality and degeneration of the native race after the Conquest, phenomena which have generally been attributed to the oppression and cruelty of the Spaniards.

It should interest hygienists to learn what were the opinions expressed by Mexican Indian chieftains who acted as informants regarding the causes of the diminished longevity and physical degeneration of their people that were noticeable sixty years after the Conquest.

Vegetarians, prohibitionists and eugenists will doubtless be gratified to learn from the following extracts the nature of the information contained in the replies to questions 5 and 15 that were sent to the Spanish King.

ACOLMAN².

"In past times it had many inhabitants. The natives were not able to tell us anything more certain than that in every house there lived six or seven

¹ Extracted from *Official Reports... sent by Francisco de Castañedo to His Majesty Philip II and the Council of the Indies in 1580*. Translated and edited... by Zelia Nuttall. Published by the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, vol. II, No. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.), 1926.

² The towns of Acolman, Tequizistlan, Tepechpan and Teotihuacan belonged to the Diocese of the City of Mexico, whilst the towns of Tepeucila, Miahuatlan, Chichicapa, Ocelotepec and Iztepechi belonged to the Diocese of Oaxaca.

married couples besides unmarried youths. They died of the illnesses which spread amongst them. At the present day, according to the list of tribute payers, it has nineteen hundred of these...

...In time of peace the chieftains always wore fine loin cloths, mantles of agave fibre and sandals, excepting at festivals when they wore mantles worked with designs. When they went out, in order to protect themselves from the sun, each carried a feather fan. All vassals wore only a mantle of coarse agave fibre and a loin cloth. Nowadays all generally wear cotton shirts and mantles and trousers: they cover themselves at night with blankets, whereas in ancient times they only covered themselves with the mantle they wore in the day time. The chieftains used to eat game birds and some domestic fowl. The commoners only ate the cooked leaves of the cactus, the agave and other wild herbs. Nowadays all eat maize bread and chickens and beef or mutton. In olden times previous to the Conquest they were very healthy but nowadays they suffer from disease and do not live as long. The natives believe that it is on account of the little work and much feasting they now have."

TEQUIZISTLAN.

"In ancient times, before the Conquest, this town was densely populated and had more than four thousand tribute-paying inhabitants. After the Conquest many died from an illness like itch or mange all over the body. Since then they have always had illnesses. The Indians think that these have increased because they now have more luxury than in former times and because, before the Conquest, they used to go naked and sleep on the ground and eat cactus leaves, cooked agave leaves and other plants yielding scant nourishment. Now they live well, eat delicate viands, baked bread, chicken and beef and mutton, and wear clothes and sleep on high (beds), covered, at night, with blankets. Any excess makes them ill, especially the drinking of pulque, which is general amongst them and is drunk from their childhood. Previous to the Conquest, when they did not drink nor were permitted to do so and were punished for drinking they died old. Nowadays they do not live as long...

...In time of peace they went naked and only wore coarse mantles of agave fibre and loin cloths. The chieftains wore sandals.

Nowadays all, in general, wear cotton mantles, shirts and trousers and the women cotton skirts and shoulder capes. Some use woollen mantles. They sleep on high (beds) and cover themselves with woollen blankets.

In ancient times their food consisted of snakes, cactus, cooked agave leaves and some herbs of little nourishment with which they lived healthily. Nowadays they are accustomed to eat game birds and domestic fowl, baked bread, also other products of the lagoon with which they are not as healthy as in olden times because they have more luxury now than they had then."

Mexican Indians

TEPECHPAN.

“At the present time this town and its dependencies have nine hundred and fifty tribute payers. In former times, and a short time before the Conquest, it was densely populated. The inhabitants have dwindled on account of the diseases they have had which, according to the native belief, proceeded from their having less work (exercise) and more luxury than before the Conquest, and also from the drinking of pulque, and because, at present, the natives eat fowl and other birds whereas formerly they ate cactus leaves, the pulpy agave leaves and other herbs of little sustenance. . . .

. . . the commonest foods they have always used and still use are maize, beans, squashes, huanhtli (amaranthus) and chili peppers. After the arrival of the ‘Marques del Valli’ they ate fowl. The natives state that before he came they never had any remarkable illness but that, about a year before his arrival, a great number died of a disease like small-pox which broke out all over their bodies. Since then they have never been free of illness, they do not know why.”

TEOTIHUACAN.

“The natives say that in ancient times this town was densely populated by a great number of inhabitants. At present it has, besides the ordinary population, according to appraisalment one thousand and six hundred payers of tribute. The natives say that many of them died of an epidemic which occurred a year before the discovery of New Spain.

. . . The common Indians . . . went naked excepting for a loin cloth and coarse mantle of agave fibre. Nowadays they all wear cloaks, cotton shirts and trousers. They sleep on beds and cover themselves with woollen blankets. They eat good food, boiled maize, domestic and wild fowl, beef and mutton.

In ancient times most of them sustained life on the boiled leaves of the cactus and agave, or roots, or mice, snakes and other reptiles and were healthier because of this and because they were more accustomed to exercise and hard work than nowadays. The natives realise that the luxury they now live in and the little work they do is the cause of illness, because they now fall ill whenever they make any exertion, and especially on account of the pulque which they are now accustomed to drink from childhood and which does them much harm.”

TEPEUCILA.

“ . . . Their ordinary food used to be maize cakes (tortillas), chili and beans and if anyone hunted a deer, rabbit or mouse they ate it, although usually they presented it to their native lord who would give them some of it or some other food or clothing as a compensation, because only the lords had permission to eat turkeys, quail, deer and other game. Nowadays everybody eats tortillas, chile, beans, gourds and deer although they cost excessive prices, also other meats of our cattle or of the game they kill. . . .

MIAHUATLAN.

They use at present the same foods they used to, but have many meats, as they eat sheep, ewes and cows, there being no town which does not have

its community ranch and private ones, thus having meat in abundance... As to the reason why, in ancient times, they lived much longer, all dying old then and young nowadays, they say it must be because they work less now than they used to, having then to render personal service not only to the caciques and lords but also to the 'Tequitlatos' who were those who were in charge. Also because nowadays they marry in boyhood, whereas formerly they did so at the age of thirty or forty...."

CHICHICAPA.

"The oldest inhabitants state that the reason why the natives are more short-lived nowadays than in heathen times is because anciently they did not sleep in towns or settlements; and ate naught but dry tortillas made with great labour and care. Thus they lived strong and healthy and when they married they were at least over thirty years of age and thus led healthy lives. After the Spaniards came they built houses and lived in peace and tranquillity; ate an abundance of different foods; wore clothes and indulged themselves. The boys marry at twelve and fifteen, and all these things, as it is reasonable to suppose, cause them to be more short-lived nowadays."

OCELOTEPEC.

"... In olden times the natives lived a hundred years or more and now they die young and what they say and explain and communicate to each other on the subject is that the reason for this is: that anciently the children were put to work at the age of six or seven. As there were so many wars there was no time to cultivate much and so they ate little, slept in the open and were fitted to live in constant labour. After the Spaniards came they wore clothes, slept in houses, ate and drank and indulged themselves much. In those days an Indian married at forty and now at twelve or fifteen...."

IZTEPEXI.

"... They used to fight with the natives of other neighbouring towns for no cause or reason whatsoever, only for the exercise and they ate the flesh of those they captured alive in battle, and not that of those killed in warfare... They ate tortillas or tamales and some chile and no more. Once a year, when they celebrated their harvest, they killed a fowl (turkey), dog or rabbit (if able to catch it) or other game and ate it, offering, first of all, to their idol, the first fruits of all they caught or killed—for in all things they were subjected to strict laws... They say that notwithstanding the hard work they used to suffer under, they used to be healthier... they say an Indian used to live more than a hundred and twenty years and now it is a great deal if the age of eighty is reached, although the natives now lead such an easy life and are the masters of their properties which formerly they were not, for no one then dared eat anything they raised under pain of fine or death."

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