

Introduction

History Will Write Our Names

In the first months of 1920, an unlikely coalition of university students, coffee planters, army officers, urban laborers, and clerical and lay supporters of the Catholic Church organized to overthrow the brutal twenty-two-year dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898–1920). Multiplying across the country through a loosely knit network of Unionist Party branches and clubs, the diverse movement electrified the country with a unified call for democracy. As the movement swelled in early April 1920, participants suffered violent attacks by the National Police in Guatemala City's streets, which enlivened the resistance and expanded the Unionists' base of support.

Only five days before the dictator's hand-picked National Assembly declared President Estrada Cabrera insane and removed him from office, a group of more than a hundred Q'eqchi' Mayas (hereafter Q'eqchi') from the Unionist Club "Freedom of the Indian" seized the national spotlight. Spearheaded by José Ángel Icó, a relentless Q'eqchi' patriarch, the movement grew from the long-neglected, northern department of Alta Verapaz and sparked fear in the hearts of Guatemala's wealthy landowning classes. Driven by demands that far exceeded the ousting of an aged and corrupt president, these Q'eqchi's sought nothing short of a political revolution in the name of Maya rights and freedoms. Before the all-ladino (non-Maya) National Assembly, the Q'eqchi's delegates announced: "We are knocking on the door of our political emancipation."¹ They demanded Maya rights as citizens and an end to coerced

¹ Archivo General de Centro América (hereafter AGCA) B, Legajo (hereafter Leg.) 29466, "Club Unionista 'La Libertad del Indio' a la Asamblea," Cobán, April 3, 1920.

labor. Their petition, likely penned with the collaboration of a lawyer, invoked the constitutional articles that granted full rights to all citizens and pointed out the contradictions in the state's historical practices, ranging from a lack of primary schools in rural Maya communities and exclusion of Mayas from local governance to coerced labor and obligatory military service. Evoking the nation's upcoming centenary celebration of independence, the Q'eqchi' Unionist Club maintained: "We believe that if Guatemala wants to take its place among the civilized nations of the world so as to celebrate the centenary of its independence with dignity, before anything else it needs to give the Indian complete freedom." These radical Q'eqchi's concluded their missive by requesting that the assembly "honor our humble petition and take into account that an entire PUEBLO is looking upon Us, as the only ones to resolve their situation of FREEDOM OR SLAVERY" and remember that "History will collect our names in its pages, writing them with gold letters."² Evoking the structured binaries of slavery and freedom that framed nearly all nineteenth-century movements for political emancipation, Q'eqchi's pushed the National Assembly, and the nascent Unionist movement, toward broader definitions of the nation, citizenship, and Maya historical agency than previously conceived and demanded inclusion in the present. This book argues that, against state and others' efforts to continually render Mayas as anachronistic subjects who were out of step with progress, Q'eqchi's in Alta Verapaz continually built innovative political modernities and claimed agency as historic actors in the present.

Q'eqchi' Unionists sought to upend nearly a century of state practices toward Mayas in the western and northern coffee-growing regions that were at the heart of the nation's economy. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, coffee entrepreneurs drove a rapid political and economic transformation. Prior to the rise of coffee production, Alta Verapaz was largely a political and economic periphery. It neither possessed lucrative resources nor was geographically situated on a route to anywhere: beyond the Verapaz lived the largely autonomous indigenous populations in present-day Petén, Chiapas, and the Yucatán. Beginning in the 1860s, the promise of lucrative coffee production brought not only coffee trees, but also new settlers including ladinos, Germans and other Europeans, and North Americans. By the turn of the century, Alta

² Ibid.

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Verapaz was transformed from a marginal region into a new center of the nation’s political and economic production and power (see Map 0.1).

Across the late nineteenth century, indigenous–state relations also changed as the Conservative government of President Rafael Carrera addressed burgeoning demands for indigenous land and labor by eroding colonial-era institutions that protected communal landholding and indigenous local political power, and by expanding and reinstituting the use



MAP 0.1 Political map of Guatemala.
University of Wisconsin-Madison, Cartography Lab

of *mandamientos*, a state-operated system of forced wage labor. As a result of land dispossession and *mandamientos*, coffee production and export expanded rapidly, and state revenues derived from coffee jumped from less than 1 percent of total exports in 1852 to half of the nation's exports by the end of Conservative rule in 1871.³ These processes accelerated after 1871 when the new Liberal government institutionalized *mandamiento* labor, formalized land privatization, and dissolved Maya-controlled town councils in favor of mixed town councils headed by *ladinos*. Since coffee production in Alta Verapaz overlapped with indigenous-owned land, planters and state officials increasingly understood Mayas as a caste to be maintained and mobilized for their labor in the context of fierce labor shortages, and they coveted Maya lands for export-production crops. In the early 1920s, when Q'eqchi's from Alta Verapaz proclaimed their political emancipation and demanded the end of coerced labor, they sought to overturn nearly a century of racialized economic and political practices.

Q'eqchi' Unionists also challenged more than a century-old discourse that rendered Mayas as anachronistic subjects, the remnants of a bygone past rather than agents of a progressive future. To justify the mobilization of indigenous labor and dispossession of indigenous lands during the expansion of coffee production, state officials and coffee planters frequently recoded Maya resistance to capitalism, including their refusal to labor for meager wages and their fierce hold on subsistence lands, as evidence of an inherent cultural backwardness. Remarking on the coffee planters' difficulties in obtaining labor, one editorialist in the *Diario de Centro-América* asserted that Mayas stood "immobile on the road to progress."⁴ Maya opposition to coerced labor, then, was rendered not as a rational response to political and economic coercion but as a racialized condition: a natural indolence that supposedly arose from Guatemala's fertile landscape, which required little effort to produce basic necessities and had sheltered Mayas from the civilizing influences of commerce.⁵

³ Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821–1871* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 383.

⁴ Quoted in Steven Palmer, "A Liberal Discipline: Inventing Nations in Guatemala and Costa Rica, 1870–1900" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1990), 179.

⁵ This perspective is attributed to the Colombian Mariano Ospina, who was for a time a diplomat in Guatemala. This analysis can be found in various editorials, reports, and coffee planter complaints. See, for example, Antonio Batres Jáuregui, *Los indios su historia y su civilización* (Guatemala: Tipografía La Unión, 1894), 158–9. See also David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760–1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 174–6.

A report from the Ministry of Development explained the solution to this supposed lack of drive: “It is necessary to make the Indian work for his own good, for the good of business and for the country because as a result of his apathetic and stationary character and his few needs, he is satisfied with practically nothing.”⁶ At other times, Maya practices, including their religious and spiritual traditions, were lambasted as problematic legacies of colonialism or as barbaric and superstitious traditions that should have been replaced by science and reason. Together, these discourses represented Mayas as temporal anomalies who needed special kinds of intervention or who threatened the progressive march of the nation.

In response to the Unionist Club “Freedom of the Indian” petition to the National Assembly in April 1920, Guatemalan intellectuals and coffee planters offered familiar, and trenchant, opposition. In the country’s foremost newspaper, *El Diario de Centro-América*, an editorialist responded directly to the Freedom of the Indian Club’s petition. He argued that Mayas were lazy and superstitious, opposed to all forms of progress and thus not yet ready for self-governance and citizenship. Instead, Mayas required state tutelage, “so that in the future, as soon as possible, *el indio* may constitute a true citizen capable of exercising their rights and fulfilling their obligations to themselves, without any special imposition or regulation.”⁷ This dynamic of contemporaneity and anachronism also constituted a strategy of temporal containment. State officials, coffee planters, and others often attempted to manage a recalcitrant difference by presuming a totalizing historical movement that applied to all peoples and cultures, labeling certain forms of difference as primitive or anachronistic.⁸ The charge of anachronism – the claim that something is out of kilter with the present and really belongs to a superseded past – amounted to “somebody’s way of saying ‘not yet’ to somebody else,” of postponing the acquisition of sovereignty and self-government for those “not yet” advanced enough along the course of modernity.⁹ This out-of-time argument repeated a refrain that had long been the cornerstone of what I call the *politics of postponement*. In this political strategy, Mayas’ full participation as citizens in the nation was

⁶ Cited in McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 175.

⁷ Jorge García Salas, “Comentarios a la iniciativa del Club ‘La Libertad del Indio,’” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 1, 1920.

⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.

postponed until an undisclosed time in the future when they had finally shed their uncivilized ways and become modern, thereby allowing the state and coffee planters to set limits to democratic participation and deploy practices largely regarded as antiquated remnants of colonialism and feudalism, such as coerced labor.

The Q'eqchi's of the Unionist Club, however, directly inverted the politics of postponement and made their emancipation a linchpin in Guatemala's final liberation from colonialism and entrance into the modern world of independent nation-states. Q'eqchi' Unionists also claimed the ability to act in historical time, to overcome circumstances, and to create history.¹⁰ As with so many other early twentieth-century national democratic and revolutionary movements, Q'eqchi' Unionists envisioned themselves as historical actors who would finally put an end to the purgatory of history's waiting room. As the potential of a new future appeared on the horizon, Q'eqchi' Unionists, along with many other Guatemalans, also envisioned themselves as agents of revolutionary change, indeed history itself, even as some Q'eqchi's upended the modern notion of a universal, singular time altogether and spoke of times that included the enchanted worlds of gods and nonhumans. For some Q'eqchi's, other-than-human actors, including mountain spirits known as Tzuultaq'as, were also historical agents that directed the pace and quality of change.

Throughout the 1920s, rural Q'eqchi's in Alta Verapaz also took up the promise of a different world in ways that frequently exceeded the demands of the Q'eqchi' Unionists in Guatemala City. Rural Q'eqchi's invaded coffee plantations, uprooted coffee trees, and replaced them with subsistence crops, and they tore up labor contracts and declared themselves free. In doing so, they blended liberal ideas of virtue, autonomy, and self-determination with Q'eqchi' principles of solidarity, reciprocity, and subsistence production, ideas that derived from entirely different sets of principles, including notions of Maya spirit worlds. Through their varied actions, Q'eqchi's lived in a revolutionary time that was something akin to Walter Benjamin's *Jetzt-Zeit* (Now-Time) – that is, a time that diverged from nineteenth-century teleological and linear history. Instead,

¹⁰ See, for example, “El Comercio” *El Norte*, April 3, 1889. Historians of Latin America have argued that liberalism “privileged individuals who had attained an independence that depended upon financial means, age, and gender.” Sueann Caulfield, Sarah C. Chambers, and Lara Putnam, “Introduction,” in *Honor, Status, and Law in Modern Latin America*, ed. Sueann Caulfield, Sarah C. Chambers, and Lara Putnam (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 18.

these actors embraced a time that was disruptive and discontinuous with the state's practices of coerced labor and land dispossession and with liberal ideas of human agency. Most significantly, they refused to be relegated to an ahistoric passivity. Their efforts to bring into being other political modalities, however, were frequently met with violence and material retribution. When rural Q'eqchi's took matters into their own hands, the state and coffee planters squashed labor strikes and land invasions with brutal military force, foreshadowing Guatemala's bloody counterinsurgency war in the twentieth century.

This book is a history of how Alta Verapaz, and Guatemala more generally, came into being through the state and coffee planters' active disavowal of Maya political ontologies and the privileging of coffee capitalism and German settler immigration in the nineteenth century. While historians of Guatemala have been quick to identify the prevalence of exclusionary racism at the heart of Guatemalan history, often they have been less willing to uncover the many political projects and futures erased by their own insistent focus on liberalism's exclusions.¹¹ While attending to the potency of exclusionary liberalism and capitalist exploitation, this book centers the struggles among Altaverapacences over different political projects and imagined futures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These struggles reveal that Q'eqchi's continually unsettled and recast the dominant histories of liberal modernity. In this book, I use the term *unsettling* to refer to practices of unfixing, unfastening, and loosening, or depriving of fixity or quiet. In their efforts to upend the politics of postponement with calls for rights and freedom in the present, Mayas unfastened *who*, *when*, and *where* modernity was located. Q'eqchi's in Alta Verapaz continually unfixed the geographical and temporal location of modernity in the North Atlantic corridor or in the hands of a small class of local elites. Instead, they situated it in a distant and largely indigenous frontier region of a peripheral nation and in Q'eqchi's own hands. By highlighting ongoing practices of exclusion, violence, and coerced labor, Q'eqchi's also unfastened the historical myth that Guatemala's modernity had successfully left behind colonialism. Q'eqchi's reveal instead how the Guatemalan state reproduced colonial practices of coerced labor, racial hierarchy, and land dispossession long after the formal end of colonialism with Spain. When they brought together liberal

¹¹ The exceptions are Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

principles and Maya spirit worlds, they also unsettled disenchanted modernities that erased the agency of nonhuman actors and spirit worlds. By the mid-twentieth century, these dynamics culminated with unsettling modernity in another way: the literal removal of settlers, including the deportation of German citizens to concentration camps in the United States, the nationalization of German-owned properties, and the partial and temporary redistribution of these properties among rural laborers. Q'eqchi's thus challenged many commonly received narratives among historians then and now: the transition from slavery to freedom, the realization of state sovereignty over territorial space, the establishment of liberal democracy through representative government, and the disenchantment of political life. Through these multiple moments, Q'eqchi's demonstrated how the history of modernity braided the liberal promises of emancipation, free labor, and representative government with the heterogeneous pasts of conquest, coerced labor, dominion, and violent exclusion. However, these interwoven and hybrid modernities also grew out of local and specific textured histories and other Maya ontologies and practices.

FORGING KNOTS OF TIME: ALTA VERAPAZ

Alta Verapaz is often understood as an exceptional region that stood outside received Guatemalan narratives for its sixteenth-century history of “peaceful conquest” by the famous protector of the Indians, the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, and for its exceptional nineteenth-century history of German immigration and modernization through coffee production. Because of its history of peaceful pacification, Alta Verapaz was often seen as lacking the stains of colonialism and thus better positioned to uplift the nation in the journey toward progress. In the early twentieth century, some Guatemalan intellectuals, including Nobel Laureate Miguel Ángel Asturias, imagined Alta Verapaz as a laboratory for national development via coffee production and interracial unions between Germans and Q'eqchi's.¹² For others, however, Alta Verapaz's dual histories of peaceful conquest and German settlement

¹² In this sense, Alta Verapaz, like other exceptional regions such as São Paulo in Brazil or the Antioquia in Colombia, reveals a lot about how some Guatemalans imagined the nation. Yet, unlike São Paulo or Antioquia, Alta Verapaz never fulfilled its promise of racial whitening and national progress. Instead, Alta Verapaz remained a site of Guatemalan hopes and desires of a future yet to come. Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke

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illustrated the importance of understanding the region's nineteenth-century, post-independence histories of conquest and colonization as well as how these histories shaped Guatemala's descent into a bloody, genocidal civil war in the twentieth century. For example, Alfredo Cucul, José Angel Icó's great-nephew, argues that the peaceful conquest was a mere prelude to the real colonial story, which centered on nineteenth-century German settlers and the rise of coffee plantations.¹³ This other colonialism, Cucul argued, helps to explain Guatemala's extreme land inequality and racism. Like Cucul, this book asks us to consider the multiplicity of colonialisms, their historical specificity, and the nonlinear entanglements across time and space they helped to produce. From these varied and multivocal pasts, this book aims to narrate Alta Verapaz's history as marked by the uneven, unsettled, contingent histories that fold back on themselves forming knots of time.¹⁴ These "time-knots" are entanglements of life in time that defy linear sequences of modernity in which the past is fully overcome and consigned to history.¹⁵ These are stories filled not with rupture or continuity, but partial reinscriptions and modified displacements.

Alta Verapaz's experience of nineteenth-century capitalist expansion also differed from Guatemala's western highlands, which historical studies have tended to emphasize. In much of the western highlands, coffee production occurred on lands that were at a great distance from indigenous communities, whose lands were more suitable to corn than coffee. Thus, indigenous communities in the western highlands maintained their subsistence lands and were integrated into the world market in a different way. Mayas from the western highlands became migrant laborers who traveled to the coffee coast during planting and harvesting seasons. In contrast, Alta Verapaz's indigenous lands were often ideal for coffee production. For that reason, coffee expansion in Alta Verapaz occurred through the dispossession of some subsistence lands and labor was mobilized over much shorter distances. As a result, plantation worlds swallowed up entire indigenous communities. In Alta Verapaz, a sexual

University Press, 2015), and Nancy Appelbaum, *Muddied Waters: Race, Region, and Local History in Colombia, 1846–1948* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹³ Interview with the author, May 17, 2008.

¹⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ On time-knots, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Florencia E. Mallon, *Courage Tastes of Blood: The Mapuche Community of Nicolás Ailío and the Chilean State, 1906–2001* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

labor economy also emerged alongside the coffee economy in which elite Q'eqchi' women served as both cooks and concubines on plantations. Here, labor patterns more closely resembled the colonial hacienda or even sharecroppers in the American South. In addition, immigrant German coffee planters quickly established economic predominance in the late nineteenth century and forged a tightly knit diasporic community, even as they established intimate bonds with Q'eqchi' women and produced interracial families. Together, these factors ensured that Alta Verapaz had a different matrix of indigenous, state, and coffee planter relations than the western highlands region. K'iche Maya elites in western highlands city of Quetzaltenango, for example, positioned themselves as promoters of racial regeneration among the lower-class K'iches and distinguished themselves as modern through photography and urban associations. As with their K'iche counterparts, some Q'eqchi' patriarchs in Alta Verapaz positioned themselves as leaders of racial regeneration, but they also frequently sought to reproduce their positions as communal leaders by becoming coffee planters themselves and defending the lower classes from the worst effects of plantation capitalism, coerced labor, and land dispossession. Individuals such as José Ángel Icó and the Unionist Club emerged from Alta Verapaz's specific regional context of Q'eqchi' patriarchy and histories of coerced labor and land dispossession, and helps us to understand Guatemala's regional diversity.

As Altaverapacences struggled over distinct futures during the rise of coffee production in the second half of the nineteenth century, their historical struggles also shaped Guatemala's turbulent and important period between 1898 and 1954. As a result of their conflicting visions and dreams for modernity yet to come, many Altaverapacences experienced the early twentieth century as one of awaiting modernity's arrival.¹⁶ These deep desires for modernity and for the end of the politics of postponement also made postcolonial nations such as Guatemala particularly ripe for populism and revolution – modalities of governance that offered to end for the first time, if only temporarily, the purgatory of history's waiting room and to incorporate those who had long been excluded from modernity's present. When political and economic

¹⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. Bruce M. Knauft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 220–40; Michael Kirkpatrick, "Optics and the Culture of Modernity in Guatemala City since the Liberal Reforms" (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2013).