

ANCIENT EXCHANGE AND ITS SURVIVAL TO MODERN TIMES IN MEXICO

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When mankind learned to exchange things he had for things he needed, he had made a step forward in the world. In connection with this, he had to determine the value of his products, the value of the things he wanted, and convince the other person involved in the transaction of their relative values.

But he soon learned that many of the items he bartered were perishable, and would not keep. A cow had a relatively short lifetime; skins were not much better; some were bulky; it was hard to trade a bag of grain for half of a live sheep. Some medium of exchange had to be arrived at, that could be stored, be a satisfactory medium, a measure of value, and accepted as a standard among various peoples.

Shells were one of the first materials used to satisfy these requirements, and were used by the Chinese in the tenth century before Christ. Coins of precious metal as we know them were used in Asia Minor around the seventh century before Christ. Civilizations having much business to transact developed these mediums before other civilizations did, so it could not be said that development of the medium of exchange determined the level of culture of a people.

The Indians of Mexico used the barter system of trade, although they had items of a fixed value that were exchanged as money.

Exchange developed on a large scale when regional specialization led to exchange with other communities. For instance, the coast tribes had fish and shells; those in the tropics had seeds and fruits; while perhaps an interior tribe without these items made pottery.

Some of the items that were considered of sufficient value to warrant their use in transactions included pottery, foodstuffs, obsidian and stone tools, shells, gold ornaments,¹ cacao beans, salt, quills of gold dust, copper crescent-shaped knives, jade, silver, cotton cloth, tin pieces, and stone beads.²

These items were used both as barter, which usually occurred in a market place, and as tribute. As tribute, the King of Azcapotzalco received fish and sea fowl.³ Also, foodstuffs and raw materials, foreign and native to the Valley of Mexico, were used. These included warriors' and priests' costumes, mantles, pottery, and other items of craftsmanship.⁴

As the exchange of specialized items developed, there grew the need for a definite place of exchange. Gradually, centers were established where these items could be exchanged, and still exist in the markets. Barter was the only means of exchange. The value of the items use was established by its desirability and rarity. The cacao bean, called nibs or grains, of cacao, was used to balance the inequalities of exchange. This bean was distinct from the type used for the beverage.⁵ They were counted as *tzontles*, equal to four hundred cacao beans; twenty *tzontles* made one *jiquipil*, and three *jiquipils*, one *carga*.⁶ Frances Toor described the markets as follows:

Markets constituted the only pre-Conquest places for trade, so that every

product was found in them – from foodstuffs to the very finest of cloths and the most precious of jewels – each kept in a separate section as in our modern department stores. Everything that was for sale, even slaves, was sold in the market places. Markets were held on fixed days. Among the Aztecs they were made attractive with the celebration of games and fiestas, but also there were laws forcing the people to attend with their wares, and there was a fine for selling them on the way. But the people then, as now, enjoyed going to market; the early missionaries complained that they preferred attending markets to churches.⁷

The most precious items that they bartered was jade. It was their custom to place their most precious possession with a dead person, to allow him to have something of value to take into the next world. This jade was often used to bury with the deceased if the family could afford it. They gave more value to silver than to gold, because gold was more abundant.⁹ When Cortes searched for metal for artillery pieces, he discovered tin pieces circulating as money in several provinces, and learned that a tin mine was worked around Taxco.¹⁰

Around Oaxaca, prior to the coming of the Spaniards, the Indians made T-shaped scrapers from copper, called *Tajaderas*. These were very thin, and while fairly large, were the closest thing to coined money that the Aztecs had.¹¹ These *tajaderas* are still in abundance around Mitla, and may be purchased as souvenir items for about one peso each.

The cloth that was used to barter with was called *patolquachtli*. These were used to purchase items of little value, of immediate necessity.¹²

Golden quoits or *quauhtli* were used by the kings to make purchases of relatively high cost. It is also believed that they paid the gambling losses of the kings, and served as money to some extent.¹³

In the pre-Conquest days, the people were used to getting along on what they produced and exchanged. Usually each family had its own plot of ground which they worked. However, with the coming of the white men, and the plantation system, the henequen workers of Yucatan adapted themselves to working for other people. But they still were paid in goods under a system that was not too difficult for them to learn, considering their background.

There were tokens of nickel, copper, brass, or lead, usually ill-made, and not at all artistic, which were given to the employees for their labor. Some were even made by American concerns, like those which carried the name of the manufacturer, the American Railway Supply Company, of New York. Many were perforated, on the Chinese coin style, to facilitate carrying them. These tokens were known as *fichas*, *quitones*, and *contrasenas*.

When the henequen worker cleared an area of four hundred square meters, known as *mecates*, he was given a token (*ficha* or *contrasena*) representing one *mecate*, or one *mecate de Chapeo*, *chapeo* meaning the weeding and cleaning of the area.

Fichas, round and rectangular, of brass were used on the Santa Maria Chi hacienda, to pay the workers for cutting the leaves from the henequen plant. Thus, a round *ficha* represented 250 leaves, and a rectangular one 2,000 leaves.

The machines on the plantations were powered by wood-burning steam engines. For each stack of wood delivered which was two yards

long, two yards high, and one yard wide, called a *tarea*, the employee received a *contrasena*. Each employee scraping 100,000 leaves was given a *ficha* representing one hundred units. For the employees traveling on the electric cars to the plantations from their homes, passes were given them, as the one marked "VALE POR UN PASE A KANCABCHEN."

These tokens were supposed to be exchanged for national currency on the plantations, but sometimes they circulated in the adjoining towns as money. These *fichas* were used until a decree by the governor of Yucatan, on February 9, 1915, declared them illegal.¹⁴

The market is still the important place of barter, purchase, and sale. Granted, it has many innovations over the old markets — money circulates some, many new items are offered for sale, and Spanish is spoken as well as the Nahuatl language, but the essential charm of the Indian market still prevails.

It is still an important social period — some say that the Indians will not sell their wares on the way to market because if they do, they'll miss the social contact. Frances Toor has this to say about the matter:

There is a current story which tourists without realizing the psychological reason for it love to tell about some craftsmen who would not sell their wares even at double price before reaching the market place. When a native goes to market to sell something, he feels he has no reason for going if he has already accomplished his mission; also his refusing to sell before reaching the market may have some remote connection with the ancient law forbidding such transactions. Customs are often preserved without anyone remembering the reason for their existence. One asks a native why he does something and his laconic reply is, "Es costumbre," "It is the custom."¹⁵

Others declare that if the Indians sell on the way to the market, they are afraid that they will displease the market gods. Frances Toor continues:

The custom of fixed market days exists now and the natives prefer markets to stores; in fact, even though they may buy things in a store, they never own one. For them, the markets are not only commercial but also social institutions, where they go to meet old friends and to make new ones; to exchange gossip and to have a good time.

The present-day markets are departmentalized, especially the larger ones, where everything is sold, from small objects to supply the kitchen to clothes and personal adornments. The Mexicans, with their artistic sense of order and composition, arrange even the vegetables in beautiful patterns. In the markets where there are no stalls, there is an unwritten law which permits each vendor always to occupy the same place and all those selling the same things do it in groups; and even on the ground they arrange their wares artistically.¹⁶

Miguel Covarrubias describes marketing in Tehuantepec as follows:

Whether the men go to the fields or work in town, from dawn till sunset Tehuantepec becomes a woman's world. Everywhere there are busy women moving about, carrying heavy loads on their heads to and from the market, buying, selling, gossiping. All activity flows toward the market, and a simple glance at the products displayed affords a vivid picture of the economy of Tehuantepec. Everything the region produces is there in its traditional allotted place: rows of luscious fruits and vegetables, stands of meat and fish, fresh and dried, shrimps, cheese, butter, flowers of all sorts, long rolls of fresh banana leaf for wrapping, baskets of corn, piles of *totopos*, steaming baskets of tamales, turtle eggs, rows of onions, sandals, straw hats, mats, fiber nets, hammocks, black potter from Jichitan, green glazed plates from Oaxaca, sausages, gaily lacquered gourds from

Chiapas, embroidered blouses, food of all sorts, coffee and chocolate stands, and even a small table with a display of gold jewelry.

It is evident that only women sell in the markets; the meek and rare men seen there come from elsewhere; *serranos* from Oaxaca who sell fiber goods, and Huave who bring in fish, shrimps, and turtle eggs. Should a *tehuano* dare set a stand in the market, the sharp tongues of the women would quickly drive him away.¹⁷

The type of workmanship still distinguishes the origin of the market items.

In some parts of Mexico, cacao beans still are used as a medium of exchange, and their possession constitutes a measure of wealth.¹⁸

We are told that the custom of hiding money in the ground prevails, and no inducement whatsoever would persuade an Indian to entrust his money to another.¹⁹ The recent *aftosa* campaign in Mexico illustrates this point. The Indians who have had their cattle condemned not only do not understand why their cattle were killed, but find it difficult to handle the money that they are paid for the animal. Other animals are not the same to them, and they will not place their money in a bank, so spending it or hiding it are the only recourses left.

The present-day Mayans still use the cacao bean, small copper bells, precious stones, and rare shells for money.²⁰

The Tarahumaras of Chihuahua do not use national money for their exchange today, but a unit called a *chiva*. Relative values include one blanket equal to ten or twelve chivas; a hectolitre of corn equals eight chivas, etc. They rarely have occasion to exchange with themselves, but use this system when exchanging with white people or other tribes of Indians. Also, they exchange kilograms of salt for cattle.²¹

Thus, it can be seen that the white man has made a marked difference in the marketing methods of the Indians of Mexico, but at the same time, many of the original methods are kept, or operate side by side with the new innovations.

1 Valliant, Geogre C., *Aztecs of Mexico*. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc., 1944. p. 127.

2 Bancroft, Hubert Howe, *The Native Races*. San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft and Company, II (1883), 381-2.

3 Zamacois, don Nieto de, *Historia de Mexico*, Mexico: J. F. Parres y Cia., I (1876), 165.

4 Valliant, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

6 Soley Guell, Tomas, *Historia Monetaria de Costa Rica*. San Jose: Imprenta Nacional, 1926, p. 10.

7 Toor, Frances, *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways*. Mexico: Mexico Press, 1947. pp. 88-89.

8 Valliant, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

10 Bancroft, *op. cit.*, II (1883), 381-2.

11 *Loc. cit.*

12 Clavigero, Francisco Javier, *Historia Antigua de Mexico*. Mexico: Editorial Porrua, S.A., II (1945), 283.

13 Bancroft, *op. cit.*, II (1883), 381-2.

14 Romero de Terreros, Manuel, *Apostillas Historicas*. Mexico: Editorial Hispano Mexicana, 1945. pp. 229-32.

15 Toor, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

16 *Loc. cit.*

17 Covarrubias, Miguel, *Mexico South*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947. pp. 274-5.