

Alfonso Villa Rojas, from Chan Kom to Chicago

One day a young Yucatecan riding the bus to the village of Chan Kom, where he worked as a teacher, noticed some very tall, pale people who sounded like they were barking when they talked.

Alfonso Villa Rojas' curiosity was kindled by the experience, so he went to Chichén Itzá to investigate. He followed his innate talent for observing, which he would later exercise professionally. The people that had aroused his interest in 1930 were the Carnegie Institute team of archaeologists and artists working with Morley.¹

The group included Kitty Mackay, a friendly housekeeper and nurse, who saw Villa Rojas in the hot sun and invited him in for coffee and a meal. He accepted the coffee, but feared the peculiar food that she took out of tin cans. He waited until she wasn't looking to get rid of it, lest he be poisoned. These are some of the stories that Villa Rojas enjoys telling.

Kitty Mackay's warmth made it possible for Villa Rojas to come back to Chichén on numerous occasions. "It was close, only 20 kilometers," he says, without mentioning that there weren't any roads from Chan Kom to Chichén Itzá. Morley befriended him, introduced him to books about the Yucatan and invited him to use his

library. The soft-spoken Yucatecan was on his way to unraveling the mystery of the harsh-sounding pale people's language—English!

Robert Redfield, also with the Carnegie Institute, arrived in Chichén Itzá in 1932. Morley encouraged him to study the village of Chan Kom, a community near Mérida. He enthusiastically recommended Alfonso as a field assistant.

Villa Rojas began his career as an anthropologist observing and recording with Redfield in Chan Kom. A part-time activity grew into full-time work. It expanded from Chan Kom to Tusic, and other villages, including some where outsiders were not welcome unless they were sales agents. Redfield describes how Villa Rojas disguised himself as "a traveling peddler of cloth, medicine and gunpowder"² to gain entry into remote villages.

Villa Rojas gave up his role as a school teacher, but he never gave up teaching the people of the Yucatan. His work has always been two-fold: writing as an academic and solving problems for villagers as a teacher-anthropologist.³

Redfield's support was crucial in helping Villa Rojas obtain Carnegie Institute funding to do academic work at the University of Chicago. Villa Rojas' help was just as critical for Redfield in the field. Together they

documented the customs and beliefs of the Mayan people.

The historical setting

The events take place during a period of important changes in Mexico and especially in the Yucatan. When the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was over, artists and intellectuals worked together to create a new society.

Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a socialist governor of the Yucatan, later murdered, brought socialists such as Roberto Haberman—who in turn brought Bertram Wolfe—to the peninsula to participate in this work. He had the Constitution of 1917 translated into Mayan, so that the people would know the law and their rights.

One of the primary issues was restating the importance of Mexico's indigenous peoples. Anita Brenner was among the first to write about artists' turning away from the European influence in Mexico and towards the indigenous. She recorded religious customs and beliefs expressed by the people and their art. Her first book, *Idols Behind Altars*, originally conceived as a catalogue of Mexican art, illustrates the merging of the indigenous with Spanish elements. She recorded Nahuatl stories told by Luz Jiménez⁴ and later published them for children.

A longer version of this paper was presented by the author at the Society for Applied Anthropology meeting in Cancún.

¹ Sylvanus Morley led the Carnegie Institute's excavations at Chichén Itzá as early as 1923.

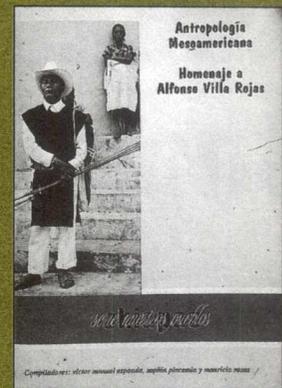
² Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*, p. 34.

³ Jacinto Arias, "Algunos recuerdos de los indios sobre Alfonso Villa Rojas" (Indians' Recollections of Alfonso Villa Rojas) in *Antropología Mesoamericana. Homenaje a Alfonso Villa Rojas*, p. 53.

⁴ Model for Diego Rivera, Jean Charlot and many others and later instructor of Nahuatl at the University of the Americas. Her stories are published in Anita Brenner, *The Boy Who Could Do Anything*. Connecticut, Shoestring Press, 1992.

**Antropología mesoamericana.
Homenaje a Alfonso Villa Rojas**

(Mesoamerican Anthropology.
A Tribute to Alfonso Villa Rojas)
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Chiapas and the Yucatan, home of the Maya, are the subject of many research projects. This book is based on the special meeting organized by students and colleagues of Alfonso Villa Rojas to honor this important Maya anthropologist. The published proceedings include translations of his work published in English in the 1940's.

The material is organized by topic, in six major areas: 1) Villa Rojas, 2) the Highland Peoples of Chiapas, 3) the Zoques, 4) the Maya, 5) Philosophy and Policy, and 6) Other.

About Villa Rojas

Four papers focus on Villa Rojas. A short biography is complemented by an impressive chronological bibliography that includes 110 entries. The real portrait is drawn by Jacinto Arias, who went back to the villages where Villa Rojas worked and lived to gather anecdotes from people who knew him. We learn that as a participant-observer, Villa Rojas did not hesitate to defend people when the occasion arose. He prevented Protestants from being expelled from one village and in another helped defend a man who had been treated unjustly.

Villa Rojas is one of the few anthropologists to contribute both to the community and to academic knowledge. His role as an anthropologist included that of rural school teacher, a friendly educator who participates in village life. While I was visiting Chan Kom with a group from the Society of Applied Anthropology, a nineteen-year-old woman came up to me and asked me to tape a message for him; he had given her a doll when she was a little girl. She knew he had been ill and could not travel, but she wanted to thank him.

The highland peoples: Tzeltals and Tzotzils

The first paper in this part of the book, "Kinship and *Nagualism* in a Tzeltal Community, Southeastern Mexico," was written by Alfonso Villa Rojas and published by the *American Anthropologist* in 1947. Manuel Jiménez Castillo of UNAM's Institute of Anthropological Research has translated it into Spanish and contributed a brief introduction.

Villa Rojas began his work with the Tzeltals in 1938. He went to live in the area in 1942 and worked with Robert Redfield, who had received a grant from the Carnegie Institute of Washington. The paper was published in English and the field notes were microfilmed by the University of Chicago. The information which many Mexicans read in English is finally available in Spanish.

The other contributions in this section are by prominent anthropologists who were introduced to Chiapas by Villa Rojas. Some are descriptive, while others look at change over a period of time, using Villa Rojas' material as a reference.

Zoques and Maya

The papers included in these sections deal with issues that have been examined, discussed and debated in the literature of the field. They include mythology, archaeology, geography, power structures, medical information, identity and survival.

Gertrudis Duby Blom contributes a plea for the survival of the Lacandon people. Although she is not a "trained anthropologist," she spent forty years living in the area with her husband and welcomed many social scientists to their home-hostel, known as "Na Bolom." Her first encounter with Villa Rojas took place on a

stormy night, when he and his wife invited her in for coffee. It was the first of many long conversations, some by the fireplace in "Na Bolom."

Blom describes witnessing ritual ceremonies focused on rain, fertility and personal requests. Her recollections include the transition from indigenous religion to Catholicism and then to Protestantism. The process of exploiting tropical woods brought disease and with it the death of the great chief and the loss of information on tribal traditions. Her vivid description of the arrival of civilization and with it the destruction of forests is a moving plea to learn from these events. She closes with a quote from Chan K'in, the wise octogenarian from Naha, who said: "When a tree falls in the jungle, a star falls from heaven."

Philosophy, government policy and other topics

Four papers were presented that discuss the philosophy behind government policies for indigenous peoples: *indigenismo*. The issues, very much alive today, focus on integrating native peoples into contemporary lifestyles. Villa Rojas identifies language and dress as priorities. Acquiring a working knowledge of the Spanish language, without losing the native tongue, requires a delicate balance. One of the papers addresses educational issues, including the problems that arise in hostels that board students from villages in a given area. Others deal with specific time periods in recent years.

The last section includes work that is related to Villa Rojas' interests but does not fit into the above categories. One deals with the controversy with Paul Kirchhoff about the dissemination of ideas from Asia to America. Another discusses the advantages of being an anthropologist. Lucía Aranda compares a Maya ceremony with one in the Huasteca region.

The diversity of subjects presented illustrates the wide scope of Villa Rojas' work. His contributions are both as a scholar and as an extraordinary field worker. The conference and book are an homage to Villa Rojas in appreciation for his enrichment of the field and its professionals.

Brenner travelled to Chichén Itzá in 1927 with her roommate, Lucy Knox, to visit their friends Jean Charlot⁵ and Lowell Houser, artists working with Morley. Her journal says:

It is about nine thirty in the morning and so hot that one is clammy in the shade.

Nevertheless, I don't mind it, and out on the white roads, with dark glasses to shut out some of the glare, tramping along and drip drip dripping, I love it and so does Lucy. It is very much like Texas in the summer time....

We've been here a week.... One breakfasts between five-thirty and six, and everybody scatters between six and seven. At eight it is like eleven or twelve o'clock in the morning elsewhere.

At eleven thirty the tocsin sounds for lunch. Siesta until two, then back to work until tea time, that is, of course, five. Dinner at

six, and then dancing, or bridge, or walking, or whatever it may be. People scatter or fall into little groups of cliques, if they partake of recreation at all, and these cliques hold throughout. One dresses for dinner, white trousers are the order of the day. At table, when the daily paper comes, Morley reads out choice bits, translating literally, providing much amusement for the familia....

Earl Morris is also admirable. He is Scotch-looking, with large blue eyes which look as if they were accustomed to looking always upon wide space...what can you say about a man who has spent most of his life in the desert, digging.... Ann, his wife, is well-described by both Lowell and Jean as brittle, fragile, glittering.... We have less contact with the others, who are —Kitty Mackay, the housekeeper, a gay and light-footed Irishwoman, in spite of her bulk, and capacious

emotionally. Even the parrots love her, and she is the mamacita [loving mother] of the Indians. There is Karl U. Ruppert, a long Blue-clad person, much like a university prof. of the younger kind who form nuclei of poets and intellectuals in their schools around them.... Of women, there is Morley's fiancée, Frances Rhodes, a little dark girl, whom Lowell thinks has something of the demure and the shrew; her sister Dorothy, also a little dark girl, but more romantic, much more of a dreamer and with the air of one who has just been emerging from a hot-house.... Their chaperone, a Mrs. Thornton, is like hundreds of slim and normally blonde married women of those who run in "sets" —bridge and tea and newest book stuff. She is the kind of person I visualize in a dressing gown. Nina Piatt, Morley's secretary, is also little and dark (that's his style, evidently), very young,

⁵ See article in our previous issue on the retrospective exhibit of Charlot's work.

amiable, a little aloof due, thinks Lowell, to her youth and inexperience —inferiority complex stuff easily acquired in a highly specialized crowd like this.... At intervals, there are Dr. and Mrs. Geo Williams, who metabolize and measure heads and all that sort of thing. They are focused entirely on their work, but in a disagreeable German way of seeing people no longer as anything but a set of measurements, and acting accordingly, a thing much resented by whomever happens to be subjected to it. We live scattered around the central building, the old main building of the hacienda, which is the dining room, dancing room, library and where Morley is living now, also Miss Mackay and Nina. The old despacho [office] of the hacienda is the office. The Japanese butlers and so forth live someplace near the hacienda, which also contains kitchen and bodega [warehouse]. The old chapel of the hacienda, a short way down the road, is now Morley's house, as pretty a little place as could be had, with a patio, hammocks, and all the rest of the love-bird stuff.⁶

Villa Rojas recalls his admiration for the *indigenista* [pro-Indian] position Brenner put forward in her writing. The artistic expression of the indigenous population was recognized. Public art, murals and publications such as *El Machete*⁷ posted on the walls, with vivid illustrations —this was the order of the day. Those Mexicans who could not read and write were part of the population that the artists sought to reach. Brown-skinned Mexicans became “visible” in the avant-garde

works of artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jean Charlot, to mention only the best known.

The web of connections among anthropologists

People came from Europe and the United States to build a new society. Mexicans who studied abroad put new ideas into practice. Manuel Gamio —a Franz Boas Ph.D. from Columbia University— was among the first to transform “cultural” anthropology into what Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán calls “living anthropology.”⁸ The role of the professional went beyond observing and recording; it involved facilitating change so that indigenous peoples could participate in the mainstream, without losing their identity.

The role of anthropology in the United States was primarily historical, limited to observing and recording traditions and beliefs from the past. Boas introduced scientific elements into the study of people and culture, and his results are a key element in fighting racism.

The complex web of relationships among intellectuals involves issues of race, politics and gender. Women acting as catalysts often cut across divisions of race and politics. Boas, a German pacifist, was in contact with Zelia Nuttall, an American archaeologist who moved to Mexico in 1908.⁹ Although the written documentation of Boas’ role in Mexico is scant, we know he was in Mexico as early as 1911, when he founded the International School of

American Archaeology and Ethnology, which he directed.¹⁰

Encouraged by Nuttall, Gamio was invited by Boas to come to New York and work towards a graduate degree at Columbia University. He sailed for New York in 1909¹¹ with a scholarship from the Mexican government. When he returned, he brought back his own version of Boas’ anti-racist philosophy.

Villa Rojas’ route into a professional relationship with intellectuals in the United States was direct. He responded to Kitty Mackay’s warm gesture and delved into a library which led to bringing change to the Maya people.

Villa Rojas crystallizes the shared vision of U.S. and Mexican anthropologists. He became a major contributor to his field, with academic and field work that both improved the living conditions of the people of the Yucatan and Chiapas, and expanded understanding of their wisdom and knowledge.

Although Villa Rojas dropped the formal title and role of a school teacher, what he did, while listening and learning, was to teach, lead and defend the Maya people so that they could choose their own path to integrate into the 20th century with dignity.

He, and others such as Gamio and Aguirre Beltrán, were the intellectual brigade, the pioneers who brought ideas to the people who today have formed the Zapatista Army, struggling for the right to self-rule and the benefits of education and medical care **M**

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⁶ Anita Brenner, unpublished journal; May 4, 1927.

⁷ See Alicia Azuela, “*El Machete* and *Frente a Frente*, Art Committed to Social Justice in Mexico,” *Art Journal*, Spring 1993.

⁸ Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El proceso de aculturación y el cambio sociocultural en México* (The Acculturation Process and Socio-Cultural Change in Mexico), p. 194.

⁹ Angeles González Gamio, *Manuel Gamio, una lucha sin final* (Manuel Gamio, A Struggle with No End). Mexico City, UNAM, 1987, p. 30. There is a record of contact between Boas and Nuttall as early as 1901. See Angeles González Gamio, *Lucha sin fin* (Struggle Without End), p. 31.

¹⁰ Aguirre Beltrán, p. 187; and Melville J. Herskovits, *Franz Boas, The Science of Man in the Making*. New York and London, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953, p. 61.

¹¹ Angeles González Gamio, p. 31.