

# The utopian Guillermo Bonfil Batalla

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**A** professional anthropologist, and a full-time cultural and Latin American theorist and defender of ethnic minorities, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1935-1991) will be sorely missed in the intellectual world, as he will be too in the personal world. He was a close friend, a lively personality, a caustic conversationalist, and a great dancer of jarabes, rumbas and danzons. One listened to music with him as if it were a ritual; with opera no one was allowed to breathe a word, but the experience was equally ritualistic if one were listening to María Betania or Milton Nascimento.

He wrote stories in rich and unpretentious prose, and loved to read poetry aloud. He could share the charm of living with Darcy Ribeiro and Juan O'Gorman, with carpenters, artisans or "conchero" dancers. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, who would burst out in peals of laughter, whose company was so pleasant... his parting has left a deep sense of loss among his friends and old schoolmates.

At the National School of Anthropology and History he received a master's degree in anthropological science, specializing in ethnology. His thesis, *Diagnóstico del hambre en Sudzal, Yucatán* (A Diagnosis of Hunger in Sudzal, Yucatán), published by the INAH in 1962, indicated what was to be the direction of Bonfil's professional path. He was extremely sensitive to the problems of the marginalized and undernourished population of the henequen-growing region.

He obtained his doctorate in Anthropology from the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, National University of Mexico (UNAM). His thesis *Cholula. La ciudad sagrada en la era industrial* (Cholula, The Sacred City in the Industrial Age), directed by the scholar Paul Kirchhof, was published in 1973 by the UNAM's Institute for Historical Research, where Bonfil had worked as a researcher from 1967 to 1972.

Bonfil Batalla did his ethnological work at a time when field work was the principal type of research. The

script that Bonfil Batalla wrote for the film *Los Amuzgos* in 1962 was a product of field work and his interest in film as a vehicle for showing how poorer sectors of society really live. Thomas Stanford, a researcher of ethnic music, and Alfonso Muñoz were also part of the team. In 1965, with Arturo Warman, who did the soundtrack, the recording and the research and Alfonso Muñoz and Víctor Anteo, he filmed *El es Dios* (*He is God*), a documentary on the lives and work of the dancers known as "concheros". This film, a moving portrait of these people dedicated to ritual dancing who were little-known up to that time, was highly commended at the Folk Festival in Florence, and received the Silver Goddess from the Mexican Association of Film Critics in 1967.

In the early 70's, he published other results of his fieldwork, the article "Introduction to the Cycle of Lenten Festivals in Cuautla, Morelos" and another on the *Graniceros* of Tepetlixpa, State of Mexico, in which he describes the strange manner of these "weather workers" to invoke the angels to fend off rain and hail.

While he was staying with Alejo, a *Granicero* who had been struck by lightning three times, in the sacred caves at the foot of the volcanoes, Bonfil used a technique known in ethnology as "participative observation": he took part in night-long sessions and offerings to the Holy Cross, and in *limpias* (spiritual cleansings) to ward off evil. At that time, working with Arturo Warman and Alfonso Muñoz, he found that a type of fortune telling which uses grains of corn, still survives in Tepetlixpa from Pre-Hispanic times.

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's theoretical work did not lag behind his ethnographical research. In 1967 he wrote an article on "Imperialism and National Culture," and in 1970, with Mercedes Olivera, Arturo Warman, Enrique Valencia, and Margarita Nolasco he published a book that was to become a manifesto of the new anthropology which went beyond the old functionalism-culturism type. Bonfil's article is titled "From the Revolution's Defence of the Indian Population to Critical Anthropology." The

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title of the whole book is *De eso que llaman Antropología Mexicana (About What They Call Mexican Anthropology)*.

At that time Guillermo Bonfil Batalla began to speak out courageously, although he was not the only one to do so. Ethnic questions became the linchpin of his intellectual concerns. In 1972 he wrote a brilliant article, "The concept of The Indian in America: A Category of the Colonial Situation." This article, a critical view of the realities of Indian life, came from a consciously politicized position:

The notion of the Indian is in fact a supra-ethnic category that does not denote any specific characteristics of the communities it purports to describe, but rather a particular relationship between them and other sectors of the wider social system of which the Indians are part. The notion of Indian describes the condition of being colonized, and necessarily refers to the colonial relationship.

He himself pointed out that the initial plan for this proposal, which was new in the field of anthropology, grew out of his intense academic and teaching activity, particularly from the seminars he directed at the National Museum of Río de Janeiro in 1970 and at the UNAM and the Ibero-American University in 1971, and the Conference on Inter-ethnic Frictions in South America that took place in Barbados, also in 1971.

It was there that he and anthropologists Alicia Barabas, Miguel Bartolomé, Stéfano Varese, and several Indian intellectuals, wrote and published the historic manifesto known as the Barbados Declaration. This marked the emergence of Bonfil Batalla as a new anthropologist, dedicating his academic and political work to the struggles of ethnic groups to speak out for themselves. His thought, always radical and sometimes utopian, was enriched by the Barbados Group, and others who thought as he did such as his colleague and close friend Salomón Nahmad.

His unyielding defence of ethnic minorities, his vision of a Mexico reflecting its deep Mesoamerican roots and his capacity to synthesize our history and culture are all in one of his most recent books, *México Profundo (Grass-roots Mexico)*, an original and polemic work that has jarred various sectors of society and the academic world.

In *México Profundo*, Bonfil Batalla makes two claims. First, that Mexicans need to recognize Mexico's cultural and ethnic diversity and must organize society based on this recognition, and secondly, that such a plural society is only viable to the extent that the dominant sectors of

Mexican society can change their mentality and acknowledge the legitimacy of this plurality.

In this book Guillermo Bonfil Batalla bequeathed to us the search for a new society, a society that adapts itself to make room for 12 million people speaking 56 different languages, whose views of the cosmos and of life are different from ours, but not any less worthy of respect. In this sense, Bonfil Batalla was not a romantic, he was a utopian. A utopia which, like Lamartine's, is thoroughly possible.

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's work encompassed other dimensions and frames of mind.

For example, he was a remarkable administrator and civil servant. From 1972 to 1976 he was Director General of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. His administration was characterized by a strong drive to protect and restore the nation's cultural heritage, by its encouragement to historical research, and by the importance it attached to museums, the maintenance and diffusion of their collections and their values, and their accessibility to school children.

From 1976 to 1980 Guillermo Bonfil Batalla was Director General of the National Institute for Anthropology and History's Center for Research and Advanced Studies, at the same time heading the Ethnic Studies Seminar. From 1981 to 1985 he was Director of the Museum for Folk Culture which grew out of new ideas which worked well with an older project started by Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Leonel Durán, old school mates of his from the National School of Anthropology and History, and founders of the School of Popular Culture, another institution which Bonfil Batalla had directed.

At the time of his death Bonfil Batalla headed the Seminar on Mexican Culture, part of the National Council for Culture and the Arts, where he organized important research work and academic conferences. He was also a member of the Commission for the Quincentennial, in which his input was considered very valuable, and a consulting member of the National Human Rights Commission.

The work and intellectual life of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla went beyond what a mere summary can express: teacher, researcher, civil servant in cultural and academic institutions, and adviser for national and international projects. During his life he was widely recognized, receiving awards from the governments of France and the German Democratic Republic, and the *Manuel Gamio* award given for outstanding work for the cause of Indigenous communities. From Guillermo Bonfil Batalla the social sciences inherit a truly valuable legacy. 