



CHRISTIANITY CHANGED THE IDENTITY OF THE INDIGENOUS INHABITANTS OF GUAINÍA

The communities of this Colombian Department mostly practice an evangelical Christianity. Some anthropologists interpret this as a case of cultural loss. For the indigenous people, the adoption of Christianity is regarded as a positive change in their relations with agricultural colonists and the State. Who is right?

By: Juliana Vergara Agómez
Photos: Alberto Sierra, Esteban Rozo

The past and present of the native inhabitants of the Colombian Amazon cannot be understood without taking into account the processes of evangelization and colonization which have reshaped these societies. As in all human societies, there are nuances, variables and very complex relations which have been built up over centuries. To understand a little more of this reality, Esteban Rozo, Professor of Anthropology at the School of Human Sciences of the Universidad del Rosario, has been carrying out several anthropological and historical studies, mainly in the Departments of Guainía and Vaupés.

He became interested in this subject when he was doing field work in Guainía in 2005 at a time when he was working on a project on indigenous political organizations. There, he began to see the social and political importance of the indigenous evangelical churches. It was then that he witnessed the process of a mass conversion to evangelical Christianity which involved most of the Department's indigenous population. That and other parallel processes, like the establishment of the Commissariat in 1965, and the differences and similarities between the

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The racism of White men and mestizos still exists in Guainía and a certain empowerment by evangelization gives the victims a chance to defend themselves against it.



Catholic and evangelical missionaries there, are the subject he studies, which has resulted in a number of publications.

Rozo began by showing that this could not simply be regarded as a phenomenon of cultural loss. He explains that the evangelical churches in Guainía are autonomous, and their followers speak their own language and have their own pastors. Its present situation is the result of a new cultural configuration, in which its practitioners do not see any contradiction between simultaneously asserting their indigenous and evangelical identities. He refers to an indigenous Christianity which causes a special relationship with modernity and indigenous practices that are considered to be traditional. The indigenous evangelical Christians do not “*mambear*” (consume coca leaves) or smoke or drink alcohol, nor do they celebrate their traditional fiestas.

When seen from without, the changes associated with their conversion to Christianity are thought of in a negative way. As Rozo points out, “in the imaginary there is the idea that for an indigenous person to be really indigenous, he or she must be less modern, more scantily dressed and live in a more remote place.” The idea that they are children who have to be cared for persists, when in reality they are free beings with rights and the autonomy to make their own decisions.

How do you notice the changes? Many communities in Guainía have their own church and have changed their internal political organization. There are two heads of each community: The captain (*capitán*), a powerful figure who emerged in the epoch when wild rubber was exploited in the region and is responsible for the community’s relations with the State, and the pastor, the spiritual and moral leader. In the face of external actors, like miners, they are responsible for establishing the norms of coexistence, like the prohibition of alcohol and prostitution, in exchange for which they permit such actors to exploit their natural resources and provide jobs for the men of the community.

But while anthropologists have traditionally had a negative view of such arrangements, the indigenous inhabitants themselves see it in a different way, as Rozo has been able to show. What they feel is that they are building new relationships with the colonizers and *blancos* (white men), since the latter two cannot treat them as savages. They defend their position, emphasizing that evangelization “civilized” them and put them on the same level as those external actors, because they now know how to read and write in their own languages, but also know basic mathematics,





which enables them to do business with those outsiders and defend their interests.

It all began with a woman

In an article entitled *Between rupture and continuity. The politics of conversion in the Colombian Amazon*, Esteban Rozo, who has a doctorate in Anthropology and History, tells how the process of converting the indigenous communities began in the 1940's with the arrival of a U.S. missionary, Sophie Muller, who penetrated these remote territories, learned several native languages and then translated the New Testament into them. She thus taught the indigenous peoples to read and write in their own languages. "She won the race with the Catholics," he says.

The Catholic missionaries, specifically the Montfort Fathers, many of them French, arrived in the region within the framework of an Agreement (*Convenio de Misiones*) between the Colombian State and the Vatican that was signed in 1902. Their official status was as "protectors of the indigenous peoples": They were also sent to exercise the State's sovereignty over a vast region then known as the "National Territories". Their work of evangelization was a little more tolerant of the traditional practices of the indigenous inhabitants of the region. They took charge of the education of children and youngsters in boarding schools and orphanages, while the evangelicals focused more on the adults. The Catholic missionaries settled in Vaupés, while the evangelical ones settled in Guainía.

Rather than defending one or another of the two missionary groups, Rozo seeks to analyze the role of Christianity in what were then known as the National Territories. He stresses that it had a much more ambiguous effect than is usually recognized, one which has to be investigated and analyzed because "it forces us to rethink the relations between the indigenous communities



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and the State," taking into account the heterogeneous experiences of the different ethnic groups with the political-administrative institutions and their representatives.

Racism persists

This researcher also points out that stereotypes about the indigenous peoples still persist, like the notion that they are lazy or their women are an easy sexual prey for White men. The racism of White men and *mestizos* (those of mixed blood) still exists in Guainía and their empowerment by means of evangelization offers the indigenous people a way to defend themselves. For those reasons, Rozo believes that the key is to intervene in negative imaginaries and stereotypes which deny the humanity of the indigenous inhabitants of the region. "We have to start with a fundamental acknowledgment of the truth that races only exist as social facts, not as a biological one," he vehemently insists.

That is why it is important to understand the social and political context of racism, as well as its new forms of expression, which are more subtle, but just as harmful. It is likewise essential to think about how the peripheral and marginal regions of the country have been shaped, employing a more complex view of colonization and evangelization as processes which have been crucial in the configuration of the nation and its indigenous societies. ■