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p. 127-132

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Family and Fertility in Amatenango (Chiapas), 1785-1816[1]

The French model of family reconstitution has always been difficult to apply in Latin American historical research.[2] The high rate of illegitimacy, the quality of the local parish registers, the intensity of geographic mobility of the American populations, and sometimes even the sheer size of the parishes, have made the task of reconstruction a difficult one.[3] Thus most of the historical demographic research which has been undertaken has been of the macro-analytical kind. Parish registers have been used to reconstruct total population and crude death and birth figures, or to look at patterns of births and deaths by seasonality or in relation to specific events.[4]

There is one group within the American population, however, for which rates of illegitimacy were low and for whom migration was not a serious concern. This was the stable rural Indian population, especially in the more isolated regions of colonial Spanish America. Although migration was a constant part of the rural world, migrations from such culturally homogeneous and isolated communities were usually temporary. Residence was thus recognized as one's trditional community and was so recorded. Marriage in such relatively closed communities was common and illegitimacy rates low.

For all of these reasons small, well-defined Indian communities in relatively isolated farming regions can provide the necessary conditions for which historical family reconstruction methods can be used to determine the vital rates of past American populations. Such a community is the Tzeltal-speaking pueblo of Amatenango in the province of Chiapas, which was part of the Audiencia of Guatemala in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Through a fortuitous series of accidents the birth, death, and marriage registers of this isolated farming community of Mayan-speaking Indians have survived intact for the late colonial period. In an 1810 *padrón de indios*, local census officials recorded some 121 married males and a total of 138 *tributarios*, or men from the ages of 15 to 50 years. Thus the town in this period consisted of between 550 and 700 persons, depending on the

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[2]The reconstruction of demographic indices through the use of parish registers to reconstruct historical families was elaborated in Louis Henry, *Manuel de démographie historique* (Geneva and Paris, 1967).

[3]One study found that close to half the births in the city of Guadalajara in the late seventeenth century were illegitimate: Thomas Calvo, "Concubinato y mestizaje en el medio urbano: el caso de Guadalajara en el siglo XVII", *Revista de Indias*, 44 (1984); while another suggested that under-registration of births made the task extraordinarily difficult: Cecilia Andrea Rabell, "Demografía histórica y crítica estadística: evaluación del subregistro de defunciones infantiles en los libros parroquiales de San Luis de la Paz, México, 1735-1799", *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, [vol.] (Enero-Marzo, 1976). On the unusually large size of the central Mexican parishes see Elsa Malvido, "Tula, problemas técnicos de las reconstrucciones familiares, 1592-1813", *Cuicuilco*, 1 (Junio, 1980), p. 27.

[4]See, for example, the articles of Elsa Malvido, "Factores de despoblación y de reposición de la población de Cholula (1614-1810)", *Historia Mexicana*, 23 (1973), and "El abandono de los hijos - una forma de control del tamaño de la familia y del trabajo indígena - Tula (1683-1730)", *Historia Mexicana*, 39 (1980); as well as Claude Morin, *Santa Inés Zacatelco (1646-1812), Contribución a la demografía histórica de México Colonial* (Mexico City, 1973). Also see Morin's useful introduction to the use of Mexican colonial parish registers in "Los libros parroquiales como fuente para la historia demográfica y social novohispana", *Historia Mexicana*, 21 (1972).

multiplier adopted for measuring the ratio of tributarios to total population.[5] This is manageable size quite comparable to small European farming communities, and about a tenth the size of a typical contemporary central Mexican parish.[6] On the basis of this census of tributarios an initial and still incomplete listing of families was made. The existence of complete parish registers for this same period allowed me to record all births, deaths, and marriages which took place in the community for the generation of 1810.[7] From these separate items, taken over a forty-year period between 1780 and 1820, I was able to reconstruct the demographic histories of 319 Indian marriages in the community, of which 217 were couples with at least one child already born by 1816.[8] I was thus able to reconstruct complete histories of all births and deaths which occurred in some five-sixths of the tributario families found in the padrón listing (or 100 out of 121 on the list), as well as complete histories of some 219 earlier and later families.

These reconstructed family histories indicate that the Tzeltal speaking Indian peasant women of Amatenango married at an unusually young age and had rather high marital fertility rates for a population found within Western European and American colonial societies in this period. The average age of women at marriage was 16.8 years (for 228 women),[9] quite young by 18th- and early 19th-century standards. In rural England in the 1750-1799 period, for example, women on average married at 25.7 years of age, which represented a decline from earlier decades. These mean ages, moreover, well reflected the experience for the overwhelming majority of women. Thus three-quarters of the Amatenango women were married by 17, and fully 90% by age 20 (see table 1). By contrast, only two-thirds of English women were married by the time they reached 26 years of age, and it took until 30 years before 90% of them were married.[10] In the Normandie community of Crulai, the average woman married at 24.1 years in the period 1674-1742.[11] In a recent survey of some 38 family reconstitution studies, mostly dealing with peasant populations in various parts of France in the 18th century, the average age of women at marrage was found to be 25.7 years, again highlighting the unusual pattern of very early marriages revealed in the eighteenth-century Chiapas data.[12]

Table 1:
Age of Amatenango Women at Marriage, 1780-1820

Age of Women (in years)	Number	Comulative Pct.
11	3	1.3%

[5]Archivo General de Guatemala, A3.16, legajo 306, expediente 4126, "Lista de tributarios del pueblo de Amatenango existentes en este año de 1810". In fact a clerical census of 1778 listed the community with 571 persons in 159 households; see Robert Wasserstrom, *Class and Society in Central Chiapas* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 97.

[6]Elsa Malvido "Tula, problemas técnicos", p. 27.

[7]The parish registers are from the Arcivho General Eclesiástico de la Diócesis de Chiapas, Pueblo de San Francisco Amatenango, Libros de Bautismos, 1759-1791 and 1791-1817; Libros de Difuntos, 1727-1790 and 1790-1810; Libros de Matrimonios, 1772-1798, 1798-1807, and 1808-1816. All of these are contained in the microfilm collection of the Museo de Antropología (México), Fondo de Microfotografía, Serie Chiapas, rollos 4, 5, 6, 19.

[8]Of the 102 marriages which listed no children, 38 were contracted from 1813 onward and could conceivably have produced no children by 1816. Another twelve women who had contracted marriage did not have any children because of their own death before the age of 19, or because they died within three years of being married. This leaves 52 marriages (or 16 porcent of the total) who either had no children, migrated out of the community during their period of reproduction, or whose registrations are missing. Another 28 percent of the women who did have at least one child had no birth certificates which could be found or confirmed and their ages at marriage and first birth could thus not be established.

[9]The average age at marriage for the 215, single women contracting marriage for the first time was 16.1 years.

[10]E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Scofield, "English Population History from Family Reconstitution: Summary Results, 1600-1799", *Population Studies*, 37 (1983), pp. 162, 164.

[11]E. Gautier and L. Henry, *La population de Crulai, paroise normande* (Paris, 1958), p. 84.

[12]Daniel Scott Smith, "A Homeostatic Demographic Regime: Patterns in West European Family Reconstitution Studies", in Ronald D. Lee, ed., *Population Patterns in the Past* (New York, 1977), p. 23.

12	4	5.3
13	20	14.0
14	27	25.9
15	40	43.4
16	32	57.5
17	38	74.1
18	19	82.5
19	15	89.0
20	3	90.4
21	8	93.9
22	3	95.2
23	4	96.9
24	2	97.8
25	2	98.7
26		
27	2	99.6
28	1	100.0%
TOTAL	228	

Source: For this and all following tables, see note 4.

So young were these Amatenango brides by contemporary European standards that they probably entered upon childbearing as soon as was biologically possible for an 18th-century population. While it is impossible from the available data to calculate accurately the age of menarche, or the period of initial post-menstruation adolescent infertility for these Chiapas women, it would appear from the experience of other historical populations of the period that this was probably the case. Mid-19th-century U.S. Black slave women, probably the best studied historical population on this question, reached the age of menarche at an estimated 15 years of age and had an initial period of infertility of some 3 years, which meant that such women on average could have had their first child at 18 years of age.[13]

The birth of the first child among Amatenango women in the 1780-1820 period occurred 2 years and 3 months after marriage (for the 166 mothers whose date of first parturition is known). This meant that the mean age of mothers at the birth of their first child was 19.1 years (with the mode at 18.5 years). This was probably close to the natural limit of fecundity of these poorly nourished peasant women. Clearly there were no significant social restraints practiced in Amatenango which limited the beginnings of fecundity for the women in the community. In early 18th-century France, where women married later than in Amatenango, the time between marriage and first parturition was only 13.9 months.[14]

This combination of marriage at or close to menarche and a normal subsequent temporary adolescent infecundity period also explains the low level of pre-marital sexual activity recorded in the marital birth figures. For legally married Tzeltal mothers, the number of pre-marital conceptions were few. Of the 157 first births which are known in relationship to the date of the mother's age at marriage, only 12 (or 7.6%) were born 7 months or less from the time of the marriage. The level for such premarital conceptions in early 18th-century Crulai was almost double this figure, or 14.5%.[15]

[13]James Trussel and Richard Steckel, "The Age of Slaves at Menarche and their First Birth", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 8 (1978), p. 594.
[14]Henry, *Manuel*, p. 102.
[15]*Ibid.*, p. 104.

While early marriage may have been the norm for the women of the community, this was not quite the case for the men. The men of Amatenango were typically older than their spouses. This age difference is usually associated with sharp wealth differences among men, but in this case may possibly be related to delayed male access to the limited agricultural resources available in this poor community. On average, the men tended to be three years older than their wives (or aged 19.6 years for the 216 men whose birth dates were known).[16] This would suggest that men were delaying marriage somewhat until they could inherit or obtain sufficient resources to marry, which in this case must have been access to fertile lands. It would thus appear that men were forced to delay their marriages until they could provide an income for their families, no matter what the rule of post-marriage residence may have been.

Once the first child was born, there was a steady conception of childeren, the average spacing between children on the order of 36.3 months (see table 2). This suggests that the women of Amatenango were nursing beyond the first year of the newborn child. In societies where nursing is shorter or only part-time and no artificial contraception is practiced, the average spacing between children is around 20 months. The extra 16 months between Chiapas births most likely represents lactationally caused infecundity due to full time nursing by Amatenango mothers. Herbal contraceptives, post partum sexual taboos, or even abandonment,[17] may have also been operative, but the experience of contemporary Guatemalan women studied by demographers shows that on average 14.3 months of added infertility was due to intense lactation by peasant women, a figure close to that found among 18th-century Amatenango births.[18] Of course, 18th-century European peasant women were also engaging in full-time lactation of infants, though it would appear that they were nursing for a good six months less than the women of Amatenango. Thus in early 18th-century Crulai, France, the average spacing between children was between 24 and 30 months depending on birth order.[19] The spread was somewhat broader for all the 17th- and 18th-century European peasant populations so far studied, but in the end the overall average spacing was 27.9 months for all birth intervals of completed large families.[20]

Table 2:
Birth Intervals Between First and Subsequent Childrenamong Amatenango Families, 1780-1820 (in months)

Birth Interval	Mean	Std.Dev.	N
Between lst & 2nd child	34.9	14.5	153
Between 2nd & 3rd child	36.7	15.1	105
Between 3rd & 4th child	36.5	16.1	79
Between 4th & 5th child	35.7	15.2	59
Between 5th & 6th child	44.1*	56.9	41
Between 6th & 7th child	31.6	11.9	22
Between 7th & 8th child	36.0	11.6	14
Between 8th & 9th child	31.2	6.9	8
Between 9th & 10th child	37.4	17.6	5

Note: *The high mean of this interval is due to one birth of 380 months. Excluding this birth, the mean drops to 35.7 months for the remaining 40 births.

[16]The average for the 199 *solteros* who contracted marriage for the first time was 19.0 years.

[17]Abandonment was practiced among the Indians in the north in the early part of the century; see Malvido, "El abandono de los hijos".

[18]John Bongaarts, "A Framework for Analyzing the Proximate Determinants of Fertility", *Population and Development Review*, 4 (1978), pp. 115-116.

[19]Gautier and Henry, *La population de Crulai*, p. 147.

[20]Smith, "A Homeostatic Demographic Regime", p. 23.

Despite the longer spacing due to amenorrhea induced by longer lactation, married fertility among the Amatenango women was still quite high because of the total lack of artifical contraception. Estimating the age of menopause at 35 years (which provides a sample of some 19 women in our collection of marriages), the average number of children born to women over 35 years of age was 7.6 children. As can be seen in table 3, there was a normal increment of births with each passing decade in the life of the mother. If the age of 40 years and above is used as the cut-off point for fertility (the average age of women at birth of their last child in 17th- and 18th-century rural Europe was 40.1 years), then the average births would be 8.5 children per completed family. This is a rather high birth rate and comes quite close to the European peasant norm of the time. In 17th- and 18th-century European communities, women who successfully completed their fertility and survived to age 44 had on average 8.9 children.[21] But this was the rate for women who on average had their first child at 27.4 years of age. Thus the longer spacing between children experienced by Amatenango women because of longer lactation practices was compensated for by their beginning their child bearing years at a much younger age.

Table 3:
Number of Children by the Age of Mothers at the Birth of their Last Recorded Child

Age of Mothers	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
10-14	1		1
15-20	1.3	.6	39
20-24	1.9	.8	42
25-29	3.7	1.7	39
30-34	5.2	1.8	25
35-39	6.9	2.7	11
40 & over	8.5	1.9	8

Not all marriages recorded were in fact first marriages of single persons. Some 19% of all unions involved the remarriage of widowed persons remarrying (as can be seen in table 4). This figure is rather close to the 19% figure given for remarriages in a sample of English marriages in the 1781-1809 period, which was 17%.[22] It is also comparable, though somewhat higher, to that found earlier in the century for the French rural community of Crulai.[23] But the ratio, which was the same for both men and women in Amatenango, was quite different for the contemporary French peasants, where it was much higher for the men than for the women (19% of all men and only 11% of all women marrying). In Amatenango remarriages, widows married single men as often as widowers married single women, which in fact was quite rarely. Rather, widows and widowers overwhelmingly married other persons for whom the marriage was a second union. In contrast, late 17th- and 18th-century French peasant widowers in Crulai predominantly married younger single women, whereas widows were primarily confined to widowed men.[24] In Amatenango, however, young single brides were clearly reserved almost exclusively for single men. The reason for this lack of sexual difference in remarriage in Chiapas may have something to do with more equal female access to resources in the American Indian community, and the more equal distribution of the resources between younger and older men.

[21] *Ibid.*
[22] E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Scofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 259.
[23] Gautier and Henry, *La population de Crulai*, p. 83.
[24] The average age for the remarrying couples was, like that for single persons, also considerably younger in Chiapas than in France, with the mean age of remarried women being 20.7 years and men 25.7 years.

Table 4:
Marriage & Remarriage Partners in Amatenango, 1785-1816

	MEN		
WOMEN	Solteros	Viudos	TOTAL
Solteras	255	2	257
Viudas	3	59	62
TOTAL	258	61	319

Thus all the evidence from our collection of 319 marriages during this late 18th- and early 19th-century period in the life of an isolated rural community, strongly supports the idea of very early marriages in the Amerindian rural zones of the Meso-American region. Women were clearly marrying at or before the age of first menstruation and were having children as soon as biologically possible. All this was in sharp contrast to the contemporary northern European pattern of much later first marriages and consequently shorter intervals between marriage and first birth. Equally, the Amatenango women had on average some 10 months more between the births of their children than did the European women. This fact, in the light of contemporary nursing practices and the lack of any formal contraception techniques, strongly suggest that the Amatenango women were intensively nursing close to a year or more beyond the European peasant women of their time. The end rate of completed fertility was the same in both cases, however, with both European and Chiapan women having 8 to 9 children per completed family for women who had reached menopause. The comparable result was clearly due to the much earlier entrance of Amatenango women into childbearing.

If these very preliminary findings hold up to the test of further family reconstitution studies undertaken on other American populations, it will show that 18th-century peasant families in Latin America did not share in the famous "northwest European family model system".[25] This "system" of late marriage, high ratios of non-marrying adults, and very low illegitimate births was designed to control population in relationship to resources. But having suggested that this small peasant village in Chiapas differed from conteporary Europe does not guarantee that it was the model for the rest of Latin America or even Mexico. The only other available family reconstruction for colonial Mexico, the study by Thomas Calvo of an urban parish in Guadalajara in the 17th century, found a far different pattern with later marriages, fewer children per completed family, higher pre-marital conceptions, and other indices which suggest that the rural Indian society differed strikingly from the contemporary urban populations of Mexico.[26] Late 18th-century Chiapas may even have differed from earlier local developments in that this was a region recovering from a century and a half or more of population decline beginning with the Spanish conquest. The high fertility rates per completed family and the low ages of marriage may thus have been a response to the previous period of population loss.

But however late colonial Amatenango may have differed from contemporary urban populations and even earlier local ones, the patterns emerging from this reconstruction suggest that this was a zone with a high rate of population growth, and that such growth must have been related to a resource environment permitting a relatively unrestrained natural expansion to the local peasant population. Whether the Chiapas norm was common throughout the stable Indian communities of rural Mexico cannot be determined, however, until more detailed reconstructions have taken place.

[25]The standard surveys of the European family pattern and its opposites are found in J. Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective", in D.V. Glass and D.E.C. Eversley, eds., *Population in History* (London, 1965); and the same author's more recent "Two Kinds of Preindustrial Household Formation System", *Population and Development Review*, 8 (1982).

[26]Thomas Calvo, "Familles mexicaines au XVII siècle: un tentative de reconstruction", *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1984). On the other hand, eighteenth-century *porteño* wives of merchants had both completed family fertility and age of marriage rates quite close to those found in contemporary Amatenango; Susan Socolow, "Marriage, Birth and Inheritance: The Merchants of Eighteenth-Century Buenos Aires", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 60 (1980).