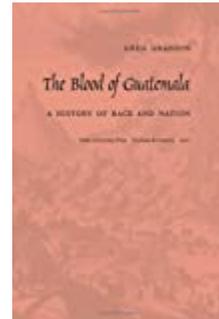




Greg Grandin. *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000. xx + 343 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2495-9.



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K'iche' Elites as Power Brokers in Guatemala

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In recent years, scholars have offered many explanations for Guatemala's four decades of civil war – a war that unleashed some of the most violent and repressive campaigns in Latin American history. Many of these studies look back to the nineteenth century and identify distinct divisions that arose between Indians and Ladinos (non-Indians) during that important period of nation building. Tending either to chronicle the ways in which the liberal Ladino state exploited peasants and workers to build an export-oriented economy or to describe the ways in which Indians resisted this process of modernization, these accounts often cast Ladinos as villains and Indians as victims. But Greg Grandin offers a new interpretation. His study of K'iche' Indian elites cuts across rigid class and ethnic boundaries; it links local and national histories, uncovers both Ladino and Indian forms of nationalism, and helps explain the power structure that ultimately sparked war in Guatemala in the 1950s. *The Blood of Guatemala* is essential reading for Guatemalanists and Latin Americanists alike.

Grandin's study deals with roughly two centuries of

Guatemalan history, from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Grandin proceeds chronologically through the book, examining everyday events as well as critical points and phases in Guatemala's past, including the late colonial period, the 1786 riot, the 1837 cholera epidemic, conservative rule in the young republic under Jose Rafael Carrera, the transition to liberal rule after 1871, the post-1871 building of an export economy based on coffee production, and, finally, the "decade of democracy" (1944-54) when reforms gave peasants and workers an unprecedented voice in Guatemala. Grandin pays particular attention to the republic before 1944 when the Ladino state, like in many other Latin American nations, viewed Indians as obstacles to modernization and believed assimilation was the course to follow. Grandin ends his study in 1954, the point at which anti-communist forces supported by the CIA overthrew the elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, and started four decades of civil war.

On one level, *The Blood of Guatemala* provides an excellent history of Indian elites, specifically K'iche' elites in the city of Quetzaltenango. From the colonial era to

the mid-twentieth century, these K'iche' elites, or principales as Grandin calls them, maneuvered for power and prestige in Guatemala. Amazingly, they preserved their position for more than two centuries, even in the face of significant obstacles and changes like the Bourbon Reforms, independence, the transition from conservative to liberal rule, and the arrival of coffee capitalism in the late-1800s. Grandin demonstrates that, at each juncture and with each new challenge, K'iche' elites managed to retain their position because they became effective brokers, brokers initially between Indian peasants and the Spanish colonial government and later between Indian workers and the Guatemalan (Ladino) state.

On another level, then, *The Blood of Guatemala* goes well beyond the story of principales in Quetzaltenango. By focusing on K'iche' elite brokering, Grandin also addresses broader issues related to Indian identity, the solidification of state power, and Guatemalan nationalism – both a Ladino, anti-Indian version and an Indian version that saw Ladinos and Indians coexisting in Guatemala. To maintain their position as Indians and as elites, principales had to remain legitimate in the eyes of Indian commoners and the Spanish, Creole, and Ladino elites in control of the state. K'iche' elites thus tried to appeal to both groups by embracing the modern (Ladino) world and the traditional (Indian) world. They welcomed the railroad, used the telegraph, sent their children to school, displayed photographs of themselves, dressed in traditional garb (the women usually), erected Indian monuments, and held Mayan beauty pageants. K'iche' elites also developed a distinct Indian nationalism, claiming that Indian peasants and workers were needed to build a modern, coffee-producing country. And importantly, principales retained control over local resources and an increasingly proletarianized Indian population. Ladino elites, therefore, depended on these principales. According to Grandin, K'iche' elites did appeal to both Indians and Ladino elites and in the process, they “produced an apparently contradictory effect: ethnic identity deepened while state power increased” (p. 54).

It is within this historical context that Grandin describes the 1954 outbreak of civil war. So long as K'iche' elites could effectively broker between a distinct group of Indians and a powerful central state, a relative peace existed in Guatemala. But the “ten years of spring” (1944-54) altered this power structure by bringing democracy and giving power to peasants and workers. When Indian commoners began to acquire land through agrarian reform in the early 1950s, they threatened the K'iche' elite position. Principales, in response, stopped broker-

ing. They joined anti-Communist groups that directly and violently opposed reform. In short, they sided with their class and turned against other Indians. A powerful state and a strong Indian identity remained, two entities K'iche' elites had helped create during the previous two centuries. In 1981, the Ladino state targeted and massacred Indian villages in the highlands. Pan-Mayan movements emerged at the same time. Grandin believes these events stemmed from the influence K'iche' elite brokering had had on nation building in Guatemala.

Like all provocative, well-researched, and thoroughly documented books, *The Blood of Guatemala* opens doors for additional studies that will ultimately refine the argument and follow up on additional points. Future studies might test whether Grandin attributes too much agency to K'iche' elites. His claim that they brokered to preserve their own position is solid. But the extent to which Indian commoners accepted principales' view of Guatemala and believed that their labor could build a strong Guatemalan nation is not revealed. Yet Grandin suggests that one of the key pillars supporting the K'iche' elites position was their ability to represent the interests of all Indians. From this study, that does not probe deeply into commoners' perspectives, though, and we can only speculate that principales did, in fact, speak on behalf of all Indians.

On a similar note, the crucial role K'iche' elites played in preserving a strong Indian identity in Guatemala seems questionable. Even in places like Mexico and Nicaragua where mestizaje has been a powerful component of nation-state formation, numerous Indian groups remain with their identities intact. In Guatemala, where Indians account for the majority of the population, it seems likely that a strong Indian identity would have survived without K'iche' elites pushing an Indian nationalism. And once the civil war began, Grandin implies that class overshadowed ethnic identity. He recognizes that the state attacked both Ladinos and Indians during the war and Ladino elites probably would have attacked peasants and workers in the highlands whether they were Indians or Ladinos. Violence directed specifically against Indians did not occur until 1981-82, and K'iche' elites were not targeted because they were part of the wealthy class. Perhaps future studies will further illuminate the effects of K'iche' elite brokering on Indian identity and worldviews.

Finally, when Grandin introduces the book as being “about nationalism, race, class, and gender” (p. 7), he falls short on one point: gender. Elite men are at the center of this study and Grandin fully acknowledges this.

Women appear only occasionally and usually as conduits through which family honor, prestige, and identity are carried. Rather than a deficiency in the overall quality of the book, the lack of gender analysis is striking because readers are led to believe it will be treated with the same depth as his discussions of race, class, and nationalism. These few quibbles aside, *The Blood of Guatemala* is an excellent, thought-provoking study.

The strength of Grandin's work lies in his ability to see across boundaries and to show interconnections that run deep in Guatemalan history. He effectively links commoners and elites, Indians and Ladinos, local and national. Grandin demonstrates how principales' actions at the community level affected both Indian commoners and the nation state. He also illustrates clearly how local people and the state became bound and interconnected,

even though each group remained distinct. Not a book for general readers or for those without graduate training, this very academic work engages key threads in the Latin American historiography. By focusing on Indian elites and their ability to broker between commoners and the state, Grandin tackles questions about nation-state formation, ethnic and class relations, hegemony, nationalism, and identity. He is in dialogue with both historians and anthropologists and makes a valuable contribution to diverse disciplines and world regions. *The Blood of Guatemala* is an important book.

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