

Tadashi Obara-Saeki, Juan Pedro Viqueira Alban, *El arte de contar tributarios. Provincia de Chiapas, 1560-1821*, El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, Mexico City, 2017, pp. 788.

El arte de contar tributarios. Provincia de Chiapas, 1560-1821, the fruit of impressive research, raises questions that go far beyond what the authors initially intended to study. An extensive and detailed exploration of a terrain that requires extraordinary rigor, the text masterfully develops a powerful discussion of historical demography under Hapsburg and Bourbon rule in the province of Chiapas, part of the Kingdom, *audiencia* and Captaincy General of Guatemala. The first four chapters, which the authors suggest need not be read in order, underpin the solid arguments presented in the final one, but the book will nonetheless be used, as the authors recognize, primarily as a reference text, and will be standard for the colonial history of Chiapas, Central America and Mexico. Yet *El arte de contar tributarios* is also a model for careful and critical text analysis and should be required reading for scholars of tribute in Spanish America and those who use tribute registers in their research.

The authors' historiographical commitment is to "promote the development of historical demography in Chiapas in order to provide a basis for a general history of the state that follows contemporary academic standards" (p. 12, n. 1). The need for a general history of the Mexican state of Chiapas arises from the more than three decades of work that Viqueira has dedicated to it (and its territorial predecessors) and the fifteen years of research by Obara-Saeki in the same field. Drawing on that experience, the book surpasses the initial proposal, and, in addition to applying historical demography to construct an important overview of the colonial history of Chiapas, it gives us an examination of Indian tribute in a specific region of Spanish America that is simply unparalleled.¹

¹ For recent bibliographical reviews of research on tribute in colonial Spanish

Any historical understanding of the territory that the Mexican State of Chiapas now occupies, the authors argue, requires a clear notion of how regional population dynamics developed, including changes in the Indian as well as the non-Indian population. As information about the non-Indian population (Spaniards, mestizos, mulattos and *ladinos*) can scarcely be found in tribute records that deal almost exclusively with Indian tributaries, Obara-Saeki and Viqueira limit their discussion to the Indian population of Chiapas, which, in slow retreat relative to the total number of inhabitants in the province, still made up 84% of that total at its lowest point in 1814 (p. 553), shortly before independence from Spain and the elimination of tribute as such. But if this estimate may be valid for the province as a whole, regional differences abound, as can be seen by the localized presence of *indios laboríos*, many of whom could have well been described as mulattos or, later, *ladinos*.

Working the numbers does not suffice to understand population dynamics, however, since the definition of “tributary” changed over the years, as Chapter 2 takes pains to explain in one of the book’s signal contributions. For much of the colonial period, the amounts charged depended on marital status (single, married, widowed; marriages to non-Indians or to spouses from other towns or *parcialidades* also had implications), age (children and older adults were exempt), gender (payments made by single men and widowers were not the same as those by single women and widows) and ability to earn (individuals with conditions that impeded income-generating work were exempted). The surprisingly complicated methods of calculating tribute payments changed over time, and the information presented calls for careful consideration of how these charges and subsequent adjustments modified the society in which they were applied. What was the impact, for instance, of the 1757 decision to eliminate tribute payments by

America, see Pollack (2016) and Albiez-Wieck (2017). For an excellent and innovative recent work on tribute in New Spain, in the form of an interactive computer program, see Terán (2016).

women (effectively single women and widows) and simultaneously to raise tribute rates for single and widowed men so that they equalled those paid by married couples (*casados*)? Although it is clearly outside the scope of the book, one also wonders whether the existence of these differentiated charges related in some way to Pre-Hispanic tribute systems and, in any event, how they were established. Or, perhaps more pertinently, why did it take the Spanish officials a century and a half to make these changes, which certainly simplified all the accounting involved? The authors argue that this was an example of Hapsburg indifference or incompetence, which, owing at least in part to the nearly impenetrable confusion that it created in the paperwork, benefitted local officials. Still, one wonders how the tributaries themselves perceived the differential payments and the changes made to them.

While *El arte de contar tributarios* begins its treatment of population in Chiapas in 1561, the opening sections of its first chapter offer a highly pertinent and original discussion of the early tributes levied in Chiapas under the encomienda system and the first *tasaciones* (lists of tribute amounts owed by each town or *parcialidad*) in the previous decades. Only toward the end of the 1550s or the beginning of the 1560s did the *tasaciones* begin referring to specific numbers of Indians (each of whom would be responsible for a certain amount of tribute), thus making it possible to use the tribute registers to estimate population. The rest of the first chapter offers a detailed discussion of the different tribute counts made in the following two hundred and fifty years, divided into distinct periods and described individually, up to the final elimination of tribute in 1822 when Chiapas declared its independence from Spain and adherence to Mexico.

The following chapter includes a description of the types of payments made (e.g. the *fondo de comunidad* and the *tostón del rey*, as well as less commonly mentioned items such as the *diezmo del tributo*), in addition to tribute *per se*, and the processes by which all of these were organized, showing again how these charges, and the bureaucratic procedures

that they implied, underwent modifications over time. This original research on tribute payments in colonial Spanish America also gives us important insight into how Spanish authorities and local actors in a provincial center like Ciudad Real interacted with their capitals, in this case Santiago de Guatemala and later Nueva Guatemala, always under the aegis of Madrid. Recognizing just how difficult it is to assimilate the information presented in this chapter, Viqueira and Obara-Saeki present an overview, with an interesting periodization regarding tribute, whose translated subtitle reads something along the lines of “From Chaos and Lack of Knowledge to Order and Territorial Control.”² The overview begins with the exceptionally extractive and uncontrolled period of tribute collection in the years following the conquest, early attempts at limiting that abuse with the application of the New Laws after 1549, and the creation of a relatively stable system of tribute collection, already functioning during the late sixteenth century and fully consolidated shortly thereafter. Confusion and inconsistency were the hallmarks of the system, permitting and fostering fraud, and the system would continue to function in this way, with minor changes, into the eighteenth century. Within these arrangements, a more systematic form of abuse in tribute collection, related to the pricing of in-kind goods paid in tribute, marked the latter part of the seventeenth century and the early years of the next, benefitting local elites in Ciudad Real, and ultimately becoming one of the principal causes of the 1712 Zedillo rebellion. Reforms to what the rebellion showed to be unsustainably abusive practices had been proposed in the late seventeenth century, but such measures were seriously considered only after the military expenditures and the loss of tribute revenue related to the uprising and its aftermath suddenly made their implementation much more important to the Spanish authorities. These reforms included the conversion of tribute in kind into cash payment, a response to existing

² Compare with the periodization proposed by Gil Montero (2015).

abuses that was applied in the 1730s throughout the Kingdom of Guatemala. The new policies, which the authors note were developed through exchanges of views among Spanish officials in Ciudad Real, Santiago de Guatemala and Madrid, dovetail with recent reconsideration of early Bourbon attempts at fiscal reform in America, long overlooked or underestimated (Pearce, 2001; Sánchez Santiró, 2013).³ In Chiapas, the more familiar reforms of the latter part of the eighteenth century included the 1757 changes mentioned above and the steps taken, starting in the following decade, and strengthened with the *ordenanzas de intendentes*, throughout Spanish America during the 1780s, to register and charge tributaries more carefully and to include certain previously exempt categories of individuals on the tribute rolls.

The book's penultimate chapter contains an unusually dense and detailed discussion of each of the many sources referred to in the tables (the sources and tables are available online) that the authors have developed as a basis for the regionally informed discussion of historical demography that is fully elaborated in the following chapter. This "exercise in numerical philology", as the authors subtitle the chapter, was undertaken in order to "understand and evaluate the different general sources – direct and indirect" (p. 387) whose analysis is effectively the book's central concern. In other words, each of the more than fifty documents used to elaborate the "Tributaries in the Province of Chiapas (1598-1818)" database is described and critically analysed.⁴

³ In the Viceroyalty of Perú, an epidemic (1718-1723) provided the impetus for reform in the tribute and *mita* systems (Pearce, 2001), while in the Captaincy General of Guatemala, Obara-Saeki and Viqueira argue, it was the 1712 rebellion that catalyzed initial tribute reforms (the *mita* as such did not exist in Chiapas, and with no pressing need for labor such as that required at the mines in Potosi, forced labor systems were much less developed).

⁴ The 56 documents used for the database are but a small sample of the total that the authors consulted and list in the reference section, principally from the Archivo General de Indias, the Archivo General de Centroamérica and the Archivo Histórico Diocesano de San Cristóbal.

Let us note that these documents are of a more general nature, i.e. each of them refers to all or the majority of the Indian towns in Chiapas, and that the authors elected not to consider the large number of individual town registers (their book *is* already quite weighty), which they nonetheless list in the reference section. Decades of previous research inform their insightful and critical reading of these texts.

The final chapter of the book, which can, as the authors indicate, be read as an independent text, describes the demographic development of what was once the *alcaldía mayor* of Chiapas, which they divide into four major regions (*Depresión Central y Vertiente Sur del Macizo Central, Montañas Mayas, Montañas Zoques, Amatán y Palenque*), each composed of smaller sub-regions, all of which are discussed in terms of six historical periods. Throughout the chapter, the data show Indians in constant movement to and from towns that not very long ago were thought to be “closed”, an observation that raises questions about how these mobile Indians (and *ladinos*) compare to Andean *forasteros* and about regional differences in the institutional treatment of colonial Spanish American migrant populations. The authors also confirm that while it is possible to develop conversion factors that permit an approximate calculation of the total population in a *region* from the number of tributaries (given prior knowledge of what “tributary” meant at any given moment), it is not possible to estimate the population of a given town using that same system.

The first of the six historical periods, which begins with the conquest and ends in 1585, draws more on description than on tributary counts, but the immense population loss associated with the conquest, forced labor and epidemics is clear enough. The following periods describe the principal findings of the book, demonstrating that the areas along the Río Grande (now Río Grijalva), the most densely populated at the time of conquest and into the late sixteenth century, lost population as the ravages of disease in a hot climate, accompanied by close contact with Spaniards along the principal road (*el camino real*) took their toll.

The *Montañas Mayas* (the Central Highlands), and especially those areas heavily involved in the 1712 rebellion, gained relative importance in terms of population during the colonial period and were home to more than half of the inhabitants of Chiapas by the end of it. The region's demographic importance began to increase in the decades before the rebellion and this would continue after a hiatus in the years following the violence. The book mentions several factors bearing on the population growth in the highlands, but a clearer explanation would be desirable – and the authors are well placed to provide one in the future. In any event, by the end of the colonial period, this area, nearly one hundred percent Indian, was bordered by others in which export agriculture dominated and the non-Indian (*Ladino*) presence was much greater. Indians from the Central Highlands worked in these adjacent regions to earn money for tribute payment. This regional organization of labor would become more pronounced in the nineteenth century, while the Indian/non-Indian territorial split survives to this day. The text itself offers a much more nuanced discussion that contemplates the many different regions and sub-regions.

El arte de contar tributarios more than achieves its author's goals. Still, the text would have benefitted from more references to historical demography in general and to research on tribute in other parts of Spanish America. Reliance on New Spain for comparison with Chiapas and the Captaincy General of Guatemala, rather than on the experiences of other colonial Spanish American political divisions, may have restricted possible interpretations. In the same vein, while tribute in Spanish America was effectively *sui generis*, one wonders how the experience of Chiapas compares with what took place in other parts of the world during this period. Further, it is not clear just how the book's conclusions regarding historical demography modify current discussions in that field concerning Chiapas, Central America, Mexico and Spanish America. The lack of a broader historiographical discussion of existing interpretations makes it difficult to evaluate some of the book's specific

contributions. Given their attention to detail, the authors may well have thought that addressing these additional concerns would have required another 788 pages, which would have delayed the appearance of this pathbreaking and important text for quite some time.

Aaron Pollack

Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS)-Sureste - San Cristobal de Las Casas

References

- ALBIEZ-WIECK S. (2017), "Tributgesetzgebung und ihre Umsetzung in den Vizekönigreichen Peru und Neuspanien im Vergleich", in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas/Anuario de América Latina*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 211-257.
- GIL MONTERO R. (2015), "El tributo andino reinterpretado: El caso del corregimiento de Lípez", in *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, no. 99, October, pp. 69-88.
- PEARCE A.J. (2001), "The Peruvian Population Census of 1725-1740", in *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 69-104.
- POLLACK A. (2016), "Hacia una historia social del tributo de indios y castas en Hispanoamérica. Notas en torno a su creación, desarrollo y abolición", in *Historia Mexicana*, vol. LXVI, no. 1, pp. 65-160.
- SÁNCHEZ SANTIRÓ E. (2013), *Corte de Caja. La Real Hacienda de Nueva España y el primer reformismo fiscal de los Borbones (1720-1755)*. Alcances y contradicciones, Mexico City, Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora.
- TERÁN M. (2016), *Tributos tardíos de la Nueva España*, Mexico City.