



# **Fields of the Tzotzil: The Ecological Bases of Tradition in Highland Chiapas (Texas Pan American)**

*George A. Collier*

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Fields of the Tzotzil is the first study of social processes in contemporary highland Maya communities to encompass a regional view of the highlands of Chiapas as a system. In viewing tradition, not as a survival of traits, but as a dynamic process of adaptation by local systems to their placement in larger social and economic systems, it lays to rest the theory that tribal peoples apparently are politically and economically isolated. In addition, its broad regional perspective sheds light on the problems of understanding the position of traditional ethnic groups in contemporary society.

The approach of the book is ecological in two senses. First, all the topics dealt with concern the traditional behavior of Indian groups as revealed in their relationship to the land. Second, the analysis seeks out factors that condition land use, not just locally, but as part of a larger system that includes influences of the market and the impact of nationalist agrarian policy. Thus, the author examines land inheritance patterns and food production, as well as the interethnic relations in the region in which Indians are subordinate to mestizos. He discusses in detail corn farming, craft specialization, wage labor, and Indian colonization efforts under the Mexican ejido—all factors that directly affect land use and are thus part of the environment in highland Chiapas.

The study is unique in its use of previously inaccessible historical source material and its use of novel methodological aids. Aerial photography was used in data collection, and the computer was used in ethnographic census analysis. The result is a book that reveals the Indian groups of Chiapas as apparent enclaves whose ethnicity is a dynamic, adaptive response to their position of marginal dependency. While their plight is extreme, it is nevertheless structurally similar to the position of ethnic groups in most large social systems.

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