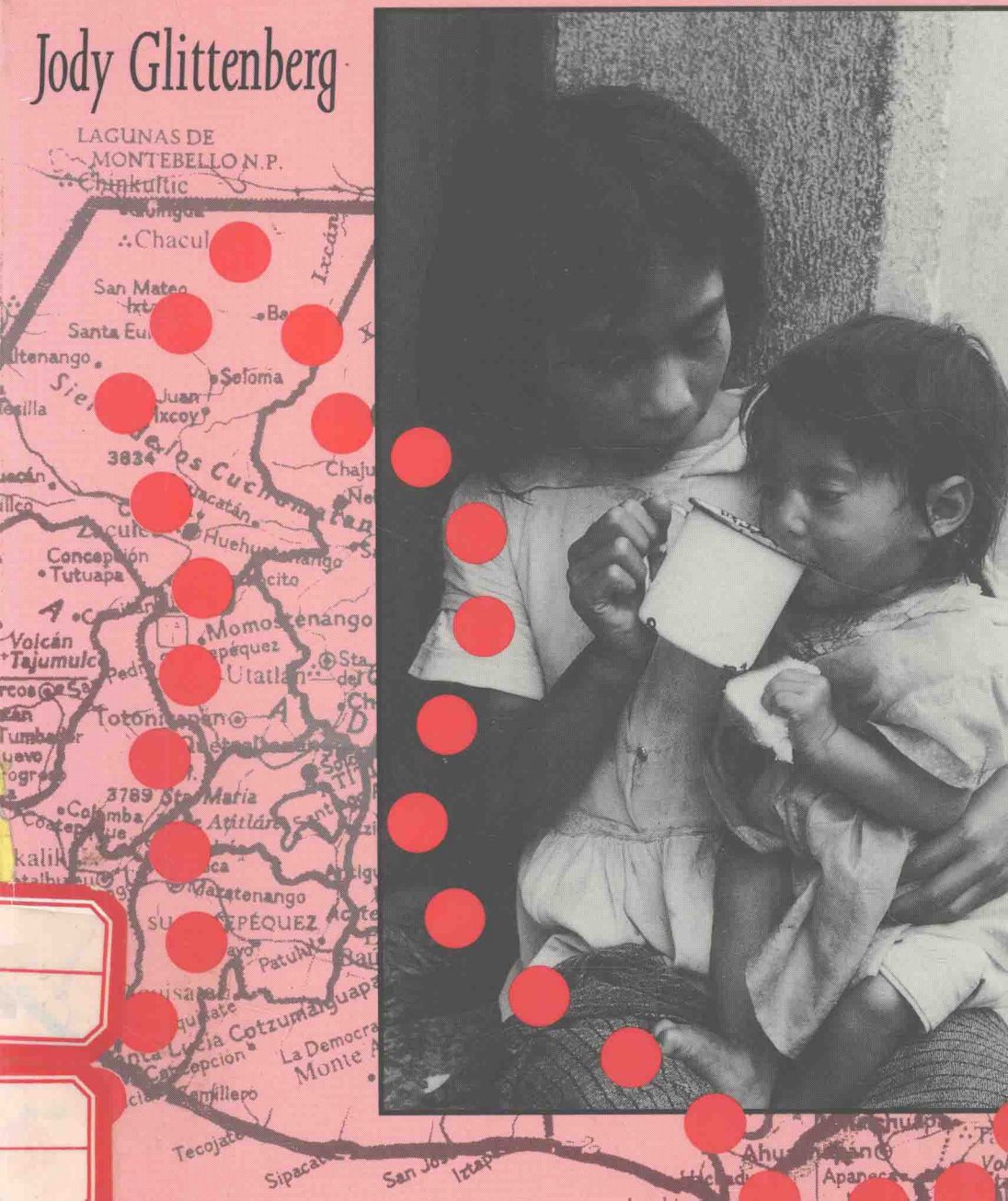
To the Mountain and Back

The Mysteries of Guatemalan Highland Family Life

Jody Glittenberg



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For information about this book, write or call:

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Acknowledgments

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My longtime friend and mentor, Madeleine Leininger, you gave me encouragement to fly high and sometimes dangerously in pursuit of truth. I still owe much to my dissertation advisor, Waldemar Smith; I admire him for his honesty and integrity.

My Guatemalan friend and mentor, Dr. Eugênio Schieber, you are remembered with deepest respect, for you taught me the beauty of the land you love; you shared your *chispa de la vida* with me and made the fieldwork come to life. Dr. Carroll Behrhorst—Doc—gave me my first comprehension of what primary health care and health care reform are all about; it was an essential beginning.

Thanks must go to the program managers of the National Science Foundation, who carved out a program of financial support for dissertations, which although small in actual dollars, made the difference in the actual depth of my findings. I hope my success has helped inform legislators of the importance of supporting budding scientists as a public trust.

Certainly neither last, nor least, I acknowledge the people of Guatemala—and especially of Zaragoza and Patzún—who accepted the *gringa* and her family, shared their life stories, and opened their hearts during times of troubles. There are so many specific *guatemaltecos* who taught me so much. I will name but a few: Eugénio, Margarita, Julio Cesar, Jerry, María, Aña, Sandra, Juan, Silvia; and also: Elmer, Doc, and Jenny, who were so influential. Several have died, some at the hands of assassins; I miss you.

And, not ever to be forgotten, Tom Curtin, anthropology editor at Waveland Press, who five years ago began asking me to write my story. Thanks, Tom, for your encouragement, your persistent nudging, and your outstanding editorship.

Participants

Colorado Family

Don, husband
Paul, son
Janis, daughter
Author's names: JoAnn, Jody, Juanita (used differently in various settings)

In Chimaltenango, Behrhorst Hospital and Clinic

Baby Rosa, a significant infant
Dr. Carroll Behrhorst, medical missionary from Kansas, 1959–1990
Edith Sherwood, British midwife, medical assistant, and director of under-five clinics and literacy program
John McCory, Peace Corps volunteer, medical assistant, at the hospital/clinic and outlying clinics
Margarita, Mayan head nurse in the hospital
Mike, Peace Corps volunteer, assistant in the 1971 surgery
Sally, American missionary nurse from Denver

In Xajáxac

El brujo (witch doctor), one of seventy-five in the village
Magdelena Katok, Mayan nurse in charge of the village clinic

In Zaragoza: The Ladino Town

Andradé family, a modernizing family: Carmen, Humberto, and three children, live with Carmen's widowed mother
Anna López, widow, interviewer for the fertility questionnaires
Don Marquez, host for the cofradia celebration
Hermana Marta, one of six Guatemalan Catholic nuns living in a convent in the cathedral
Hernández family, poorest-of-the-poor:
Tina (mother) and Jorge (father), Juan (10), Franco (8), Juanita (5), Dahlia (4), Miguel (6 mos.)
Isabela, an aging neighbor, first wife, with ten adult children:

Alberto, a farmer and eldest son; Juanita, her youngest, and Marta, her modernizing daughters living at home
Miguel, her wandering husband

Jorge Martínez, school teacher

Author's fictive Marquez family:
Silvia (mother) and Pablo (father), Victoria (25-year-old daughter), Antonia (22-year-old daughter), Juan (Victoria's novio, a traveling businessman), Mario (Antonia's novio, a local carpenter)

Mayor and his wife

Olympia Lucas, lives in Los Angeles, queen of the Corpus Christi Fiesta

Padre Pius, town's Italian Catholic priest

Roberto, a handsome *muy hombre* (local term), would-be suitor

In Patzún: The Indian Town

Caj family, poorest-of-the-poor:
Concepción (mother) and Leonardo (father), Lucío (8), Felicia (6), Hermando (2)

Chief public health officer, a barrier to literacy

Felipa Noj, Cakchiquel/Spanish interviewer for the fertility questionnaires

Hortensia, president of the Women's Club of Patzún, her husband, Ernesto, and their three children

Author's fictive Maczul family:
Mother, Father, Maria and Gloria (unmarried daughters), Alberto (the eldest Maczul son) and his wife and three children, the second-eldest son and his wife and five children, and the eldest daughter and her husband and three children

Maria, author's assistant interviewer, Cakchiquel/Spanish speaker

Mayor and town clerk

Padre Sergio, town's Spanish Catholic priest
Christiana and Sonia, American nuns at the Colégio San Bernardino

Strong older woman, berater of the attacking mob

Others

Dr. Eugénio Schieber, a friend whose home is near Lake Atitlán

Gary Elbow, cultural geographer, doctoral student from the University of Texas

Maximón, a folk saint

Muñeca, the author's pet dog

Two American passers-by, Ed and Pete

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

> Our work is to show we have been breathed upon . . . to sing it out, to live out in the topside world what we have received through our sudden knowings from story, from body, from dreams and journeys of all sorts.
>
> —Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, 1992

Early American anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn and others studied whole cultures as patterns, configurations, and—in some ways—as riddles. Anthropologists have continued to study societies as systems of beliefs, values, rules, and practices that fit into patterns. To explain such patterns, we must assume that life is not just random, but rather that there are reasons why people value some things over others and why they believe and behave as they do.

Marvin Harris, a contemporary anthropologist, in 1975 published a best-selling book, *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*. In this book, Harris explains the different patterns of culture, such as not eating the sacred cow among the Hindus, as riddles that have down-to-earth, practical explanations. As Harris explains, to understand the riddle, one must examine the whole society in order to be aware of how the parts fit together into a pattern, like a puzzle. The backbone of an anthropologist's work is unraveling or explaining such mysteries, or riddles, that surround the lifeways of different people.

The customary way of learning these lifeways or cultures is to actually live *with* the people, doing what they do, learning their

rules, and their rules to break rules, by participating in and observing their day-to-day living. To actually *learn* the new culture means you must become as a child, learning to adjust, to participate, to survive. Sometimes this learning is exciting, other times, boring, and occasionally, dangerous.

The ideal time for an anthropologist, or fieldworker, to spend in the field is a whole year, which allows the fieldworker to participate in all the holidays, the seasons, the various events, the rituals and rites of passage in a society. However, many times this is impossible, so the research must be *focused* on the many facets of a whole culture: the social institutions of family, religion, education, power and prestige, economics, and health. First, the fieldworker must learn the language in order to understand the symbols, the rules of behavior, the belief systems, and the diverse patterns of life in that culture. Learning takes place by participating in as many life events as possible: births, funerals, marriages, civic and religious celebrations, whatever seems notable and whatever is made possible. Second, the ethnographer (fieldworker) must decipher the various roles of the people within the culture, as accurately as possible in terms of what is happening within a society at a particular time. For instance, how do females differ from males in their specific roles in a society? Or what behavior is appropriate for older women, or prepubescent females, or pregnant women, or for children? Or what do women of various statuses, such as those married to mayors, or widows of wealthy men, do in respect to specific events? Or what can you know by observing the behavior of the poorest-of-the-poor families? Or what can you find out about the behavior of ostracized women, such as prostitutes? Both men and women are included in the ethnographer's fieldwork, but because I am female, I am often able to study men only by observing or asking questions, as sometimes it is inappropriate for me to participate in certain male activities.

And in addition to a general description of the culture, fieldworkers may seek answers to specific questions, as I did about family formation. I wanted to know the reasons for having a large family in such a poverty-stricken area and what factors went into a family's decision-making process in forming their family. And I wondered if the child-rearing practices shape children to continue in these same decision-making processes.

As a fieldworker first enters a new culture, all symbols, mores, and rules seem fuzzy, strange, or indistinguishable, but as time goes by and with deep reflection, patterns of the lifeways become more clear, and understanding begins. It is important to remember that cultures are ever changing and adapting, so that rules and

behaviors are also changing. It is impossible to gain a *complete* understanding, but an honest, dedicated fieldworker can do much to add to our knowledge about different lifeways. The anthropologist, after completing the field study, writes an account of that research; this account is called an ethnography—a picture from the people's points of view. It is through this ethnography that the story of a particular society comes alive and engages and informs the reader.

In this ethnography, *To the Mountain and Back*, I tell about the lives of people in a subsistence, peasant agricultural society from two different sides of the same coin. One side is Ladino and the other is Cakchiquel Mayan Indian, who live only ten kilometers apart in hoe-and-machete societies in the highlands of Guatemala. I take the reader through a period of discovery about how a stranger begins to function within a strange culture, to the growing awareness of the cultural fabric that binds each society into a functioning whole, and then finally toward an understanding of how these microcultures fit within the larger culture of Guatemala, a developing country.

In gaining perspective on understanding these peasant societies, I reach back into the rich history of the Maya who occupied the area before the Spanish Conquest, and I try to learn how this past still affects the present and will affect the future. I look also at the cultural beliefs and practices that the Spaniards brought to the New World which still retain an influence within these microcultures. I hope, through this process of discovery and reflection, to entice readers to use a similar process in researching the mysteries and riddles of other cultures.

My understanding of these people took place over a five-year period (1971–76) and in three separate phases: the first phase took place in 1971 in an Indian hospital and a remote clinic in the Department of Chimaltenango, Guatemala, during a six-week period when I worked as a volunteer nurse and a beginning doctoral student in anthropology. Three years later, in 1974, I began the second phase, my dissertation fieldwork, an ethnographic study based on living eight months in Zaragoza, a Ladino town, and in Patzún, an Indian town. During this time I focused broadly on sociocultural issues but also narrowly on the mystery of family formation. In addition to the ethnographic fieldwork, I did a randomized sample household survey of reproduction in each of the towns using a questionnaire I had developed. For this part of the work I had the help of two paid, trained interviewers. After finishing the fieldwork and analyzing the reproductive data, I returned yet another time, in 1975. During this third phase, I spent


Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Caribbean Sea
CENTRAL AMERICA
PACIFIC OCEAN
Tikal
BELIZE
MEXICO
GUATEMALA
Nebaj
Huehuetenango
Xajóxac
Quetzaltenango
Panajarchel
Patzún
Sololá
Patzicía
Zaragoza
Lake Atitlán
GUATEMALA CITY
Chimaltenango
HONDURAS
EL SALVADOR
PACIFIC OCEAN

several months doing further fieldwork and family studies in order to gain more information about the relationships between men and women and family decision making. I concluded that family reproduction and child-rearing practices in the towns were specific to the changing sociocultural needs of a hoe-and-machete subsistence agricultural society, Patzún, and an emerging, low-level cash economy in the other, Zaragoza.

The actual names of the towns are used in this study, as permission to do so was received from the towns' leaders. Copies of the original dissertation were given, in English, to a leader in each town. Names of all participants in the ethnography have been changed to protect their anonymity. I have used the real names of persons involved in my personal life, when possible with their permission, but when not possible, I hope with their endorsement.

An epilogue describes what has happened to the towns since 1976, to the people in Guatemala, to some of the people in this study, and to me, the researcher, during these subsequent years.

The first part of the ethnography begins with my undertaking a new role—missionary nurse in the Behrhorst Clinic and Hospital in Chimaltenango, Guatemala, May 17, 1971.

Chapter 2

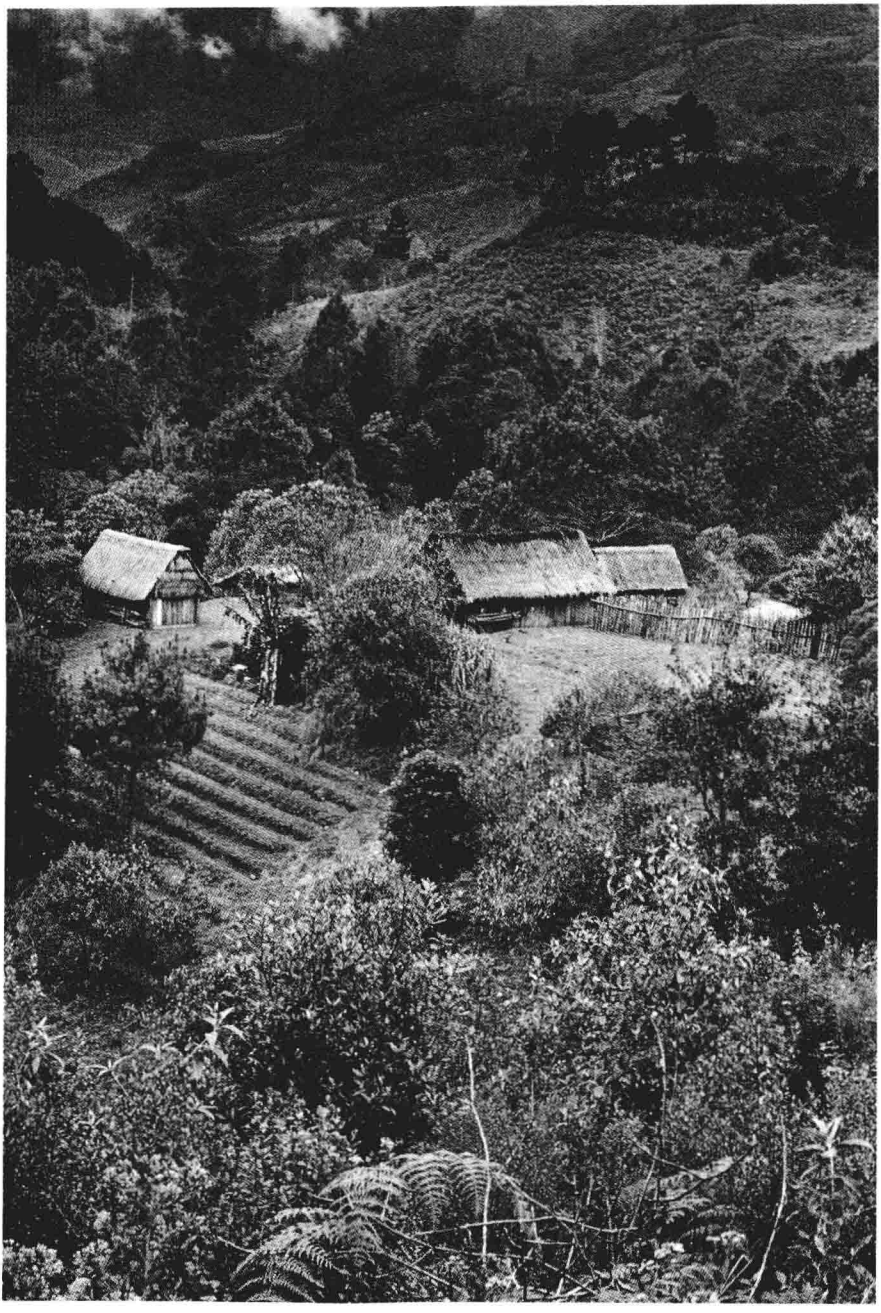
A Man with a Mission

> In the beginning . . . God gave to every people a cup,
> a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank their life.
> —Ruth Benedict, *Cups of Clay*, 1934

It is incredible that I would return to these mountains, time and again, now for over two decades. Recalling the first time—the smell of the burning timbers, when precious soil was being laid bare for yet another crop of sacred corn and the skies foretold the crashing rains of yet another monsoonal season—I can hardly believe that only I seem to have changed during these twenty years. The highlands of Guatemala still hold the secrets of the Mayan gods; the land still goes hungry, so overused, as the displaced indigenous people cope with their daily lives of hoe-and-machete agriculture, and women with wombs full of hope still have arms filled with the ache of another hungry child. Yet, the mystery of life continues, unrelenting and resounding, a scoff at those with less courage and a snub to those of less will. The bravery I encountered, lived, feared, and cherished is but a shadow of the greatness of the people in these haunting hills, with the dawning of yet another challenging tomorrow.

The Beginning

In the summer of 1971, I began a journey to the Land of Eternal Spring, Guatemala, with two motives in mind: to survive without



To the mountain . . . and back . . . serenity . . . eternity