

Padre Subirana and the Indian Land Grants, Mid-19th Century, Honduras

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Introduction

The history of indigenous Honduras generally depicts something of the worse that resulted from the clash of Old and New World cultures. In Honduras, examples of open warfare, enslavement, forced migration, and harsh treatment in mining and in agriculture, all directed towards Indian populations, are numerous. On rare occasions individuals did come forward and attempted to make the lot of the Indians better as the native population was incorporated into the new society, but those individuals were few in Honduras. The most prominent personalities acting on behalf of the indigenous population seem to have been the famous Indian apologist, Bartolomé de las Casas, Cristobal de Pedraza, the Trujillo bishop who was designated as "Protector of the Indians" in 1538 (Chamberlain 1953:127-32), and political leaders of the Audiencia de los Confines (especially Lopez de Cerrato), who in 1544 first enforced the royal edict that declared that Indians were no longer slaves, but subjects of the King (Rodriquez B. 1977:72). Yet among all who have served Honduran Indians, the Spanish priest, Manuel Subirana, is probably the best representative. His activities, of the mid-nineteenth century, are now legendary throughout the country. There, he is most commonly known as "El Padre Santo" and he is often mentioned as a prime candidate for sainthood. Perhaps his greatest contribution was the attempt to secure legal rights to Indian lands in the early period of Independence.

Biographical Sketch and Travels in Central America

Manuel de Jesus Subirana was born (in 1807) and reared in Manresa, Spain. His hometown lies some fifty kilometers northwest of Barcelona in the heartland of Catalonia. By age 27 he had been named a priest. In 1850, the 43 year-old missionary came to America to accept a position in Cuba, where he served for six years (Alvarado G. 1964, Antunez 1964). In the fall of 1856, Subirana entered the Republic of Honduras reaching Comayagua on the 26th of October. In Honduras he made his home for the last eight years of his life. He died at Potrero de Olivar, near Santa Cruz de Yojoa, on the 27th of November, 1864.

Exactly where the good missionary roamed during his years in Central America cannot be known completely, but much of his journey can be reconstructed in detail from church documents and contemporaneous land titles (see map 1). After reporting to his superior in Comayagua (at that time the political and ecclesiastical capital of Honduras) in January, 1857, Subirana headed west into Lenca Indian territory near Gracias. From there he went briefly into El Salvador, but soon returned to Honduras visiting Tegucigalpa and Cantarranas on his way to Danlí (June 17). The first report of missionizing activities came from Juticalpa, Olancho, on July 9, when Subirana noted the baptism of 700 Paya Indians. This was his first experience with the Paya of the Catacamas-Culmi region.

Evidently, Subirana continued to the northeast into the watershed of the Rio Paulaya and on downstream to the coastlands then inhabited by the Garifuna (Caribes Negros). He must have then turned to the west and passed through the Garifuna villages and Trujillo (AET, LB: fols. 283-86), eventually reaching Yoro for the first time in mid-1858. We have indications of this route from the second major report of Subirana, dated October 17, 1858, from Yoro (Alvarado G. 1964: 79-80). This initial contact with the Jicaque Indians in Yoro resulted in at least 2177 new converts in fifteen settlements.

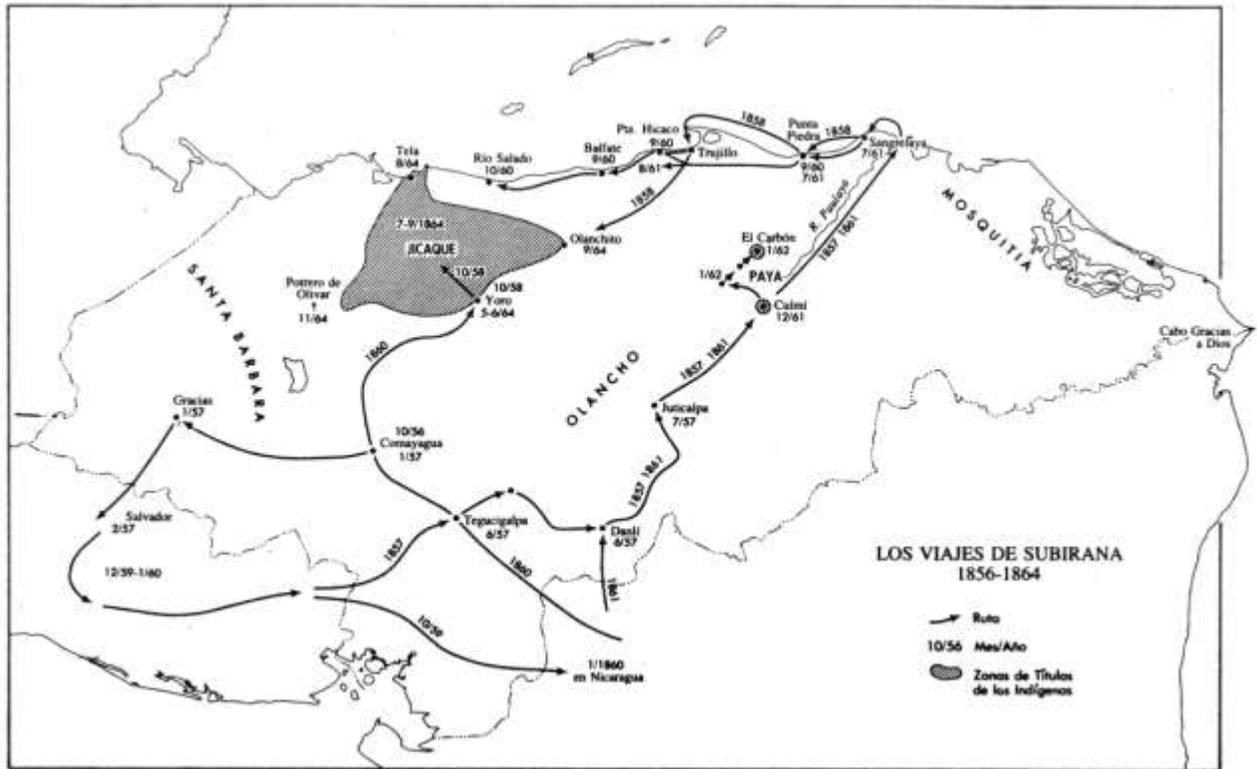
On October 18th, "El Padre Santo" left Yoro for a hard two-month trip to the northwest where he baptized another 2,200 Jicaques.

During 1859, before November 4, the missionary's whereabouts are unknown. On that date he recorded his fourth major report of activities from Yoro and one might therefore expect that most of 1859's work was among the Jicaque. Perhaps he also travelled among the Indians of Santa Barbara where today Subirana legends abound (Castellanos 1964). There is brief notice that at the close of 1859 and the earliest days of 1860 Subirana visited El Salvador and Nicaragua for the second time, returning directly to Yoro. Church documents from Trujillo prove that he worked along the north coast of Honduras in September and October of 1860, baptizing and marrying the Garifuna and Ladino residents of places such as Punta Piedra, Santa Fe (then called Punta Hicaco), Balfate, and Rio Salado (AET, LM: fols. 170-71, 183; AET, LB: fol. 382). For 1861, after another quick trip into Nicaragua, Subirana returned to the same villages along the north coast while making his headquarters at Trujillo. In July and August, 1861, he worked in the coastal villages between Santa Fe and Sangrelaya (AET, LB: fols. 420-21; AET, LM: 186-89). By December of that year he had returned to the interior lands of Olancho. And in January of 1862, it was here, among the Paya of Culmi and El Carbon, that he for the first time considered the possibility of acquiring land with titles for the Indians. Two-and one-half years later, in Yoro, among the Jicaque, this idea received its greatest successes.

However, during the intervening 26 months (February 1862-May 1864), we have not yet uncovered specific evidence of his activities. It might be supposed, however, that for much of the time Subirana was in Mosquitia among the Garifuna and the Miskito Indians. Indications of this come from his fifth important report (June 26-27, 1864), from Yoro, which is addressed to the Bishop of Honduras and which discusses the geography of eastern places, such as Cabo Gracias a Dios. The report recommends that officials in Comayagua accept the missionary's two guides in the little-known eastern

area to be governor of Mosquitia and as leader of the Garifuna. Victoriano Sambula, a descendant of a former Garifuna chief, was so appointed, along with another Garifuna, Juan Francisco Bebedí of Iruona (the so-called Juan Bul), who was named Governor of Mosquitia (Alvarado G. 1964:98-99).

Map: The Travels of Subirana.



The final, and perhaps most important, episode in the life of Manuel Subirana was acted out in the departamento of Yoro between May 13 and September 19, 1864. During this period the good priest organized and actually aided in the on-site measurement of 21 Jicaque Indian land grants. Roaming throughout the mountains and valleys of Yoro with his team of government surveyors for a extremely hard four-month session apparently took much from the health of Subirana. Two months later, at the age of 57, "El Padre Santo" died. For his arduous work among the Jicaque, Padre Subirana acquired the stature of a martyr. Even today, his memory remains throughout Honduras and his greatest legacy is intact--in the Indian land grants.

Table 1. The Subirana Land Grants of 1862-1864.

CUADRO					
Concesiones de tierras por Subirana de 1862 – 1864					
Fecha de la medición con Subirana presente		Lugar	Tamaño	Documento: Sección de Títulos de Tierras, Archivo Nacional de Honduras	
Títulos Payas					
3 Ene.	1862	Aguanquirito (Culmí)	20 cabs.*	Olancho	16
13 Ene.	1862	El Carbón	20 cabs.*	Olancho	64
Títulos Jicaques					
12 Jul.	1864	Santa Rita Mataderos	7.21 cabs.	Yoro	157
14 Jul.	1864	Siriano	7.59 cabs.	Yoro	281
19 Jul.	1864	Santa Marta	7.53 cabs.	Yoro	269
21 Jul.	1864	El Pate	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	191
		Quemado (Subirana)	7.58 cabs.	Yoro	219
		Tablón	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	290
23 Jul.	1864	Camalote de Cataguana	7.18 cabs.	Yoro	93
		El Palmar	7.43 cabs.	Yoro	188
27 Jul.	1864	Venque de Lagunitas (Negrito)	7.59 cabs.	Yoro	316
2 Agost.	1864	Guajiniquil	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	97
4 Agost.	1864	Candelaria (El Viejo)	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	41
14 Agost.	1864	Tela	7.18 cabs.	Atlán.	21
20 Agost.	1864	La Bolsita	7.26 cabs.	Yoro	30,130
22 Agost.	1864	La Pintada	7.39 cabs.	Yoro	202
24 Agost.	1864	San Francisco (Locomapa)	7 cabs.	Yoro	92
			+ / -		
27 Agost.	1864	Agua Caliente de Reinada	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	4
29 Agost.	1864	Ojo de Agua, Lagunita de	7.32 cabs.	Yoro	177
3 Sept.	1864	Anisillos	7.94 cabs.	Yoro	13
7 Sept.	1864	Zapotal (de Olanchito)	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	322
19 Sept.	1864	Agua Caliente de Guadarrama	7.12 cabs.	Yoro	3
?		Las Vegas (Tepemechín)	7 cabs.	Yoro	314
			+ / -		

* Dos lotes en cada título

The Subirana Land Grants, 1862-1864

Before the time of Subirana, very few Indian communities in Honduras had received legal land titles for ejidos or other purposes. Among the first titles known to this writer are those of Tapale de los Jicaques (1613) (ANH-TT, Francisco Morazán 433); Copan's Chortí ejidos (1629) (ANH-TT, Copán 53); Colohete (1634) (ANH-TT, Ocotepeque 38); and Santa María de las Payas, dating from 1735 (ANH-TT, Olancho 201). Other Indian land documents are known from throughout Honduras, but clearly the titles granted with the help of Subirana reflect the first concentrated effort to acquire legal lands for Indians in Honduras.

Regions of the Grants. The far-flung travels of Subirana undoubtedly played an important role in his widespread popularity in modern Honduras, but the Indian land grants that he organized are concentrated in two relatively small areas of the country (see map). In the high hilly lands near Culmí, where the headwaters of several rivers (Paulaya, Wampú, Tinto, Sico) originate, Subirana found the greatest concentration of Paya Indians when he first passed through in 1857. Five years later, he returned to Culmi to lay out two plots totaling 20 caballerias among the pine forests. On the same trip two similar plots of land were given to the Paya of El Carbón a short distance to the north. With this initial experience among the Paya, Subirana, two years later, turned to the Jicaque area of north central Honduras and produced 21 land documents (see List of Subirana Land Grants, 1862-1864). Each of the Jicaque grants was for approximately seven caballerias.

Procedures of Measurement. Most regulations governing land measurement in Honduras during the Subirana era were based on the laws passed on July 23, 1836. These were the first land laws promulgated by the Spanish American republics after Independence. As copied by Vallejo (1911), the law contains two major points that relate to the Indian grants of Subirana: one mentions the size of a caballeria, the other governs the shape of the plot and the location of population centers within the plot.

The caballeria was the most common unit of land measurement in 1864. According to the 1836 law, article 2, "a caballeria is a parallelogram of 22 cuerdas and 36 1/2 varas in length and half that much in width. Each cuerda must have 50 varas castellanas in length."

Article 16 required that "In measuring one should try to locate the town in the center of the lands measured. If you cannot because someone would be dispossessed of their lands you then should make the plot as close as possible to the people to facilitate its common use."

Both of these rules brought problems during and after the measurement of Subirana's land grants. In the first case, the size of the caballeria depended, in the final outcome, on the size of the "vara castellana," a basic unit which in Spain had had a history of variations. But as Chardon (1980:149) has explained, after 1849 the official vara contained 835.905 millimeters. Therefore, in 1864, according to the land format proposed by Article 2 above, a caballeria should have 645,816.12 square varas castellanas, or an equivalent of 451,255.7 square meters, or about 45.125 hectares. The land documents show, however, that in reality the caballeria was far from being a standard measurement. In one case, the Jicaque land document of Las Vegas, the size of a caballeria is stated as containing 700,000 varas castellanas, or 8.5 percent greater than the standard. When such a difference is multiplied by the factor of seven (normal number of caballerias granted), errors become even more obvious. Normally, the errors were not so great. In the case of El Carbón, the written description in the land title indicates an area of 7.839 caballerias; the survey map however when placed over a modern map of the same terrain, shows an area of 8.111 caballerias. The difference here might be caused by the rough, hilly lands surrounding El Carbon. The more irregular lands make precise surveying difficult. Another factor that caused errors in land measurement was the type of material used to construct the cuerda (survey lines). Most

often, cuerdas of this period were made of pita grass which stretched a bit longer in times of high humidity.

Subirana proceeded in a systematic manner during the process of acquiring land and legal titles for the Indians. That he was so organized is perhaps one reason that he was so successful. To initiate the procedure, the padre wrote a formal petition to the governor of the departamento to request a land title for an Indian tribe. In the request Subirana asked for about seven caballerias of land, a figure he probably derived from the land laws of 1836. Normally, within one week the governor agreed in writing to the request and appointed an agrimensor to oversee the measurement of lands. (At the time of the Subirana grants Francisco Castro was the chief surveyor of the departamento of Yoro. Guillermo Herrera had that role in Olancho.) About one month later, a comisión de medidas, composed of Padre Subirana, the agrimensor, and local witnesses met at the general site to select the specific, most suitable land for the grant. This initial inspection was known as the visita de ojos, and preceded the formal measurement. Apparently, Subirana forced the timely measurement of the land grants by his presence on the site, because all 21 Jicaque titles were completed in a nine-week period.

Form of the Lands Granted. According to the Spanish Americans who had recently gained their independence during the early 19th century, the ideal form of a land grant was the square, of equal width and length, and with a settlement in the very center. The first Indian land granted after the 1836 land law (in 1838, at Agalteca, just north of Olanchito) was of this exact form (See ANH-TT, Yoro 1). But for the bulk of Indian grants such symmetry was not reasonable. Generally, lands available for Indian occupation were in relatively isolated and ruggedly sloping terrain. Most often Indians occupied river terraces that followed a linear pattern on each side of narrow stream. In an effort to give the Indians usable lands, rather than the steep, virtually useless land upslope, most grants were measured in elongated rectangular shapes. The most exaggerated forms found among the Subirana grants were those of La Bolsita (a 1-to-35

width-to-length ratio) and San Francisco Locomapa (a 1-to-20 width-to-length ratio). Each plot appeared as a narrow ribbon of land on both sides of their respective rivers. Normal ratios were 1 to 4 or 5.

Concluding Remarks

In closing, two themes seem most appropriate for discussion: 1) In a difficult period of Indian-Ladino relations in Central America, why was Subirana so successful? and 2) Are there lasting impacts of the mid-19th century Indian land grants?

Any interpretation of Subirana's success must include a variety of factors, often interrelated. The factors would include some of the following. 1) The padre was knowledgeable of the Indian places and situations in specific locations. He was not a theoretician removed from the actual sites. No land grants were attempted until after five years of familiarity. He knew the lands well and the Indians had confidence in him after repeated contacts. 2) The geographical locations of the Indian lands were in relatively isolated areas, beyond the frontiers of Honduran population concentrations, and without Ladino population pressures from adjacent lands. There were no immediate conflicts. 3) Subirana, as a well-known priest, missionary, and prestigious representative of the Church in Honduras, had sufficient political protection to be considered non-controversial in a potentially controversial activity--helping Indians. Evidently, he was physically so energetic--as demonstrated by his extreme travels in harsh environments--that he must have appeared as a charismatic figure. The power of his individual personality, in addition to the powers that he represented, was probably a great factor in his favor. 4) He was systematic and organized. Government officials knew what to expect step-by-step after he initiated requests for the land grants. His documentation followed a format and he used the same government surveyors, who must have quickly learned what techniques he desired. 5) Subirana personally guided the on-site surveying. Rapidly, he pushed through all of the measurements with the aid of local Indians who already knew best their own lands and prominent landmarks for

boundaries. 6) Finally, with the urging of Subirana, the legal documentation was quickly concluded. Departmental records were sent to Comayagua for final ratification, which secured the legal titles.

It would be difficult to assess the complete impact of the Subirana grants on modern activities, and particularly difficult to distinguish direct influences from more indirect developments. Still, some few relationships are obvious. Perhaps most importantly, the grant lands still control, at least in part, the distribution of Indians in Honduras. However, it is clear from the research of Chavéz B. (1982) that while the Jicaque land titles are still intact and legal, Indians no longer are the majority population on the Subirana land grants. Indians account for as much as 69 percent of the occupants at El Pate, Negrito, but that is a rare instance. The normal proportion of Jicaque residents on Indian land is between 32 and 40 percent of the total (examples from Santa Marta, Tablon, Lagunitas, and Subirana). And the proportion of Indians decreases yearly. Thus, the colonial threat of a dominate culture overwhelming a minority aboriginal population apparently has not lessened. Modern Indians in Honduras are still subject to land alienation, being pushed and pulled from their lands just as they have been for centuries. In the case of the Paya lands, the situation is mixed: at El Carbón, Indians control original lands, but at Culmí, Ladinos have periodically invaded and acquired former Indian lands. Paya moves to new land openings seem only to attract Ladino competitors. Ethnic conflicts over land remain tense in that vicinity.

But the most lasting impact of the 120-year-old grants may lie in the knowledge that such legalities are available to Indians. Even among the Indians who live off of the grant lands, their recollections and legends of the exploits of Padre Subirana have instilled an awareness of the possibility of securing land with legal titles.

Today, with the organized assistance of a more socially-aware government, Indian land title programs can possibly prove successful again. Subirana learned, and

by his actions passed on the lesson for our observation, **that secure land is the key factor in the indigenous quest to retain identity.**

Postage stamps recognizing 100 years anniversary of Subirana's death.



Subirana shrine and tomb at Church in Yoro, Yoro. Photographs courtesy Craig Revels, 2005.



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