CHAPTER THREE

INVISIBLE CONVERTS TO PROTESTANTISM IN HIGHLAND GUATEMALA

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 "This case study provides additional evidence to the complex and intriguing fuzziness of ethnicity as category of identification. Religious linkages, values, and apparently indelible beliefs may be removed or transformed, but the social self continues to re-define itself as an enduring but different entity". A social anthropologist, Liliana Goldin, who is Associate Professor of Anthropology (Latin American and Caribbean Studies), State University of New York, has done field work in Guatemala since 1980. Brent Metz, fluent on Ki’Che’ Maya, is Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Central Connecticut State University. Both authors have contributed numerous articles on indigenous people in Guatemala to books and specialized journals. Their article—which appeared in Ethnology, No. 30, vol. 4, 1991 pp. 325-338—is used with the permission of the authors and publisher.

Introduction

The process of religious conversions to protestantism is widespread and rapid in the underdeveloped world, and the numbers in Latin America are especially significant.¹ It affects urban and rural peoples of varied cultural and ecological backgrounds. Often, major economic changes are either attributed or related to the significant ideological shift associated with religious conversion. The nature of the changes taking place as individuals or families convert is complex. In Latin America, and particularly in Guatemala, people convert for reasons as varied as the popularity of a Protestant political leader (president Rios Mont), an earthquake, and the ongoing violence.² Nash found alcoholism to be one of the major reasons for conversions, and refers to protestantism as the Alcoholic Anonymous of

Maya Indians.\textsuperscript{3} Economic, political, and social reasons have been cited as the basis for conversion to protestantism in the area.\textsuperscript{4}

Some scholars have pointed to the tendency of studies to provide limited attention to experience, discourse analysis, and other processes of identity change within which conversion may be understood.\textsuperscript{5} Historical accounts of protestantism's introduction to Latin American countries elaborate on the type of discourse that different denominations use in their missionary enterprises, often through development or education projects.\textsuperscript{6} The association of economic development through progress and modernization with protestantism has been explicit in the teachings of Protestant missionaries and writers\textsuperscript{7} and the social and economic benefits of associating with Protestants is emphasized by numerous recent studies.\textsuperscript{8}

In the case of western Guatemala which we shall discuss below, the