

FROM CANNIBALS TO KINGS:
HISTORY AND CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG LACANDON MAYA INDIANS,
1542 - 2002

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Southwest Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

By

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San Marcos, Texas
May, 2003

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the result of several years of research and study, none of which would have been possible without the support of my family and the faculty from the Department of Anthropology and the Department of History at Southwest Texas State University. Any weaknesses in this work are entirely mine and the strengths belong to everyone who has helped me along the way.

The individuals that I am indebted to are numerous. I must acknowledge and thank the faculty in the Department of Anthropology for challenging me as an undergraduate and supporting me as a graduate student. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Warms for opening his home to me and my family and for always asking the difficult theoretical questions. I also appreciate Dr. Britt Bousman for employing me and allowing me to work as much and as little as my schedule permitted. My graduate studies in the Department of History would not have been possible without the encouragement of Dr. Eugene Bourgeois. His class on Tudor England drew me into the program and his passion for history hooked me on the discipline. The specific history

faculty members that assisted me are too many to mention, so I would just like to thank them all as a group for their dedication to the discipline and for being both friends and mentors to me.

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee. I appreciate Dr. Paul Hart's calming influence on this frantic graduate student--he kept me focused on the big picture. I am deeply indebted to my thesis chair Dr. Frank de la Teja who knew little about me and still took me on as a student. He worked many late nights evaluating my work and his comments were always insightful and thorough. He is a model historian and I learned just by watching him work. Ultimately this project would not have been possible without the friendship and mentoring of Dr. Jon McGee. He introduced me to the Lacandon and to the world of scholarly research. He tolerated me in the classroom and put up with me in the jungles of Chiapas. I am eternally in his debt.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the people that are the focus of much of this thesis--the Lacandon Maya. Many in Lacanja and Nahá open their communities and

their lives to outsiders like me. I am thankful for their directness and friendliness.

And finally, it is my family that I owe the most thanks. I spent several months in the jungle and too many nights in the office working on this project; Andrea and Myles were always patiently waiting for my return. They supported me and motivated me. I would like to thank my parents, Hossein and Steffania, for being supportive of me and my work. This thesis would not have been possible without the encouragement of my family--there are not enough words to express my gratefulness to them.

This manuscript was submitted on Monday, April 21, 2003.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Introduction

In the spring of 1903, an up-and-coming American anthropologist named Alfred Tozzer encountered a group of Lacandon Indians in the jungles of Chiapas. In a letter from March 1, he retold his first impressions of a the first Lacandon man he met. This individual was:

The most curious looking [man.] His hair was long and unkept [sic] hanging over his shoulder. He wore a sort of poncho-like affair which hung just below the knees and this was his only dress. A scanty and straggly beard made his appearance all the more strange and out of the ordinary. It did not take me long to find out who he was ... I knew I had found my first Carib.

In 1907 Tozzer published *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandones* in which he described the Lacandon as "unchanged and untrammelled by Spanish contact." In the twentieth

century, Tozzer's analysis became the seminal work on the Lacandon Maya.¹

The Lacandon Maya have been the subject of numerous studies over the past century. Tozzer was the first description of Lacandon culture and society. He depicted Lacandon society as static and unchanging and proposed that the Lacandon were the cultural heirs to pre-Conquest inhabitants of Central America. Numerous researchers, such as Jacques Soustelle (1932, 1933, and 1971), Gertrude Duby and Franz Blom (1952), and Robert Bruce and Victor Perrera (1984), proposed that Lacandon society had changed little since the pre-Colombian period.²

Throughout the last two centuries, however, Lacandon society has changed in several fundamental areas. First, settlement patterns shifted from small, isolated, family-based compounds to large communities of non-related individuals. Second, the basic economic system shifted from subsistence farming and trade to a mixed economy of

¹ Alfred Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandonas*, (New York: MacMillan, 1907), 3; "Letter of 1 March 1903," Personal Papers of Alfred Tozzer, Tozzer Library, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

² Jacques Soustelle, "Notes sur les Lacandon du Lac Peljá du Río Jetjá (Chiapas)," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 25 (1933): 153-180; Soustell, "Le Totémisme des Lacandonas," *Maya Research* 2, no. 4 (1935): 325-344; Soustelle, *The Four Suns* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971); Gertrude Duby and Frans Blom, "The Lacandon," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 7, ed. Evon Voght, 276-297 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969); Robert Bruce and Victor Perrera, *The Last Lords of Palenque, The Lacandon Mayas of the Mexican Rain Forest* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984).

commercial agriculture and tourism. Finally, the traditional Lacandon religion dissipated as local elders died and protestant missionaries proselytized in the communities. Other researchers have overlooked these changes. There has been little emphasis placed on tracing Lacandon history and the changes in Lacandon society over the centuries.

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of Lacandon history and to review changes in Lacandon society. Two broad questions are addressed: who were the ancestors of the modern Lacandon and how have the Lacandon changed in the past two hundred years? It traces the history of the seventeenth century Chol-Lacandon, who are erroneously identified as the ancestors of the modern Lacandon and describes the origins of today's Yucatec-speaking Lacandon. This thesis refines the existing interpretations of Lacandon Maya society and provides the first systematic history of changes in their settlement patterns, economy, and religion. This study also synthesizes existing scholarship and popular literature to present a comprehensive model of social change. Specifically, it describes the impact of some of the external forces that have transformed Lacandon society.

The Maya World

The Maya constitute the largest indigenous ethnic group in North America today. Most of the population, which numbers about six million people, lives in a concentrated, unbroken area that encompasses Belize, Guatemala, the western parts of Honduras and El Salvador, and the Mexican states of Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Yucatan. There are over thirty-two Maya language families, each with numerous subfamilies and dialects. The most commonly spoken language is Yucatec Maya, which is used throughout most of the Yucatan peninsula and in small pockets of the forests of Chiapas and Guatemala.

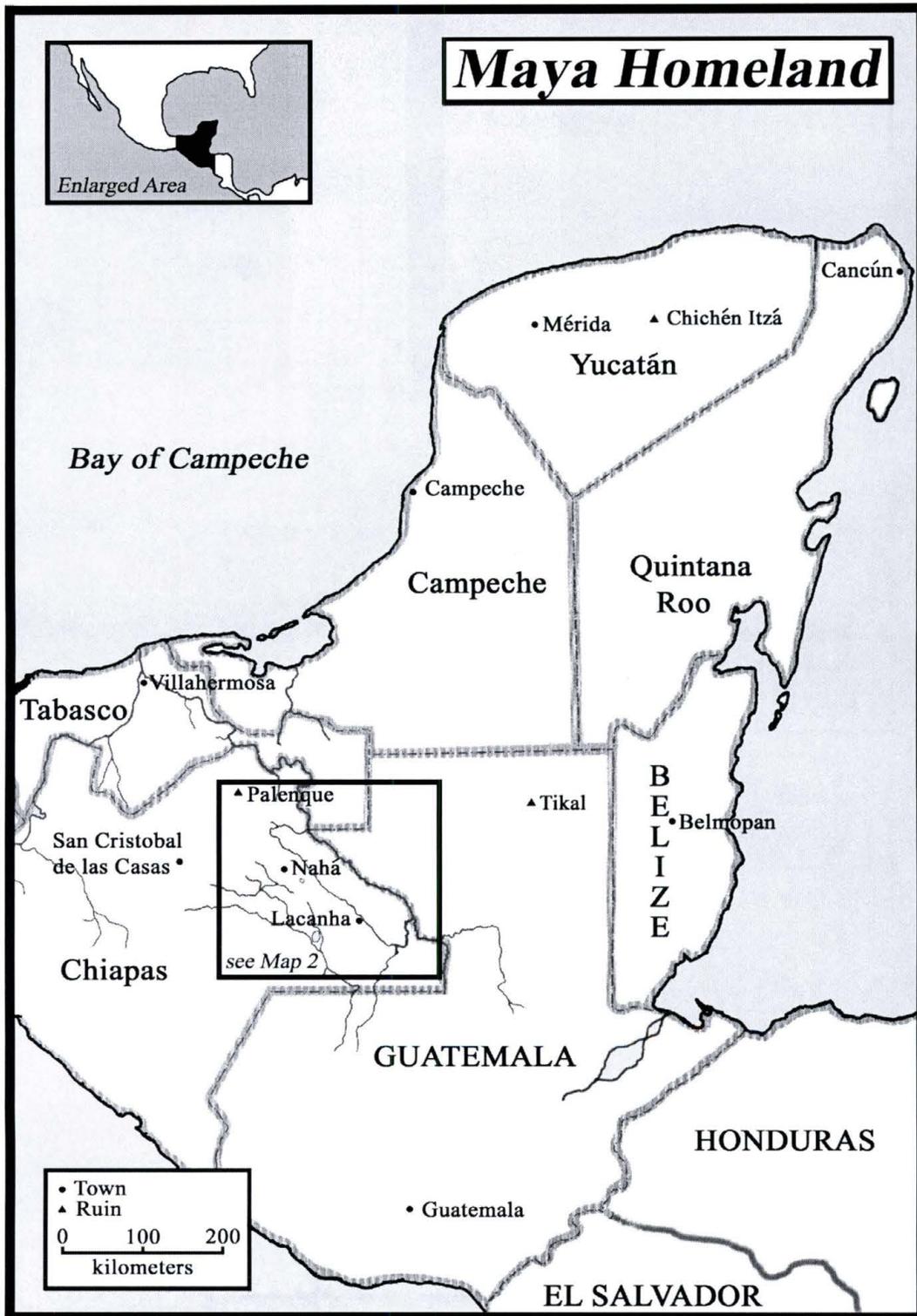
The Maya inhabit an ecologically diverse region of central Mesoamerica. The Maya zone includes two main geographic areas: warm lowlands and cold or temperate mountains. A hot and humid environment characterizes the lowlands, while in the highlands different elevations have gradients of temperature and rainfall. In general, the lowlands have average temperatures above 18°C (64°F). The highest mountains of the region (Tacaná volcanoes) have average temperatures between 5° and 12°C (41° to 56°F). Forests are spread throughout the region. The lowlands consist of deciduous, evergreen, and tropical rain forests. The cooler highlands contain deciduous and pine-oak

forests. Mangroves are common in coastal areas while savannahs are found in Campeche, Tabasco, and Yucatan.³

Most Maya are slash-and-burn subsistence farmers who exist in the lowest income levels in the region. The Mexican state of Chiapas has one of the largest and most diverse Maya populations. In Chiapas there are nine major Maya ethnicities that constitute nearly forty percent of the state's three and a half million people. In 1990 the Maya inhabitants of Chiapas displayed extremely high rates of illiteracy (54% compared to 41% for other indigenous groups in Mexico) and infant mortality (55 deaths per thousand compared to 39 per every thousand for other native groups in Mexico). Most Maya in Chiapas (54%) lived without electricity and half of their homes were without potable water. In recent years numerous Maya groups have created political, and sometimes military, organizations to protest these conditions.⁴

³ Paul Kirchhoff, "Mesoamérica: sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales," *Acta Americana* 1 (1943): 92; Arturo Gómez-Pompa, "Vegetation of the Maya Region," in *Maya*, eds. Peter Schmidt, Mercedes de la Garza, and Enrique Nalda (New York: Rizzoli Press, 1998), 38-51.

⁴ Michael Coe, *The Maya*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996); *Chiapas: Hablantes de Lengua Indígena* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía E Informática, 1993).



Map 1

The Maya Region

On New Year's Day in 1994, hundreds of masked Mayan men and women swarmed the empty streets of the colonial city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. The rebels overwhelmed the local police force, disabled the telephone system, and turned the foggy city into the revolutionary headquarters of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* or *Zapatistas*, as they are commonly known. The Zapatistas erupted on the world stage of politics rejecting five hundred years of marginalization and subjugation. They protested the political, economic, and social position of Chiapas' indigenous inhabitants. The militancy of the Zapatista movement brought a new era for indigenous protests. The movement disrupted the Mexican economy and sent economic and political shockwaves as far as the United State and Europe. For the Maya, however, resistance to external control was not actually new at all, because Mayan history is filled with intense periods of protest and resistance.

The colonial Maya were known for their tenacity and resistance to subjugation. Since the earliest period of the Spanish conquest of Central America, the Maya rejected outside influences and encroachments. Even the first exchange between Maya and Old World civilization was one of conflict. When Francisco Hernández de Córdoba made

landfall along the shores of the Yucatan peninsula near the island of Cozumel in 1517, Maya warriors greeted him with a barrage of arrows and lances. Six years later Pedro de Alvarado's attempts to subjugate the Quiché and Cakchiquel Maya of Guatemala and southern Mexico were met with ambushes, night attacks, and traps. Similarly, in 1528 Francisco de Montejo tried to conquer the Yucatec Maya and local inhabitants resisted fiercely. By the mid-1540s both areas were under Spanish rule following the surrender by the Quiché and Cakchiquel lords and Montejo's establishment of the regional capital of Mérida, however, indigenous resistance continued throughout the colonial and modern periods.

Rebellions and protests occurred throughout the Maya homeland. Yucatec Maya challenged an oppressive *auto de fe*, the judicial prosecution of heretic and wayward Christians, initiated by the Franciscan Friar Diego de Landa during the 1560s. In the seventeenth century the Itzas resisted Spanish rule from their island capital in Guatemala until the early eighteenth century. The Tzeltal of the Chiapas highlands rebelled against the colonial political system in the early eighteenth century. The nineteenth century brought the most violent Maya rebellions. The Yucatec Maya rebelled against social and

religious oppression between 1847 and 1860 during the so-called Caste Wars, which took as many as 250,000 lives. In 1868, the Tzeltal of highland Chiapas again took up arms against the ruling classes. At the end of the century, Maya chiefs of Quintana Roo were in open revolt against the autocracy of Porfirio Díaz.⁵

Violent conflict was by no means the only form of protest and resistance - rather than taking up arms and fighting, many groups chose to retreat into the protection of the dense tropical jungle. In the seventeenth century, Chol-Lacandon first attempted to fight a Spanish siege and then sought refuge within the forests of eastern Chiapas. Similarly, western Chiapas became a refuge for members of other groups - Yucatec-speakers from Campeche and Quehach and Itza from northern and western Guatemala. In the eighteenth century, Yucatec-Lacandon, the ancestors to the modern Lacandon, moved into the jungles of Chiapas and Guatemala. Well into the twentieth century, the Lacandon chose resistance through flight.⁶

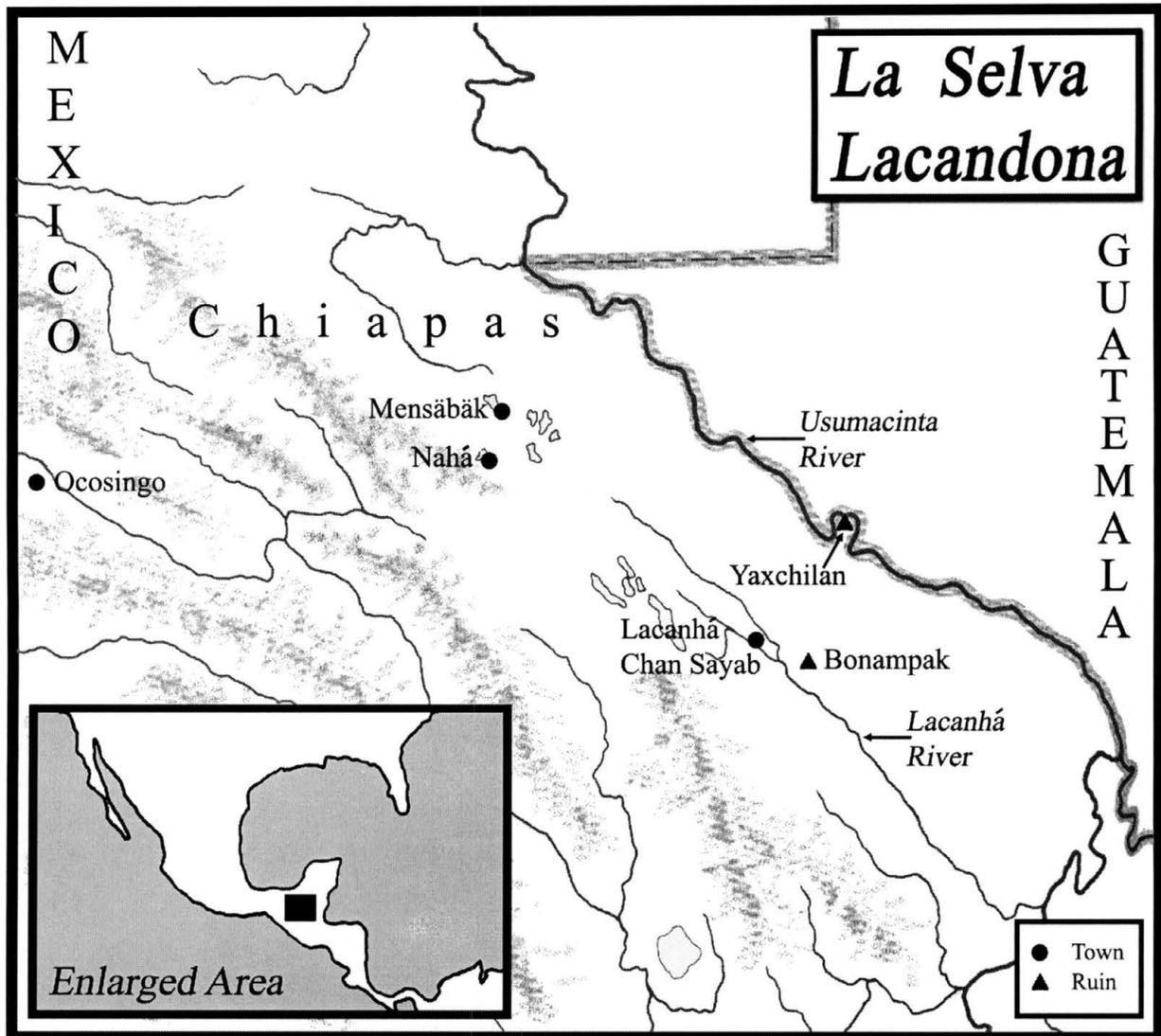
⁵ Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests, Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1991); Grant D. Jones, *The Conquest of the Last Maya Kingdom*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Juan Pedro Viqueria, *Une rebellion indienne au Chiapas, 1712*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999); Jan de Vos, "The Mayas in Modern Times," in *Maya*, 494-506.

⁶ James Nations, "Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya," (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1979), 88.

Who are the Lacandon Maya?

Today, Lacandon Maya number about 650 individuals and constitute one of the smallest indigenous groups remaining in the Americas. Most Lacandon live in three communities: Lacanha Chan Sayab, Nahá, and Mensábäk (see Map 2). There are two subgroups of Lacandon: Northern and Southern. While the two groups speak closely related dialects of Lacandon Maya, there are significant cultural differences between the two groups. The two groups are distinct in dress, hairstyle, patterns of marriage and kinship terminology. Since the late eighteenth century, the Lacandon wore a white tunic called a *xikul* (see Image 1). However, Northern women generally wore a patterned skirt beneath their *xikul*. Southern Lacandon typically wore their hair shoulder-length, free-flowing and parted in the middle. Northern Lacandon also wore long hair, but cut brow level bangs. Women braided their hair. Today, many of these distinctions have been loosened and many Lacandon dress in Western clothes and cut their hair in modern styles.⁷

⁷ R. Jon McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990).



Map 2

The Lacandon Region showing the three principal contemporary communities of Lacanhá Chan Sayab, Nahá, and Mensábäk

At the turn of the century, Lacandon referred to themselves as *massewal*, which appears to be derived from the Nahuatl term for commoners, *macehual*. The use of *macehaul* was common throughout the Mayan region and the Maya of Yucatan continue this practice. Today, both groups

of contemporary Lacandon refer to themselves as *Hach Winik* or "real people," but still recognize the cultural and linguistic differences between themselves. Northern Lacandon identify their southern counterparts as *Chukuch Nok* (long clothes), which refers to the long calf-length tunic that they typically wear. Likewise, southern Lacandon distinguish themselves from northerners by referring to them as *Nachi Winik* (far people) or *Huntul Winik* (other people).⁸

The northern Lacandon are the descendants of individuals who lived on the Usumacinta River near the ancient Maya ruins of Piedras Negras and on lakes south of the Chicolja River during the late eighteenth century. In the early twentieth century, Alfred Tozzer and Jacques Soustelle conducted ethnographic research with communities on Lake Pelja, which is near the present-day community of Nahá. Although it is unclear where the southern Lacandon originated, some authors have asserted that they lived near their present location on the Lacanhá River.⁹

⁸ Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandones*, 3-4.

⁹ Ibid; Jacques Soustelle, "Notes sur les Lacandon du Lac Peljá du Río Jetjá (Chiapas)." *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 25 (1933): 153-180.



Image 1

Two Lacandon men from the nineteenth century wearing traditional clothes ¹⁰

Southeastern Chiapas is a region broadly referred to as *La Selva Lacandona* (The Lacandon Jungle) (see Map 2). The area has numerous lakes and rivers, the two largest being the Usumacinta and Lacantún. Within this region the Lacandon inhabit the Montes Azules Biosphere Preserve,

¹⁰ Photo by Jeremiah Curtin, 1897

which consists of 660,200 hectares (approximately 1.4 million acres) of North America's last tropical rain forest. The Preserve is home to a vast variety of flora and fauna and contains 25 percent of Mexico's plant and animal diversity. There are an estimated 4,000 species of plants, 345 birds, and 112 mammals contained within the region. However, much of the region is sparsely settled and extensive scientific investigation has not been conducted.¹¹

Located seventeen degrees latitude north of the equator, the region is generally warm and wet. The average temperature is 18 degrees Celsius (70 degrees Fahrenheit) and yearly rainfall totals 250 centimeters (90 inches). Within this environment agriculture is extremely productive and for most Lacandon farming is a central part of their existence. The Lacandon are swidden horticulturists and farm throughout much of the year. Swidden horticulture is commonly described as slash-and-burn farming, in which fallow forest is cleared by cutting vegetation and burning the debris. Among the Lacandon these fields are farmed for short periods and then allowed to regenerate into secondary-growth forest. This practice allows for maximum

¹¹ Dennis Breedlove, *The Flora of Chiapas*, (San Francisco: California Academy of Sciences, 1981), i; Karen O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 6.

production and minimal long-term damage to the environment. The Lacandon typically farm hectare-sized *milpas* (fields) that contain a wide-variety of crops and produce high yields.¹²

Historiographic Trends

The Lacandons have long been known to exist; but the Spaniards never succeeded in conquering them.... The tribes are completely isolated and utterly independent of outside civilizations ... The Lacandons, it would appear, are in the direct line of descent, and of degeneracy. [emphasis added]¹³

Current anthropological knowledge and methodology suggest that the present-day Lacandones ... are in fact the direct descendants of the ancient Mayas,... the direct descendants of the rulers of Palenque at the time of its Classic splendor [circa A.D. 700],... the last and only direct cultural heirs of the Maya civilization

¹² James Nations and Ron Nigh, "The Evolutionary Potential of the Lacandon Maya Sustained-yield Tropical Forest Agriculture," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 36, no. 1 (1980): 1-30; Olga Herrera-MacBryde and Rodrigo A. Medellín, "Lacandon Rain Forest Region." *Middle America: CPD Site*, 2.

¹³ Count Byron de Prorok, *In Quest of Lost Worlds* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1935), 143, 175.

... [and] the last of the *halach winik* (great lords) of the Olmec-Maya tradition.¹⁴

Historical and anthropological writings about the Lacandon fall into two categories, which I label *cultural minimalism* and *historical reductionism*. Since the early-nineteenth century the Lacandon Maya have been the subject of numerous works. Individuals searching for navigable rivers reported Indians living deep in the unexplored jungles of Guatemala and Chiapas in the 1830s. In the 1880s and 1890s, European explorers searching for ancient Maya cities recounted their encounters with Lacandon deep in the jungles of Chiapas and Guatemala. In many of these cultural minimalist accounts, the Lacandon were portrayed as the heirs to the ancient Maya. These authors proposed that within the jungle refuge of the Lacandon, they continued traditions that dated back to the pre-historic past of Mesoamerica. The Lacandon, thus, were viewed as living fossils.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries Western travelers searching for the *wild Indians* of Chiapas reported Lacandon communities near the Usumacinta River.

¹⁴ Robert Bruce and Victor Perrera, *The Last Lords of Palenque, The Lacandon Mayas of the Mexican Rain Forest* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 12, 13.

In many of these accounts the Lacandon were described as destitute and their society on the verge of collapse. These authors proposed that the Lacandon culture was collapsing over time.

Throughout much of the twentieth century social scientists took up these positions and evaluated Lacandon either as the link with the ancient Maya past or as a degenerating society. Although this tradition of scholarship is deeply rooted, these interpretations are often based on romantic, idealized portraits of Lacandon society and have misrepresented who the Lacandon are and the circumstances that have shaped their society.

Cultural Minimalism

Cultural minimalists proposed that within the jungles of Chiapas, the Lacandon retained the essential traits of the ancient Maya culture. They portrayed the Lacandon as "untrammelled" and the isolated vestiges of a pre-historic past. They argued that the Lacandon sought isolation from Spaniards, other Maya groups, and later from Mexicans. This isolation theory was typified by Grant D. Jones' statement that Lacandon society existed in a state of

"anticivilization [that was] in search of refuge from a larger reality."¹⁵

Several nineteenth century authors fall into the cultural minimalist category. In 1832, Juan Galindo was the first European to report on the Lacandon. His account of the Lacandon portrayed them as "the only pure remnant" of the ancient Maya. As a member of the Royal Geographic Society, Galindo's findings were presented to a broad European audience. Nine years later John L. Stevens presented a similar account. In 1839, Stevens recounted a trip through Central America in his book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*. Stevens described the Lacandon, whom he identified as "Candones," as "unbaptized Indians, who live as their fathers did, acknowledging no submission to the Spaniards."¹⁶

Galindo and Stevens portrayed the Lacandon as jungle chiefs who carried on the traditions of the ancient Maya, a conclusion that was based on fanciful exaggeration. During the 1890s and 1900s anthropologists adopted and reinforced

¹⁵ Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandones*, 3; Grant D. Jones, *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: Time and History on a Colonial Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 21.

¹⁶ Juan Galindo, "Description of the River Usumasinta, in Guatemala," *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society* 3 (1833): 59; John L. Stevens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (New York: Dover, 1969), 2: 195; Karl Sapper, *Northern Central America with a Trip to the Highland of Anahuac: Travels and Studies of the Years 1888-1895* (Brunswick: Friedrich Viewig and Sons Publishing, 1897), 264.

these fallacious images. For example, in the 1890s a German ethnographer named Karl Sapper spent time with several communities and wrote:

While it is true that there are many people in a natural state on the earth today already near extinction... it must still be of especial importance to listen to the beliefs of the Lacandons and investigate their customs, for thereby, despite the... already much altered and varied form, there must still fall many a revealing light on the mysterious mythology and remarkable customs of the ancient nation of the Maya.¹⁷

Tozzer's *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandones*, the first modern ethnographic study of the Lacandon, incorporated fieldwork and linguistics and is still regarded by many as a noteworthy study. However, Tozzer perpetuated the perception of the Lacandon as heirs to the ancient Maya. He specifically stressed religious parallels between the Lacandon and the pre-Columbian Maya. He generalized Lacandon religion as representative of the "former religion of ... the ancient Mayas of Yucatan ... [and] the whole Maya stock." Tozzer's interpretation of religion proved to be influential throughout the twentieth

¹⁷ Karl Sapper, *Northern Central America with a Trip to the Highland of Anahuac: Travels and Studies of the Years 1888-1895*, trans. A.M. Parker (Brunswick: Friedrich Viewig and Son, 1897), 264.

century and numerous authors stressed religious parallels. Many of these authors based their cultural minimalist interpretations on his work.¹⁸

In the decades that followed Tozzer anthropologists trickled into the Lacandon jungle. In the 1930s David Amram and Jacques and Georgette Soustelle researched Lacandon religion and social structure. Similarly, in the 1940s Howard Cline studied the Lacandon pantheon of gods. In the 1950s and 1960s Frans Blom and Gertrude Duby-Blom studied Lacandon society as a whole, however, they placed great emphasis on religion. Finally, in the 1970s and 1980s Dale Davis and Jon McGee studied Lacandon religious rites.¹⁹

For the most part the work conducted during this period was repetitious--author after author made reports on Lacandon religious rites and practices and proposed parallels with the pre-Columbian Maya. For example, in 1933 Georgette Soustelle wrote that Lacandon religion

¹⁸ Alfred Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1907) 79; Tozzer's interpretation of religion see 79-150.

¹⁹ David Amram, "The Lacandon, Last of the Maya." *El Mexico Antiguo* 6, nos. 1-3, (1942): 15-30; Soustelle translations mine from Jacques Soustelle, "Le Totémisme des Lacandones." *Maya Research* 2, no. 4 (1935): 325-344; Howard Cline, "Lore and Dieties of the Lacandon Indians of Chiapas, Mexico." *Journal of American Folklore* 57 (1944): 107-115; Gertrude Duby, *Los Lacandones*, (Mexico: Secretaria de Educacion Publica, 1944); McGee, *Life, Ritual and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*.

developed "independent of the conquest and European influence." Soustelle also proposed that this ideology formed the basis of the "high civilizations of Chiapas, Yucatán and Guatémala [sic], when they reached their high points." Similarly, in 1967, Pierre Ivanoff wrote that the Lacandon have "preserved the worship of the gods of long ago, as well as certain customs and skills of their Maya ancestors." In 1990 Jon McGee reaffirmed this tradition when he wrote on Lacandon ritual symbolism. He proposed that "these items have been retained from the ceremonial practices of their prehispanic ancestors."²⁰

Another recent work in the cultural minimalist tradition is Robert Bruce and Victor Perrera's 1982 book entitled *The Last Lords of Palenque*. The work is a firsthand account of life in a Lacandon community, which based on the underlying theme that the Lacandon are the sole heirs of an ancient Maya oral tradition. The authors go as far as to claim that an elderly man from the community of Nahá called Chan K'in Viejo was the "direct

²⁰ Georgette Soustelle, "Observations Sur La Religion Des Lacandons Du Mexique Méridional," 1st quote 141, 2nd quote 190; Pierre Ivanoff, "The Tribe That Turned Its Back," *The Geographical Magazine* (July 1967), 180-182; McGee, *Life, Ritual and Religion Among the Lacandon Maya*, 59.

descendant of the rulers of Palenque at the time of its Classic splendor."²¹

Although there are significant differences between many of the cultural minimalist positions, all of the authors share the interpretation that the present-day Lacandon are the carriers of essential elements of ancient Maya culture. Quite simply, this position both ignores basic logic and thorough historical analysis. In simple terms the logic of this position goes as follows: the ancient Maya had a polytheistic religion and built large cities; the Lacandon Maya have a polytheistic religion and live near several Classic Period ruins; therefore the Lacandon Maya are the descendants of the ancient Maya. If a similar position were made in about a Western society, scholars would easily dismantle it.

For most authors, however, the Lacandon Maya were a living link to the Maya who lived well over a thousand years ago--a position that seems to be due to popularized romanticism on the part of Mesoamerican scholars. Central to this issue is the general lack of analysis of colonial history in Chiapas. One issue that has typically been overlooked is the basic distinction between the Chol-

²¹ Bruce and Perra, *Last Lords of Palenque*, 13.

speaking aboriginal inhabitants of the region and the Yucatec-speaking Lacandon who immigrated into Chiapas in the eighteenth century. These two fundamental issues, are the foundation for the work of the cultural minimalists and will be thoroughly examined in the following chapters.²²

Historical Reductionism

In contrast to cultural minimalists, historical reductionsists--most notably wealthy travelers from nineteenth century Europe and twentieth century United States--maintained that the Lacandon existed in a state of social degeneracy and decay. They frequently described Lacandon society in materialist terms and provided inventories of traits and tools. Lacandon hunting tools, such as bows and flint-knapped arrows, attracted considerable attention. Lacandon society was often labeled as "stone-age" and "primitive." Among late nineteenth and early twentieth century authors these interpretations implied simplicity and savagery.²³

²² For secondary sources see Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967) and articles in the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); R. Jon McGee, *Watching Lacandon Lives* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), 1.

²³ Karl Sapper, *Northern Central America with a Trip to the Highland of Anahuac*, 60.

Désiré Charnay first articulated this perspective in the 1880s. Searching for the ruins of ancient Maya cities, Charnay encountered a small group of Lacandon on the Usumacinta River near the Classic Period site of Yaxchilan in 1883. He proposed that the group existed in a reduced state and wrote that "...their flesh is flabby and soft, the lips pale, the teeth poor, they appear anemic... Their tribe is ruined, has lost ... the tradition of the arts that was cultivated by the ancients."²⁴

Fifty years after Charnay's account Count Byron de Prorok, an English aristocrat, led an expedition into the jungles of Chiapas. In his 1935 book *In Search of Ancient Cities*, de Prorok proposed that the Lacandon were detached from all aspects of the surrounding world. De Prorok claimed that within this isolation the Lacandon degenerated into "pygmies" with faces that were "almost devoid of intelligence." Vincente de Caso-Mier proposed a similar claim in 1935. He maintained that the ancestors of the Lacandon were "strong, tall men" while the Lacandon were

²⁴ Désiré Charnay, "La ville Lorillard au pays des Lacandons." *Revue d'Ethnographie* 2, no. 6 (1883), 502-503; translation mine.

"dwarflike ... pigmies [sic], sickly, degenerated and weak in appearance."²⁵

Numerous historical reductionists proposed that Lacandon society as a whole was on the verge of collapse. In the 1950s Juan Leonard asserted that Lacandon marriage patterns were rapidly disintegrating. Leonard's analysis claimed to "note changes" on the "break-down of the social structure of the group." He proposed that in addition to the Lacandon's gross ignorance on issues of age and affinity, most marriages were polygynous and incestuous. These marriages were between brothers and sisters and adopted siblings. In the 1960s Alfonso Villa Rojas reinforced Leonard's position by presenting a complex historical reductionist argument on the disintegration of the basic components of Lacandon culture and social institutions. Like the cultural minimalists, he proposed that the Lacandon retained ancient patterns of culture, however, these patterns were unable to function under the stresses of the twentieth century. Villa Rojas proposed that Lacandon society was dysfunctional and on the verge of collapse. The Lacandon were so isolated from Mexican

²⁵ Count Byron de Prorok, *In Search of Ancient Cities* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1935) 158, 155; Vincente de Caso-Mier, "Among the Lacandones," *Three Americas* 1, no. 5 (1935), 12.

society that they were, as Villa Rojas states, Mexico's "most destitute Indian group."²⁶

The problems inherent in the historical reductionist position are relatively simple to recognize. Like the cultural minimalists, many of the historical reductionist arguments were not built on historical analysis. Numerous authors overlooked simple issues. For example, Juan Leonard's assertion (mentioned above) that marriage practices were disintegrating into polygyny and incest ignored the fact that these practices dated back well over a century. In 1793 a Franciscan priest working with the ancestors to the modern Lacandon reported on the practices of multiple wives and consanguineous marriages of his potential converts. Leonard's position also serves as an example of another fundamental flaw in the historical reductionist model. Although employing kinship, Leonard diagrams seemingly qualified his assertion that the Lacandon regularly practiced incest, he overlooked culturally relative issues. He maintained that members of the same family were married. However, he passed over the basic Lacandon construction of family and restrictions on marriage. Specifically, he ignored issues of adoption and

²⁶ Alfonso Villa Rojas, "Los lacandonos: su origen, costumbres y problemas vitales," *América Indígena* 27, no. 1 (1967): 53.

that these siblings had different parents; thus the children belonged to different family groups. This is significant because within Lacandon society there are strict rules against endogamous marriages. The historical reductionists often based their claims solely on superficial traits and brief experiences, which they typically posed in derogatory terms like "primitive" and "degenerate."²⁷

Hybrid Approaches

Some authors merged both the cultural minimalist and the historical reductionist positions. Two husband-and-wife teams, Jacques and Georgette Soustelle in the 1930s and Frans Blom and Gertrude Duby-Blom in the 1950s and 1960s were representative of this approach. Jacques Soustelle proposed a cultural minimalist position maintaining that Lacandon religion existed completely independent of Spanish influence. However, when discussing social and family structure, Soustelle claimed a historical

²⁷ Manuel Calderón reference see Ilmo Orzoco y Jiménez and Sr. Don Francisso, *Colección de documentitos inéditos relativos a la Iglesia de Chiapas*, 2 vols. (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico: Imprenta de la Sociedad Católica, 1911); For a thorough analysis of marriage patterns see Philip and Mary Baer, "Notes on Lacandon Marriage," *American Anthropology* 5 (1949): 101-108, Didier Boremanse, *Hach Winik* (Albany: University of Albany Press, 1998), and R. Jon McGee, Ryan Kashanipour and Linda Hodges, "Polygny, Incest and Tourism: Reinterpreting Lacandon Marriage Patterns," forthcoming.

reductionist position and stated that their kinship system had been "eaten away by the jungle" and "atrophied." Similarly, the Blom claimed that the Lacandon of the early twentieth century carried the religion of the ancients. Nevertheless, they proposed that the Lacandon were on the verge of disappearing into the growing *Ladino* and Mexican society. These positions, although generally more thoughtful, contained many of the same flaws of misinterpretation. Essentially, they typically failed to understand the history and context of Lacandon society.²⁸

The pervasiveness of the cultural minimalists and historical reductionist approaches extends beyond academic scholarship. Oral tradition in southern Mexico and Yucatan has perpetuated both of these over-romanticized images of the Lacandon. On a recent trip to Chiapas I followed a tour of the Museo Na Bolom, which houses a Lacandon museum and supports indigenous research. As the group snaked through galleries of Lacandon artifacts and photographs, the guide recounted the "tragic story" of the Lacandon. He proposed that Lacandon society was the last physical and cultural link to the ancient Maya and that, sadly, their

²⁸ Jacques Soutelle, *The Four Suns*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971), 41, 43; Gertrude Duby and Frans Blom "The Lacandon," in *Handbook of Middle America Indians*, Volume 7, Evon Z. Voght ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 292.

society was on the verge of collapse. However, these old themes were targeted towards the new goal of raising money for the Museo Na Bolom.

Both the cultural minimalists and the historical reductionists treated the Lacandon not simply as a Mesoamerican cultural enclave, but as the isolated vestiges of the Pre-Columbian Maya who existed apart from the surrounding society. The Lacandon were depicted as wholly distinct from Spaniards, Mexicans, and other native groups. Many authors misinterpreted sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish accounts of Lacandon Indians as the ancestors of the modern Lacandon. Cueing on the term Lacandon, they failed to recognize basic differences among historical groups identified as *Lacandonnes*. For example, the groups identified as Lacandon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries lived in large settlements and spoke Cholan Maya languages. Conversely, the modern Lacandon and their ancestors live in dispersed family-based settlements and speak a Yucatec Maya dialect.

In essence, each perspective created fictive Lacandon societies. The cultural minimalists ignored historical, linguistic, and cultural evidence that distinguished the Lacandon from the ancient Maya. Instead, they constructed a majestic Lacandon society that retained the culture of

the rulers of Mesoamerica. The historical reductionists were often so focused on issues of primitive and civilized that they ignored the functionality of Lacandon society. Instead, they depicted the Lacandon as an endangered society on the verge of extinction. These perspectives ignored basic historical analysis and objective anthropological research. Furthermore, they ignored the distinct changes that occurred within Lacandon society over the past two centuries.

Recent Trends

Although I have identified the two dominant trends in Lacandon research, it is important to note that several recent works represent new dimensions of research. Three authors are specifically worth noting. First, in Didier Bormanse's 1998 publication of *Hach Winik*, he presented a structural-functionalist interpretation of Lacandon culture. Boremanse compared social traditions of two groups of Lacandon and identified their variation and necessity. Because Boremanse was concerned largely with the functionality of social and cultural institutions, the work indirectly challenged the historical reductionist perspective of a dysfunctional society. However, Boremanse's interpretations of the ethnographic present of

the 1970s neither endorsed nor rejected cultural minimalist perspectives of the Lacandon as the forebears of ancient traditions.²⁹

R. Jon McGee's 2002 book *Watching Lacandon Lives* was another significant work that broke from the traditional interpretations. In *Watching Lacandon Lives*, McGee abandoned the cultural minimalist position that he articulated a decade earlier in discussing Lacandon religion. Instead, he presented a material-functionalist interpretation of economic changes in Lacandon society from 1970 to 2000. McGee also disputed the relevance of historical reductionism by exploring Lacandon history and directly challenging the myth that the Lacandon were directly descended from ancient Maya rulers. This work was also the first to deal significantly with cultural change in Lacandon society.³⁰

Joel Palka has written several articles on the Lacandon of the nineteenth century. His work is the first to incorporate archaeology into Lacandon studies. Palka uncovered several Lacandon settlements in Guatemala and

²⁹ Didier Boremanse, *Hach Winik, The Lacandon Maya of Chiapas, Southern Mexico* (Albany, NY: University of Albany Press, 1998).

³⁰ McGee, *Watching Lacandon Lives*.

maintains that the Lacandon were actively engaged in trade, rather than living completely isolated.³¹

The Study

The work that follows is a study in historical anthropology that combines the methods of historical comparison and cultural analysis to challenge some common misunderstandings about the Lacandon Maya. By accurately distinguishing between the original inhabitants of the area, the Chol-Lacandon, and the modern Lacandon, this thesis dismisses the irrelevant *heir* or *degenerate* questions that have fascinated previous scholars. Instead, this thesis identifies the historic origins of the Lacandon and follows three areas of change within Lacandon society: settlement, economics, and religion. The overall aim of this work is to present a new context for the interpreting of Lacandon society employing both the anthropological and historical record.

³¹ Joel W. Palka, "Sitios lacandones cerca Dos Pilas," *El Proyecto Arqueológico Regional Petexbatún: Informe Preliminar #3*. Edited by Arthur Demarest, Hector Escobedo, Takeshi Inomata, and Joel Palka, 381-390. Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1991; Palka, "Lacandón Maya Culture Change and Survival in the Lowland Frontier of the Expanding Guatemalan and Mexican Republics." *Studies in Culture Contact: Interaction, Culture Change, and Archaeology*, Edited by James Cusick, 461-471. Center for Archaeological Investigations, Occasional Paper 25, 1998.

The four chapters that follow provide an overview of the history of Chiapas and changes in Lacandon society. Chapter Two provides an outline of Maya society and traces the history of the Chol-Lacandon from the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries. Specifically, Chapter Two examines the Spanish attempts to conquer the Chol-Lacandon and their forced resettlement. Chapter Three explores the arrival of the Yucatec-Lacandon into the lowland regions of Chiapas and Guatemala during the seventeenth century. Chapter Three also identifies several communities that were the ancestors of the modern Lacandon. Chapter Four addresses Yucatec-Lacandon society during the first Republican period and the early attempts economic development in the Lacandon region. Chapter Five discusses how economic and environmental changes in Chiapas affected Lacandon settlement patterns, religion, economics.

CHAPTER II

SUBJUGATION OF THE MAYA AND AN ISLAND OF INDEPENDENCE

(1542 - 1712)

On that day, dust posses the earth;
On that day, a blight is on the face of the earth,
On that day, a cloud rises,
On that day, a mountain rises,
On that day, a strong man seizes the land,
On that day, things fall into ruin,
On that day, the tender leaf is destroyed,
On that day, the dying eyes are closed,
On that day, three signs are on the tree,
On that day, three generations hang there,
On that day, the battle flag is raised,
And they are scattered afar in the forests.

-Prophecies of Chilam Balam

Introduction

The history of the Yucatec-Lacandon is intimately linked to the regional history of Chiapas and Mesoamerica.

Numerous colonial sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries describe groups living in the jungles of Chiapas as "Lacandones." These individuals, however, were not the ancestors of the modern Lacandon. Instead, Spaniards applied the term Lacandon broadly to identify non-Christians living in the rain forests of Chiapas near Lake Miramar. Unlike today's inhabitants of the region, the early colonial Lacandon spoke Cholan-Maya languages, lived in large villages, and had typical pre-Columbian cultural institutions, such as noble families and priestly classes. The contemporary Lacandon speak a Yucatec-Maya dialect and live small family-based communities.¹

This chapter addresses the general history of Mesoamerica during the colonial period. It begins with an overview of the pre-Columbian history of the region, traces Maya society during the contact period, and then describes the conquest of the Chol-Lacandon.

Prehistory of the Maya

Mesoamerica has been home to humans for more than 9,000 years. Small bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers

¹ Francisco Ximénez, *Historia de la Provincia de San Vicente de Chiapas y Guatemala de la Orden de Predicadores*, (Guatemala City: Biblioteca "Goathemala" de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, 1929-31); Diego de López de Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatan* [1688], (Campeche: Comisión de Historia, 1955).

migrated through the Yucatan peninsula and the Belician coast following large game herds of wild horses and mastodons. Semi-nomadic inhabitants during the Archaic period (7000 BCE to 2000 BCE) domesticated some of the most important New World foods, such as maize, beans, squash, and peppers. These foods became the center of agriculture in the Maya region--as they still are today. The development of the Proto-Mayan languages during the third century BCE coincided with the growth of the Mayan civilization, which was marked by three phases.²

The earliest period, commonly known as the Pre-Classic, lasted from about 1800 BCE to about 250 CE. During the Pre-Classic densely inhabited villages spotted Mesoamerica and the Maya region. Buildings were constructed through the palm-and-post method, which in many ways resembled the thatch-roofed houses used by many Maya today. The cultivation of maize, beans, and squash became the central elements to Mesoamerican agriculture. Mother cultures, such as the Olmec of Chiapas, Tabasco, and Veracruz and Zapotec of Oaxaca, developed a rudimentary calendar and a writing system.

² Richard MacNeish, S. Wilkerson, and A. Nelken-Turner, *First Annual Report of the Belize Archaic Archaeological Reconnaissance*, (Andover, MA: Peabody Foundation for Archaeology, 1989).

From 250 CE until 925 CE, Maya society flourished during an age classified by modern scholars as the Classic Period. The Classic Maya had an elaborate calendric system, hieroglyphic writing and advanced construction methods. The Maya region was composed of dozens of religious and political centers that often warred with each other. Immense stone cities and towns emerged from the tropical forest and supported large, centralized populations. Tikal, one of the largest Classic Period cities, contained over 3,000 structures, ranging from stepped-pyramid temples and palaces to dwellings and baths, and covered an area of six square miles. Local lords and noble families topped an elaborate social hierarchy that contained religious leaders, bureaucrats, artisans, warriors, commoners, and slaves. At its pinnacle of power and prosperity Tikal may have regularly contained 90,000 people and controlled cities hundreds of miles away.³

Classic period art was lavishly detailed and extremely complex. Media ranged from bark-cloth books, pottery, and carved or incised sculptures, to painted frescos. Classic Maya iconography often merged cosmological myths with dynastic histories. Political statements were often presented on an immense scale. Rulers constructed huge

³ Linda Schele, *A Forest of Kings*, (New York: Morrow, 1990).

temples (the tallest towering over 70 meters high) and commissioned stele, lintels, tablets and other sculptures to decorate them.

By 1000 CE, during a period commonly known as the Post-Classic that extended until the arrival of the Spanish dramatic changes transformed the Maya and traditional calendar dates (long count) ceased to be recorded. Cities were abandoned as dramatic social, political, and demographic catastrophes ravaged the Maya region during what modern scholars have labeled the Classic collapse. The specific causes of these profound changes are somewhat of a mystery. Scholars have proposed myriad possibilities that range from disease, revolution, and natural disasters, to foreign invasion. However, none of these answers has proven satisfactory. Invaders from central Mexico undoubtedly reached the Maya area, but a population explosion may have overstressed the natural environment beyond its breaking point. When the Spanish arrived in the Yucatan peninsula in the sixteenth century they found small family-based polities fighting for control of scarce water resources.

Maya Societies and European Contact

At the time of the Spanish conquest parts of the Americas were heavily populated. Although population estimates vary greatly, a substantial aboriginal presence in the New World in the fifteenth century is indisputable. Mesoamerica was the largest and most densely populated area in the Americas, with as many as twenty-five million inhabitants. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán and surrounding valley was home to as many as three million people. The central Maya region of Guatemala and Chiapas was also densely populated, with approximately two million inhabitants.⁴

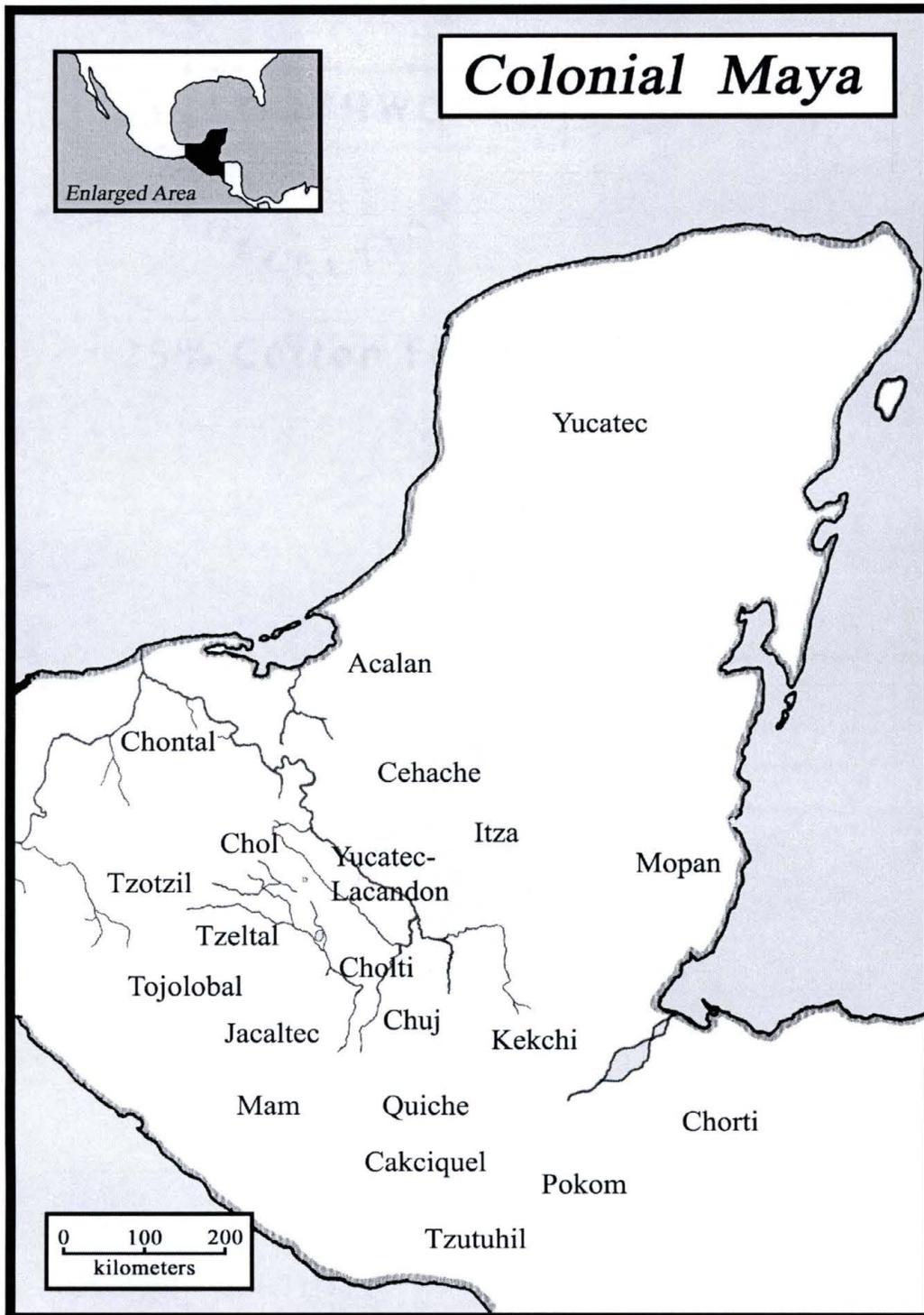
Numerous Maya-speaking groups inhabited the region during the sixteenth century (see Map 3). Similar to the Classic period Maya, chiefdoms separated by linguistic and cultural differences divided the Maya area. Along the Pacific Coast Tojolbal-speaking kingdoms dominated shoreline trade. Chontal Maya lived along the Gulf of Mexico in the modern states of Tabasco and Campeche. Several kingdoms of Yucatec-speakers ruled much of the

⁴ Mesoamerican population figure from W. Borah and S.F. Cook, *The Aboriginal Population of Central Mexico on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, Ibero-Americana No. 45 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 88; Valley of Mexico estimate from T.M. Whitmore, *Disease and Death in Early Colonial Mexico* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992), 4; Guatemala estimate from W.G. Lovell and C.H. Lutz, "Conquest and Population: Maya Demography in Historical Perspective," *Latin American Research Review* 29 (1994): 133.

Yucatan peninsula. Tzeltal and Tzotzil-speaking Maya inhabited the central highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala. The lowland jungles of the Usumacinta River valley were inhabited Chol-speaking Maya.⁵

Beginning in the sixteenth century the Indian population of Central America began a dramatic and steady state of decline. The first cause of this depopulation was the spread of Old World diseases such as smallpox, measles, and influenza, even before direct contact with Europeans.

⁵ France Scholes and Ralph Roys, *The Maya Chontal Indians of Acalan-Tixchel*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 159, 323, 328.



Map 3

Indigenous groups in the Maya area during the early Colonial Period

Disease, Depopulation, and Destruction

The spread of Old World diseases often preceded Spanish attempts at conquest. Before Spanish *conquistadores* entered Chiapas diseases moved along trade routes that reached distant corners of the jungle. Smallpox, influenza, and pulmonary plague were the first great pandemics to traverse Central America, and reportedly killed one third of the indigenous population in the early 1520s. During the 1530s measles killed over half the inhabitants of Honduras. Tabasco was regularly ravaged by a variety of diseases during the same period. An anonymous work from 1579 asserted that ninety percent of the Indian population suffered "great infirmities and pestilences ... [such as] measles, smallpox, ... coughs, nasal catarrhs [sic], haemorrhages [sic], bloody stools and high fevers." Similarly, the Maya of Guatemala were victimized by regular pandemics of smallpox, measles, typhus, and plague. Between 1519 and 1632 eight episodes of disease devastated the region, while twenty-five local epidemic outbreaks annihilated entire communities. In the highlands of Guatemala, illness may have killed one third of the population.⁶

⁶ Honduras information from Sir J. Eric S. Thompson, "The Maya Central Area at the Spanish Conquest and Later: A Problem in Demography," *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and*

In the lowlands of the Petén lived the Itza Maya, who were able to resist conquest until the late seventeenth century. The *Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, an Itza account of history, reports outbreaks of "xe kik" (blood vomit) and "kan tenal" (yellow deaths) throughout this period. In 1695, two years prior to final conquest of the Itza, their population numbered 25,000. After a hundred years of Spanish colonization, the entire region of the Petén, of which the Itza only inhabited a small western portion, numbered only 2,555 inhabitants. The population reduction left near permanent devastation--the number of inhabitants of the region remained below their pre-conquest levels well into the twentieth centuries. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century the Petén contained less than 8,000 people. The 1839 census reported 6,327 people, and nearly a century later the population had only grown to 7,820 inhabitants.⁷

Ireland 24 (1996): 24; quote from "Relaciones de Yucatán, 1898-1900," *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de ultramar*, 1:350; accounts of disease in Guatemala come from W.G. Lovell and C.H. Lutz, "'A Dark Obverse': Maya Survival in Guatemala, 1520-1994," *The Geographical Review* 86 (1996): 399; Murdo MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History 1520-1720* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 89, 41.

⁷ Itza population figures from J.E.S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 65; Itza quotes from *The Ancient Future of the Itza: The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin*, trans. M.S. Edmonson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 150; Petén population figures from Arthur Morelet, *Travels in*

As diseases spread rapidly throughout the New World, endemic illnesses such as malaria and pneumonia brought further havoc to the weakened population. Few Spanish reports record the devastation of these diseases, however, native accounts chronicled this period in detail. In the following passage the Cakchiquel Maya of Guatemala recorded the horror disease during the 1520s.

It happened during the twenty-fifth year that the plague began, oh, my sons! First they became ill of a cough, they suffered from nosebleeds and illness of the bladder.... It was in truth terrible, the number of dead among the people. The people could not in any way control the sickness.... Great was the stench of the dead. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields. The dogs and vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible.... So it was that we became orphans, oh, my sons! So we became when we were young.... We were born to die!⁸

Similar to Guatemala, Chiapas experienced a series of devastating pandemics during the colonial period. The eight epidemics that devastated the Guatemalan populations

Central America, Including Accounts of Some Regions Unexplored since the Conquest, trans. M.F. Squier (London: Trübner, 1871), 281.

⁸ *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, trans. Adrián Recinos and Delia Goetz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 115-116.

affected Chiapas as well. In 1525, when the first attempts at conquest began, northern Chiapas and southern Tabasco contained approximately ten thousand Chontal Maya. However, by mid-century the group numbered around four thousand. Prior to 1520 the population of Chiapas was approximately 250,000 people. By 1611 the population numbered just 78,320 inhabitants.⁹

In the two centuries that followed the Indians of Chiapas experienced periodic endemic and epidemic diseases. Such disasters included a typhus epidemic in 1631, *peste* (pneumonic plague) in 1668, famine and disease in 1713, and smallpox in 1780. In total, Chiapas experienced at least eleven periods of intense disease from 1611 to 1808. The Indian population of Chiapas consistently remained below 75,000 during the colonial period.¹⁰

As late as the twentieth century the Lacandon Maya were particularly susceptible to disease. At the turn of the twentieth century Alfred Tozzer reported that the Lacandon had tremendous fear of European diseases. Tozzer stated that before he was allowed to visit a Lacandon family he had to prove that he was healthy. The Lacandon

⁹ Murdo MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, 41.

¹⁰ Ibid; Peter Gerhard, *The Southeast Frontier of New Spain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 159-161.

were particularly fearful of their susceptibility to "calentura" (literally fever, but most likely referring to influenza). Similarly, an entire Lacandon family was struck ill during Guatemala's annual fair of 1938, where they were exhibited in an "Indian Village."¹¹

Early Conquests of the Maya

"Had we not been the men we were, we might have been defeated."¹²

The Spanish moved quickly through most of the Mayan region in search of treasure and fame. The reduced aboriginal population managed only limited resistance, and three *entradas* (military campaigns), in 1530, 1559, and 1586, gave the anxious conquistadores control of the highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas and the lowlands of Campeche and Yucatan. Disease, as mentioned above, severely decreased the aboriginal population and the Spanish occupation devastated the remaining groups. Because the region lacked the gold of central Mexico and

¹¹ Alfred Tozzer, *Personal correspondence of Alfred Tozzer, 1903-1905*, Tozzer Library, Harvard University; Vera Kelsey and Lilly de Jongh Osborne, *Four Keys to Guatemala* (New York, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1939), 123.

¹² Bernal Díaz del Castillo, quoted in Herbert Cerwin's *Bernal Diaz, Historian of the Conquest* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 47.

the highlands of Peru, the conquerors promptly turned to exploiting the labor of the Indian population.

The highland Indians of Chiapas submitted to Spanish rule in the sixteenth century. Conquered populations were organized around *colonias*, such as Ciudad Real de Chiapa (the modern town of San Cristóbal de las Casas), or brought together under the *reducción* (resettlement) system.

The Spanish implemented two labor systems to extract wealth from colonized populations. Under the *encomienda* system the Crown granted huge tracts of land to preferred citizens--*encomenderos*. The native populations that lived in the territory were included in the land grant and the *encomendero* owned the labor of the inhabitants. This system resembled slavery in that the Indians had little political power and even less control over the means of production. Nevertheless, the Indians were, theoretically, to be the wards of the conquistadors rather than their property. Indians were heavily taxed and mercilessly worked by the *encomenderos*. The priesthood often challenged the *encomenderos* for overworking the Indians and failing to meet their obligation to Christianize their wards. The system was largely abandoned in the seventeenth century and abolished in 1785. Replacing it was the *repartimiento*--a labor system in which Indians were

required to donate only a portion of their time to work on Spanish *haciendas*. Both systems were designed to exploit Indian labor and extract wealth from native societies.

Spanish authorities attempted to Christianize the inhabitants as required by the Papal Bull of 1493. Priests and friars accompanied many conquistadors. Francisco Marroquín, for example, was a close companion of Pedro de Alvarado and served as the first bishop of Guatemala. Dominicans, Franciscans, and Mercedarians were charged with the conversion of native souls in Central America in the sixteenth century. Franciscans were largely active among the Maya in Yucatan peninsula, while Dominicans controlled much of the highland area.¹³

First Conquest Attempts of the Chol-Lacandon

Chol-speaking Maya vehemently resisted Spanish rule in the remote areas of the lowlands surrounding the Guatemala border between the Chixoy and Pasión rivers. Colonial Spaniards generally referred to the Chol who inhabited this resistant region as "Lacandon y Pochutla, Tecpan y Topiltipeque." However, as a group they were commonly known as "Lacandones." The specific origins of this term are unknown, but it is most likely a corrupted form of

¹³ Murdo MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*, 106-107.

Maya. The Chol-speakers of southeastern Chiapas referred to a large lake with a rocky island (today's Lake Miramar, as *akam tun*, which translates as massive rocks. Colonial Spaniards knew the lake as *El Acamtun* and eventually *Lacantun*. The resistant Chol-speaking Maya from the region commonly became known as *Lacandones*, a corrupted form of *Lacantun*. Throughout the colonial period, Spaniards labeled non-christianized Indians in Chiapas and western Guatemala as *Lacandones* and often continued to associate them with debauchery and resistance.¹⁴

Hernán Cortés, the insatiable conqueror of the Aztecs, was most likely the first Spaniard to encounter the Chol-Lacandon. On a trip through the lowlands in 1525, Cortés reported that the idolatrous Indians of Yztapan, a site near the ruins and modern town of Palenque, had "fled in terror" after hearing word that Spaniards were near their community. The retreating inhabitants set fire to their homes, food stores, and milpas as the Spanish invaders approached. In a nearby village Cortés captured and interrogated twenty men who remained in the community.

¹⁴ Ilmo Orzoco y Jiménez and Sr. Don Francisco, *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos a la Iglesia de Chiapas*, 2 vols. (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico: Imprenta de la Sociedad Católica, 1911), 2:159-160; Alfred Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandones*, 3; Throughout this paper I distinguish between the Cholan-speaking Lacandon of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Chol-Lacandon. The modern Yucatec-speaking Lacandon and their ancestors, who are discussed below, are referred to as Yucatec-Lacandon or, more simply, as Lacandon.

These villagers were found protecting a house containing highly decorated idols. Cortés chastised the villagers for their "vain and foolish" beliefs, to which the villagers defiantly responded that they would continue their ancient practices "until they found something better." The interaction between Cortés and the Yztapeños was only the first conflict between the Spaniards and Chol-Lacandon.¹⁵

In the mid-sixteenth century the Chol-Lacandon launched numerous campaigns against Spanish incursions into the region. In 1546 and 1552 they burned fifteen Christian towns and captured and killed the inhabitants. In 1555 Fathers Domingo de Vico and Andrés López, the Dominican priests charged with converting the Indians of the region, and a group of about thirty Indian acolytes were killed by marauding Chol-Lacandon. The Spanish responded quickly to these attacks by invading the Indian controlled forest.¹⁶

Between 1559 and 1586, several Chol-Lacandon settlements came under periodic siege by armies of

¹⁵ Hernan Cortes, *Hernan Cortes, Letters from Mexico*, trans. and ed. Anthony Pagden, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 353-354; Antonio de León Pinelo, *Report Made in the Royal Council of the Indies on the Pacification of the Provinces of eh Manche and Lacandon, which Don Diego Ordóñez de Villaquirán, Cavalier of the Order of Calatrava, etc, Whishes to Undertake*, trans. Doris Zemurray Stone, ed. Frank E. Comparato, (Culver City, CA: Labyrinthos, 1986), 2-4.

¹⁶ Doris Zemurray Stone, *Some Spanish Entradas, 1524-1695*, (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute Publications, 1932), 243; Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, 32-33.

converted highland Maya and Spanish soldiers. In 1559, Pedro Ramírez de Quiñónez and Gonzalo Dovalle with a force containing over one thousand Indians and soldiers, invaded the Lacandon region. The Lacandon center of resistance was a rocky island in the middle of Lake Miramar and several settlements nearby. The Spanish forces captured and burned the island town and took one hundred fifty natives captive. Most of the town's inhabitants retreated into the forest and to nearby communities. A Lacandon town to the east of the island fortress was captured. The Spaniards hung eight captive Lacandon and took another one hundred eighty Indians prisoner for their presumed involvement in the murders of Vico and López. The Lacandon prisoners, totaling over two hundred and fifty, were resettled in established colonial settlements such as San Juan Alcalá, Coban, and Palenque. Nevertheless, the Chol-Lacandon around Lake Lacandon continued to resist colonial control.¹⁷

In 1586 Captain Juan de Morales Villa Vincencio directed a campaign against the town at Lake Miramar. Vincencio's forces laid siege to the island while the captain sent surrender demands to the inhabitants. Rather

¹⁷ Stone, *Some Spanish Entradas*, 244-245; Alonso de Escobar, "Account of the province of Vera Paz in Guatemala, and of the Indian settlements or pueblos established therein," *Journal of Royal Geographical Society of London* 2 (1841): 90-94; Victoria Bricker, *Indian Christ, Indian King*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 48-49.

than submitting to the expeditionary force, the Chol-Lacandon abandoned the island and disappeared into the jungle. When the army entered the town, all the inhabitants were gone. Vincencio's army destroyed much of the town and nearby fields, but once again the Chol-Lacandon eluded Spanish forces. While Vincencio's army succeeded in conquering a Lacandon town, they were unable to capture and control the recalcitrant Chol-Lacandon.¹⁸

Like Cortés, López, Vico, Quiñónez, and Dovalle before him, Vincencio failed to institute colonial rule over the Chol-Lacandon. The disappointment of the 1586 expedition soured the desires of colonial officials to conquer the Chol-Lacandon and for the next sixty years no new attempts were made. For most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Chol-Lacandon ensured their independence by periodically raiding *ladino* (communities of Christian Indians of native and Spanish ancestry) villages, fleeing from colonial soldiers, and defying Spanish rule.

¹⁸ Juan de Morales Villa Vincencio, "Fee de la llegada al peñol y autos de lo que en la jornada zusedio," *Boletín del Archivo General del Gobierno* 2, no. 2 (1936): 134-138; Bricker, *Indian Christ, Indian King*, 49-51.

Subjugation of the Chol-Lacandon

"I know that even if Chols changed into angels, they would in the end turn to witchcraft, heresy, and rebellion."¹⁹

Throughout the seventeenth century English and French pirates threatened Spanish trade along the Yucatan coast. These mercenaries disrupted the movement of goods between Guatemala, Yucatan, and Mexico. Late in the century Spanish authorities proposed an overland roadway to bypass the difficult waters of the Caribbean and connect Guatemala and Yucatan. The route would pass through the area controlled by the unconquered and aberrant Itzas and Chols. Spanish priests working among the recalcitrant Indians were skeptical of their conversion. Resistant Chols greeted Friar Francisco Ximénez with "cigars in their mouths and bows and arrows in their hands" saying two words, "meaning 'welcome' and 'when will you leave?'" Friar Cristóbal de Prada felt that converting the Chols was futile. "They have total disgust for the Holy Faith for these people flee from all subjugation ..." Prada added "...they only worship their liberty dishonestly."²⁰

¹⁹ Cristóbal de Prada, "Declaration [1695?]," In *Lost Shores, Forgotten Peoples: Spanish Explorations of the South East Maya Lowlands*, trans. and ed. Lawrence H. Feldman, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 203.

²⁰ Franciso Ximénez, [1695], In *Lost Shores, Forgotten Peoples: Spanish Explorations of the South East Maya Lowlands*, trans. and ed. Lawrence H. Feldman, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 193; Cristóbal de Prada, "Declaration [1695?]," In *Lost Shores, Forgotten Peoples*:

Throughout the century, Chol-Lacandon marauders emerged from the jungle, attacked Spanish settlements, and abducted village children. In 1692, after approving a Chiapan roadway, the Spanish Crown decreed that the pagan Indians of the area needed to be pacified. These rekindled efforts to conquer the Chol-Lacandon, however, differed from the military conquests of the sixteenth century. The official policy of the Crown declared that the subjugation of the Chol-Lacandon was to be led by missionaries rather than the military. Soldiers were to be "escorts to the missionaries, and not make war on the Indians."²¹

In 1693 two Franciscan priests, Melchor López and Antonio Margil de Jesús, made contact with Chol-Lacandon in a town called Sac Balam (literally White Jaguar) in the forests near Lake Miramar. The priests provided food for several feasts and brought gifts of bells, beads, hatchets, and machetes. Although skeptical, the unconverted Indians were responsive to the initial Christianizing efforts of the priests. After almost two dozen important Indians fell

Spanish Explorations of the South East Maya Lowlands, trans. and ed. Lawrence H. Feldman, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 202.

²¹ Leon Piñelo, *Report Made in the Royal Council of the Indies*, viii; James Nations, *Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya*, (Southern Methodist University Dissertation, 1979), 57-59; quote from Francisco Ximénez, *Historia de la Provincia de San Vicente de Chiapas y Guatemala de la Orden de Predicadores*, Vol. 5 (Guatemala City: Biblioteca "Goathemala" de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, 1929-31): 312.

ill and died, however, Chol-Lacandon religious leaders sent a startling message of intimidation to the missionaries. Several Chol-Lacandon revealed to the Franciscans a missal, a breviary, altar cloths, and other religious ornaments that had belonged to Father Domingo de Vico, who had been killed in 1555. The Indians reported that their ancestors were responsible for Vico's death in 1555 and the guerrilla warfare carried out in the late 1500s. They also revealed that they descended from the individuals who fled Vincencio's 1586 siege. The purpose of the Lacandon religious leaders' message was clear--they would not be subjugated, they would fight. Recognizing the intent of the Chol-Lacandon leaders, López and Margil requested military support from the Audiencia de Guatemala to Christianize the region.²²

In May 1695 Jacinto de Barrios Leal led a military force of six hundred men in a final conquest of the resistant Indians. Instead of directly combating the Spanish army, however, the Chol-Lacandon relied on their centuries-old technique of leaving their villages and disappeared into the forest. Margil and Vico, established

²² Antonio Marjil, *Nothingness Itself, Selected Writings of Venerable Father Antonio Margil, 1690-1724*, ed. Marion Habig, trans. Benedict Leutenegger, (Chicago: Franciscan Herlad Press, 1976), 63-84; Bricker, *Indian Christ, Indian King*, 51.

a mission called Nuestra Señora de los Dolores at the site of Sac Balam near the present-day Jataté River. This mission was fortified and the soldiers of the Barrios expedition brought Indians back from hiding. By August of 1695 many of the Chol-Lacandon who had fled returned to their homes, most likely in time for the Fall harvest season. Along with this voluntary return, the Indians also allowed the Franciscans to preach to them. Nevertheless, the Lacandon did not fully endorse Christianity. Margil lamented that:

... when we tell them to come together ... and when we tell them to stop painting themselves and come to mass and to the women that they must leave off all the wicked ceremonies, the rubbish and painting of their heathendom ... they do not heed us, and if we show anger and tell them that God will punish them and they will go to hell, they laugh and say they are Lacandones, and it is their custom, and they laugh at us.²³

Within a decade of the creation of Mission Dolores the Christianizing efforts of the Franciscans failed. The Chol-Lacandon refused to fully endorse Christianity and, more importantly, when conflicts arose between the priests

²³ Antonio Marjil de Jesús, Lazaro de Mazariegos, and Blas Guillen, *A Spanish Manuscript Letter on the Lacandones* [1695], trans. Alfred Marston Tozzer, (Culver City, CA: Labyrinthos, 1984), 8-9.

and the local leaders villagers would retreat to the forest. In 1703 the Dolores priests requested additional money and troops to try to contain and control the Chol-Lacandon. By 1711 the mission had become an economic drain and the Crown decided that the Chol-Lacandon were to be resettled into haciendas in the highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas. The Lacandones were settled to the towns of Aquespala, San Ramón, and Santa Catarina de Retalhuleu. In these communities they could be more easily converted, controlled, and used as labor sources. In the highlands they integrated into the native and *mestizo* (people of racially mixed ancestry) societies and became indistinguishable from the other indigenous groups of the area. By 1720 all the Chol-Lacandon from Dolores were cleared from the lowlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, which left the region empty and open for settlement.²⁴

Basic Characteristics of the Chol-Lacandon

It is important at this point to identify some basic characteristics of Chol-Lacandon society. Spanish chroniclers left detailed ethnographic accounts that identified Chol-Lacandon social structure, personal Maya

²⁴ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Central America*, (San Francisco: The History Company Publishers, 1887) 3: 616.

names of religious and political leaders, agricultural practices, religious rituals, and residential patterns.

Spanish chroniclers were aghast to find Chol-Lacandon men and women dressed in loincloths. Villagutierre Soto-Mayor noted that the cotton cloth hung around the waist and "poorly" covered the genitals. Men and women wore their hair long and both sexes had pierced ears. Women also pierced their septums, which they decorated with silver and amber.²⁵

It is difficult to estimate the number of Chol-Lacandon that inhabited Chiapas and Guatemala when the Spanish arrived, however, there are several colonial period sources that identify population figures. The first reliable figures come from the early seventeenth century. In 1609 a missionary expedition to the Lacandon region encountered two settlements called Culuacan and Cagabalah. These two towns were located near Lake Lacandon and lay eight leagues from each other. Between the two communities there were approximately four hundred forty family compounds. In 1630 a town along the Guatemala-Yucatan route contained three hundred Lacandon families. In the 1690s several towns were located; three were identified as

²⁵ Juan de Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, *History of the Conquest of the Province of the Itza*, trans. Robert D. Wood, ed. Fran Comparato, (Culver City, CA: Labyrinthos, 1983), 199.

Sac Balam, Peta, and Mop. Sac Balam contained one hundred and three families, Peta had one hundred seventeen families, and Mop had one hundred and five families. An unnamed community near Sac Balam contained sixty family compounds. The population of these towns may have totaled seven thousand individuals in the early sixteenth century and five thousand by the time of the Chol-Lacandon *reducción*.²⁶

Chol-Lacandon families, as Spanish chroniclers defined them, were comprised of several generations of related individuals. Grandparents, children, and grandchildren all lived together. These families could be quite large. One religious leader from Sac Balam lived with his family of ten people. A Lacandon captured in 1695 reported that in his undisclosed community most families had twenty to thirty persons. Men took only one wife and residence patterns were patrilocal, since sons-in-law lived with their wives' families.²⁷

²⁶ The population estimate is from J.E.S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 67; Culucan and Cagabalah described by Nicholas M. Hellmuth, "Progreso y notas sobre la investigación etnohistórica de las tierras bajas mayas de los siglos XVI a XIX," *América Indígena* 32 (1972): 179-244; Sac Balam discussed by Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, *History of the Conquest of the Province of the Itza*, 166 [n.666], 228.

²⁷ Hellmuth, "Progreso...", 185; Martín Alfonso Tovilla, *Relación histórica descriptiva de las Provincias de la Verapaz y de la del Manché* [1635], eds. France Scholes and Eleanor Adams, (Guatemala:

Chol-Lacandon communities were permanent settlements. Villagers periodically left to farm, but towns did not change locations regularly. Villages consisted of centrally located house compounds with maize fields in outlying areas. In addition to family houses, specialized buildings were organized in the center of town. Sac Balam, for example, contained three community buildings in the town center--two buildings oriented east to west and one north to south. Buildings were constructed of wood, clay, and straw. Walls were formed of vertical boards covered in clay. Roofs were thatched and had ventilation holes to allow smoke to dissipate. The fronts of houses were open, while three sides were boarded over. House compounds had separate sleeping and working areas. Kitchens and storage rooms were in one area and sleeping quarters were in another. Sleeping areas contained adult and child-sized beds. Adult beds were large enough to hold four people and beds for children were smaller. Small infants slept in cradles constructed of reed. In general the layout and make-up of Chol-Lacandon houses were similar to those found in the Yucatan in the sixteenth century. Unlike other groups, such as the Yucatec-Lacandon discussed below, the

Editorial Universitaria, 1960), 210; Margil claimed that marriages were monogamous, see Marjil, *A Spanish Manuscript Letter*, 20.

Chol-Lacandon slept on beds within three-walled houses and had organized town centers.²⁸

Gardens and agricultural areas lay outside of the communities and contained buildings for storage and sleeping. Chol-Lacandon gardens were permanent sites. Fields were cleared periodically by fire and planted in two growing seasons, with the summer being the more productive. The Spanish applied the term *milpa*, which traditionally meant maize field, to all Indian gardens. This term was somewhat misleading since Chol-Lacandon fields contained a wide variety of plants, not just maize. The three most important domesticated crops in Mesoamerica were maize, beans, and squash, which were important to the Chol-Lacandon diet. Other plants, both domesticated and wild, were just as important, however.

Domesticated crops included a variety of tubers, such as *camote*, *jocote*, and *jicima*, beans and peas, and a variety of fruits, including *ramón* and Asian species of bananas and pineapples. Foods from several wild plants were also culled, such as, *achiote*, cacao (chocolate), *guayaba*, grapes, and zapote. In addition to farming Chol-Lacandones kept domesticated animals and hunted regularly. In the

²⁸ Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, *History of the Conquest of the Province of the Itza*, 198.

community dogs, turkeys, and *guacamaya* were regularly found. In the jungle, Lacandones hunted two kinds of deer, howler monkeys, spider monkeys, peccaries, aguti, rabbits, tapirs, iguanas, and several species of birds. Rivers and lakes were sources of fish, eels, snails, freshwater shrimp, and turtles. By growing numerous types of plants and extracting fruit and meat from the jungle the Chol-Lacandon undoubtedly enjoyed well-balanced diets.²⁹

Similar to the nobility of the Petén and Yucatan, elite lineages held both political and religious power within each Chol community. Men called *caciques*, belonging to noble families, led Chol-Lacandon communities (see Table 1). While these families were held in high esteem and controlled religious activities, they farmed and sustained their own families. Unlike in the Petén and Yucatan, they did not receive tribute from the locals. The 1609 accounts of Culuacan and Cagabalah recorded four noble lineages in each community. The 1695-1696 records from Peta, Mop, and Sac Balam (the site of Mission Dolores) identified numerous *caciques*. Peta had four elite families, while Mop had

²⁹ N. Hellmuth, "Cholti-Lacandon (Chiapas) and Petén-Ytzá Agriculture, Settlement Pattern and Population," *Social Process in Maya Prehistory, Studies in Honour of Sir Eric Thompson*, ed. Norman Hammond, (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 421-448; Lawrence H. Feldman, ed. *Lost Shores, Forgotten Peoples, Spanish Explorations of the South East Maya Lowlands*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 35-37.

three. Margil identified ten caciques associated with Sac Balam.

Culuacan 1609	Cagabalah 1609	Sac Balam (Dolores) 1695	Peta 1696	Mop (Ebula?) 1696
Bilbaao Julamna Acchicel Cagtei	Cabnal Tunhol Tuztecat Chancuc	Chichel Cahual Tuxnól Tustecat Chancut Polón Quimbabari Sirlabna Tzatzis Itzquin	Bubau Xulmna Chichel Saczi	Bubau Chichel Cabnal Tustetac Tzactzi

Table 1
Chol-Lacandon *Caciques*³⁰

Caciques performed numerous religious and social activities. "Caciques," Margil stated, "have no skill in anything except their idolatries, sacrifices, baptisms, marriages, [and] confessions." They determined when fields were to be sowed and harvested and when feast days occurred. They also acted as local judges and healers. Divination was an integral aspect of Chol-Lacandon religion

³⁰ Hellmuth, "Progreso y notas sobre la investigación etnohistórica," 187; Margil *Nothingness Itself*; Marjil, *A Spanish Manuscript Letter*; Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, *History of the Conquest of the Province of the Itza*, 197.

and caciques exclusively performed it. One method of communing with the supernatural world was through intoxication. Caciques drank fermented infusions made from pineapple and sugar-cane. They became inebriated on the concoctions, painted themselves black in soot and took on supernatural forms. One ritual recorded by Margil, for example, consisted in a group of religious leaders getting drunk and taking on the form of flashes of lightning.³¹

Offerings were an integral part of religious rites and rituals. Copal, the pungent fruit of trees found in the jungle, and tobacco were used as incense and burnt to feed to the gods. Animals, specifically turkeys, were sacrificed on specific holidays. Spanish accounts often mentioned human sacrifice as a typical Lacandon religious practice. After the killing of Vico in 1555, for example, the Chol-Lacandon were said to have "immediately tore open his chest and took out his heart." Copal, food, and human offerings were dedicated to specific deities.³²

Chol-Lacandon gods represented aspects of their natural and manmade world. Margil stated that the Chol-Lacandon "worship the demons in the many idols they have

³¹ Marjil, *A Spanish Manuscript Letter*, 15-22.

³² Hellmuth, "Progreso y notas sobre la investigación etnohistórica," 179-244; Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, *History of the Conquest of the Province of the Itza*, 49.

for their corn fields, chickens, cacao orchards, rivers, etc." Their polytheistic system had numerous gods including: Ahate, Ahua, Chacmuo, Chua, Macon, Quizin, Taxanitz, Tepecthic, Xcacuihalal, Zainoh, and Zintun. According to the Spanish the god of the sun was the most important deity to the Chol Lacandon.³³

Conclusions

As the Spanish entered Mesoamerica they encountered numerous complex societies. Within a few years of Indo-European contact most indigenous groups were reduced to a fraction of their former strength. The Maya of Chiapas suffered a series of epidemics that destabilized their society and eased Spanish attempts at conquest. Resistant Indians in the Maya lowlands during the sixteenth century were identified as Lacandones.

Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Chol-Lacandon tenaciously fought Spanish colonization and Christian conversion. A series of military and religious expeditions were made into the heart of the Chiapas lowlands to subjugate the resistant Indians. Until the late seventeenth century the Chol-Lacandon were able to resist and escape Spanish control. Religious leaders

³³ Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, *History of the Conquest of the Province of the Itza*, trans. Robert D. Wood, (Culvier City: Labyrinthos, 1983): 49.

directed what became a final attempt, however, at the end of the century. The Chol-Lacandon put down their weapons and allowed outsiders into their communities. Within two decades Spanish authorities ordered the removal of Indians and the Chol-Lacandon were resettled to the Maya highlands, which left the Chiapan lowland open for settlement.

CHAPTER IV
CANNIBALS IN A WILDERNESS OF SOLITUDE
(1803-1910)

The Lacandones ... are well formed ... but their flesh is flabby, their teeth decayed, and they look anæmic, owing probably to their forest life.... Nevertheless, they are far from being as savage as supposed. Their cruelty is the result of their hospitality and confidence having been grossly abused by the *monteros*.... They are extremely diffident, and will hide in the woods at the approach of strangers.¹

Introduction

The nineteenth century was a critical period for native societies across Middle America. Late colonial governments granted native communities autonomy by minimizing the impact of the repartimento and encomienda systems and limiting missionary expansion into new fields.

¹ Désiré Charnay, *The Ancient Cities of the New World, being Travels and Explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857-1882*, trans. J. Gonino and Helen Conant (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), 458.

After independence in 1821, creole-led governments stripped most rural natives of land and self-sufficiency. In the first half of the century Indian communities close to creole population centers were the focus of exploitation and control, while those in rural areas separated from the broader society. Many of these native societies enjoyed self-sufficiency as the newly independent nations struggled to strengthen their sovereignty and create stable governmental institutions. In the latter half of the century, economic development encroached on the Maya world and brought isolated Indian societies into contact with the outside world.

For the Lacandon the nineteenth century represented a period of profound change. In the first half of the century the Lacandon remained isolated from outsiders and independent from governmental control. Their territory covered a vast area that other natives and government officials simply ignored. Conflicts over regional control of Chiapas and struggles between factional politicians delayed the development of the Lacandon region. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century disputes between Indians and creole leaders caused many natives to relocate from the highlands to the Lacandon controlled region. The Lacandon, who prized isolation and independence, in turn retreated

into inaccessible areas in the southern Maya lowlands. During the second half of the nineteenth century the economic development of the region began as the natural resources that the dense jungles of Chiapas contained became highly valued commodities on the world market. Beginning in the 1880s the timber industry claimed land and established settlements deep within the Lacandon jungle. As the timber industry attracted large numbers of workers who settled near the Lacandon, the Lacandon relocated to isolated areas of the jungle.

This chapter chronicles the changes in the distribution of the Lacandon and developments in their society during the nineteenth century. Because few sources exist on the Lacandon from this period, this chapter is limited to three themes: political reorganization, economic development, and social characteristics of the nineteenth century Lacandon.

The Republican Period in Context

The Maya region changed dramatically in the first half of the nineteenth century. Intense political and social change forced many native communities to assimilate into the larger mestizo society. The newly independent republican governments struggled to establish sovereign and

independent rule. Defining national and state boundaries was one of the first challenges of national and regional governments, while factionalism between liberals and conservatives challenged governmental stability later.

Ownership and control of Chiapas was an area of conflict between Mexico and Guatemala. Chiapas was, as one author stated, "a meal bone fought over" by the two great dogs of Mexico and Guatemala. Although Chiapas became a Mexican state in 1824, Guatemala threatened at the border until the 1880s. The two nations contested the border, control of resources, and trade throughout the century. The department of Soconusco claimed autonomy from both Mexico and Guatemala until 1843, when Santa Anna forcibly brought it under the control of Chiapas. Nevertheless, much of Chiapas remained beyond the control of any government.²

Throughout the period conservatives and liberals vied for supremacy. In the Maya region conservatives were typically creole elites from the older colonial towns such as San Cristóbal and Antigua. They were often wealthy civil and religious bureaucrats who owned large tracts of land. Local Indians, who outnumbered the creoles ten to

² Peter V.N. Henderson, "Modernization and Change in Mexico: La Zacualpa Rubber Plantation, 1890-1920," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (1993): 238.

one, rented land and worked for the elite landowners. Liberal leaders from the Maya region lived in the lowlands, where they were only slightly outnumbered by Indians. Ranchers and merchants were the leaders in the region and they hoped for reforms that would extend their ownership of Indian lands.³

As these factions battled for control, they left behind a series of failed governments. The American John Lloyd Stevens, who traveled through Chiapas in 1841, wrote that "war was again in our way ... and while all the rest of Mexico is quiet [the southern states were] in a state of revolution." In fact, political and military revolts were so frequent that by 1850 Chiapas had been under the rule of twenty-five governors.⁴

Liberals and conservatives clashed over numerous issues including the role of the federal government and the power of the Catholic Church. For native societies, however, both factions had one common effect--the steady reduction of native economic power and social independence. The colonial laws and Indian courts that once protected

³ Jan Rus, "Whose Caste War? Indians, Ladinos, and the Chiapas 'Caste War' of 1869," *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica*, ed Murdo J. MacLeod and Robert Wasserstrom, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 127-168.

⁴ Ibid; John Lloyd Stevens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America Chiapas and Yucatan*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1841), 2:250.

native societies from creole exploitation disappeared during the Republican period. Creole elites, motivated by an insatiable appetite for land expansion, stripped the Catholic Church of much of its land.⁵

During the colonial period the Spanish Crown and Catholic Church controlled most of the land in Mesoamerica. Technically designated as *terrenos baldíos* (vacant lands), the state-controlled lands created barriers between Indian communities and ladino settlers. The *terrenos baldíos* created a buffer between Indians and ladinos, which allowed natives to own land without fear of annexation into ladino communities. During the nineteenth century, however, creole elites dissolved the vacant land system and parceled native properties into large independently owned holdings. Until 1844 anxious landowners in Chiapas simply claimed vacant Indian land to gain ownership. Similarly, Enlightenment-minded liberals in Guatemala dissolved the religious and corporate protection of indigenous communities in the country's first constitution. By 1850, all "excess" lands had been stripped from Indian communities in the central highlands and western lowlands.

⁵ Jan Rus, "Whose Caste War?," 131-132; Greg Gradin, "The Strange Case of 'La Mancha Negra'", 213.

At the turn of the twentieth century less than ten percent of Indian villages retained ownership of colonial lands.⁶

Nationalization and *El Desierto*

In the decades after independence, the states of Mesoamerica sought to define geographic boundaries, strengthen sovereignty, and define a new expression of culture--a process commonly referred to as nationalization. The new nations of Mexico and Guatemala struggled to create stable regional governments and to control their rural regions. As Mexico and Guatemala grappled to define national borders and liberal and conservative factions also fought for dominance, the governments failed to control outlying undeveloped areas. In particular, the Lacandon jungle of the southern lowlands became the most independent and isolated region in Central America. As a result the Lacandon of Chiapas and Guatemala were autonomous for the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷

During this period the Lacandon inhabited a vast region unexplored by the Mexican and Guatemalan

⁶ Simpson cited in Ralph L. Beals, "Acculturation," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 6, ed. Robert Wauchope, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 449-468.

⁷ Definition of nationalization from Richard N. Adams, "Nationalization," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 6, ed. Robert Wauchope, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 469.

governments. Although Spanish missionaries explored along the Usumacinta and Jataté rivers during the seventeenth century, the colonial government never truly controlled or developed the region. By independence most of the Maya lowlands lay beyond governmental control. The dense *montaine* jungles near Palenque and Ocosingo and the thick tropical forests of the Usumacinta River valley formed a boundary that was unbroken by settlers. The Dominican settlement of San Cristóbal de las Casas was the largest population center and formed the most notable western entry-way into the uncontrolled region.

The region was poor in resources. It lacked precious metals and marketable natural products. Also missing were the large labor pools necessary for intensive agricultural production. For most of the inhabitants of Chiapas and Guatemala the uncontrolled area remained a vast zone of mystery. Official maps of the nineteenth century labeled the area the "*Desierto incógnito habitado por los indios lacandones*" (Unknown wilderness inhabited by the Lacandon Indians). For this reason the region took on two simple names: *El Lacandón* and *El Desierto*.⁸

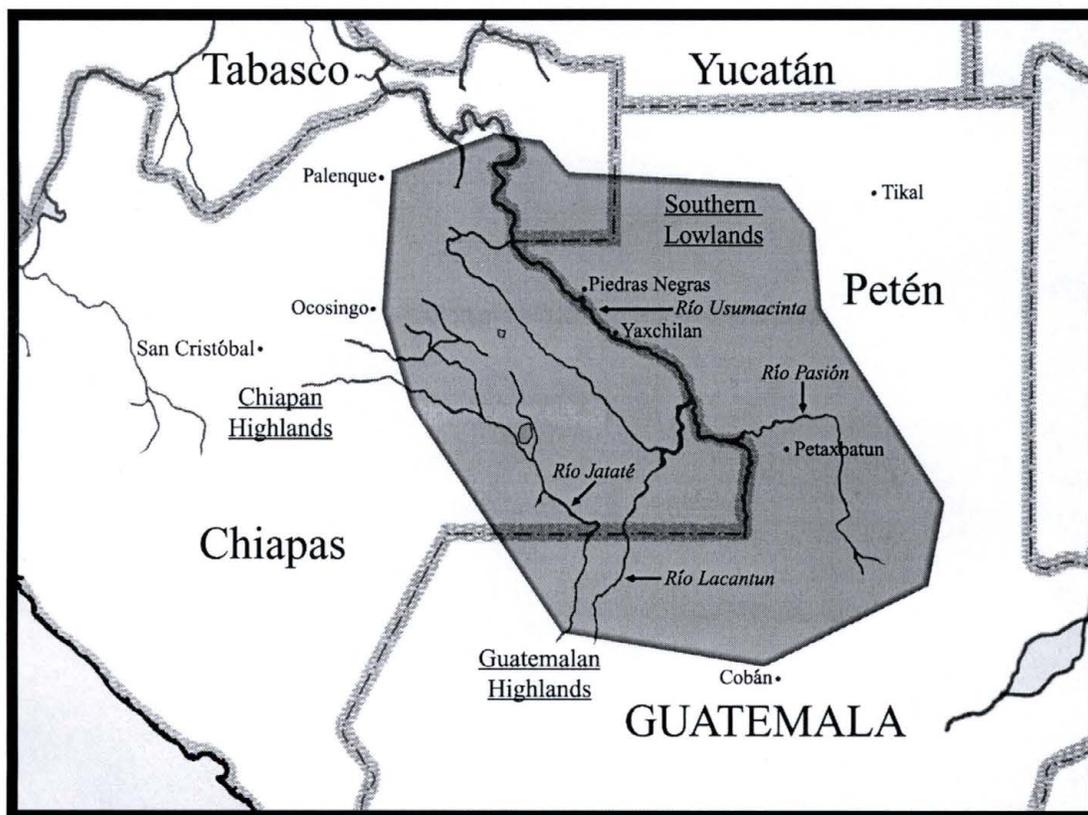
⁸ Karen O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest: Environmental and Social Struggles in Chiapas* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 37; Jan de Vos, *Oro Verde, La Conquista de la Selva Lacandona por los madereros tabasqueños, 1822-1949* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988); D.

El Desierto extended along the Usumacinta River basin bordering the Chiapan and Guatemalan highlands (see Map 4). Palenque and Ocosingo formed the northwestern edge of the area while the Cobán formed the southeastern border. Throughout the region there were numerous lakes and rivers. The former Chol-Lacandon stronghold of Lake Miramar lay in the south, and the modern Lakes Naha' and Metzabok were located in the north of the region. The largest river of the region was the Usumacinta, which eventually formed the boundary between Chiapas and Guatemala. Several smaller rivers included the Pasión, Jataté, and Lacantún.

During this period misinterpretations of the Lacandon limited interaction between Lacandon and outsiders. Few individuals wandered into the Lacandon region. For the inhabitants living on the periphery of El Desierto the Lacandon were enigmatic and scary. John Lloyd Stevens, an American sent by the Van Buren administration to evaluate the politics, economy, people, and terrain of Central America, identified the Lacandon as vicious cannibals. Stevens related a story of a European who disappeared in the jungle after living with the Lacandon. "His friends endeavored to dissuade him," Stevens recounted, "and the

Angel A. Corzo, *Carta general del Estado L. y S. de Chiapas* cited in Jan de Vos, *Oro Verde*, 16.

[Palenque] prefect told him 'they will either make a god of you and keep you among them, or else kill you and eat you.'" Similarly, a local exploring the Lacandon jungles with a timber prospector reported that it was better to die in the jungle alone rather than encounter a Lacandon.



Map 4

Approximate boundary of *El Desierto de El Lacandón*

Scholars early in the period, such as Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, C.H. Berendt, and Hubert Howe Bancroft, still associated the Yucatec-speaking Lacandon

with the remnants of the rebellious Chol-Lacandon. The interpretation the Lacandon as blood-thirsty and vicious kept most individuals out of the Lacandon regions. In fact, there are extant records of only two government-sponsored incursions that made contact with the Lacandon in Chiapas from 1830 to 1860.⁹

Living in a region relatively undisturbed by outsider settlements, Lacandon settlements covered an immense area that extended from Palenque to Tikal. A Guatemalan expedition into El Desierto in 1832 reported that Lacandon settlements extended from Palenque to Ciudad Flores, an area of over 1.5 million hectares (3.7 million acres). Large communities lived in the foothills near Ocosingo, close to the town of Tenosique, and along the Pasión River. Other settlements existed along major rivers, including the Pasión, Usumacinta and Lacantun. The greatest concentration of Lacandon lived in Guatemala, along the Jataté River, and were the focus of the missionizing

⁹ Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, "Le Maya et ses Dialectes, Lacandon, Peten, Mopan, Chol," *Archives de La Commission Scientifique du Mexique*, (Paris: Du Ministère de L'instruction Publique, Imprimerie Impériale, 1864), 127-129; C.H. Berendt, "Report of Explorations in Central America," *Smithsonian Institute for 1867*, (1867), 420-426; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Central America, 1530-1800*, (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft & Co., 1883), 7:695, 729; Juan Galindo, "Description of the River Usumasinta, in Guatemala," 59; John Lloyd Stevens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, 2:293; Juan Ballinas, *El Desierto de los Lacandones, Memorias, 1876-1877*, (Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas: Publicaciones del Ateneo de Chiapas, 1951), 53-54.

attempts of Dominican and Capuchin friars during the early decades of the century (as discussed in Chapter 3). By mid-century there were hundreds of Lacandon living in the southeastern region of El Desierto. A baptizing expedition along the southern Usumacinta and Jataté rivers in 1864 found 674 wild Indians living in the area.¹⁰

Their isolation, combined with the large area they were able to exploit, allowed the Lacandon population to grow quite large in the early nineteenth century. Specific population figures are unavailable since no census records were kept for the Lacandon region. Several sources, however, estimated that three thousand Lacandon lived in the jungles of Chiapas and Guatemala.¹¹

Some Lacandon reacted violently to incursions into their region. In the 1830s one group living along the Jataté River launched aggressive campaigns against interlopers in the Lacandon jungle and nearby settlements. These attacks were significant enough for the Guatemalan government to dispatch a military expedition into the

¹⁰ Palka, "Lacandón Maya Culture Change," 462.

¹¹ Julián A. Pinelo, "El cacique Bool Menché y su visita a Ciudad Flores," (26 February 1929) Manuscript, Rare Books, Latin American Library, Tulane University; The baptizing figure cited in Joel W. Palka, "Lacandón Maya Culture," 462; Population estimates come from Julián A. Pinelo, "El cacique Bool Menché" and José María Soza, *Pequeña monografía del departamento del Petén*, (Ciudad de Guatemala: Editorial de Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1957), 277.

region. In 1832 Lucas Pinelo traveled into the region to subjugate the rebellious natives, however, these efforts were unsuccessful. The Lacandon apparently continued the insurrection until 1837, when a Lacandon cacique traveled to Ciudad Flores to make peace.¹²

The isolation the Lacandon enjoyed during the first half of the nineteenth century only lasted as long as the bulk of the region's population remained stationary in the highlands. As creole leaders wrested control of land from highland natives in the 1840s and 1850s the Indians of those regions sought refuge in the lowlands and began encroaching on El Desierto. Furthermore, the economic development of the southern Maya lowlands in the last decades of the century dramatically altered the Lacandons' isolation in the region.

Resettlement and Economic Development in El Desierto

The economic development of El Desierto occurred in two phases. In the first phase Maya who lost their lands in the highlands relocated to the peripheral regions of the area. In the mid-nineteenth century liberal republican governments attempted to extend citizenship to all members of society. In the highland Maya regions these legal

¹² Julián A. Pinelo, "El cacique Bool Menché."

changes adversely affected native societies. While Indians in theory gained the rights of citizenship, in practice they lost the institutions that protected indigenous independence--most notably the Catholic Church and the indigenous corporate community. Indian societies were subject to a new level of exploitation by elite members of creole society. The elites quickly claimed native lands, created large plantations, and pushed Indians into economic servitude. Highland Maya Indians often saw the land they lived on become the property of large landowners, who pushed them to either work on the property or relocate. Many natives from the highland areas near San Cristóbal chose the latter and moved into sparsely settled areas, such as the peripheral foothills of El Desierto.

Highland immigrants relocated outside of Ocosingo and Palenque, which had been inhabited by Lacandon since at least the early eighteenth century. As the new communities sprang-up, Lacandon villages disappeared. It is unclear what happened to the Lacandon inhabitants of this region, but they most likely moved deeper into the jungle. Although some may have abandoned Lacandon culture and integrated into the new communities, however, the Lacandon preference for isolation and autonomy would suggest that this was not the case--these groups simply relocated.

Thus, a labor pool entered the Lacandon region that would be available in the last decades of the century, when economic expansion brought timber companies into the region.

The second phase of economic development in El Desierto occurred in the mid to late nineteenth century, when the timber of the southern lowlands became a highly valued commodity or, as one author put it, it became *oro verde* (green gold). The discovery of plentiful hardwood trees and, more importantly, navigable rivers, attracted lumber prospectors. In the 1870s Juan Ballinas, an ambitious land surveyor mapped the western rivers of El Desierto, which earned him the title "The Discoverer of the East of Ocosingo." Between 1874 and 1878 Ballinas made five trips into the region and charted the Jataté River. A wealthy timber magnate named Policarpo Valenzuela funded his expeditions and shared timber rights. Ballinas' expedition marked the beginning the timber industry's development of El Desierto.¹³

¹³ José Emigdio Rodríguez, "Dos Palabras," in Juan Ballinas *El Desierto de los Lacandones, Memorias 1876-1877*, (Tuxtla Guriérrez, Chiapas, Mexico: Publicaciones del Ateneo de Chiapas, 1951), 11, 53-56; Jan de Vos, *Oro Verde*, 69-70; Orzoco y Jiménez, *Colección de documentos*, 2:184-185.

Just twenty years after Ballinas explored the Usumacinta and Jataté rivers, nine timber companies held lands in the region. These companies owned much of El Desierto along the Usumacinta and Jataté rivers and three companies dominated the industry in Chiapas. *Compañía Valenzuela*, established by Policarpo Valenzuela, held titles to more than 100,000 hectares (247,000 acres) near the ruins of Yaxchilán. The Bulnes family controlled nearly 50,000 hectares (123,500 acres) near the Jataté and Santo Domingo rivers. Finally, *Compañía Romano* owned large tracts of land along the Tzeltales and Chocolja rivers in the north and the Lacantun River in the south. The timber companies focused their operations along the Usumacinta River, which dissected the Lacandon territory.¹⁴

The timber industry enjoyed a "golden age" in Chiapas between 1890 and 1914. The industry functioned with few government restrictions, low production costs, and in response to heavy international demands for tropical hardwoods. Two families dominated the timber industry in Chiapas. The Bulnes family, mentioned above, wielded

¹⁴ See Robert M. Carmack, "Spanish-Indian Relations in Highland Guatemala, 1800-1944," in *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica, Essays on the History of Ethnic Relations*, eds. Murdo MacLeod and Robert Wasserstrom, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 215-252; Rus, "Whose Caste War?", 127-168; Robert Wasserstrom, "Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Chiapas, 1528-1790," *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica*, 92-126.

complete control over lumber extraction in the western portions of the Lacandon jungle for nearly forty years. Between 1880 and 1926 the family extracted between 50 million and 70 million pesos worth of lumber. Over 50 percent of the company's profits went directly to the family, while only two hundredths (0.02) of one percent was issued to company workers.¹⁵

Along the Usumacinta River, the Valenzuela family displayed similar dominance and profit levels over Chiapas' western edge of the Lacandon jungle. Mexican exports of tropical mahogany to the United States reached dramatically high levels at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1908 these exports totaled 12,611 thousand board feet--a level that was not reached again until 1948.¹⁶

By 1915, however, this prosperity suffered a dramatic implosion. Plentiful and easily accessible hardwood stands had been devoured by overactive logging companies. Untouched areas were located deep in the jungle and required substantial investments in machinery and capital

¹⁵ Cuauhtémoc González Pacheco, *Capital extranjero en la selva de Chiapas: 1863-1982*. (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, 1983), 53; David W. Amram, Jr., "Eastern Chiapas," *Geographical Review* (January 1937): 30; Moisés de la Peña, *Chiapas económico*. (Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico: Departamento de Prensa y Turismo, 1951), 2:677.

¹⁶ González Pacheco, *Capital extranjero*; Mexican Mahogany exports in 1908 accounted for over 34 percent of the world's production; Bruce F. Lamb, *Mahogany of tropical America, Its Ecology and Management*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), 20.

to open. The productivity was further undermined with the onset of World War I, which brought on a significant decline in demand for hardwood lumber. Furthermore, the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1917 dramatically interrupted timber production. The 1917 constitution created sweeping land reforms that limited the expansion of timber company lands.¹⁷

The timber companies attracted large numbers of individuals to the once remote lowland jungles. Some of the timber workers were unwilling employees who had been sent to the Lacandon jungle by the Mexican government. Many of these timber workers were rebellious Indians from Yucatan and northern Mexico. Other workers came from the towns of Ocosingo and Palenque in search of work. The timber workers established a number of permanent communities in El Desierto, which brought them close to Lacandon settlements. The immigration of outsiders created well established routes into the Lacandon region, which attracted European and American explorers searching for Classic Period ruins and the descendants of the ancient Maya.¹⁸

¹⁷ O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest*, 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 36-43.

Shortly after Ballinas encountered Lacandon along the Jataté River, two Europeans independently contacted Lacandon along the Usumacinta River. In 1883, Désiré Charnay, a Frenchman searching for ancient Mayan ruins, encountered a Lacandon family living near the ancient Maya city of Yaxchilan. In the same year Alfred and Anne Maudslay, a husband and wife team also searching for ancient ruins, contacted a group of Lacandon in a nearby area. According to Charnay and the Maudslays, these Lacandon owned European goods, such as coins and jewelry, and worshiped the traditional Lacandon religion. They were, however, quite sickly.¹⁹

Twelve years after Charnay and the Maudslays contacted these Lacandon along the Usumancinta, Teobert Maler, yet another European explorer looking for ancient Maya cities, traveled through the region. At the same site that Charnay made contact with a Lacandon family, Maler was unable to find any sign of the Lacandon. In 1895 he wrote that they "disappeared, no one knows whether they have died out or become absorbed by the mixed Spanish population (of the

¹⁹ Désiré Charnay, *The Ancient Cities of the New World*, 455-457; Anne Cary Maudslay and Alfred Percival Maudslay, *A Glimpse at Guatemala and Some Notes on the Ancient Monuments of Central America*, (London: John Murray, 1899), 236-238.

nearby *montería*) or withdrawn into the distant unexplored wilds."²⁰

In 1891 German anthropologist Karl Sapper spent time with Lacandon in two communities. In a village southeast of Palenque on Lake Petja (the modern Lake Mensäbäk), Sapper found natives that were healthy and strong. They lived in isolation and rarely saw outsiders. Conversely, in a community to the south that was found along the Lacantun River, Sapper encountered a small group of very different Lacandon. According to Sapper these Lacandon were aggressive towards outsiders, but traveled to ladino villages to trade for European goods. Both groups worshiped the traditional Lacandon deities (discussed in Chapter 5) and visited nearby ancient ruins to give offerings and perform religious rites.²¹

In 1903 and 1904 Harvard anthropologist Alfred Tozzer lived with a group of Lacandon along Lake Petja. These experiences became the basis of his 1907 book *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandones*, which focused on Lacandon religion. Although in this published analysis, Tozzer claims that the Lacandon were in "complete isolation," his

²⁰ Teobert Maler, *Memoirs of the Peabody, Upper Usumatsintla and Adjacent Region* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1895) 4:27.

²¹ Karl Sapper, "Ein Besuch bei den östlichen Lacandonen," *Das Ausland* 64 (1891), 892-895.

unpublished letters from 1903 and 1904 show that this was quite untrue. Located near the Lacandon community at Petja was a montería so close that Tozzer's servant could leave early in the morning and be "back in time to get breakfast in the fireplace." In fact, this community was so close to the logging camp that Tozzer was able to send and receive mail without leaving the compound.²²

With the influx of permanent settlements deep in the lowland jungles ended the isolation of the Lacandon. Settlements along the Usumacinta and Pasión rivers dissected the Lacandon region and forced the Lacandon to live in close proximity to non-Lacandon settlements. A considerable part of the area was peppered with the communities of the timber companies. Some Lacandon sought refuge in remote northern areas that were far off the usual paths for timber workers. The northern portion of El Desierto was not exploited by the timber industry to the same extent as the south and therefore became a refuge for the Lacandon. These areas were all still relatively close to outsiders, which meant that the centuries-old Lacandon tradition of fleeing from outsiders into isolated corners of the jungle was ending. By the end of the century,

²² Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandones*, 24; Tozzer's Personal Correspondence, Tozzer Library, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge.

independent Lacandon settlements were limited to two areas. In the north, Lacandon settlements developed near Lakes Nahá and Mensábäk. In the south, the Lacanja River became a concentrated area for caribales.

Characteristics of the Nineteenth Century Lacandon

Throughout most of the nineteenth century Lacandon settlements were distributed over a huge area. In 1832 Lucas Pinelo found Lacandon settlements near Palenque, Ocosingo, and along the Lacantún River in Chiapas and along the Guatemalan Pasión and Chixoy rivers. Other accounts identified Lacandon settlements along the Usumacinta and Lacanja rivers. One report even identified a Lacandon carribal at the ruins of Tikal in northeastern Guatemala. Their settlements were also commonly found in relative proximity (within a few days walk) to ancient Maya ruins, such as Bonampak, Dos Pilas, Lacanja, Palenque, Piedras Negras, Tikal, and Yaxchilan.

Despite their relatively widespread occupation of the region, they numbered no more than a few thousand. Pinelo estimated in 1832 that there were somewhere near three-thousand Lacandon inhabitants in the region. A missionizing campaign through southern Petén reportedly baptized hundreds of idolatrous Indians in a short two-week

period in 1837. By the end of the century, however, the number of Lacandon had diminished to several hundred. Sapper estimated that there were no more than one to two hundred Lacandon living in Chiapas and Guatemala at the turn of the twentieth century.²³

The Lacandon remained subsistence farmers who grew a variety of crops. They cultivated wild, naturalized, and domesticated fruit trees, including mango, avocado, and zapote. Archaeologist Joel Palka recently identified extant fruit tree stands from Lacandon milpas abandoned in the nineteenth century. Late in the nineteenth century Teobert Maler found large fields planted with maize, sugarcane, and banana and papaya trees. The Lacandon collected cacao and achiote from the jungle, as well. Corn, beans, and squashes were the staple foods, but they regularly hunted forest game as well.²⁴

Nineteenth century caribales were difficult to find, not only because of their remoteness, but because entrance paths were winding and deliberately hidden in the brush. House compounds were organized around several small single-

²³ Ibid; Salvador Valenzuela, "Informe sobre el departamento del Petén, dirigido al Ministerio de Fomento," *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala* 25, no. 4 (1951): 408; Palka, "Lacandon Culture Change," 462; Karl Sapper, "Ein Besuch bei den östlichen Lacandonen," 892-895.

²⁴ Teobert Maler, *Researched in the Usumasintla Valley*, 2.

room, thatch-roofed huts, which were used as sleeping quarters. There were no walls as such, but the roofs of some structures hung low enough to the ground to prevent wind and rain from blowing under the structure. Cooking was done over a hearth located in the open. Immediately outside dwellings the family planted small gardens of herbs, fruit trees, and other useful plants.²⁵

The Lacandon of Chiapas and Guatemala displayed slightly different cultural characteristics. C.H. Berendt, a nineteenth century explorer who traveled extensively in Guatemala and Southern Mexico, and Hubert Howe Bancroft, the seminal nineteenth century historian of Central America, divided the Lacandon into two subgroups: western and eastern (see Map 5). Although modern authors have overlooked this division, it clearly illustrates the differences between twentieth century Lacandon subcultures of northern and southern Lacandon, with the eastern Lacandon corresponding to the modern northern Lacandon and the west relating to the southern Lacandon . The directional distinction implied by Berendt and Bancroft apparently referred to a distribution pattern that existed at the beginning of the century but was no longer practiced at its end. The groups were split along longitudinal lines

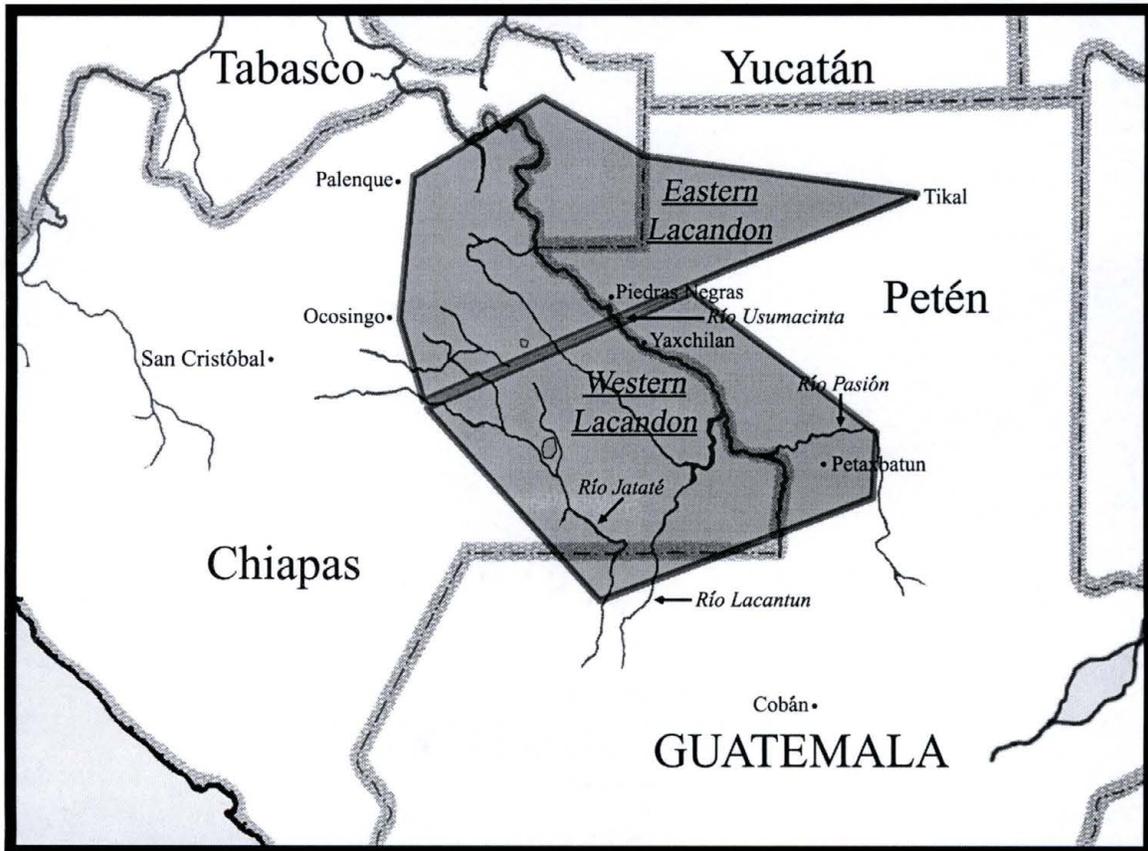
²⁵ Teobert Maler, *Researched in the Usumasintla Valley*, 2:29.

with western groups living in the south and the eastern ones in the north. These traditional divisions fell apart as the Lacandon relocated in more remote areas when settlers and the timber industry invaded El Desierto. The western Lacandon retreated to the Jataté River when Christian missions and new settlements formed along the Pasión River. The eastern Lacandon moved from the mountainous terrain near Palenque and Ocosingo to lowland communities along isolated lakes.²⁶

The western Lacandon were a composite group of recalcitrant natives. They were aggressive and warlike and attacked outsiders regularly. Both Dominicans and Capuchin priests noted that the Western Lacandon waged war in the southern Petén. To keep outsiders away the Lacandon of western Guatemala created barriers around their communities by planting perimeters of spiny plants. At the end of the century they warned interlopers by staking jaguar skulls on the paths leading into their villages. Berendt and Bancroft claimed that the ancestors of the group were Chol speaking; however, they noted that in the nineteenth century they spoke a Maya [Yucatec] dialect. The western Lacandon evidently lived in the southern region of El

²⁶ C.H. Berendt, "Report of Explorations in Central America," *Smithsonian Institute for 1867*, (1867), 424-426; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Central America*, 7:695, 729, 8:616.

Desierto along the Pasión, Jataté, and Lacantun rivers. After hearing of western Lacandon in these areas, Berendt wrote that "they had never been fully subjugated, they are reduced to-day to very insignificant number."²⁷



Map 5

Distribution of the Western and Eastern Lacandon

²⁷ Berendt, "Report of Explorations in Central America," 425; Joel W. Palka, "Lacandón Maya Culture Change," 462; Anne Cary Maudslay and Alfred Percival Maudslay, *A Glimpse at Guatemala*, 236.

Although seemingly aggressive towards intruders into their communities, the western Lacandon visited Ladino villages to trade. Early in the century, the exchange of goods typically took place in the pueblos in rather than in the jungle. The Lacandon from the Petaxbatun and Lake Cacrío traded with towns as far away as Ciudad Flores and Cobán. They traded a wide variety of goods cultivated in their milpas or extracted from the jungle, including game, cacao, tobacco, and honey, along with other cultivated products. In exchange they received jewelry, metal tools, kitchenware, cloth, sugar, and salt. Tools and salt were particularly important items. Salt was one item that was difficult to extract from the jungle. Recent archaeological excavations have uncovered European and North American goods such as pottery, glass bottles, and china littered among discarded Lacandon stone-tools. After exchanging goods, Bancroft noted that the Lacandon would "suddenly disappear by unknown paths, and never allow strangers to visit them." As the isolation of the Pasión and Usumacinta Rivers disappeared, the dealings took place in the Lacandon territory itself. By the end of the century the Lacandon were in close contact with refugees, timber workers, and European explorers. This close contact

made disease a considerable threat to the western Lacandon.²⁸

When Sapper visited the Lacandon along the Lacanja River (approximately 60 kilometers west of the Usumacinta River) in 1891, he found that they were chronically ill. They suffered from skin conditions, rheumatism, measles, and yellow fever. "Lung diseases and small-pox," Sapper wrote, "threaten to annihilate the tribe once so powerful, but now weakened by war and religious persecution." Likewise, one author from the period remarked that few people of this region did not have "goître" (goiters).²⁹

Contact with religious groups, specifically Dominican and Capuchin friars in the mid-nineteenth century also affected western Lacandon religion. Some Lacandon settlements in the lower Pasión River region lacked god houses, which were a necessity in traditional Lacandon religion. Some Lacandon may have indeed become Christians, but many undoubtedly feigned conversion in exchange for

²⁸ Berendt, "Report of Explorations in Central America," 425; Bancroft 1883, 616, n.27; Joel W. Palka, "Lacandón Maya Culture Change," 463-468.

²⁹ Sapper referred to the Lacandon living near Lacanja as the eastern Lacandon, which as corresponded to their location at that immediate time rather than to an ethnological distinction. Karl Sapper, "Ein Besuch bei den östlichen Lacandonen," 893; Alonso de Escobar, "Account of the Province of Vera Paz, in Guatemala, and of the Indian Settlements or Pueblos established therein," *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society of London* 2 (1841): 96.

rewards. Berendt remarked that while the Lacandon were "occasionally baptized by Catholic missionaries and fond of saying their prayers, they still adhere to their old heathen worship and indulge in polygamy." The superficiality of their conversion may be inferred from the fact that by the turn of the century all hints of Christianity had disappeared from Lacandon religious practices.³⁰

Culturally the eastern Lacandon very much resembled their western Lacandon cousins, however, the eastern Lacandon region that was more isolated. While the western Lacandon lived in a region that periodically was the focus of Christianizing, settlement, and, eventually, timber harvesting, the eastern Lacandon lived in the remoteness of the jungles east of Palenque and Ocosingo. There they were free to live peaceably and in good health. Sapper noted that unlike the western Lacandon along the Lacanja River who were sickly, the eastern Lacandon of Petja were healthy and strong. Contrary to their local reputation for rapaciousness and violence, reports of encounters with the Lacandon living in this area identified them as "harmless" and "pleasant." In the 1830s an Irishman named William Beanham lived among a group of Eastern Lacandon along the

³⁰ Berendt, "Report of Explorations in Central America," 425

Usumacinta River. Beanham spent one year with the Lacandon. He hired a Lacandon servant and built a house along the Chacamal River. Beanham was apparently well liked by the Lacandon.³¹

Eastern Lacandon caribales were small, family-based settlements. During the early nineteenth century the settlements were not only just isolated from outsiders, they were separated from each other as well. By the end of the century these communities lay close to outside communities, nevertheless, most eastern Lacandon settlements remained a considerable distance from each other. Unlike their western counterparts, who lived in grouped caribales that could place several hundred individuals in close proximity, the eastern Lacandon lived in isolated family compounds that typically contained less than twenty people. Maler stayed with an eastern family group in which three brothers and their families lived within a few kilometers of each other, but all other Lacandon lived several days away.³²

³¹ Ibid; Sapper, "Ein Besuch bei den östlichen Lacandonen," 893; William Beanham's tale was noted by both John L. Stevens and John H. Caddy, however, Caddy referred to him as Baynham. According to both accounts, Beanham's servant and two individuals from a nearby ladino town robbed him and murdered him by chopping his head open with a machete. John L. Stevens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, 293-294*; Palenque, *The Walker-Caddy Expedition to the Ancient Maya City, 1839-1840*, ed. David M. Pendergast, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 112.

³² Teobert Maler, *Researched in the Usumasintla Valley*, 22-40.

Conclusions

During the nineteenth century Lacandon isolation and autonomy decreased dramatically. Early in the period the Lacandon lived in an area that remained independent of government control. Few individuals took interest in the Lacandon region, which was identified as a wilderness. During this time Lacandon settlements extended from Palenque to Tikal and from Tenosique to Cobán. There were hundreds, if not thousands of Lacandon living in the remote areas of the Maya lowlands. The migration of the highland Maya during mid-century created settlements along the edges of the Lacandon region. The Lacandon living in those areas responded by moving to more isolated retreats.

By the end of the nineteenth century economic interests brought the timber industry into the deepest parts of El Desierto. Timber companies established communities for their workers, which finally brought the outside world close to the Lacandon. Again, the Lacandon responded by relocating. The Lacandon established communities that were close to the new settlers. Contact with these individuals brought disease to the Lacandon, ravaging their population. As we will see in the following chapter, the timber industry crashed early in the twentieth

century, but immigrants continued to settle in the Lacandon jungle, which fundamentally changed Lacandon society.

CHAPTER V

TRANSFORMATION OF A JUNGLE, TRANSFORMATION OF A SOCIETY

(1910 - 2002)

Introduction

The twentieth century brought tremendous changes to the Lacandon. In the early decades of the century, the Mexican Revolution caused a lull in the economic development of the jungles of Chiapas. By mid century, however, the state of Chiapas initiated a series of reforms that transformed the Lacandon jungle. First, the state government of Chiapas lifted restrictions and then encouraged of migration into unsettled areas. The government also attempted to acculturate independent Indian societies and supported religious proselytizing to non-Christians. Finally, late in the twentieth century Chiapas attempted to modernize outlying areas by building roads, and providing electricity and potable water.

Together these changes caused a demographic explosion in Chiapas that brought critical changes to Lacandon society: first, the settlement and development of the

Lacandon jungle as the Lacandon pushed into restricted settlements; second, a demographic collapse paired with Christian proselytizing of missionaries caused many Lacandon to abandon their traditional religion; and, finally, new economic opportunities allowed the Lacandon to acquire some wealth and diversify their economy.

Chicleros

In the decades following the Mexican Revolution and the collapse of the timber industry, settlers entered the Lacandon region in search of economic opportunities and cheap, underutilized land. They created communities in the Lacandon jungle and regularly interacted with the Lacandon. The Lacandon attempted to isolate themselves deep in the jungle, as they had for centuries before. During the twentieth century, however, the jungles of Chiapas became valuable economic resource that attracted industry and settlers and thus ended the isolation and independence of the Lacandon.

The prosperity of the timber industry waned during the revolutionary period in Mexico. In Chiapas revolutionaries battled the logging industry for equitable labor practices. The most noteworthy conflict came in 1913, when a revolutionary Tabasqueño named Luis Felipe Domínguez led a

militia force into the state and liberated indebted workers. Domínguez swept down the Usumacinta River and decreed freedom for all loggers, dissolved their debts, and ordered the execution of logging camp administrators. This act sent the timber industry reeling in the years that followed.

The 1917 Mexican constitution instituted broad land reform across Mexico. Article 27 designated expropriated *haciendas* (large independently or corporately owned agricultural estates) to indigenous communities that could prove ancestral ownership, or divided the lands into *ejidos* (cooperative farms shared by twenty or more landless farmers). In Chiapas this redistribution of land largely took place in the highlands and Sonusuco. However, these reforms did not break-up the timber industry's ownership of lands in the Lacandon jungle, although the expansion and acquisition of new lands were prevented. With these restrictions and a decreased demand for timber in the decades after World War I, the hardwood timber industry declined in the Lacandon jungle.¹

¹ Karen L. O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest: Environmental and Social Struggles in Chiapas* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 72-73, 110-113; Peter R.W. Gerritsen and Nancy R. Forster, "Conflict Over Natural Resources and Conservation in the Indigenous Community of Cuзалapa, Western Mexico," in *Land and Sustainable Livelihood in Latin America* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 2001), 139-140.

During the 1920s and 1930s rubber became a highly valued resource and Central America became one of the leading producers. Before the invention of synthetic rubber in the 1940s, natural rubber was sapped from *chicle* trees that grew in the American tropics. The harvesting of rubber involved bleeding tree sap over extended periods. The industry demanded both a large work force and vast expanses of forest.

During the lull in the hardwood market, the *Selva Lacandona* contained both an anxious labor force of former lumbermen and an ample supply of *chicle* trees, which produced a boom in the rubber industry in the Lacandon jungle. As the demands for rubber increased, Chiapas attracted itinerant *chicleros* (rubber harvesters) from all over the Maya region. While hardwood harvesting had to take place close to large rivers, which were used to transport the trees, latex collection could take place wherever rubber plants were found. Chicaleros traveled the whole jungle in search for stands of gum-bearing *zapote* trees and many of these workers became permanent residents of the region.²

The new settlers created small communities along the Jataté and Lacantún rivers and Lake Miramar--the heart of

² Nations, *Population Ecology*, 108.

the Lacandon region. Many Tzeltal and Chol abandoned their homes near Ocosingo and relocated eastward in the jungle to harvest latex. They created settlements in the Jataté valley and along the Lacantún River. The chicaleros established homes along the Usumacinta and near the Euseba River.³

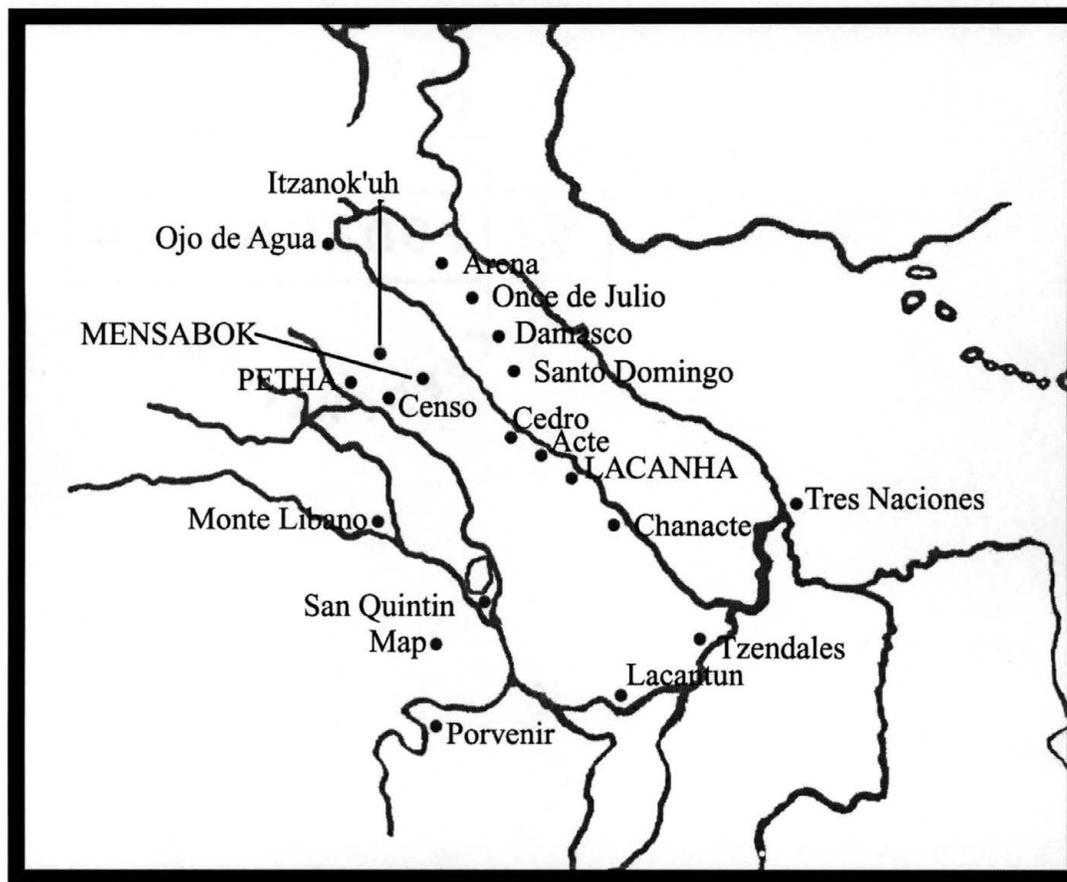
These settlers clashed with the Lacandon over numerous issues. One major conflict concerned land use. The Lacandon practiced subsistence agriculture that allowed the forest to regenerate. In addition to harvesting rubber, the chicleros were ranchers who cleared large tracts of land in order to raise livestock. When in close proximity to their settlements, the ranchers destroyed the forest, which limited the Lacandon's ability to farm.⁴

Other problems arose as the chicaleros and immigrants interacted with the Lacandon. Chicaleros harassed Lacandon women and stole food from Lacandon milpas. In response to these conflicts the Lacandon reacted as they had for centuries--they retreated into the jungle. In the 1920s and 1930s the Lacandon fully retreated from the mountains

³ David W. Amram, Jr., "Eastern Chiapas," *Geographical Review* 27, no.1 (1937): 30-31; Nations, "Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya," 107-108; Jacques Soustelle, "Notes sur les Lacandon du Lac Peljá du Río Jetjá (Chiapas)," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 48 (1959), 153-154.

⁴ Ibid.

and valleys of the central highlands, establishing dozens of caribales between the Usumacinta and Jataté rivers (see Map 6).⁵



Map 6

Lacandon Settlements in the 1920s and 1930s

After Alfred Tozzer lived with the Lacandon in 1903-1904, little work was done among the Lacandon until the French husband and wife team Georgette and Jacques

⁵ Ibid.

Soustelle contacted them in the late 1920s. From 1927 to 1934 the Soustelles visited Lacandon settlements along the Lacanja River and south of Palenque. In the northern Lacandon region they identified caribales they called Chocacté, Chocoljá and La Arena. They also found two settlements along the Jejá River and one on Lake Peljá. Along the southern Jataté River they discovered three communities west of Lake Mirimar. A host of other anthropologists, including Bernard de Colmont, Enrique Palacios, David Amram, and F.K.G. Mullerried, encountered Lacandon settlements along the Jataté and Lacantún rivers. De Colmont visited Lacandon groups there in 1935. Archaeologist Enrique Juan Palacios in 1928 encountered a settlement west of the Usumacinta, which his companion Carlos Basauri called Jetjá. In 1937 the anthropologist David Amram visited two Lacandon communities: Hetjá and Las Tasas. Finally, in the early 1940s the ethnologist F.K.G. Mullerried examined two communities near San Quintín, one along the Pasión River and one north of Cobán in Guatemala. He also reported that there were communities that he did not visit along the Tzeltales, Lacanja, and San Pedro Mártir rivers. All of these individuals saw Lacandon communities in transition. Beginning in the 1940s, however, large numbers of immigrant Indians moved into

Lacandon territory, forcing the Lacandon to move into two separate areas west of the Usumacinta River.⁶

Colonization of the *Selva Lacandona*

By 1940 control of most of the productive land in Chiapas was owned or controlled by a small percentage of landholders. Land reforms instituted by the 1917 Mexican constitution had little effect in Chiapas. Over twenty years after the revolution, land ownership continued to be concentrated in the hands of the elite. Less than three percent of all landowners held more than half of the land in the state. Although about twenty five thousand individuals gained land through *ejido* and communal redistribution in the years following the revolution, this accounted for less than five percent of privately owned land. One result of this disparity was an economic imbalance in the state's agricultural production. Large landowners focused production on valuable exports such as cacao, coffee, rubber, and bananas, while the staple foods

⁶ Georgette Soustelle, "Observations sur la religion des Lacandons du Mexique méridional," *Journal de la Société des Americanistes* 48 (1959), 143-144; Jacques Soustelle, "Le totémisme des Lacandones," *Maya Research* 2, no. 4 (1935): 155; Bernard de Colmont, "Le Tragique Destine d'une Race, Les Indien Lacandon," *L'Illustration* (21 December 1935), 524; Enrique Juan Palacios, *En los confines de la selva lacandona* (Mexico: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1928), 401; Amram, "Eastern Chiapas," 33; F.K.G. Mullerried, "¿Existe actualmente una tribu de Lacandones en el centro de la selva del oriente de Chiapas?," *Anales de la Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Biológicas* 4 (1945): 289-308.

of maize and beans were typically produced by subsistence farmers. This inequity led to a glut of export commodities but a dearth of essential food crops. This situation was exacerbated by the state's large population of poor who had few economic opportunities and no land to sustain themselves.⁷

In the 1940s the Mexican government instituted a plan to balance the state's economy and populate the Lacandon jungle. The *Ley Federal de Colonización* of 1946 approved the colonization of national lands and started a wave of immigration into the Lacandon jungle that would not end until the 1990s. The law created ejidos for the landless poor who lived near large urban areas. In Chiapas during 1940s and 1950s the towns of Ocosingo and Margaritas received nearly eighty-three thousand hectares for creation of ejidos. In the 1950s Tzeltal Indians from the highland towns of Candelaria and Baxek'en migrated to this region and settled along the Santo Domingo River.

Until the 1960s settlement of the Lacandon jungle was spontaneous and the government did not dictate settlement locations. Immigration into the Lacandon region came in waves (see Map 7). The best lands, which were east of Ocosingo, were settled first by Tzeltales. As colonization

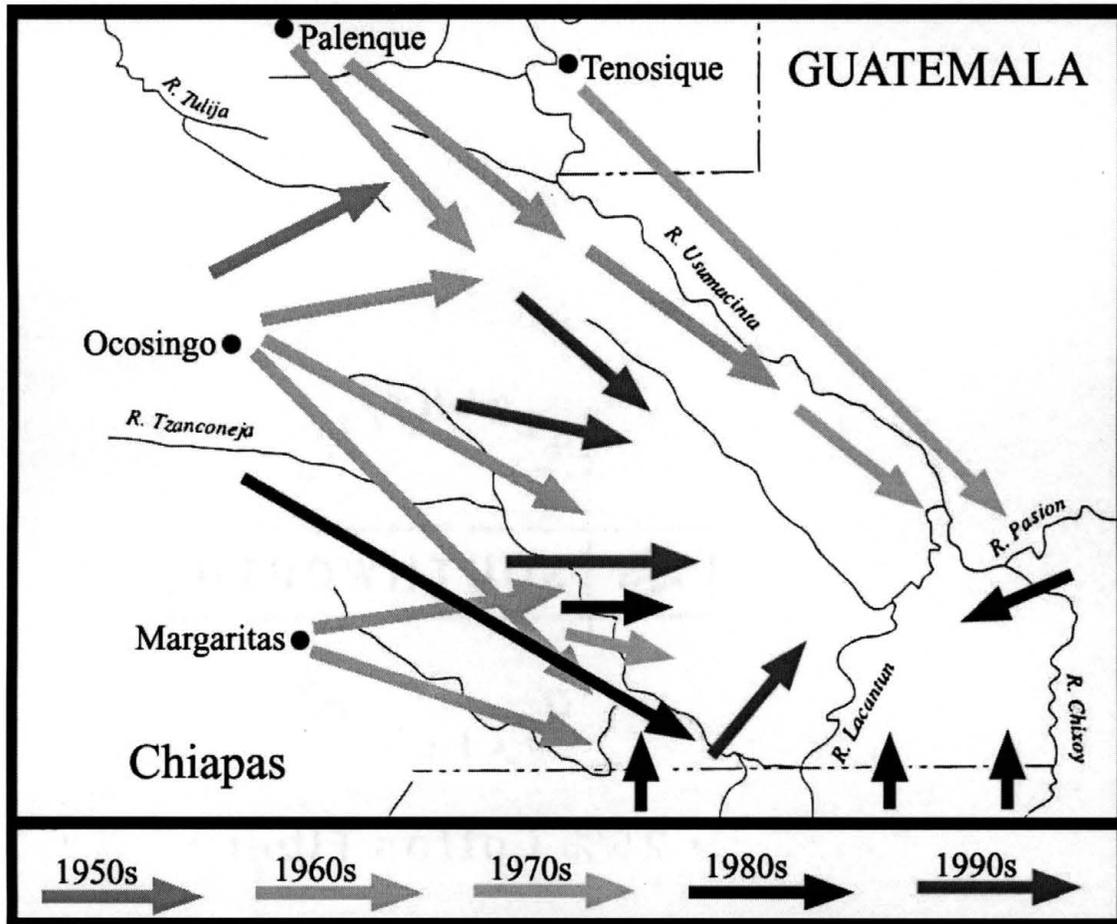
⁷ O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest*, 110-112.

continued, marginal lands were left to newcomers, such as Tzotzil and Chol Indians, who pushed deeper into the jungle. In 1961 and again in 1965 the state instituted programs to manage the settlement of the jungle. New settlements emerged along the Jataté and Usumacinta rivers. Between 1962 and 1975 over fifty thousand people were resettled into about one hundred and twenty colonies located in this region. These new communities cut into the heart of the Lacandon region.⁸

As immigration increased the Lacandon settlements along the Jataté River came into direct contact with Tzeltal communities. Lacandon settlements called Capulco, Capulín, Monte Líbano, and Puna were forced to relocate by the new immigrant communities and independent landowners. Although legally prohibited from clearing the forest, Tzeltal settlers cut large tracts of jungle to create pastureland for cattle raising. This practice again brought the Lacandon into direct conflict with the new settlers. Cattle farming and clearing of the jungle restricted Lacandon hunting and agriculture, which required large tracts of primary and secondary forest. Since these new settlers came in large numbers, as many as sixty thousand between 1950 and 1970, they dramatically reduced

⁸ Ibid.

the size of the tropical rainforest fundamental to the Lacandon way of life. Unable to farm and hunt, the Lacandon migrated eastward.



Map 7

Patterns of Colonization in the Lacandon Jungle⁹

Other conflicts between Lacandon communities and settlers often centered on land ownership. In the early

⁹ Map adapted from O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest*, 120.

1960s, for example, the Lacandon at the community of Monte Líbano were pushed out of the region by a landowner named Fernanda del Villar. The Lacandon, who had no legal title to the land, were forced to relocate when the landowner sold the timber rights to an American lumber company. Similar incidents occurred along the Lacantún and Usumacinta rivers.¹⁰

In response to the invasion, the Lacandon retreated to areas undesired by the new settlers. In the southern Lacandon region, which was populated by the descendants of the group identified as the western Lacandon, the Lacandon retreated into the region around Lake Lacanja. Individuals from the communities of Lacantún, Tzendales, Tres Naciones and Porvenir created the communities of Lacanha, Cedro and Acte. The northern settlements along the Usumacinta River and a few settlements along the Jataté River moved into the area surrounding Lake Petha and Mensäbäk. Some of Lacandon from Monte Líbano became the founders of Mensäbäk community, while those from Santo Domingo, Domasco, and Arena joined a group of families already living at Lake Petha, which became the modern community of Nahá.

¹⁰ Nations, "Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya," 109-110; Angel Trinidad Ferreira, "La Genética Escudriña a los Lacandones," *Excelcior* 48 (5 April 1964), 1A, 7A, 21A.

This relocation altered a standard pattern of Lacandon settlement. Specifically, the shift brought larger numbers of Lacandon into close contact with each other. Since the late nineteenth century, caribales usually contained two or three families along with a few single or dependent relatives. These settlements were isolated from outsiders and other Lacandon. Georgette Soustelle wrote that the Lacandon of the 1930s felt "a tremendous disdain" for large settlements. In the 1930s caribales typically numbered no more than fifteen people. The Soustelles found six people at Lake Peljá in 1934. As the Lacandon jungle swelled with new settlers and the Lacandon-controlled areas shrank, the Lacandon were forced to adopt communal settlements.

By 1944 the population of the Peljá region swelled with multiple families living close to one another. Blom estimated that there were about fifty people living in the Jetjá (Peljá) caribal. The settlements of Cedro, Santo Domingo, and San Quintín all contained multiple families. Cedro had at least seven families, Santo Domingo had three, and San Quintín may have had as many as six.¹¹

The colonization and settlement of the Lacandon region caused more than the relocation of Lacandon communities. Until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

¹¹ Georgette Soustelle, "Observations sur la Religion des Lacandons," 146; Frans Blom, "Mexico," *Boletín Indigenista* 4, no.1 (1944): 60.

the empty jungles of Chiapas not only provided a buffer from non-Lacandon, it protected the Lacandon from Western diseases. Many of the epidemic diseases that plagued colonial indigenous groups largely spared the Lacandon. From experience, the Lacandon came to fear disease. Having largely avoided contact with the outside world during the colonial period, they had little immunity to diseases that had otherwise become common in the region. While the highland Indians and the Maya of Yucatan had five centuries of built up immunity, the Lacandon had little or no resistance to illnesses such as yellow fever and measles.

From the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, as the Lacandon found isolation less possible, periodic epidemics and pandemics took their toll on the number of Lacandon. From the late nineteenth century until the late 1970s contagious diseases caused half of all Lacandon deaths. In 1935 David Amram noted they were particularly susceptible to colds and chest infections. From 1940 to 1956 twenty-one of the approximate two hundred Lacandon died from respiratory ailments in the southern Lacandon region alone. Many of these individuals were in close contact with the Tzeltal settlements along River Jataté. In 1944 the whole community of Cedro contracted measles from contact with nearby chicle workers. A total

of eight individuals died from the disease and the inhabitants of the community fled from the area. Similar events occurred elsewhere among the Lacandon as disease became a leading factor reducing the Lacandon population. Because of the spread of disease within Lacandon society, even as they struggled to remain separate, their numbers declined.¹²

During the first half of the twentieth century the population of the Lacandon declined significantly. No census data accounts for the Lacandon until the 1980s, therefore identifying specific figures is difficult. Nevertheless, their population became so small that their future rested in the loins of a few individuals. At the beginning of the century there were somewhere between two and three hundred Lacandon. By the 1940s this population was reduced by half. In 1948 the Lacandon who lived in the southern region numbered less than fifty individuals. This decline can be directly linked to the spread of disease from contact with outsiders. The population of the northern Lacandon range is unknown for this year, but there is no reason to believe that their population did not

¹² Nations, "Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya," 129; Amram, "Eastern Chiapas," 31; Philip Baer and David Merrifield, *Two Studies on the Lacandones of Mexico* (Norman: Summer Institute of Linguistics of the University of Oklahoma, 1971) 112-113, 255-267.

decrease as well. In 1959 the total number of Lacandon was about one hundred and sixty people.¹³

Creation of the Modern Communities

The final shift in Lacandon settlement patterns took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. After migrating along the Lacanja River and around Lakes Petha and Mensäbäk, the Lacandon sought protection from further invasions of new settlements. In the early 1970s they sought legal title to the small area of land that they controlled.

By the early 1970s the Mexican federal government realized that the colonization of Chiapas was out of control. Most of the new settlers cleared large tracts of jungle to farm, which eventually became cattle pasture. They cleared away the jungle and created pasturelands. By 1970 there were over two million head of cattle in Chiapas, over five times as many as forty years earlier, and the jungle was shrinking rapidly. In November 1972, in an attempt to halt deforestation by new settlers, President

¹³ Karl Sapper, *Das Nordliche Mittel-Merika nebst einem ausflug nach dem Hochland von Anahuac* (Braunschweig: Friedrich Viewig und Sohn, 1897), 259; Frans Blom and Gertrude Duby, "Entre los indios lacandones de México," *América Indígena* 9, no. 2 (1949): 155; Baer and Merrifield, *Two Studies on the Lacandones*, 13; Alfonso Villa Rojas, "Los lacandones: su origen, costumbres y problemas vitals," *América Indígena* 27, no. 1 (1967): 49; Gertrude Duby, "Estado Actual de los lacandones de Chiapas, Méx.," *América Indígena* 19, no. 4 (1959): 255.

Luis Echeverría gave the Lacandon legal title to 614,321 (approximately 1.5 million acres) hectares of jungle. The Lacandon communities of Najá, Mensábäk, Zapote, and Lacanha Chan Sayab became the official Lacandon communities and were given 2,500 hectares each.¹⁴

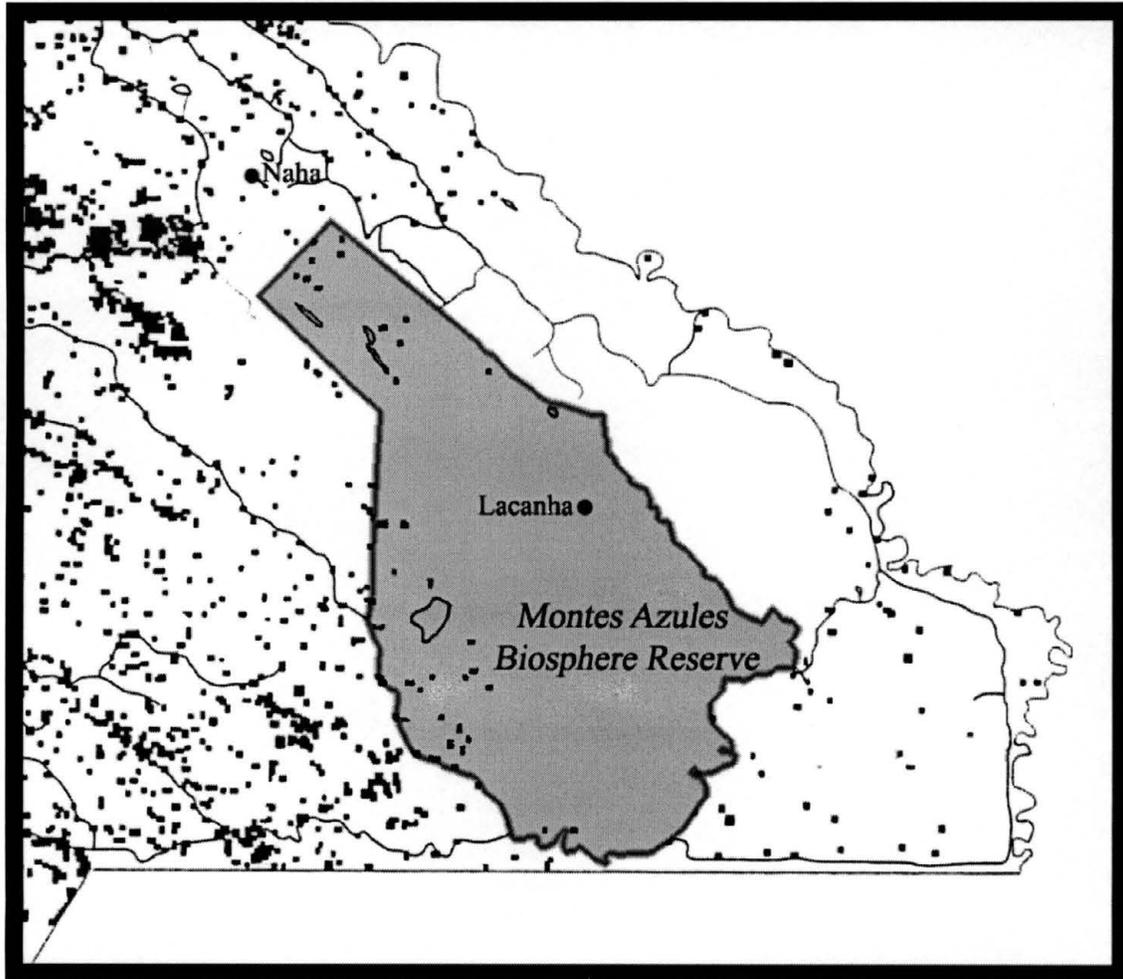
With the 1972 presidential decree the other settlers of the region, nearly six thousand people, became illegal squatters on Lacandon land. Immediately these communities petitioned the federal government for land entitlement and in 1975 the Mexican government created the Comunidad Lacandona, which gave the Lacandon Maya and the other settlers already in the region legal title to the region. In 1978 the Mexican government also created the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve as a tropical resource sanctuary, which restricted new settlements in the area and limited deforestation (see Map 8). Aside from the Comunidad Lacandona no one was allowed to settle, hunt, or farm in the region.¹⁵

The result of these changes was quite dramatic in Lacandon society. Lacanha became the home of the Southern Lacandon. Northern Lacandon settled Nahá and Mensábäk. Individuals from smaller villages, such as Tres Naciones

¹⁴ *Diario Oficial*, (6 March 1972), 10-13.

¹⁵ O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest*, 76-77, 6-7.

and Arena, were encouraged to relocate to these areas (see Map 9). Most Lacandon gave up their traditional practice of avoiding outsiders and periodically relocating.



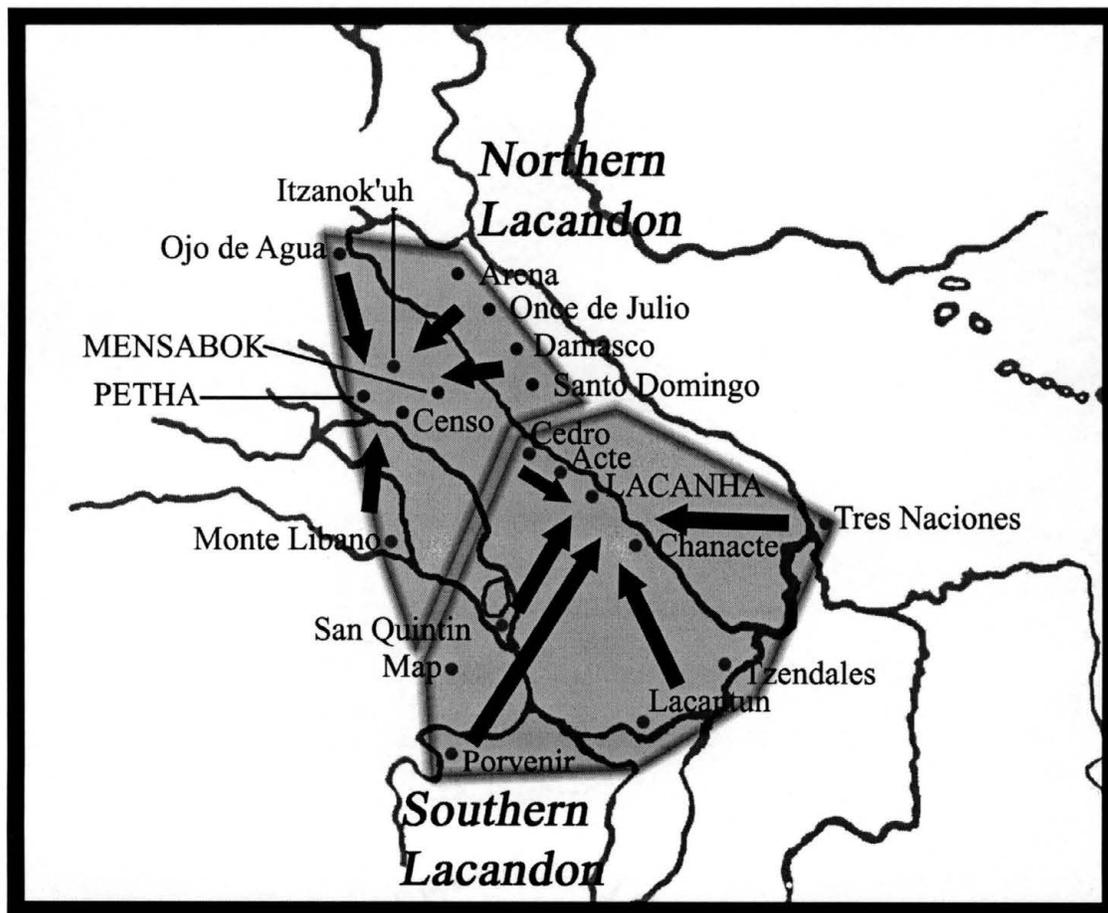
Map 8

The Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve and settlements¹⁶

In the 1980s and 1990s the Mexican government brought basic social and infrastructural services to the Lacandon.

¹⁶ Map adapted from O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest*, 121.

Free medical clinics were established in the 1980s and paved roads and electricity reached the communities in the early 1990s. With an ample amount of land and the basic infrastructure of modern villages, such as clinics and schools, the Lacandon population prospered. By 1990 the Lacandon population had swelled to 630 individuals.¹⁷



Map 9

Movement of Lacandon communities to Lacanha, Nahá and Mensábäk

¹⁷ "Chiapas, Resultados definitivos," *XI Censo general de población y vivienda*, (Where: Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 1990).

The creation of Nahá, Mensäbäk, and Lacanha caused critical changes in Lacandon society. First, the Lacandon abandoned the centuries-old practice of avoiding strangers and moving away from encroaching communities. Second, the communities had basic health and medical services that allowed the Lacandon to overcome their genetic weaknesses to Western diseases, which caused Lacandon society to grow to a size that it had not been since the nineteenth century. Finally, it brought Lacandon society closer to modern Mexican society by connecting them with roads and electricity. All together, these changes brought better health and population growth to the Lacandon.

Disappearance of the Lacandon Gods

By the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, no Lacandon were actively practicing the rituals and, for all practical purposes, their religion was essentially dead. However, during the twentieth century Lacandon religion attracted a great deal of attention by scholars, missionaries, and everyday individuals who encountered the Lacandon. Alfred Tozzer's *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandon* was the first work to describe Lacandon religious practices in detail. Similar analyses of Lacandon religion followed: Jacques Soustelle in the 1930s, Gertrude Duby and Howard

Cline in the 1940s, Jaroslaw Petryshyn and Dale Davis in the 1970s, Robert Bruce in the 1970s and 1980s, and R. Jon McGee in the 1980s and 1990s. All of these works, with the exception of Jon McGee's recent book *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, associate the Lacandon's rituals and beliefs with the Classic period Maya. Today most scholars have dismissed this notion as untenable since the Lacandon of the twentieth century were five hundred years removed from the pre-Columbian Maya and over a thousand years away from the Classic period Maya. Many of these studies restated the central elements of Lacandon religion. Nevertheless, the traditional religion was in a state of decline in the twentieth century.¹⁸

¹⁸ One cause of the repetition within these sources was the consistent use of one family as informants. In the 1930s Soustelle worked with a friendly young Lacandon named Chan K'in, who provided information on Lacandon mythology. Chan K'in became one of Duby's favorite informants from the 1940s until her death in the mid 1990s. In the 1970s and 1980s Bruce, Davis, and McGee relied on Chan K'in, who took on the affectionate title of *Viejo* (old man). Incidentally, Tozzer's study on Lacandon religion was largely based on information that he gathered with one Lacandon Man named Bor--Chan K'in's father. There may have been significant variations in Lacandon mythology between the different groups, but that information was never gathered and has, therefore, died with the people who carried it. Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandon*; Jacques Soustelle, "Le Totémisme des Lacandonnes," *Maya Research* 2, no. 4 (1935): 325-344; Howard Cline, "Lore and Dieties of the Lacandon Indians, Chiapas, Mexico," *Journal of American Folklore* 57 (1944): 107-115; Gertrude Duby, *Los Lacandonnes: Su Pasado y Su Presente* (Mexico: Secretaria de Educación Pública, 1944); Jaroslaw Theodore Petryshyn, "Divine Onen in the Mythology of the Hach Winik," *Report of the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting* (1973); Dale Davis, "Ritual of the Northern Lacandon Maya," (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1978); Robert Bruce, *El Libro de Chan Kin*, (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1974); R. Jon McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*

Lacandon religion involved a complicated pantheon of deities (see Table 4). Lacandon gods controlled the natural environment. The supreme deity was called K'akoch and it was he who created humans. He did not care about human activities and was therefore not a major element in Lacandon beliefs. Some of the most important deities in Lacandon mythology included: the sun god (Hachäkyum), the god of the underworld, (Sukunkyum--Hachäkyum's brother), the god of rain (Mensäbäk--who lived at the lake of the same name), the god that controls foreigners (Äkyantho'), the god of the milpa (Äk'inchob), and the goddess of pregnancy and childbirth (Ixchel). These important gods took prominent roles in Lacandon myths and were frequently the focus of ritual.¹⁹

It was no mere coincidence that the major gods of the Lacandon controlled many of the most important aspects of Lacandon life. The Lacandon's existence was intimately tied to the natural world and the forces that impacted their daily life and sustenance, such as rain, sun, and the milpa held tremendous power in Lacandon mythology. Pregnancy and childbirth, which was the leading cause of

(Bellmont: Wadsworth Press, 1990) and *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002).

¹⁹ McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*, 60-70.

death among Lacandon women, also had significant importance.

Lacandon Deity	Identity/function
Äk'inchob	God of the milpa
Äkna'	Moon goddess
Äkyantho'	God of foreigners and money
Chäk ik al	Assistant to the rain god
Chäk xok	Miniature humanoid water beings
Hachäkyum	Solar deity; Creator of humans
Hahanak'uh	Assistants to water gods
Itzanal	Assistant to solar god
Itsanok'uh	God of hail, lakes and alligators
Ixchel	Goddess of pregnancy and childbirth
K'aak' Bäkäl Äk Yum Chäk Xib	Son of Hachäkyum
K'ak'	God of fire and water
Känänk'ax	Guardian of the forest
K'ayum	Lord of song and music
Kebaton	Female phantom
Kisin	Lord of death
K'uk'ulcan	Malevolent giant serpent
K'ulel	Servant of Hachäkyum
Lumkab	Minor deity of rainbows
Menäbäk	Lord of Rain
Nah Ts'ulu	Celestial jaguars
Ot'uup	Master of the sun
Paal Äk Yum Chäk Xib	Hachäkyum's second son
Säkäpuk	Assistant to Hachäkyum
Sukunyum	Lord of the underworld
Ts'ibatnah	Lord of drawing, painting, and writing
Xka'le'ox	Wife of Hachäkyum
Yum K'ax	Minor forest gods

Table 4

The Lacandon Pantheon of Gods and Supernatural Beings²⁰

²⁰ Ibid, 62-63.

Ceremonial offerings were prominent in ritual activities. The gods required feeding, and offerings appeased them. Common offerings included tortillas, cacao, balché (a fermented beverage), and copal incense. Inedible items were burnt and the Lacandon believed that the smoke traveled to feed the gods. Small amounts of edible items were presented to the gods and the remainder were given to the participants in the rituals.²¹

Offertory rituals were centered around incense-burners or god pots, which were described as idols by many scholars (see Image 2). Incense-burners were fashioned from clay and painted white with brown and red stripes. Each vessel had a face in which offerings were placed on the mouth to feed the gods.

The Lacandon have been called idolaters because of the human characteristics of the god pots, however, this is incorrect because while the Lacandon believed that the god pots were alive, they did not worship them. In 1903 Tozzer was the first to observe a Lacandon offering ritual and in 1907 he wrote:

With every sacrifice made to the idols there are usually three stages. The article is brought in and 'placed' before the idols... The gift is then

²¹ Ibid; 44-53.

'offered' to the *braseros* and their idols as a sacrifice, and the gods are asked to come in person and partake in the offering. Finally the food and drink are 'administered' to the heads on the incense-burners in behalf of the god.²²



Image 2

Lacandon god pot obtained by Tozzer at the turn of the century.²³

Each Lacandon household maintained a god house as a specific structure for ritual worship. God houses were

²² McGee, *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, 38; Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandonones*, 116.

²³ Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandonones*, 91.

always four post huts with thatched roofs. Typically set some distance from the house compound, the god house was the exclusive domain of Lacandon males. Men performed daily rituals in the god house while women did the preparatory work, such as making tortillas in a nearby area. Both Lacandon men and women, however, made pilgrimages to sacred places.

Ancient Maya ruins were often incorporated into Lacandon beliefs and became sacred locales. They traveled there to make offerings to specific gods. In the nineteenth century ruins sites such as Piedras Negras were close to the settlements of the period and were pilgrimage sites. Later, the ruins of Yaxchilán, Palenque, and Lake Mensäbäk became important pilgrimage destinations for the Lacandon.²⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century religious practices were led by a religious leader called a *to'ohil*. The Lacandon believed that he had powerful abilities to communicate with the supernatural world. This communication was facilitated through ritualized drunkenness. A fermented mead beverage called *balché* was prepared inside a dugout canoe and drunk in a community-wide, day-long affair. Although the *balché* ritual

²⁴ Ibid, 55-59; J.E.S. Thompson, "A Proposal for constituting a Maya Subgroup," 15.

continued to be an integral part of Lacandon religious practices during the twentieth century, the Lacandon believed that the last to'ohil died shortly after the turn of the century.²⁵

Religious practices after the leader's death varied from community to community. Jacques Soustelle described this variation among the groups that he encountered. Different community leaders practiced with differing levels of fervor or laxness. He described Chan K'in (Viejo) as "a genuine theologian and moralist ... [and] a sage." Conversely, the leader from Jetjá was "a bad-tempered, evil, alcoholic old chief whose concern with metaphysics was reduced to a minimum, if not totally lacking." The Peljá Lacandon were "unsubtle believers" and those from Chocoljá "had a temple and incense burners ... [but] were ignorant of the rites that went with them."²⁶

By the 1950s the Lacandon in the southern region were beginning to abandon their traditional religion. Shifting settlements and the death of community elders disabled the practice entirely in some communities. At the same time the Mexican government promoted colonization and the

²⁵ McGee notes the last to'ohil was Chan K'in Viejo's father. McGee, *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, 39.

²⁶ Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandones*; Jacques Soustelle, *The Four Suns*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1967) 38.

enculturation of the Lacandon. President Lázaro Cárdenas invited Protestant missionaries into the Lacandon region. During the mid 1950s a group of American Baptists called the Wycliffe Bible Translators, who eventually took the name of the Summer Linguistics Institute of Oklahoma, entered indigenous communities preaching Christianity and distributing native language bibles. One missionary and his wife, Phillip and Mary Baer, reached the Southern Lacandon community of Lacanaha. The Baers, who both spoke Yucatec Maya, converted many Lacandon of the community. As a part of their conversion the Lacandon abandoned their traditional dress (the xikul) and men cut their hair Western style. By the mid- 1970s the Southern Lacandon had abandoned most aspects of traditional religion. The influence of the Baers cannot be overstated. They proved to be a significant force in the community of Lacanaha. In fact, when I visited the community in 2002, the Baer house complex was still intact, even though Philip Baer was dead, and an older Lacandon woman cared for it (see Image 3).²⁷

²⁷ O'Brien, *Sacrificing the Forest*, 116-117; Jacques Soustelle, *The Four Suns*, 58; McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*, 6.



Image 3

The Baer house in Lacanha in 2002

The Lacandon of the northern areas were more resistant to Christian missionaries. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, a group of Seventh Day Adventists successfully converted members of the community of Mensäbäk. Many of the missionaries spoke Yucatec Maya, which allowed them to communicate with the Lacandon in their native tongue. These missionaries espoused numerous Old Testament traditions, such as keeping Saturday as a Sabbath day and following the clean and unclean food practices identified in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. In the late 1970s they converted many individuals from Mensäbäk and quickly

limited traditional Lacandon cultural practices. The linguist Robert Bruce witnessed the missionaries at work and noted:

The first of numerous restrictions was the declaration that approximately half of the Lacandones' traditional game and fish were unkosher. Liquor, beer, and the ceremonial drink called balché or anything else alcoholic, together with tobacco in any form were sinful. The polygamous households were broken up. A man could keep only his first wife. The others though they may have been happily married for ten or twenty years, discovered that they had been living in sin; each [wife] was obliged to leave the husband and marry some bachelor.

Numerous Lacandon from Mensábäk converted to Christianity and today an Adventist temple stands near the center of the village. Most of the individuals that did not convert left the community and settled in Nahá.²⁸

The community of Nahá was more conservative towards their traditional religious practices. Until recently, they were resistant to change and managed to dissuade missionary activity in the community. Nahá has

²⁸ McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*, 6; Bruce and Perera, *Last Lords of Palenque*, 21-22.

traditionally been the most isolated Lacandon community, but for the maintenance of Lacandon religion the most important issue was the presence of dedicated religious practitioners. Chan K'in Viejo was one such committed believer. He readily shared the rites and rituals with other Lacandon and Western researchers, such as Duby, Bruce, Davis and McGee. In fact, Chan K'in Viejo, whose lifespan extended through most of the twentieth century, seems to have been the bearer of traditional practices. When he died in 1996 the religion seemed to have died with him. Today, traditional religion is no longer practiced in Nahá and Christianity is spreading into the community. Today, a few Lacandon gather on Sundays to worship with a local Christian preacher.²⁹

Ultimately, the end of the traditional religion was linked to several factors. First, the demographic buckling in the mid-twentieth century created a gap in the transmission of religious knowledge. As local elders died they took with them knowledge of Lacandon religion. Almost simultaneously Christian missionaries entered the region and led the Lacandon down new religious paths. One should point out that the Lacandon were not merely sheep (to use a Christian analogy) that blindly followed religious

²⁹ McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*, 6; McGee, *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, 44-47.

superiors. Quite to the contrary, the Lacandon chose to forgo their ancestral beliefs. Some converted to Christianity with great fervor, but many Lacandon simply abandoned any practice of religion. On a visit to Lacanha in 1999 I asked a young Lacandon man what he thought about the old religion. He responded that he believed that the Lacandon gods still existed, but no longer had power over the Lacandon--these gods simply disappeared. This response seemed to summarize what many Lacandon believe today.

From Household Economy to Global Exchange

At the turn of the twentieth century the Lacandon economy centered on subsistence agriculture. As the Lacandon came into closer contact with lumber workers, chicaleros and, eventually, with new settlers, the focus of their economy shifted towards trade and broader agricultural production. During the last few decades of the century the Lacandon economy incorporated the production of cash crops and tourism to supplement their reliance on agriculture. Through these changes the Lacandon moved from being a society dependent upon the seasonal cycles of the tropics to having numerous economic options at their disposal to support their families.

Agriculture was the one consistent element in the Lacandon economic system in the twentieth century.

In the early twentieth century the daily life of the average Lacandon was consumed by agricultural maintenance and production. Each Lacandon community was an independent economic unit. Men and women had distinct tasks, but were dependent upon each other for their existence. Though specifically interested in religion, Tozzer noted the different gender roles in economic production. "The father, assisted by his oldest son," Tozzer wrote, "clears the forest to make the fields ... while the mother and daughters spin and weave the cotton into clothing, grind the corn, and carry on the ordinary work of the household." Each capable member of the family worked to assist in agriculture or the processing of foodstuffs. Women undoubtedly carried a heavy production load. They not only assisted in the milpas, they were responsible for the arduous tasks of spinning thread, weaving clothes, and the daily responsibilities of grinding corn and preparing meals. Men on the other hand were responsible for farming and performing the daily rituals associated with productive agriculture.³⁰

³⁰ Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandones*, 45, 55-57.

Lacandon milpas had two growing seasons, one beginning in April and the other in September. A variety of foods were grown and Tozzer listed many of them (see Table 5?). Undoubtedly, the plants identified by Tozzer represented only a portion of the plants in the Lacandon milpa. Squash, for example, was noticeably absent from Tozzer's list, but it has long been a staple among the indigenous groups of Mesoamerica. There is no reason to believe the Lacandon did not grow the plant. Jacques Soustelle identified many of the same plants from his work among the Lacandon in the 1930s.³¹

<i>Achiote</i>	<i>Chicosapote</i>	Lime	Sugarcane
Avocado	<i>Chili</i>	Maize	Sweet Potato
<i>Anona</i>	Cotton	<i>Mamey</i>	<i>Tamarindo</i>
Banana (2sp.)	Gourds	Mango	Tobacco
Black Beans	Grapefruit	<i>Manioc</i>	Yucca
Cacao	<i>Guanabana</i>	Orange	
Chayote	<i>Guayaba</i>	Papaya	
Tomato	Lima Beans	Pinapple	

Table 5

Plants found in Lacandon milpas from the early 1900s.³²

In the late 1970s anthropologists James Nations and Ron Nigh evaluated Lacandon agriculture. They found that the Lacandon during this period grew an immense variety of

³¹ Ibid, 21-23; Soustelle, *The Four Suns*, 24.

³² Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of Mayas and Lacandonos*, 21-23.

crops. Some individual Lacandon grew as many as seventy different varieties in each milpa. The Lacandon also practiced a method of swidden agriculture that produced enormous yields. Nations and Nigh estimated that Lacandon milpas produced as much as 3.3 metric tons of shelled corn in each growing season, which far exceeded other Maya farming methods. By the 1990s Jon McGee found that the diversity within Lacandon milpas fluctuated from year to year. During the 1980s the Lacandon expanded their cultivation of crops such as corn, beans, and chilies for cash crop purposes. Chilies smoked over an open hearth, for example, brought a hefty profit to the Lacandon farmer (see Image 4). Overall, the Lacandon effectively varied the size and variety of plantings in their milpas a economic and climatic conditions required. When times were lean, they planted several milpas with numerous species of plant; when times were fat, they grew less. Thus, throughout the twentieth century agriculture was a stable aspect in the Lacandon economic system. ³³

³³ James Nations and Ron Nigh, "The Evolutionary Potential of Lacandon Maya Sustained-Yield Tropical Forest Agriculture," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 36 (1980), 1:1-30; McGee, *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, 92-104.



Image 4

A Lacandon man smoking chilies in 1999

One economic activity that fluctuated during the century was trade. In the 1900s and again in the 1930s numerous authors suggested that the Lacandon were completely independent and did not engage in any trade activity with the outside world. Soustelle is a typical example of this position. He states that "What may surprise us most about their existence is that the Lacandones manage to live day after day and year after year without a single element from the outside world." This position is curiously flawed. While authors like Tozzer, Soustelle, and Cline remark about the utter independence of

the Lacandon in one instance, they also identify numerous occasions when the Lacandon went to great lengths to trade with outsiders.

The tropical jungles were rich in flora and fauna that the Lacandon could easily exploit, but minerals were noticeably lacking. Salt was one substance that the jungle did not provide in large quantities and so made up a regular trade item. By the 1950s the Lacandon were regularly trading for metal tools such as machetes to replace their traditional stone tools.

It is unclear when the Lacandon began trading with outsiders, but it certainly predated the twentieth century. As discussed in chapters 3 and 4 above, their ancestors, the unconquered Yucatec speakers, traded for precisely the same things as twentieth century Lacandon: salt and metal tools. As the outside world closed in on the Lacandon exchange of goods increased. Thus the 1950s the Lacandon were traveling to monteros to exchange goods with timber workers. Chicaleros were even making specific trips to Lacandon communities to exchange tools for Lacandon food. By the 1960s the caribales were well supplied with metal tools and desire guns, which they used for hunting.³⁴

³⁴ Soustelle, *The Four Suns*, 26; Amram, "Eastern Chiapas," 32; also see Alfred Tozzer, *Personal Letters*, Tozzer Library, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

After the creation of the Comunidad Lacandona, the Lacandon became the legal inhabitants of Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve and the owners of many of the area's natural resources. The tropical mahogany and cedar timber contained in the reserve was a highly prized resource by the lumber industry. In 1974 the Lacandon agreed to a contract with the Mexican government and the Compañía Forestal de la Lacandona for the sale of tropical hardwoods. In this deal the Lacandon sold tropical cedar and mahogany for guaranteed prices. The government timber company gave the Lacandon fifty pesos (\$4 US at that time) per cubic foot of cedar and two hundred fifty pesos (\$20) per cubic foot of mahogany. On international markets the same amount of cedar and mahogany sold for three thousand pesos (\$240) and eight thousand pesos (\$640). In the end, each of the sixty-six Lacandon families that agreed to the deal received nearly five thousand pesos (over \$400) every six months. The original agreement also required that the government create a communal fund containing seventy percent of the profits gained from the extraction of timber. This money never materialized, however, and the Lacandon to this day do not know what happened to it.³⁵

³⁵ Nations, "Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya," 113-114; "Chiapas: State-level Indigenous Profile," <http://www.sedesol.gob.mx/>

The Lacandon did not become wealthy from this source of income. With the money came government agencies designed to help the Lacandon. The state-sanctioned Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (CONASUPO) opened stores stocked with processed foods such as refined sugar, flour, and ground corn. With the money they gained from the sale of timber, the Lacandon bought from the CONASUPOs and were instantly hooked into the cash economy. When cash from the hardwood agreement ceased to flow in the 1980s, the Lacandon's dependence on the money economy forced them to seek other sources of income.³⁶

Chiapas in the 1980s bustled with activity. Basic infrastructure such as roads and electric power were extended into the jungle, while droves of tourists began flooding to the region to see ancient Maya ruins and surviving indigenous societies. In the early 1980s dirt roads were cut through the jungle connecting the Lacandon communities with the major cities of Palenque and Ocosingo. This, as Jon McGee points out, "would establish a dividing line between traditional subsistence-oriented living and today's commercial enterprises." Essentially, connecting the Lacandon communities to the rest of Chiapas gave the

perfiles/estal/Chiapas/00_summary.html, accessed on 9 June 2002.

³⁶ Nations, "Population Ecology of the Lacandon Maya," 113-114.

Lacandon access to a new world of economic resources and opportunities.³⁷

The ancestors of the twentieth century Lacandon sold goods in urban areas, such as Palenque, Ocosingo, and Ciudad Flores, since the eighteenth century. There they exchanged goods then returned home. The Lacandon during the twentieth century did the same, however, the creation of roads allowed the Lacandon to travel long distances in a short period of time and to transport large quantities of goods. It did not take the Lacandon long to realize that tourists spent money. By the mid 1980s numerous individuals were selling their folk crafts at the ruins of Palenque (see Image 5). In attempts to look more like the stereotypical Lacandon (even though many of them had abandoned the dress), they donned their traditional xikuls and let their hair down. While some tourists snapped pictures, many of them bought Lacandon goods. They sold bows and arrows, god-pots, beads, copal, along with many other handicrafts.³⁸

With money in hand, the Lacandon bought a variety of Western goods and returned to their communities. Today, most Lacandon homes are stocked with televisions, stereos,

³⁷ McGee, *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, 87.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 87-92.

and electric kitchen tools. Some Lacandon even have satellite dishes and vehicles.³⁹



Image 5

A Lacandon family selling folk crafts at the ruins of Palenque

During the late 1990s this system was essentially turned on its head. The road that leads to Lacanha and the nearby ancient ruins site of Bonampak was paved in 1994. Bonampak, which is a unique Maya site that contains colorful paintings preserved from twelve hundred years ago,

³⁹ Ibid, 87-92.

attracts tourists from around the world. Many of these tourists now visit the community of Lacanha where they buy Lacandon crafts. Some Lacandon have become tour operators, leading trips to the ruins and into the jungle, and bringing campers into the community.

On a trip to Chiapas in 2002 with Jon McGee we found that the Lacandon tourist economy had grown in complexity. There were Lacandon who abandoned their communities to sell souvenirs on a full time basis. They lived in apartments in Palenque and went to the ruins every morning to sell their goods. Other Lacandon had developed into folk-craft middlemen. They bought handicrafts from Lacandon in the communities and traveled to Palenque to sell them to the full time tourist merchants. They also traveled to the popular tourist destination of San Cristóbal de las Casas to sell Lacandon goods to shops there. Walking through the streets of San Cristóbal it was difficult to find stores that did not carry Lacandon bows and arrows or god pots. We even met a Texan who was in the community of Nahá to purchase Lacandon goods to sell in the United States.

During the twentieth century the Lacandon economy shifted dramatically. They moved from a subsistence lifestyle that included occasional trade for essential

items, to engaging in entrepreneurial enterprises that allow them to own a host of consumer items.

Conclusions and this Thesis in Context

During the twentieth century the Lacandon changed dramatically. In the early decades of the century, the Lacandon attempted to flee from new settlers. By mid-century the Lacandon jungle was full of immigrants and there were few isolated areas left. The Lacandon population dropped to less than two hundred individual as contact with outsiders caused disease to spread. In the 1960s the Lacandon, unable to relocated to more remote areas, petitioned the Mexican government for title to state-owned lands. In 1972 the Lacandon received ownership of over six hundred thousand hectares of tropical rainforest. With this grant the Lacandon moved into large communities and ended their centuries-old practice of fleeing from outsiders. By 1990, the population of the Lacandon had grown to over six hundred people--three times the number they had in 1950.

At the turn of the century Tozzer wrote about the links between Lacandon religious rites and the classic Maya. Over eighty five years later, scores of authors were making the same conclusions. Traditional religion,

however, was being abandoned by the Lacandon throughout much of the twentieth century. In the 1950s the death of religious leaders and the preaching of Christian missionaries caused the Lacandon near the community of Lacanha to convert to Christianity. Similar occurrences happened in the 1970s and 1980s at the Northern Lacandon community of Mensäbäk. Finally, in the 1990s the last practicing elder died in Nahá and the other members of the community failed to maintain traditional religious practices.

The Lacandon economic system changed significantly as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century the majority of the Lacandon supported themselves solely by farming. They traded with outsiders for tools and essential items that they could not harvest from the jungle. By the late twentieth century the Lacandon were engaged in a host of economic activities, such as cash crop farming and selling tourist goods, which allowed them to buy a variety of Western goods and attain economic stability.

This thesis has outlined several basic themes in the Lacandon history. First, colonial sources used the term Lacandon to describe the unconverted Indians of Chiapas and Guatemala. The application of this term confused numerous

scholars. This thesis has identified that there were in fact two separate groups of Indians identified as Lacandones. The two groups spoke different languages and had different cultural traditions. They both shared, however, the desire for independence and they resisted Spanish control. The known history of the Chol-Lacandon ends during the early eighteenth century when they were forcibly removed from the Maya Lowlands. What happened to the Chol-Lacandon is a mystery and a subject ripe for study.

In the mid-seventeenth century the ancestors of the modern Lacandon migrated into Chiapas and Guatemala. Few attempts were made to subjugate these individuals using force, however, Catholic priests briefly attempted their spiritual conquest. These Indians began a pattern of avoidance that lasted well into the twentieth century. As outsiders drew close to Lacandon settlements, the Lacandon moved into remote areas of the jungle. And as the cover of the isolated jungle disappeared, the Lacandon altered this tactic. By the end of the twentieth century, the Lacandon were no longer fleeing from outsiders, but regularly engaging them. They developed a new economic system that thrived on their interaction with outsiders.

There are numerous Lacandon issues that remain unanswered. Little information has been uncovered on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ancestors of the Yucatec-Lacandon and several fundamental questions persist. Were there Yucatec-Lacandon in the southern Maya lowlands in the sixteenth century? What specific issues caused Yucatec-speakers to immigrate into Chiapas in the seventeenth century? Which of these groups were the ancestors of the modern Lacandon? The nineteenth century is particularly unclear and ready for study as well. At the beginning of the century there were thousands of Lacandon in Guatemala and Chiapas, however, a hundred years later there were only a few hundred living along the Mexico-Guatemala border. What happened to the Lacandon during this period? Did most die of disease? Did they assimilate into nearby communities? How did these changes impact the twentieth century Lacandon? More recent changes in Lacandon society are also understood poorly. The contemporary Lacandon are dramatically different than their ancestors and few scholars have detailed the impact of Lacandon integration into Mexican society. How did the shift from small settlements to large communities affected Lacandon society and culture overall? What aspects of

traditional society have the Lacandon retained and what have they discarded?

Future research on these issues will shed light on the history of the Lacandon and their contemporary society. Ultimately, this work is important to dispel with the old stereotypes that once labeled the Lacandon cannibals and kings. Instead through thorough historical review and ethnographic analysis, interpretations of the Lacandon can view them in realistic terms--as an indigenous society striving for autonomy.

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VITA

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