

POWER AND PRIVILEGE:  
CONTEXTUALIZING LACANDON IDENTITIES

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: WRITING AND REWRITING HISTORIES

Considering that Lacandón Mayas have not exceeded one thousand inhabitants since the earliest records of their existence, the amount of attention they have received in scholarship is extraordinary. Since Alfred Tozzer's 1907 account of how "the complete isolation of the Lacandones has freed him from assuming the tamed and subdued character that is often noted in Maya proper," (1907:24) this Maya group for many has become tied to a romantic image, one sequestered in a fictive past in part created and guided by ethnographic accounts over the last century.

Part of people's fascination with the Lacandón was tied to the environment in which they live. Now known as the Selva Lacandona, this neo-tropical forest accounts for almost twenty-five percent of Mexico's plant and animal diversity (O'brien 1998). Since the colonial period, the dense forest that surrounded Lacandones provided a degree of insulation and continued to limit contact with outsiders



until the latter part of the twentieth century. However, most central to the western construction of Lacandón identity, the perceived isolation in which the Lacandón lived imparted a perception of mystery and exoticism about these people that distinguished them from other Maya groups. Based on perceived isolation and the notion that they were unconquered peoples, some scholars concluded that Lacandón culture was the product of unadulterated cultural continuity with the ancient Maya (Tozzer 1907, Blom 1944, Blom and Duby-Blom 1955, 1957, Bruce 1974, Bruce and Perera 1982, and McGee 1990). In response to this historical narrative, written by ethnographers, amateur archaeologists and travel writers and woven into public consciousness, the Mexican government in 1972 awarded the Lacandón 612,472 hectares (2.48 hectares equals one acre) of land on the basis that they were the "legítimos dueños" of the forest (Gollnick 1998: 139). Other inhabitants within the region were forcibly removed, and with this land grant, Lacandones became the largest single indigenous landholders in Mexico. The government's recognition of Lacandones as rightful owners of the forest fueled romantic perceptions of the group in popular consciousness and especially within tourism. The land grant created a tripartite division of power and control. The government attempted to control

Lacandones by continuing to exploit forest resources under the pseudo-guise of Lacandón control while reinforcing romanticized images of Lacandones within the tourist industry. At the same time, Lacandones exerted economic and political control over other indigenous peoples in the region.

More recently, historians have rewritten the history of the Lacandón. These new historical narratives debunked notions that Lacandones were direct heirs to the ancient Maya of Chiapas. Beginning with the work of Jan de Vos in the early 1980s, historians have used colonial documents to carefully reconstruct a new interpretation of Lacandón history. De Vos (1980, 1988a, and 1988b), Gollnick (1998), McGee (2000) and Kashanipour (2002) distinguished between Cholan-speaking Mayas, who were cleared from the lowland region in the seventeenth century, and Lacandones speaking a Yucatec Mayan derivative, who arrived in lowland Chiapas during the early part of the eighteenth century. Using linguistic evidence and colonial documentation, they suggested that modern Lacandones were actually colonial refugees from the Petén and Yucatán, who escaped to the Selva Lacandona in an attempt to avoid colonial subjugation. To further refute notions of cultural purity, these historians demonstrated ongoing contact between

modern Lacandones and outsiders since their arrival (De Vos 1980, Gollnick 1998, McGee 2000, Kashanipour 2002).

New interpretations of the historical narrative have yielded significant consequences. Some texts, such as works by Gollnick (1998) and Kashanipour (2002), failed to clearly distinguish that the Lacandón were not active writers of their own histories and disregarded potential consequences of competing narratives for Lacandones. Such new historical narratives even suggested that the Lacandón, by co-opting the romantic narrative, were active members in the (mis)representation of their cultural and historical identities (Gollnick 1998). By exposing misconceptions of Lacandón histories, these narratives deconstruct the bases for Lacandones' recognition and privileged status. Other indigenous groups, such as Tzeltales, Tzolitziles, and Choles displaced by the reappropriation of land, have responded to the reinterpreted histories. Some members of these groups asserted that because the Lacandón were given the Selva Lacandona under the guise of a fictive history, the land grant should be revoked and redistributed to incorporate other Maya groups (Althaus n.d.). Today, the Lacandón are wedged between divergent historical narratives that were written without their own voices. Now the subjects of ongoing conflict, members of Lacandón



Figure 1-Map of Lacandon Region<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Boremanse, Didier. *Hach Winik: The Lacandon Maya of Chiapas, Southern Mexico*. Albany: The University at Albany, 1998.

communities are persistently renegotiating their identities in response to these competing historical narratives.

In this thesis, I examine how Lacandones were portrayed in texts and how these narratives acted to create and manipulate the identities of Lacandones. Since the 1970s, Lacandones have been settled in three communities—Najā, Metzabok, and Lacanjá Chan Sayab. When examining former representations of Lacandones, I draw on research conducted in each of these communities. However, my field research is limited to the region along the Carretera Fronteriza, including the Lacandón community of Lacanjá Chan Sayab, as well as other Tzeltal and Chol communities. When describing contemporary Lacandón society, I am referring explicitly to the conditions in Lacanjá and its vicinity. I do not aim to extend my findings to the communities of Najá and Metzabok, where, because of geographical differences, social, political, and economic changes have manifested somewhat differently.

## **Overview**

In Chapter Two, I draw from ethnographic accounts of Alfred Tozzer (1907), Franz Blom and Gertrude Duby-Blom (1955, 1957), Robert Bruce (1974), and Robert Bruce and

Victor Perera (1984) to demonstrate how fictive narratives were shaped and how these narratives, in part, acted to privilege the Lacandón over other Maya groups in Chiapas. In Chapter Three, I explore diverging historical representations of Lacandones beginning with works by Jan de Vos (1980, 1988a, 1988b, 1998, 2002). De Vos' reinterpretation of Lacandón historical identities further influenced accounts by Brian Gollnick (1998), R. Jon McGee (2000), and Ryan Kashanipour (2002). Using these texts, I assess the implications of rewriting cultural histories and consider how historical narratives can act to promote or demote perceptions of authentic cultures.

In Chapter Four, I explore how Lacandones today are renegotiating their identities in the face of competing histories. I explore how members of the community Lacanjá Chan Sayab actively co-opt romantic images as a means for economic and political control. In addition, I reveal how the Mexican government, in an effort to bolster tourism, encourages the people of Lacanjá to consciously maintain their romantic images through performances for tourists.

In Chapter Five, I examine how Lacandón women were not only underrepresented by often misrepresented in the majority of texts. I assert that because Lacandón women were grossly underrepresented in public images, they have

occupied neglected positions in popular consciousness. I then turn to contemporary Lacandón women's lives and explore how culture change has affected women's relation to power in the community. In particular, I explore how the new tourism-based economy has affected gender relations, labor, and access to power in the community.

In Chapter Six, I question how to define a culture as authentic, asking if any culture is more or less authentic than another. In closing, I situate the Lacandón in relation to the writing of their history. Recognizing that Lacandón people lacked representation or voice in the construction of their history, I probe whether they can be held accountable for the implications of histories written *about* but not *by* them.

## **Methodology**

My fieldwork for this research began as an undergraduate at Centre College. I spent four weeks in Chiapas in August of 2001 for a senior research project on tourism and the Lacandón Maya. I focused the research on tourist ventures in Lacanjá Chan Sayab, among Lacandones from Najá selling souvenirs at the ruins of Palenque, and at the *Na Bolom* institute in San Cristóbal de las Casas. During this first year in Lacanjá, I stayed at *Campamento*

*Río Lacanjá*, the most successful accommodation in the community and interacted on a limited basis with families near the establishment.

In the summer of 2003, I returned to Lacanjá for three weeks in May. This time, I stayed with a family on the periphery of the community who was just beginning to enter the tourist industry. During this second field season, I began to interview community members about governmental and non-governmental (NGO) developmental aid and to identify the different way that Lacandones engage tourism.

Upon returning the following year, I stayed with another family who had immigrated from Najá. This fieldwork season lasted from May until July. During this time, I interviewed Lacandones from various regions of the community. I also incorporated interviews with representatives of governmental and NGO agencies. Luz Martin del Campo, an anthropologist who had conducted intermittent fieldwork in Lacanjá since 1991, was particularly helpful in my research. Her long term perspective offered great insight into the social, economic, and political conditions along the Carretera Fronteriza. Also, Miguel Sanchez, a representative of Conservation International (CI), offered a great deal of



information about intra-community politics and the changes brought about by tourism.

Lacanjá Chan Sayab is actually made up three smaller sub-communities: Bethel, San Javier, and Lacanjá. The *Instituto Mexicano Seguro Social Programa (IMSS) Solidaridad de Población Global* regularly gathers population data on rural communities. Their report states that the total population for Lacanjá is 352 persons, Bethel is 172 persons, and San Javier is 89 persons (Martin del Campo 2005:pers. com.). My interviews were limited to residents of Lacanjá proper. Over the course of three field seasons, I interviewed twenty families, most of who resided within the northern region of Lacanjá, where families who had immigrated from Najá beginning in the early 1980s settled. I also interviewed families around the airstrip, known as the *pista*, and in more marginalized regions of the community. The interviews, conducted in Spanish, took place in or near the informants' homes. I did not follow a rigid guideline of questions but rather engaged in conversation leading to specific topics. The degree of privacy during interviews varied greatly. When researching specific dates of economic aid and development in the community, I tried to interact with multiple family members simultaneously and recorded the dialogue. I found

this method beneficial for overcoming discrepancies because of the relative insignificance assigned to calendrical dates (and resulting lack of documentation) within the community.

Every family that I interviewed was involved in tourism in some way. I observed vastly varying degrees of success in the industry. Such variety of familial situations and relationships to tourism offered unique perspectives on power in the community and the ways that Lacandones associate power and identities.

## CHAPTER II

### ROMANTIC NARRATIVES: HEIRS TO THE FOREST

No se puede aplicar a los lacandones el calificativo de indios tristes, ¿por qué han de estar tristes cuando son dueños de la selva? (Blom and Duby 1955:87)

For the better part of the twentieth century, Lacandones were known among anthropologists as the most "pure" of Maya Indians. This notion was based on a popular worldview that those cultures least in contact or least adulterated by Western cultures were most culturally pure. In the early 1900s, these quests for cultural purity were formulated through endeavors in salvage anthropology and searches for remnants of "noble savages" of the past. Though emphasis on salvage anthropology waned during the mid-1900s, highly romanticized portrayals of Lacandón culture and the antiquity of their way of life have persisted to the present.

Early ethnographic accounts among Lacandones often conveyed that the legitimacy of the ethnographer's research depended on the exoticism or "primitive" nature of the

culture under study (See Jackson 1995:18). Alfred Tozzer, in his 1907 account *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones*, claimed that while the "Maya proper of Yucatan... [are] now essentially Mexican... the Lacandone as he is found today (sic.) [is] unchanged and untrammelled by Spanish contact" (1907: 3).

To judge Tozzer's work anachronistically for its shortcomings in cultural sensitivity or theoretical laggardness would be pointless. Still, his account of Lacandón culture was significant in that it steered romantic representations of Lacandones for nearly a century. Tozzer's work established parameters of representation for anthropologists, archaeologists, journalists, and adventure seekers documenting their experiences among Lacandones. Those texts, written without representation of Lacandón voices and based on limited field experience, constructed a romantic narrative that created popular perceptions of the group. The relative isolation in which they lived combined with linguistic and social barriers further restricted people's ability to understand Lacandón culture. Instead, Lacandón identities were structured over the next century by European and American scholars and adventurers. European and American authors wrote historical and cultural narratives, framing

identities and yielding widespread recognition of the "primitive" Lacandones living unchanged in La Selva Lacandona.

Over the course of the twentieth century, romantic narratives about Lacandón culture had far-reaching social, political, and economic consequences for the Lacandón. By examining the most influential of the texts about Lacandones, one could see how these accounts acted to construct and impose identities on the Lacandón with significant consequences for the privileging of this Maya group over others. I chose to assess works by Alfred Tozzer (1907), Franz Blom and Trudi Duby-Blom (1955, 1957), and Robert Bruce and Victor Perera (1982) because each of these authors presented highly romanticized narratives about Lacandones based on notions of cultural purity and cultural continuity with the ancient Mayas. Additionally, I chose these publications because of their relatively extensive readership, suggesting that these texts had greater power to write a dominant narrative.

### ***A Comparative Study of the Maya and the Lacandón (1907)***

Alfred Tozzer offered the first large-scale study of Lacandones. His fieldwork, conducted during 1903 and 1904, lasted only a few weeks. From this relatively brief period

of research, Tozzer extracted curiously detailed information. His ethnography revealed as much about anthropological perspectives in the early 1900s as Maya culture at that time. Tozzer's study was intended to compare cultural characteristics of Lacandones with Yucatec Mayas. Using linguistic similarities between the two groups, Tozzer asserted that these peoples were once culturally homogenous. He further concluded that differences in their life and customs were the result of Spanish influences on Yucatec Mayas while Lacandones were "entirely free from all close contact with the Spanish-Mexican element of the population" (Tozzer 1907:1). Tozzer's narrative was constructed to emphasize differences between Yucatec Mayas and Lacandones; to distinguish Lacandones from other "conquered" Mayas, he focused on characteristics that he perceived to be uncivilized—"primitive" dress, dispersed living, polygyny, and polytheistic and idolatrous religious beliefs. Yet, Tozzer did not employ such characteristics to advance notions that Lacandones were barbarous social degenerates but to reveal how their way of life, uncorrupted by control of Spanish authorities, was simple and pure.

The majority of Tozzer's account was dedicated to describing religious ceremonies and belief systems. He



Figure 2-Group of Lacandones on the Lacantun River, 1904<sup>2</sup>

viewed the "traditional" religion as an expression of cultural continuity with the ancient Maya, proclaiming

I shall assume from the very beginning that the religious life of the Lacandones of the present day is a survival, not only of the former religion of this one branch of the people, but of the ancient Mayas of Yucatan as well, if not of the whole Maya stock (1907: 79).

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<sup>2</sup> Tozzer, Alfred. *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones*. London: MacMillan and Company Press, 1907.

Tozzer supplemented descriptions of Lacandón religion with accounts of similar indigenous practices in the sixteenth century to demonstrate the antiquity and continuity of Lacandón religion. Tozzer offered meticulous descriptions of pilgrimages to ancient ruins and ceremonies in which offerings were made to idols representative of Lacandón gods. He drew a plan of a sacred enclosure of the Lacandones and offered drawings of various ritual implements and deities.

Tozzer's focus on religion overwhelmed his description of the Lacandón way of life. He identified religion as the central organizing feature around which "the daily thought and life of the Lacandones [was] centered" (150). Tozzer's thorough engagement of traditional religious practices and the value he assigned to their ceremonies and beliefs acted to constrict multi-faceted perspectives of Lacandones and their culture. Tozzer's text engendered essentializing representations of Lacandones in which ancient Maya ceremonies and belief systems became synonymous with the people themselves. Belief that Lacandón religion was a cultural survival of ancient Maya beliefs and practices was widely accepted among anthropologists. Archaeologists commonly used aspects of Lacandón ceremonies to explain or interpret data from classic period ruins. For example,



William Fash proposed that a structure at the ruins of Copán was designed to hold prisoners. Fash supported this interpretation in part on the basis that "the Lacandón Maya [practiced a] custom of confining prospective victims of sacrificial rites in wooden cages" (2001: 130).

Tozzer, in his ethnography *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones*, created a dominant model of representation of the Lacandón. This model imposed identities in which their religion was used to symbolize a pure cultural state unconquered and unchanged by colonialism.

### ***La Selva Lacandona* (1955)**

Tozzer's work undoubtedly influenced Franz Blom and Gertrude Duby Blom. Franz Blom studied under Tozzer at Harvard University where he earned a Master's degree in archaeology. In the first of two volumes entitled *La Selva Lacandona*, Blom and Duby described Tozzer's ethnography as "un claro y magnífico libro" (1955: 90). They were clearly aware of previous descriptions of Lacandón culture, also citing accounts by Teobert Maler (1903) and Jacques Soustelle (1934). Blom and Duby situated their own experiences among Lacandones within romanticized narratives already set forth. While they perpetuated romantic images

of Lacandones in their texts, their documentation added a new element of urgency, as if Lacandón purity was jeopardized by the encroaching outside world. They repeatedly noted the *muriendo* or dying of cultural practices, citing that elements of Lacandón religion and culture that were documented by previous scholars were no longer present. Specifically, Duby noted that the number of onens, or inherited animal names, was drastically reduced since Tozzer's 1907 description.

The couple responded by dedicating their lives to advocating cultural autonomy among Lacandones and other Maya groups. For Duby, political and social activism was a lifelong endeavor. Born in Switzerland, she studied social work and helped organize the socialist youth movement in Zurich. As a journalist, she became a prominent voice in the Socialist Workers party in Germany, and after Hitler gained power in 1933, feared for her safety. Duby escaped to Mexico in 1940, where her activism assumed a different posture.

In 1943, she joined the first (modern) government expedition to establish contact with the Lacandón. Having read Jacques Soustelle's exoticized account of his travels, during her journey from Germany, Duby was eager to realize her favorite childhood game of playing "Indians" (Harris

1984:10). Soustelle's work, much like Tozzer's, emphasized the "primitive" and unconquered nature of the Lacandones, noting that they still worshiped ancient Maya gods. For Duby, the Lacandón and the rainforest were a cause in need of protection.

Blom and Duby worked to preserve La Selva Lacandona, which was threatened by ongoing deforestation by loggers and *chicleros*, a name given to workers who extracted the sap for rubber, and by government sponsored resettlement efforts beginning in the 1960s. This effort was meant not only to preserve a fragile and vital ecological system but to defend the natural insulation protecting the Lacandones' way of life.

Blom and Duby attributed the virtuosity of these people to their secluded life in the forest, saying

Caminar sola en la selva tiene un encanto fuera de lo común. Aquí, se comprende mejor a los lacandones, su viril dignidad, su alegría, su despreocupación. Son señores de un reino inmenso, conocen sus plantas y sus animales. Ningún papeleo ni relajo de documentos les molesta, ningún reglamentos complicado limita su libertad; su vida está regida por su sencilla moral familiar (Blom and Duby 1955: 156).

They vehemently argued that Lacandones were the rightful heirs to the forest, drawing from the assertion that they had occupied the territory since pre-conquest times. Blom

and Duby described nearby ancient ruins Yaxchilán as the mecca of Lacandones. They relayed a story, citing accounts by Alfred Tozzer and Jacques Soustelle, in which Temple 33 at Yaxchilán was known among Lacandones as the house of Hachakyum, their creator deity (1955). That Lacandones had incorporated features within the ruins into their creation myth and world view was evidence enough for Blom and Duby that Lacandones were direct heirs to the builders of surrounding ruins. In a later publication, *Los lacandones, su pasado y presente*, Duby glorified the elevated moral and intellectual state of these Indians, dubbing them as "los últimos trazos vivos de los grandes constructores de Palenque, Toniná, Aguas Escondidas, Piedras Negras y Yaxchilán" (1944: 94). Brian Gollnick described that while Blom and Duby ascribed high spiritual values to Lacandón culture, they never extended such representations to non-Lacandón settlers in the jungle (1998: 132).

This couple, perhaps more than anyone, influenced popular perceptions of Lacandones and their lives in the Selva Lacandona. Surprisingly, Blom's and Duby's written narratives were only marginally active in constructing perceptions of Lacandones. Rather, their activism, continual presence in Chiapas, and foundation of *Na Bolom*, a tourist and academic retreat devoted to the study and

preservation of Lacandón culture, served to popularize romantic images.

### ***Last Lords of Palenque (1982)***

Blom and Duby were not alone in their efforts to protect and preserve Lacandón culture. Robert Bruce, a linguist/ethnographer from Oklahoma, first began visiting Lacandón settlements in the 1950s. Bruce's agenda, immediately revealed in his first article "Jerarquía Maya entre los dioses lacandones," proposed that elements of Lacandón culture demonstrated cultural continuity with the ancient Maya (1967). Bruce, like the majority of ethnographers before him, focused on Lacandón religion. Through his early works, Bruce was able to reach a largely Mexican audience by writing in Spanish and publishing through the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). Furthermore, by publishing through INAH, Bruce was positioned as the central authority on Lacandón culture for the Mexican government.

When Robert Bruce partnered with Victor Perera in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bruce had already become a prolific scholar on Lacandón culture. He was a capable speaker of Lacandón Mayan and was a welcomed visitor to the northern community of Najá. Bruce acted as the liaison

between Lacandones and Perera, a journalist and novelist who emigrated from Guatemala to the United States during his childhood. Together, Bruce and Perera published *Last Lords of Palenque*, a travelogue based on Perera's romantic accounts of dream interpretations, which rested on an introduction by Bruce for academic authority.

Nearly twenty years since Bruce's fieldwork in Najá began, he continued to support the notion that Lacandones and their way of life offered a window into the past of the ancient Maya. Bruce relied heavily on similarities found in archaeological inquiries of ancient Maya civilizations, such as language and numerical systems, to validate this claim and delivered his position under a blanket of ethnographic authority claiming that "Current anthropological knowledge and methodology suggest that the present-day Lacandones of Najá (*sic.*) [were] in fact the direct descendants of the ancient Mayas of Palenque" (Perera and Bruce 1982: 12). Bruce's claim of cultural continuity extended to suggest longevity of Lacandones' occupation of the Selva Lacandona region. Using inverse reasoning, Bruce noted that Lacandones had no migration myth, therefore concluded that they must have occupied the land since ancient times. He, like Duby, narrated Lacandón origin myths, implying an association between the regional

orientations of their myths with actual historical realities.

Bruce's work intensified romantic representations already set forth by Alfred Tozzer and Gertrude Duby. His work with Victor Perera yielded significant consequences for constructing historical narratives and identities for Lacandones. *Last Lords of Palenque* was written for an international audience and benefited from Mexico's carefully crafted tourism industry in the 1980s. As foreign tourists read and believed the image of "pure" Lacandón culture offered by Bruce and Perera, the tourist industry responded by reifying images and identities of Lacandones as a cultural survival.

Brian Gollnick, in his disseration on literature surrounding the politics and perceptions of La Selva Lacandona, described *Last Lords of Palenque* as

[representing] little more than a pseudo-academic addition to a long line of New Age distortions surrounding Indian cultures in Mexico, were it not for the particularly pernicious way Bruce's speculations regarding the historical identity of the Lacandones correspond to the cultural politics of the Mexican state (1998: 136).

Gollnick's association between the historical identity of Lacandones and the cultural politics of the Mexican government echoed a widespread backlash by scholars,

journalists, and cultural activists in the aftermath of governmental policies that privileged Lacandones over other Maya peoples in the lowlands of Chiapas. Gollnick's judgment of *Last Lords of Palenque* as a significant contributor to cultural politics of the Selva Lacandona region was somewhat anachronistic in that the travelogue was published nearly a decade after the most significant legislature was already instituted. Even more, to identify the romanticized metanarrative of Lacandón history as the single contributor to the privileging of these Maya people was to appreciably simplify the context in which the Mexican government acted.

### **Privileging of the Lacandón**

In March of 1972, President Luis Echeverría awarded the Lacandón, numbering only sixty-six families at that time, an astonishing 614,321 hectares of land in the lowlands of Chiapas (*Diario Oficial* 1972; Ankersen and Arriola 2001). In offering the land, Echeverría's proclamation "tierra communal que desde tiempos inmemoriales perteneció y sigue perteneciendo a la tribu lacandona," undoubtedly responded to historical narratives constructed during the twentieth century (De Vos 1988b: 23). This newly formed territory, named the Zona



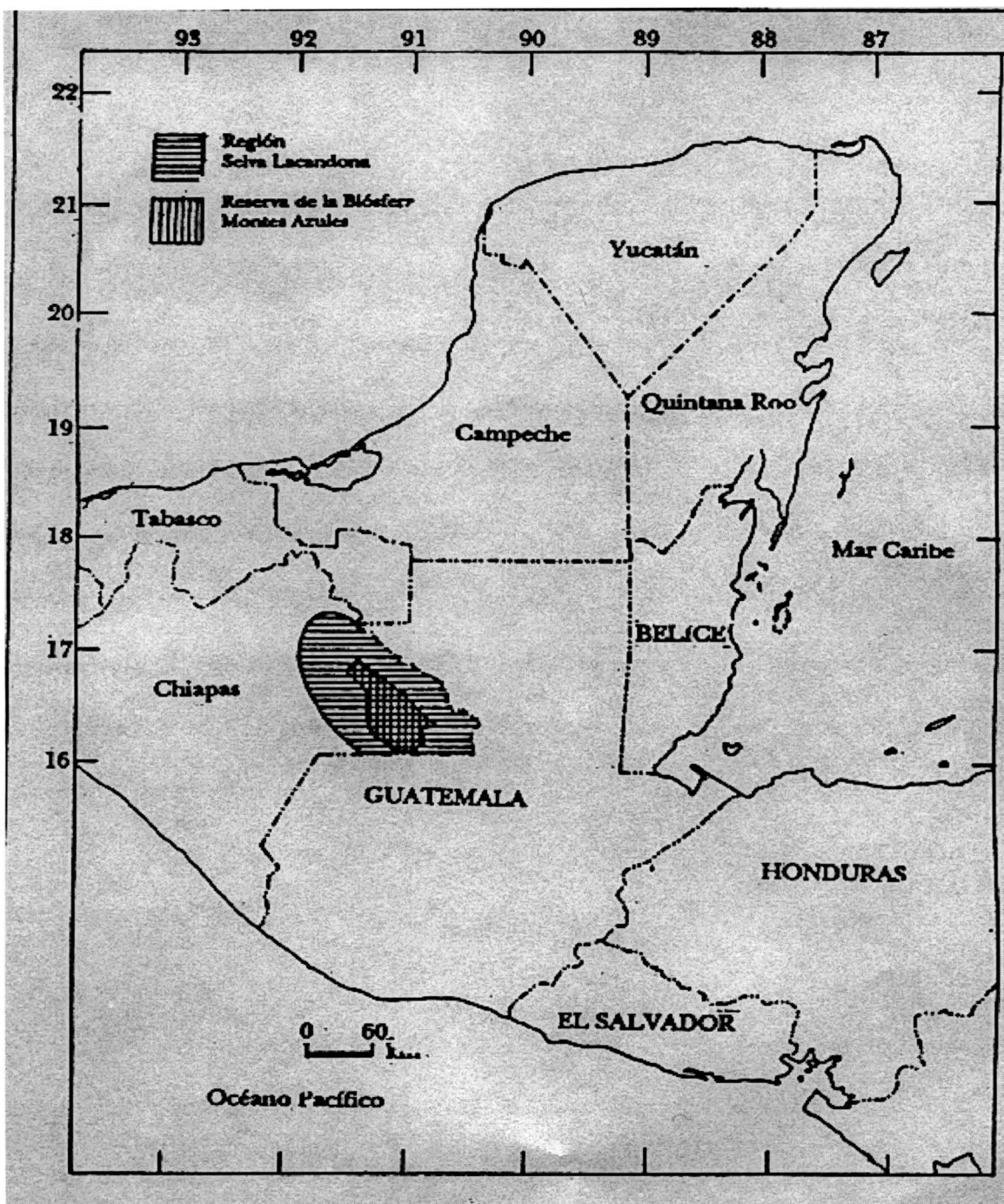


Figure 3-Map of the Selva Lacandona and the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Marion-Singer, Marie Odile. *Los hombres de la selva: Un estudio de tecnología cultural en medio selvático*. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1991.

Lacandona, suspended all previous property rights and made Lacandones the largest indigenous landholders in all of Mexico.

The Mexican government's decision to confer the land to Lacandones was legitimated, in part, by romanticized historical identities, but the privileging of the Lacandón was not initiated by these perceived identities. Rather, the government was responding to international pressures to limit the uncontrolled deforestation of Mexico's only neotropical forest. La Selva Lacandona contained the majority of the country's biodiversity, and according to scientists, the forest was in jeopardy because of unchecked deforestation from industrial extraction and overpopulation. Viewed in this context, the historical narrative and cultural identities of the Lacandón became an ideological tool to justify the forcible displacement of thousands of ladinos and indigenous peoples, thereby centering ecological preservation as the primary factor compelling the decision.

The government encouraged Lacandones to transition from living in dispersed, extended-family compounds to resettling into communities. Some Lacandones had increasingly moved toward communal life in response to the encroachment of other settlers, loggers, and chicleros, but

with the land grant, the government recognized only four communities, Najá, Mensäbäk, Zapote, and Lacanjá Chan Sayab. These communities, each given 2500 hectares, were collectively known as the Bienes Comunales. Lacanjá was appointed the political center, placing representatives from this community as negotiators of social, economic, and political contestations for all Lacandones.

The land grant situated Lacandones in a liminal position between other indigenous peoples and representatives of the Mexican government. Tzeltales and Choles, who inhabited the region since a 1946 decree legalized the colonization of national lands, resented the land redistribution and elevated status of Lacandones. After the creation of the Zona Lacandona, the government began to facilitate logging contracts between Lacandones and the para-statal timber company Compania Forestal de la Lacandona, S.A. (COFOLASA). The contract permitted COFALASA an annual extraction of a limited amount of primary growth forest, stipulating that the Bienes Comunales receive 300 pesos for each cedar and mahogany tree extracted (Alcaire 2002).

In 1976, the government modified the initial stricture of the Zona Lacandona, adopting that some Chol and Tzeltal inhabitants near the Guatemalan border could remain near

the perimeter of the Zona Lacandona. The government forcibly resettled them into two communities: Doctor Velasco Suárez and Frontera Echeverría (later called Nueva Palestina and Frontera Corozal, respectively). Tzeltales and Choles largely outnumbered Lacandones, so the two government-erected communities were "gigantescos centros de población" concentrated in relatively small areas (De Vos 1988a: 259). Although these new communities became official members of the Bienes Comunes 1979, Lacandones retained the majority of political and economic power in the region. They controlled sole rights to the community's presidency and were the only members permitted to use timber or other resources from the forest.

Extraction rights for timber and other natural resources, solely awarded to Lacandones, were permitted based on notions that this group, unlike other Maya peoples, was exceptionally tied to the land in every aspect of their lives. Meanwhile, the Selva Lacandona increasingly gained reputation as an area in need of protection. Perceptions of Lacandones and their minimal impact on the forest was supported by anthropological research. Jim Nations and Ronald Nigh (1980) found that the unique agroforestry methods practiced by the Lacandón actually encouraged sustainability of the forest by

mimicking the forest's natural layers and returning the nutrients of the biomass to the soil. This research reinforced the notion that the Lacandón way of life inherently promoted ecological preservation. Furthermore, their findings, along with other accounts of Lacandones' perceived "harmony with nature," acted to further justify their control of the forest. In this context, Lacandones became protectors of the Selva Lacandona while other groups, especially those such as the Tzeltales who practiced cattle ranching, became known as antagonists to forest preservation.

In addition to direct political and economic power attained from control of the land, Lacandones enjoyed a great deal of social capital from the creation of the Zona Lacandona. Echeverría's decision to award the Selva Lacandona to this small Maya group in many ways legitimized perceptions of their elevated cultural status. As Mexico's tourist industry boomed in the 1980s, Lacandones both initiated and responded to forging of images, which through peculiar circumstances afforded them social capital in emphasizing the cultural distance and even "backwardness" from Mexican national culture.

Lacandones continue to benefit from narratives and identities constructed over the twentieth century. As

recently as January 2004, the European Union pledged thirty-one million Euros over the next four years to provide development for communities within the Selva Lacandona and the Reserva Integral de la Biosfera "Montes Azules" (RIBMA) (Elvira 2004: 14). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) initiated a plan in Lacanjá during the summer of 2004 for developing more lucrative opportunities in tourism for Lacandones. Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, the Secretaría of Turismo de Chiapas, and many other groups continue to offer financial support to Lacandón communities.

Still, since the 1980s, competing historical narratives have challenged the romanticized versions of Lacandón history. These more recent narratives, constructed using colonial documentation, assert that modern Lacandones did not arrive to the Selva Lacandona region until the eighteenth century (De Vos 1980, Gollnick 1988, McGee 2000, Kashanipour 2002). By debunking the longevity of Lacandón occupation, these narratives question the basis on which Lacandones were awarded the Zona Lacandona. As these competing narratives increasingly permeate public consciousness, other indigenous peoples are taking notice and challenging the basis of the 1972 land

grant. How these competing narratives will change the political and economic dynamics of the Selva Lacandona remains to be seen. It is to these narratives and their affects that I now turn.

## CHAPTER III

### REINTERPRETING HISTORY: COMPETING NARRATIVES

Mitos [de la historia lacandona] gozan de gran popularidad, tanto entre mexicanos como entre extranjeros. Además, son difíciles de destruir, tanto más cuanto que sirven a fomentar el turismo nacional e internacional y a apoyar ciertos objetivos políticos y económicos de dudosa ley (De Vos 1980: 21).

#### **The New Historical Narrative**

Romantic interpretations of Lacandón historical identities went nearly unchallenged until 1980 when Jan de Vos, an ex-patriot from Belgium who eventually settled in Chiapas, undertook historical analysis of the Selva Lacandona region. De Vos was "dedicated to demystifying the history of Chiapas" (Gollnick 1998: 147). His work, much like Gertrude Duby, was impacted by continual deforestation of the Selva Lacandona and a sense of governmental inefficiency in protecting the forest. In a series of books written over a twenty year span, De Vos recounted the colonial and recent pasts of the region, focusing on economic and political forces that shaped the forest.



He was aware of competing interpretations and described the majority of reports about Lacandones as misleading. De Vos identified two major myths concerning historical identities of this group.

El primero [mito] es la creencia de que sean los descendientes directos de la tribu del mismo nombre que durante la época colonial escapó al control del gobierno colonial. El segundo mito es una prolongación del primero. En efecto, se cree que ese grupo indígena haya vivido prácticamente sin contacto con la civilización occidental, por lo cual conserve hasta tiempos muy recientes, sus costumbres y creencias mayas antiguas (De Vos 1980: 21).

In *La Paz de Dios y del Rey* (1980), De Vos initiated a new understanding of Lacandón history, which patently contradicted former representations. Synthesizing arguments first made by ethnohistorians France Scholes and Ralph Roys in 1948 and later supported by Alfonso Villas Rojas in 1967 and by Eric S. Thompson in 1977, De Vos asserted that Lacandones from the period of conquest were Cholan speakers, utterly unrelated to Maya peoples of the same name inhabiting the forest in more recent times (1980:22, 217-218). Furthermore, he dismantled interpretations that Lacandones had lived in isolation since pre-conquest times. De Vos documented contact with Cholan-speaking Lacandones during the colonial period in the form of military incursions and missionary efforts.

He also found overwhelming evidence of outside influences on modern Lacandones since the late 1700s.

De Vos' reinterpretation of Lacandón pasts recently infused historical representations of Lacandones in a number of other texts. In 1998, Brian Gollnick produced dissertation research in Spanish literature, entitled *The Bleeding Horizon: Subaltern Representations in Mexico's Lacandón Jungle*. Gollnick focused on power and representation of the Lacandón and used De Vos' accounts to direct his reconstruction of "how the original Lacandón Maya entered into modern history" (1998: 30).

Only two years later, R. Jon McGee, an anthropologist who worked among Lacandones since 1980, reassessed the romanticized version of Lacandón history that permeated his earlier works. This ethnography, aptly titled *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, followed twenty years of McGee's experiences and observations of culture change in the community of Najá. In his discussion of the group's history, McGee, like De Vos, clearly distinguished Cholan-speaking Lacandones from modern Lacandones. McGee infused the reinterpreted historical narrative with corroborating ethnographic and archaeological findings. He also expanded on the two misleading myths of Lacandón history set forth by De Vos. McGee refuted that modern Lacandones

had occupied the region since before the Spanish conquest and that they had lived in complete isolation from outsiders. Furthermore, he responded to claims set forth by Bruce and Perera, asserting that modern Lacandones were not direct descendants of the builders of nearby ancient Maya ruins (2002: 3).

In 2002, Ryan Kashanipour, a student of McGee's, offered a nuanced chronicle of Lacandón history in his thesis entitled *From Cannibals to Kings: History and Cultural Change among Lacandon Maya Indians, 1542-2002*. This work highlighted evidence of Lacandón contact with outsiders in various forms. Each of these works shared a similar general outline regarding Lacandón history, which is summarized below.

### **Subjugation and Removal of the Original Lacandones**

For conquistadores, the Selva Lacandona offered very little in the way of exploitable natural resources or large labor pools, so was not the focus of much attention. First Spanish contact with Cholan-speaking Lacandones was made by Alonso Davila's expedition in 1530. The chroniclers of the expedition documented very little about this encounter. In 1555, Pedro Ramírez de Quiñónez led a large scale military incursion on the Lacandón region in

response to a group of Lacandones murdering two missionaries. The fierce resistance of the Lacandones during this attack and to a more extended campaign led in 1586 by Juan de Morales de Villaviciencio gave rise to the Lacandones' reputation for intense violence and incivility. However, Davila, Quiñónez, and Villaviciencio ultimately failed to subjugate the Lacandón. Persistent military failures, along with the region's inhospitable terrain and climate and lack of natural resources, led the Spanish to focus their efforts elsewhere.

Over a century later, Spanish officials once again gained interest in the region. Because of increasing attacks in the Caribbean, the Spaniards wanted a land route connecting Guatemala and Yucatán. This was planned to pass through the lowland basin inhabited by Choles (Kashanipour 2002: 53). Franciscan missionaries led this expedition with the support of soldiers and peacefully occupied the Lacandón community of Sac-Bahlám in 1693. The Spanish renamed the community Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de Lacandon. Melchor López and Antonio Margil de Jesús, both Franciscan priests, led the conversion of the region's Cholan speaking inhabitants. The priests eventually met resistance and appealed for military support.

In 1695, Jacinto de Barrios Leal, president of the Audiencia of Guatemala, led an attack with approximately six hundred Spanish soldiers. Instead of fighting, the majority of Lacandones fled to the forest. Tensions slowly waned, and a number of Indians eventually returned to the community. Over the course of the next decade, Franciscan missionaries remained in Dolores with varying success in their conversion efforts. The exact moment of submission by Cholan speaking Lacandones has been interpreted in two ways. Both De Vos (1980) and McGee (2000) recorded that the group was finally subjugated in 1695, concluding that relatively successful missionization marked conquest of the Lacandones. Kashanipour challenged this interpretation, claiming that the actual conquest occurred in 1711 when "the Crown decided that the Chol-Lacandon were to be resettled into haciendas in the highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas" (2002: 57). In the highland towns of Aquespala, San Ramón, and Santa Catarina de Retalhuleu, Lacandones slowly left the missions and became integrated into the highland communities. The last documentation of these Lacandón in 1769 revealed that missionary efforts could no longer be justified because Lacandones were no longer under the mission's command (De Vos 1980: 390-391).

### **Arrival of Modern Lacandones**

Though certainly some Cholan speaking Lacandones remained in the Selva Lacandona region, the majority were wiped out by disease or through *reducciones* orchestrated by Spanish authorities. The depopulation of the region yielded open territory for refugees seeking autonomy from Spanish authorities (McGee 2000: 7). During the eighteenth century, the forest was once again slowly populated. Arriving into the region were Mayas from the Petén of Guatemala and the southern region of Yucatán. De Vos claimed that these immigrants were the true ancestors of the modern peoples known as Lacandones (1980: 247).

By the late eighteenth century, various accounts emerged of Indians once again living in the lowland region of Chiapas and Petén. Spaniards called these recent immigrants Lacandones, as the term had come to signify "unpacified Indians" as opposed to referring to a particular linguistic or cultural group (De Vos 1980: 121). In 1786, Father Manuel Calderón initiated contact with Lacandones to the southeast of Palenque, who he identified as Yucatec Mayan speakers. Calderón established ongoing contact with inhabitants of the region, baptizing several Lacandones and forming ongoing trade relations. In 1793, Calderón ordered the construction of a mission. Lacandones

chose the site for the small community, and Calderón named the place Nuestro Señor San José de Gracia Real. His missionary efforts were only marginally successful; Lacandones participated in Christian ceremonies, but they continued to practice their own polytheistic rituals at the periphery of the community. San José eventually became more of a trading center for Lacandones to acquire Spanish goods than a missionary base. "While the clergy saw the Lacandon as future converts who liked to trade, the Lacandón saw the Spaniards as trading partners who happened to preach" (Kashanipour 2002: 89). After Father Calderón's death, trade continued but waned as other missionaries slowly lost interest. The site was completely abandoned by 1807. Still, San José marked the beginning of contact between outsiders and Yucatec-speaking Lacandón.

### **Unknown Origins—The Making of Modern Lacandón Identities**

The first half of the nineteenth century brought about very few changes in Lacandones' way of life. While they continued to trade with Spaniards, no large-scale efforts were made to missionize or subdue the inhabitants of the forest. Official maps of the region designated the Selva Lacandona as "Desierto incógnito habitado por los indios lacandones" (De Vos 1988a: 50). Locals surrounding the

forest continued to associate contemporary Lacandones with the fierce Cholan-speaking Indians who inhabited the forest during previous centuries. Their fear of the Lacandón fueled tales and legends of horrendous fates that awaited those traveling into the forest.

In this period, explorers began to take notice of localized narratives and incorporated such exoticized representations of Lacandones into their accounts. John Lloyd Stevens and Frederick Catherwood, considered by many as the forbearers of Maya archaeology, encountered these Mayas after exploring the nearby ruins at Palenque. Stevens described the Lacandones as vicious cannibals (Kashanipour 2002: 110). C.H. Beredt, in 1865, reported that while some Lacandones had been baptized by missionaries, they still practiced "their own heathen worship" (McGee 2000: 12).

Several other explorers, adventurers, and anthropologists visited the region at the end of the century. These writers continued to exoticize Lacandón identities, but moved away from villainizing representations. Désiré Charnay, Alfred and Anne Maudslay, Karl Sapper, and Teobert Maler offered descriptions of their encounters with Lacandones. Like Tozzer's 1907 account, these early documentations of Lacandón culture



were infused with details of "traditional" religious practices. However, unlike Tozzer, these earlier descriptions recognized evidence of Lacandones trading and communicating with logging camps within the forest and settlements on the periphery. Charnay and the Maudsleys noted that Lacandones possessed European goods, such as coins and jewelry (Charnay 1887; Maudsley and Maudsley 1899). Though Sapper assessed that Lacandón culture represented a link to the beliefs of the ancient Maya, he recorded that Lacandones were not isolated and traded with ladino communities (1897). Finally, Maler noted that upon leaving a Lacandón village, several men from the community accompanied him to conduct trade at a distant lumber camp (1903).

### **Insulation Lost—Development of the Forest**

Beginning in the 1850s, changes in governmental policies encouraged increased immigration of other indigenous peoples into the region. This influx of immigrants forced Lacandones, who at that time lived in dispersed compounds covering vast territory, into more dense living patterns in remote areas of the forest. In addition, logging operations entering the region in the 1870s compounded the foray into the forest. They focused on

the extraction of precious hardwoods, namely mahogany, or *caoba* (*Swietenia macrophylla*) and cedar, or *cedro* (*Cedrela adorata*). The Mexican government under President Porfirio Diaz was especially receptive to industrial development. By the turn of the century, nine timber companies controlled large tracts of land in the forest, enjoying few governmental restrictions.

National and international politics in the early part of the twentieth century yielded substantial changes in the Selva Lacandona. Though employees of the timber companies did not play direct roles in the Mexican Revolution, the war still disrupted the logging industries in the forest (De Vos 1980: 228). Moreover, World War I yielded a decrease in economic demands for hardwoods and negatively impacted the timber industry. The nine companies that dominated the logging industry during the early part of the twentieth century suffered from these pressures.

In the 1920s and 1930s, natural rubber became a commodity in high demand. As rubber could be found in the large number of chicle trees within the Selva Lacandona, a number of chicleros settled within the forest. At the same time, indigenous peoples began to immigrate to the forest as it was increasingly seen as unoccupied territory. In 1946, the Mexican government passed the Ley Federal

Colonización, which approved the colonization of national lands including the Selva Lacandona. Though the government attempted to control immigration into the forest by creating ejidos, their efforts were inconsistent and unorganized. The forest was heavily colonized; almost sixty thousand settlers entered the forest between 1950 and 1970.

In 1972, President Echeverría established the Zona Lacandona and annulled all pre-existing land titles in the forest. At the same time, he initiated agrarian policies relocating settlers from the northern states of Sonora and Chihuahua into the Selva Lacandona (Arizpe, Paz, and Velazquez 1996: 28). Moreover, Echeverría's administration continued to encourage farming and ranching development in other parts of the forest. This gross inconsistency caused many to question the government leader's motivations regarding the Zona Lacandona decree. The president's actions following his grant to the Lacandón fueled suspicions.

Echeverría, along with Chiapas Governor Manuel Velasco Suarez, were both invested in logging operations and profited significantly from timber extractions from the Zona Lacandona. Though the majority of settlers had been removed from the Zona Lacandona, the government's policy in

regard to the forest was anything but clear. In 1974, the federal government collaborated with Compañía Forestal de la Lacandona, S A. (COFOLASA) to extract timber from over 1.3 million hectares of forest. COFOLASA compensated Bienes Comunes members three hundred pesos per each hardwood tree extracted. However, the agreement folded in the late 1980s after COFOLASA's venture suffered high operation costs with resulting financial losses. Shortly thereafter, Lacandones discovered that their entire imbursement, worth an estimated seven million pesos at that time, had disappeared from a trust account.

### **The Narrative in Context**

Lacandón history certainly did not end in the early 1980s. However, by closing this narrative in the context of Lacandones' poignant victimization reveals the complexity of their situation in relation to the Mexican government and other indigenous peoples in the region. To understand Lacandones only in their privileged status ignored the vulnerability of their control. Echeverría shrouded his decision to proffer nearly 1.5 million acres of land to sixty-six Lacandón families in an attempt to frame his politics as populist by reifying *indigenismo* and honoring pre-Conquest rights. The government "turned [the

Lacandón] into a show of how the Mexican state cares for 'the last descendants of the Maya'" (Boremanse 1998: 12).

However, since Mexico's independence, governmental policies were marked by recurrent land grants and revocation of those grants. To consider the Lacandones as unwavering title-holders was to ignore various precedents of changing governmental policies. Lacandones increasingly recognized that their ownership of the forest depended on notions of cultural purity and longevity of regional occupation. Reinterpretations of Lacandón history challenged each of these notions, and exposed the vulnerability of Lacandones in their privileged status. De Vos was acutely aware of the multiple factors and consequences of disrupting romanticized Lacandón identities:

No se puede por consecuencia considerar a estos caribes o lacandones como los pobladores originales ni a sus descendientes como los dueños legítimos de la Selva Lacandona, a pesar de su canonización como tales por la opinión pública, la propaganda turística, cierta literatura sensacionalista y una dudosa declaración política del gobierno mexicano... (De Vos 1980: 231).

Both the romantic representations discussed in Chapter One and the reinterpretations of history in Chapter Two have appreciably contributed to contemporary Lacandón identities. These narratives influenced how Lacandones

were perceived by others and yielded frameworks in which Lacandones forged their own identities.

Like the romantic narratives, reinterpretations of Lacandón history have filtered into public consciousness. Not only were anthropologists and other academics adopting elements of this narrative, slowly the international travel industry took notice. In a 2002 version of the Lonely Planet traveler's guidebook to Mexico, the authors offered a revised version of Lacandon history saying, "They [were] thought to have reached the Selva Lacandona in the [eighteenth] century, fleeing either from the Spanish in the Yucatán or Guatemala or from the British in Belize." However, the author's next statement, "They avoided permanent contact with the outside world until the 1950s," corresponded with ideas set forth in romantic narratives. This passage is evidence that that no single narrative has prevailed in public consciousness. Lacandón identities are spread to national and international levels primarily through tourism, and texts, such as travelogues and travel guides, more than academic discourse, have written popular narratives and constructed popular perceptions of Lacandones.

As reinterpretations of Lacandón history increasingly entered public consciousness, other indigenous peoples,

many who had been displaced by the 1972 land decree, began to question Lacandones' ownership of the Selva Lacandona. At the time of the land grant, inhabitants of the forest resented Lacandones for their privileged status. The decree,

"'hecho a todo vapor', originó un grave enfrentamiento entre los nuevos propietarios-la comunidad de los lacandones-y unos 5,000 tzeltales y choles que desde hacía tiempo habían establecido más de 30 colonias dentro de la zona ahora para ellos prohibida" (De Vos 1988b: 26).

Although some Choles and Tzeltales were eventually admitted to the Bienes Comunales, Lacandones still enjoyed more extensive privileges both directly and indirectly related to their control of the forest. Resentment toward Lacandones certainly did not fade over time.

De Vos best captured the complexity of the competing narratives when he asserted that the romantic identities of Lacandones "son difíciles de destruir, tanto más cuanto que sirven a fomentar el turismo nacional e internacional y a apoyar ciertos objetivos políticos y económicos de dudosa ley" (De Vos 1980: 21). Today, tourism has become one of Mexico's leading industries. In Chiapas, nostalgic posters of Lacandones, photographed wearing tunics, or *xikuls*, can be found in almost any travel agency. Though international tourist publications, such as Lonely Planet guidebooks, are

now considering historical reinterpretations, the majority of Chiapas' tourism industry is content to adhere to romantic representations of Lacandonas. Since the 1994 Zapatista insurrection, ethnic tourists visiting Chiapas are increasingly seeking out destinations where Mayas exercise cultural autonomy. In some cases, Mayas are performing cultural practices or placing elements of their "traditional" cultural on exhibition for public consumption and profit. Romanticized identities, in a market that values exoticism and autonomy, ultimately make for more lucrative commodities.



## CHAPTER IV

### PRIVILEGED IDENTITIES

#### **Politics and Culture Change**

The Selva Lacandona occupies nearly 1.5 million acres of territory along the eastern lowlands of Chiapas. Though the Mexican government's actions concerning the forest were often ambiguous, political leaders continued to assert their interests in protecting the forest. Only six years after the creation of the Zona Lacandona, government officials once again selected part of the forest for preservation, designating 329,826 hectares of land as nationally protected territory. The region, called the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, was allocated for conservation and investigation of biodiversity within the forest. Montes Azules occupied the central portion of the forest, part of which overlapped areas controlled by the Bienes Comunales. However, the Bienes Comunales retained nearly unmitigated control over a vast stretch of territory, and Lacandones preserved rights to extract timber and other resources outside of the biosphere

reserve. Moreover, the perimeters of Montes Azules remained far from Lacandón communities, which were situated along the eastern and western peripheries of the forest.

After the government resettled Lacandones into the communities of Najá, Metzabok, and Lacanjá, they remained relatively insulated in the forest until 1980 when a gravel road was built connecting Najá and Metzabok with Palenque. Also in the early 1980s, construction began of the Carretera Fronteriza, also known as the Ruta Maya. The highway, designed to follow the geopolitical border separating Mexico from Guatemala, was finally completed in 2000. Compared to the road to Najá, the Carretera Fronteriza was exceptional—a paved, two lane highway stretching from Palenque to the Lagos de Montebello. The Carretera was intended to open territories along the Mexico-Guatemala border and to provide more efficient protection from increasing illegal immigration in the wake of civil unrest in Guatemala. The highway also connected tourists to the sizeable Maya ruins of Bonampak and Yaxchilán and connected numerous peasant communities, including the Bienes Comunes communities Lacanjá, Frontera Corazol, and Nueva Palestina, with the cities Palenque and Benemérito de las Américas. The highway opened territories for increased colonization, and the

government responded by awarding land solicitations to 3,786 inhabitants settled into thirty-one additional *ejidos* near the Lagos de Montebello (Marion Singer 1991: 84).

In the time since the construction of the Carretera Fronteriza, communities along the highway have undergone immense economic and social changes. The Carretera became a pathway for ideological and material exchange between the inhabitants of the forest and outsiders. Collective taxis, or *combis*, deliver passengers and goods several times daily along the stretch from Palenque to Benemérito. While community members formerly had little access to commercial goods, with the *combi* service, an individual could travel to Palenque and return to her respective community in the same day. Moreover, the highway has enabled inhabitants along the border to offer services within their own communities. A number of businesses, including Coca-Cola beverage company and *Marinela*, *Sabritas* and *Bimbo* snack companies delivered goods for local *tienderos* to sell in the small communities. Traveling vendors regularly set up flea markets selling clothes, shoes, and fashion accessories within communities. Some women along the Carretera have become representatives of Avon cosmetic company; they visit several other communities, including

Lacanjá, on a weekly basis peddling clothes, lingerie, cosmetics, and decorations for the home.

In addition to increasing the flow of material goods within the region, the highway produced an economic outlet for inhabitants of the forest.' Tourism within the region became a viable source of income as the highway made the ruins of Yaxchilán and Bonampak accessible to tourists for the first time. Several residents along the Carretera responded to the flow of tourists by developing restaurants and stores to service passengers of tour buses and *combis*. Also, a number of communities developed nearby natural resources, such as waterfalls, into tourist attractions. Among the communities engaged in tourism, Frontera Corazol and Lacanjá were chosen by the Mexican government as sites for extensive development projects. The Secretary of Tourism in Chiapas chose these communities for development because of their relative proximity to the ruins. The government intended to make Yaxchilán and Bonampak into well-traveled attractions following the overwhelming success of Maya ruins as tourist destinations in the Yucatán. Development projects created transportation, accommodations and dining facilities for tourists visiting the ruins. Because no land pathway was cleared to Yaxchilán, tourists could only access the ruins by airplane

or by traveling up the Usumacinta River. A number of residents in Frontera Corazol formed cooperatives offering *lanchas*, or boat shuttles to the ruins. The *lancha* cooperatives also transported tourists across the Usumacinta River to Guatemala. In addition, a group of residents in Frontera Corazol constructed a hotel, restaurant, and *lancha* service called Escudo Jaguar.

### **Development and Aid in Lacanjá**

In the late 1990s, community members began receiving aid to develop transportation to the Bonampak ruins as well as accommodations, restaurants, and artisan shops. As in Frontera Corazol and many other communities, these changes toward modernization yielded far-reaching consequences for the political, social, and economic organization of the community.

As a result of modernization projects, Lacanjá increasingly became a tourist destination, promoting increasing interaction with tourists and other peoples. Moreover, development projects yielded immense structural and design changes in their community. As part of widespread governmental aid projects to rural Chiapas in the early 1980s, Lacandones in Lacanjá received a medical clinic, a school, and an assembly hall. The medical clinic

housed a doctor commissioned by the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS), and a Lacandón nurse was hired from within the community and trained by IMSS officials. The school included two classrooms and a house for instructors hired from other regions of Chiapas. The assembly hall was designed to hold gatherings where male Lacandones carried out decisions for the community of Lacanjá and the Bienes Comunales. These three structures, built in a concentrated area around an airstrip, formed the community's center. In addition, a small military post was erected near Lacanjá to provide security for tourists and other travelers and to quell ongoing land disputes between Lacandones and other inhabitants of the forest.

During the 1990s, Lacandones in Lacanjá witnessed increasing changes to their way of life. A paved highway, approximately fifteen kilometers in length, was constructed from the Carretera Fronteriza to the airstrip forming the community's center. Lacanjá received ongoing aid to modernize the community and provide more "sanitary" ways of life for Lacandones (See also McGee 2002 and Kashanipour 2003 for detailed accounts of modernization efforts in Lacanjá). The community received electricity and running water. In addition, government agencies in 1995 and 1999 gave cement for construction of floors to each head of

household. However, local health officials reported that many families sold the cement instead of using it for their own homes. In 1996, a government agency gave each Lacandón household tin *lamina* for roofing. In 2001, the Fundo Regional Indigena constructed seventy-three latrines throughout the community, complete with cement floors, cement block walls, tin roofs and septic tanks. With the construction of the road to the Carretera Fronteriza, health officials from IMSS became increasingly present in Lacanjá, and the community received an ambulance for transportation to Palenque in case of severe medical emergencies. In addition to medical assistance, dentists began to visit the community, offering services subsidized by the government.

After Lacanjá gained access to the Carretera Fronteriza, the local economy slowly shifted from subsistence agriculture to a tourism-based economy. Because Lacanjá was situated only a few kilometers from Bonampak, tourists often stopped by the nearby Lacandón community when visiting the ruins. In addition, Lacandón communities became a destination apart from the ruins for ethnic tourists. Guided by romantic narratives constructed by Tozzer, Blom and Duby, and Bruce and Perera, many of these tourists ascribed identities of "traditional" and

"authentic" to Lacandón culture. Romantic narratives permeated representations in the tourist industry and public consciousness followed that Lacandón culture represented a link to the ancient Maya and that Lacandones were the direct descendants of the builders of ancient ruins. Many tourists who chose Lacandón communities as a travel destination were drawn by a sense of exoticism associated with their forest environment and perceptions of cultural "primitivism." In visiting Lacandón communities, they hoped to solidify their expectations with real-life experiences among Lacandones.

### **Growth of Tourism**

To understand the development of a tourism industry in Lacanjá, I interviewed people in the community who engaged tourism in different ways and with varying degrees of success. I also interviewed Miguel Sanchez of Conservation International (CI). Miguel had been active in the community for many years, and because he was a source of ongoing developmental aid for Lacandones, he was privy to disputes and debates over aid and power in the community.

Shortly after the construction of the road to Lacanjá, one Lacandón family erected a chain barrier across the road just after the junction to the ruins of Bonampak. The



family charged tourists an admittance to the community at a fee of ten pesos (approximately one dollar U.S.) per vehicle. In charging admittance to the community, this Lacandón family fueled the process of commodifying Lacandón identities; in this instance, Lacandón culture became a commodity for tourist consumption with the community of Lacanjá and its members as actors in the exchange.

A few Lacandón families responded to increasing visits by tourists by constructing *campamentos*, or rustic accommodations for tourists. Shortly thereafter, the Secretary of Tourism of Chiapas organized Lacandones who demonstrated an interest in tourist enterprises into a cooperative. The cooperative, called *Hach Winik* (meaning "true people") consisted of 119 community members and was awarded economic control of Bonampak. Following a model first employed at the ruins of Tulum, the entrance to Bonampak was moved from the perimeter of the ruins to nearly nine kilometers from the archaeological site. Vehicles were not permitted to pass the entrance, and tourists were forced to either walk nine kilometers or pay shuttle services to the site. The cooperative was given three buses to transport patrons to the ruins at a charge of seventy pesos (approximately seven dollars U.S.) per person. *Hach Winik* also received several bicycles to rent

to tourists for fifty pesos (about five dollars U.S.) per patron. The cooperative was comprised of both male and female Lacandones. However, shortly after its formation, many female Lacandones became angry because they were not given equal access to participate in shuttle services and were restricted by male control in selling artisan wares within the ruins. Some women reported that because of these injustices, many of the female participants left the cooperative.

Shortly after the formation of *Hach Winik*, eleven male Lacandones formed another cooperative to provide transportation between the Carretera Fronteriza, the entrance to Bonampak, the ruins of Bonampak, and the community of Lacanjá. I interviewed the president of this cooperative to understand its position in the community. Initially, this cooperative used their own vehicles for the taxi service, but the vehicles were of very poor quality and unreliable. Cooperative members then petitioned to the Fundo Regional Indigena for a low-interest loan on three new vans. The shuttle cooperative, using the new and reliable vehicles, underbid *Hach Winik* by charging only fifty pesos for transportation services to the ruins. This cooperative gained partnership with several travel agencies

from Palenque and San Cristóbal and today controls the majority of taxi services around Lacanjá.

While some Lacandones ventured into tourism through taxi services, others continued to develop *campamentos*. In conjunction with granting control of the ruins to Lacandones, the Secretary of Tourism and other agencies supported the development of Lacanjá as a destination for ecotourism and ethnic tourism. A series of cabanas and lavatories were constructed, given to those families who already initiated efforts in forming *campamentos*. Using World Bank funding, the Asociación de Espacios Naturales y Desarrollos Sostenables first granted cabanas to certain families engaged in tourism. In March of 2000, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) erected lavatory facilities with showers for tourists at the *campamentos* of eight Lacandón families. Finally, in 2002 and 2003, the Secretary of Tourism in Chiapas granted eleven families large furnished cabanas, each with three rooms and the capacity to house four guests.

Other Lacandones received aid for *tiendas de artesanías*. Since the 1970s, Lacandones in Najá were well-known for their manufacture and selling of *flechas*, or bow-and-arrows, in San Cristóbal and at the ruins of Palenque (McGee 2002). Lacandones in Lacanjá forged new areas of

artisanship. Both men and women crafted seed necklaces, bracelets and earrings, net bags and baskets, wooden spoons and bowls, god and animal figurines made of clay and wood, and other souvenirs. In Lacanjá, a number of artisan shops were constructed throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Many of these *tiendas* were primarily grocery or supply stores that also sold crafts by a single woman or displayed several women's handicrafts for a percentage of the sales. Among the *tiendas*, two were recognized as women's cooperatives: *Ya Toch K'ak*, and *Ya Toch Chu'rum*. *Ya Toch K'ak* cooperative was built in conjunction with the *Na Bolom* institute and funding by the Ambassador of Canada. The Canada Fund donated \$80,000 pesos (about \$8000 US dollars) directly to the cooperative director to construct a *tienda*. *Ya Toch Chu'rum* was financed by an anonymous philanthropist from New York City in conjunction with Conservation International. A representative of Conservation International complained that the money granted for the cooperative had instead been spent by a male Lacandón to buy a vehicle. In the spring of 2004 *Ya Toch Chu'rum* stood without walls or floors because there was no remaining funding. The initial misappropriation of funds by this Lacandón man threatened to arrest potential gains for female artisans in the *Ya Toch Chu'rum* cooperative.

Fortunately, labor and financial aid came from ecotourism students at the Universidad Autónoma de Monterrey in conjunction with Comisión Nacional de Arias Naturales y Protegidas (CONANP). The students worked to build the artisan shop, finishing the project in July of 2004.

Fortunately for the Lacandón man who misappropriated the money, the incident was never reported to the philanthropist who donated the money.

### **A Tourism-based Economy**

In the twenty-four years since construction began for the Carretera Fronteriza, Lacanjá has transitioned from a subsistence-farming community to a town organized by wage labor and capitalist ventures in tourism. With the aid of development projects in Lacanjá, Lacandones forged a variety of lucrative services while creating a market for tourists seeking ecological and culture-based travel experiences.

As a result of these endeavors in tourism, many Lacandón families now enjoy economic prosperity well beyond that experienced by other indigenous peoples along the Carretera. For instance, the majority of Lacandón families providing tourist accommodations now have satellite television, a luxury seldom seen among other communities in

the region. Other Lacandones have vehicles, electric stoves, and washing machines. Many Lacandón families engaging in tourism no longer cultivate their own *milpas*, instead hiring out the labor to Tzeltales and Choles from nearby communities (For evidence of similar trends in Najá see McGee 2002: 96-97).

Changes in the economic organization of Lacanjá have profoundly affected social relationships within the community. Funding from various organizations to develop tourism in the region has created a highly competitive social complex based on economic alliances and rivalries. Some Lacandón families have become economic partners with *ladino* financiers and travel agents. The most successful accommodation in Lacanjá is run by a Lacandón family and a financier from San Cristóbal de las Casas. This accommodation, called *Campamento Río Lacanjá*, receives the vast majority of overnight guests and restaurant patrons.

Developmental aid has also constructed an economic hierarchy; those families who ventured into tourism during the 1990s received were most often selected for economic assistance. Families who did not enter the industry early reported feeling slighted and frustrated because of perceived favoritism among governmental and NGO representatives. Moreover, control of public spaces,

especially near the ruins, have become contested grounds causing ongoing conflicts. In some cases, kin relationships have become strained or broken because of disputes relating to control of tourist enterprises. Today, economic associations along with kin relationships actively shape the community's social organization.

### **Tourism and Identity**

While not every family in Lacanjá participates in tourism, the majority of Lacandones engage the industry in some way. In addition to servicing tourists with shuttles, *campamentos*, and artisan shops, other Lacandones serve as guides on nature walks to surrounding waterfalls and lagoons and also to the ruins of Lacanjá. Other community members act as intermediaries between local artisans and tourist shops in Palenque and San Cristóbal. In fact, some Lacandones moved from Lacanjá to Palenque, buying crafts from their family and friends and selling the wares to stores in Palenque for a slight profit. A few male Lacandones, when commissioned by tourists, perform "traditional" religious rituals. These Lacandón men may travel to the ruins or conduct the ritual in their own home; the performance includes lighting of copal incense and chanting in Mayan. These ritualists charge about 500

pesos, (roughly fifty dollars U.S.) per performance, which is more lucrative than most other ventures in tourism. Still other Lacandones incidentally engage in tourism, charging tourists for snapping their photograph.

Tourism in Lacanjá is guided by popular perceptions of Lacandones as constructed by texts and images. Such texts and images represent Lacandón culture as unadulterated by outside contact and promote a sense of cultural "traditionalism." Ethnic tourists come to Lacanjá because they want to view "authentic" Maya culture. However, while the identities constructed by these narratives remain stagnant in a "traditional" past, Lacandón culture changes in response to continual ideological and material exchanges. As a result, the images sought by tourists and the realities of Lacandón culture are often incongruent. Walter Little describes how "authenticity is disrupted when the modern world intrudes on the site... because it collapses the past into the present" (2004b:41-42). To reconcile the images and realities of their culture, Lacandones consciously negotiate how they present themselves to meet the perceived expectations of tourists (See also Little 2004b).

McGee notes that Lacandones from Najá participate in the reification of their "traditional" way of life for



tourists. He says, "Men who wear jeans and T-shirts at home don *xikuls* before going to the ruins to set up their tourist displays" (2002: 48). Many Lacandones in Lacanjá also use *xikuls* as a tool of "traditional" representation when entertaining tourists. Though *xikuls* are sometimes worn when tourists are not present, especially among small children, the tunics are much more visible when tour groups are staying in the community. Some younger Lacandones refuse to wear a *xikul*, instead preferring Western dress, such as jeans and a t-shirt. In the summer of 2004, I observed an episode in which a Lacandón boy was offered a relatively large sum of money to pose in a *xikul* for a German photographer. I had never seen the teenage boy in a tunic before, but he complied and borrowed his father's *xikul* so that he could be photographed for a museum exhibition. When asked why he did not regularly wear a tunic, the boy replied that *xikuls* were "embarrassing." He only wore the tunic while in the forest with the photographer and took it off before returning to the community. This instance illuminates how this particular boy considered the elements of "traditionalism" often portrayed by Lacandones as a stigmatized identity. He complied to the tourist's request for monetary compensation but resented the dominant tourist discourse that denied him

equal status and opportunities when opting self-representation outside the strict model of "traditionalism."

Unlike Lacandones from Najá who primarily engage tourists in cities some distance from their own community, Lacandones in Lacanjá take on tourist ventures within their community and homes. This presents different challenges for residents of Lacanjá. They are forced to balance images and practices among tourists with images and practices among family and community members. Additionally, tourists enter Lacanjá at irregular intervals, so Lacandones who perform elements of "traditional" ways of life must constantly be prepared to disrupt certain activities that tourists may consider inauthentic or incongruent to their expectations. For example, many residents of Lacanjá have cable television and radios, but when tour groups are visiting, most families avoid conspicuously using such modern technology. Similarly, Lacandones regularly consume processed foods, such as ramen noodles, canned tuna fish, and prepared soups, but never serve these foods to tourists. Instead, they prepare "traditional" meals for tourists, such as black beans, *camote*, *chayote*, and corn tortillas.

Lacandones also present elements of their culture that are no longer practiced outside of tourism. As mentioned, some male Lacandones perform "traditional" religious rituals, and many vendors sell souvenir implements of the rituals such as god pots and incense boards. However, Lacandones in Lacanjá have not practiced elements of the "traditional" religion since Philip Baer converted community members in the 1960s. Within the community, Christian Lacandones object to performances of "traditional" rituals because they consider them pagan acts. Still, those Lacandones performing these rituals emphasize that they are simply responding to requests from tourists and do not actually believe in the rituals.

Walter Little (2004b) addresses how identity can become a strategic tool for meeting tourists' expectations. His research among Kaqchikel Maya in the highlands of Guatemala asserts that "vendors [evoke] concepts of identity in self-conscious ways, depending on the social context and the social relation in which they [are] embedded" (Little 2004b: 16). Little views cultural identities as dynamic and flexible and considers that the community, along with regional, national and international influences, actively shape collective identities.

## **Government and Assigned Identities**

Though Lacandones certainly negotiate and deploy their own identities, through political and economic strategies, the government to an extensive degree manipulates ways in which Lacandones portray themselves. Governmental institutions, through an ongoing and formulaic process, attempt to guide Lacandón identities and representations to tourists. In the years since Lacanjá has become a tourist destination, the office of the Secretary of Tourism of Chiapas and the *Na Bolom* institute began offering courses to Lacandones instructing them how to conduct successful tourist enterprises and how to best represent *Lacandonismo* to tourists. In the summer of 2004, representatives for the Secretary of Tourism with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding offered a series of courses to improve tourist ventures. These courses, called "Basic Administration of a Tourist Project and its Legal Aspects," "Receptionist and Housekeeping," and "Food Preparation," were intended to guide Lacandones in meeting the needs and desires of tourists. Lacandones were encouraged to attend and suggested that, as in the past, those who best demonstrated interests in tourism would continue to receive economic aid from the government. Though the course titles did not mention the construction

of identity, Lacandones were instructed to present their way of life as "in harmony with nature." They were told not to play loud music when tourists were present because the tourists wanted a "natural experience." Based on the perceptions that tourists wanted a natural experience, Lacandones were instructed to guide their behavior and images in congruence with these expectations.

Similarly, in the course on food preparation, Lacandones were instructed to prepare "traditional" meals for tourists—handmade tortillas, not *Maseca*.

Similarly, *Na Bolom* held a series of workshops in 2004 entitled "Lacandón Jewelry: Developing Technology, Finishes, and New Designs". Thirteen courses were offered, several in each of the three Lacandón communities, to guide Lacandones in new areas of craft production. *Na Bolom* representatives gave tools and materials so that Lacandón souvenirs would be more pleasing to tourists' sense of aesthetic.

The majority of those in attendance were ongoing and frequent recipients of governmental and NGO aid. These individuals understood that participation and compliance to governmental and NGO requests made them more likely to receive developmental aid. Consequentially, those in

attendance understood the potential gains of portraying themselves as "traditional" and "authentic."

Lacandones are but one indigenous group in a international phenomenon in which governmental officials increasingly recognize the need to promote an authentic Indian culture (Conklin 1997; Friedlander 1986; Jackson 1995; Little 2004b). Some governments consider indigenous authenticity as both a moral apparatus, in which popular opinion construes the presence of authenticity as an absence of ideological and material corruption (Conklin 1997), and as an economic apparatus, recognizing the desire of tourists to seek authentic experiences (Koshar 1998; Little 2004b; Stephen 1993). Jean Jackson noted how indigenous peoples in the Colombian Amazon are reconfiguring their identities, in part, to garner economic benefits from governmental and NGO organizations (1995:12).

Lacandones have responded similarly by actively collaborating with governmental requests in order to maintain their social, political, and economic control along the Carretera Fronteriza. Courses and workshops demonstrate definitive ways in which the Mexican government and NGOs are attempting to guide and even control the way Lacandones portray themselves to tourists. Though Lacandones in many ways construct their own identities, the

ongoing infusion of governmental policies and ideological management reconfigures how Lacandones interact within their own community, with other Mayas and Ladinos, and with tourists.

### **Challenges to the Narrative—negotiating Identity**

The success of tourism among Lacandones profoundly relies on identities set forth in romantic narratives, but as noted, since De Vos' work in the 1980s, these narratives are being challenged. Reinterpretations of Lacandón historical identities call to question the basis of Echeverría's 1972 land grant and the privileged status of Lacandones.

In response to reinterpretations of Lacandón history, Tzeltales, Choles, and other inhabitants of the forest challenged the 1972 land decree and privileged status of Lacandones. Some Tzeltal and Chol communities confronted Lacandones, calling them "Caribs," a term that alluded to the recent migration of Lacandones into the forest (Althaus n.d.). The ongoing debate was noted by Mexican and international journalists, and Lacandones, Tzeltales and Choles eagerly voiced their concerns to the media.

As their historical identities increasingly became disputed by other indigenous peoples, Lacandones

strategically reconfigured their identities to reassert political and economic control of the forest. They co-opted a model of representation first offered by Jim Nations and Ronald Nigh in the early 1980s. According to Nations and Nigh, in 1980 Lacandones cultivated as many as seventy-nine different types of crops in their *milpas*. Based in part on the diversity of crops present in Lacandón milpas, they formulated a model asserting that Lacandón agroforestry techniques were more productive and more sustainable than those implemented by other Maya groups in the Selva Lacandona. Though a vast stretch of forest was conceded to Lacandones prior to Nigh and Nations report, many sources over the past two decades have cited their work, reasserting that the sustainability of Lacandón horticulture was better suited to protecting the endangered Selva Lacandona than the subsistence practices of other inhabitants of the forest (Kashanipour 1998, O'Brien 1998, Alcaire 2002, Lonely Planet Mexico 2002, McGee 2002). This perception of the superiority of Lacandón horticultural practices was woven into popular perceptions of Lacandón identities. Lacandones became known as ambassadors and protectors of the forest in opposition to other Tzeltal and Chol inhabitants who became represented as antagonists to the forest. Brian Gollnick describes how "Lacandones



occupy a position of privilege defines by their presumed closeness to nature, which becomes articulated as their nobility and spirituality" (1998: 132).

This new representation of Lacandón identities became an outlet for Lacandones to assert their continued control of the forest. In response to debates over their control of the forest, many Lacandones advanced their identities as protectors of the forest and emphasized that other Maya groups destroyed the forest. Consideration of control of the Selva Lacandona has reached national and international attention through the voices of environment and human rights groups as well as the media. Lacandones, Choles, and Tzeltales each utilize the press to voice their concerns and beliefs over land disputes.

While other indigenous peoples challenge the policies in the Selva Lacandona on the basis of misrepresentations of Lacandón history, Lacandones instead focus on how their way of life engenders "harmony with nature." Beth Conklin (1997) described how the concept of the "naturalness" of Indians is now associated innately carrying out Western notions of conservation. Amazonian Indians, like the Lacandon, "have learned to speak the language of Western environmentalism and reframe their cosmological and ecological systems in terms of Western concepts like

"respect for Mother Earth," "being close to nature," and "protecting biosphere diversity" (Conklin 1997:712). Using their perceived cultural purity and role as guardians of the forest, Lacandones often identified the other inhabitants of the forest as "invaders," a semantic tactic to subtly reinscribe their own control of the forest. Yet Lacandones carefully maintained that land debates were not about control or power among the communities. Numerous statements given to the media by Lacandones negate their own political and economic interests in the forest and instead focus on issues of destructive activities of other inhabitants and the "sufriendo" or "muriendo" forest. When speaking to a reporter from the *Houston Chronicle*, a Lacandón man from Najá declared that the Tzeltales "don't care about the forest" (Althaus n.d.). While several disenfranchised inhabitants of the Selva Lacandona joined the 1994 EZLN insurrection, Lacandones remained steadfastly loyal to the government. Since the insurrection, Lacandones repeatedly identified all "others" in the forest as members of the EZLN organization. In recent media attention concerning land disputes in the Selva Lacandona, a Lacandón man identified those encroaching on his community's land as EZLN sympathizers, saying "Ya no aguanta más la Biosfera, ese pulmón se está muriendo y los

del EZLN, armadas, cada ves invaden más" ("Afectan Invasiones" 2004). By situating the other inhabitants of the forest into a political group known to be enemies to the government, Lacandones encouraged governmental intervention in control of the land and, by extension, the continuation of their privilege status in the forest.

## CHAPTER V

### A MONOLITHIC IMAGE: IGNORING THE "OTHER" LACANDON

#### **Images and Identities**

Historical narratives and ethnographies written throughout the twentieth century solidified popular perceptions of Lacandón history and culture. These texts were written for the most part by male ethnographers who ignored female roles within the society. Moreover, most ethnographers relied solely on male Lacandones as "chief" informants. Blom and Duby (1955), Bruce (1974), Bruce and Perera (1982), and McGee (1990) all relied on the same few informants, all of whom were men, to describe Lacandón culture. Because of ungendered sources and a limited focus within Lacandón culture, these texts excluded women's roles in the community and denied women equal presence in popular Lacandón identities.

Equally significant in constructing popular perceptions of Lacandones were visual images. Since the earliest photographs taken in the late 1800s, images of Lacandones most often depicted an individual wearing a

white *xikul*, or tunic. However, descriptions of Lacandón dress revealed that males and females wore different styles of clothing, and only males wore white *xikuls* (Tozzer 1907).

In the early 1900s, female Lacandones wore a two-piece outfit, consisting of a poncho-like upper garment and a skirt, which, unlike male Lacandones was most often calico and other colors (Tozzer 1907:30). Over the course of the twentieth century, women's clothing changed to incorporate vividly-colored manufactured cloth, and since at least the 1970s, many Lacandón women have adopted *ladina*-style clothing. Today, both male and female Lacandones wear a variety of clothing styles. Like Lacandón women, some male Lacandones have adopted *ladino*-style dress while other men continue to wear tunics. Men engaged in tourism most often will wear *ladino*-style clothing when at home and wear a *xikul* when entertaining tourists. Today, Lacandón women also dress in a variety of ways. Some women wear two-piece "traditional" garments, but the majority wear *ladina*-style clothing. Significantly, Lacandón women never wear a white *xikul*; this clothing, considered in popular representations as the hallmark of Lacandones, is reserved for the male members of the community.

Through visual images presented in texts, tourist brochures, and museums, Lacandón identities have come to occupy a very narrow and rigid model of representation. In nearly every instance that a picture of Lacandones is published or printed, the image is of a male Lacandón wearing a white *xikul*. In a study of *National Geographic* magazine, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins described how readers equated retention of local or "traditional" dress with "social stability" while Western-style clothes were considered a "sign of cultural degradation" (1993:247). Although *ladina* or Western-style dress is "traditional" for Lacandón women, in the sense that they have been wearing such clothing for a considerable amount of time, they, in wearing such clothes, become representatives of the degradation of their own culture. Meanwhile, because of dominant imagery constructed by ethnographers and the tourist industry, Lacandón men, in wearing *xikuls*, become exemplary of long standing traditions and cultural purity.

Jon McGee noted how images of Lacandones were depicted in very limited ways. He said

The stereotypical image of a Lacandon presented to a visitor to Chiapas is that of a man with long hair hanging down to his shoulders, wearing a long white smock called a *xikul* and typically holding a bow and arrow. This stereotype is so pervasive that I don't believe I have ever seen a poster or magazine cover showing a Lacandon

woman, many of whom wear makeup and dress in current Mexican fashion (McGee 2002:30).

More than anyone, Gertrude Duby popularized images of Lacandones. In *Gertrude Blom Bearing Witness*, a book documenting Duby's ongoing interest in photography, the author noted that "in her photographs of the Lacandones and their jungle environment... Gertrude Duby joins the ranks of other great social observers with a camera" (Harris 1984: 3). However, of the twenty-eight photographs of Lacandones presented in the book, only four of those depicted Lacandón women. From the hundreds of photos available in Duby's archives, taken over a span of nearly forty years, editors chose images that fit within popular perceptions of *lacandonismo*.

Duby's photographs were not only documented in text, her work was also featured in her home/museum *Na Bolom*. Since Duby's death, *Na Bolom* has become a non-governmental non-profit organization that serves as a tourist hotel, restaurant, gift shop, and museum. The museum is dedicated to preserving the legacy of Franz Blom and Gertrude Duby and especially the Lacandón, who Duby considered "family" (Harris 1984:12). Throughout the museum, black and white photographs taken by Duby depict male Lacandones in white *xikuls* standing near large *ceibas*, sitting in dugout



Figure 4-Popular Lacandón Image<sup>4</sup>

canoes, and working in *milpas*. A tour of the museum depicts artifacts from "traditional" Lacandón cultural practices, which, for the most part are no longer carried out. The most dominant feature of the display includes elements of "traditional" religious ceremonies. These practices, which were documented as solely men's activities (Tozzer 1907, Blom and Duby 1955, McGee 2002), are

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<sup>4</sup>Harris, Alex and Margaret Sartor, eds. *Gertrude Blom Bearing Witness*. Chapel Hill and London: Duke University Press.



described at length by the tour guide and represented by god pots, copal incense, and pictures of the production of *balché* (fermented bark beer). Labor is represented in exceedingly rigid gender-specific categories. Men's work is depicted as hunting, fishing, and horticultural labor in the *milpa*. Representations of female Lacandones occupy a much smaller section and include weaving and spinning implements. These displays ignore cultural changes as a result of modernization and tourism and ignore the flexibility of labor and gender roles as documented by Boremanse (1998) and McGee (2002).

Flora Kaplan describes how museums replicate and legitimize perceptions of ruling elites and how in selecting, preserving, and presenting elements of past and present culture, "the prevailing elites views of cultural heritage... are both re-created and reflected anew" (1993:104). In this sense, *Na Bolom* officials who created the museum display were guided by governmental policies, rhetoric of the tourist industry, and already dominant public perceptions of Lacandones. These dominant views sequestered Lacandones in a state of "traditionalism," based on gender-specific labor tasks and a hierarchical community structure. The museum situated Lacandón religion as the central organizing feature of the community and as

the most dominant feature of the culture. Because women held no part in these ceremonies, women's labor was positioned as less valued than that of men. Moreover, the overall absence of attention and relatively negligible space dedicated to Lacandón women's roles negates their position within the culture and within popular discourse.

Beyond constructing the museum displays, *Na Bolom* officials have consciously *maintained* these displays, which are conspicuously outdated and promote generic essentialisms of Lacandón culture. Recently, representatives of *Na Bolom* approached Jon McGee, an anthropologist who has worked among the Lacandón for over twenty-five years, to collaborate with them on a more extensive display of Lacandón culture, including recorded tapes of "traditional" religious chanting. McGee asked that the display include elements of Lacandón women's lives, but the officials responded that they were not interested in that aspect of Lacandón culture (McGee 2005 pers. com.). This exchange reveals how officials of the organization consciously represent Lacandones in ways most marketable to the perceived interests and desires of tourists. *Na Bolom* receives the vast majority of its funding through tourism. The organization, operating to market its facilities to the perceived desires of tourists,

actively reinscribes gross misrepresentations of Lacandones and their culture.

In the museum, as well as in texts, images of Lacandón women are marginalized. This marginalization and overwhelming absence of women has excluded their presence in representations of Lacandones. Because of such rigid and limited images of the group, only Lacandón men became known as culture bearers, and Lacandón women became further marginalized in relation to the tourist industry.

Gender-specific identities are not uncommon in Mesoamerican ethnic tourism. In the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, in opposition to the situation among Lacandones, Maya women became known as representatives of their culture within the tourist industry. Walter Little (2004) describes how among the Kaqchikel in and around Antigua, Guatemala, only Kaqchikel women are recognized as "Indian." He says

Maya women were acknowledged as "Indian" or Maya, but their spouses, children, and brothers were often not considered "Indian" because they dressed similarly to the tourists. The males were frequently asked if they were real Mayas or "Indians," and they were questioned about the authenticity of the items they sold (Little 2004:62).

Little describes that even when Maya men are present within the tourist marketplace, they are viewed by tourist as

"missing" because the marketplace is conceived as a "feminine social space" (2004:145). Little attributes the exclusivity of Maya women as representatives of their culture as a product of the tourist industry and the images the industry promotes. He notes that in Antigua, guidebooks, postcards, and tourist brochures all feature images of Maya women, thereby signifying women as the real culture bearers.

Among Kaqchikeles, women are able to gain prestige and status within their household and community because of the attention they receive. However, among Lacandones, women become victims of the exclusivity of popular images. Lacandón society is patriarchal. As the economy has moved from subsistence agriculture, in which women's roles are considered complimentary to those of men, to tourism, to which women contribute labor but are not recognized as significant participants, women have been marginalized. As a result, their access to power, control, and prestige has been exacerbated by the introduction of tourism.

### **Implications of a Marginalized Image**

Maya communities have engaged tourism in vastly different ways, and each specific approach to tourism affects how cultural, economic, and social changes are

manifested. June Nash (1993b) addresses how the growth of artisan production and tourism in Amantenango del Valle, Chiapas has challenged the gender hierarchy. In Amantenango, Maya women are the chief producers of pottery and other handicrafts. Their active roles in tourism have challenged patriarchal structures within the community. Nash asserts that the backlash against Maya women in the community demands "a reevaluation of the theoretical model of indigenous families as egalitarian households where income earned was pooled and shared... [And] the structured inequalities in the complementary roles of men and women must be recognized" (Nash 1993b:145).

Though Lacandones engage tourism in radically different ways than the people of Amantengango, Nash's demand for a reevaluation of what I consider an "egalitarian myth" of familial economic interests (see McGee 2002) is applicable to Lacandones, as well. The polygynous practices noted among Lacandones as early as the nineteenth century (Sapper 1897) point to the inappropriateness of an egalitarian familial model. Lacandón women were often the objects of brutal between group raids (Baer and Merrifield 1971) and were even used in bartering for material goods (Marion-Singer 1999). Though the labor contributed by Lacandón women in a

subsistence economy could be viewed as complementary, they held very little overall power in the household and the community. The introduction of tourism only elevated the disparity between male and female access to power. The immense growth of tourist and a monetary economy in Lacanjá has led to ideological and practical economic individualism, in which many Lacandón men (head of households and others) now consider their privileged status and access to wealth an individual, not familial, benefit. This notion among Lacandón men has reconfigured the formerly complementary labor roles of men and women in the household, producing relationships where women's contributions to the household are less valued than those of men.

### **Lacandón Women and Tourism**

As tourism has increasingly become a part of the local economy, women have experienced changing roles within the household and the community. Before the development of tourism in Lacanjá in the 1990s, Lacandones, for the most part, practiced subsistence agriculture and engaged in irregular petty jobs near the community. Contrary to the rigid gender-segregated tasks depicted in the *Na Bolom* museum, men and women worked together in the *milpa* and to

some degree in the household (Boremanse 1998, McGee 2002). Men and women's labor was considered complementary, as their labor yielded a variety of products of nearly equal value. Since the transition to a tourism-based economy, those families engaged in the industry no longer consider labor with monetary rewards of equal value to household labor with non-monetary returns.

As men have become the "face" of Lacandón culture as marketed for tourists, women incur a greater burden of household labor without economic value or reward. Lacandón men engaged in tourism often spend the majority of their time near the ruins of Bonampak. They wait to transport tourists, to serve as guides, or to advertise their accommodations or restaurants to tourists. The frequent absence of men from the homeplace yields significant changes in household labor distributions. Many women now take on an amount of labor that was formerly completed by both men and women. Moreover, women often take on supportive roles within the tourist industry, for which they receive little prestige or economic compensation. For example, women often clean the cabañas after tourists have left, but men receive or adopt control of resources and prestige for first contracting the tourists from the ruins.

Despite their considerable labor contributions in tourism, women who are part of male-headed households rarely maintain control over the economic benefits of their own labor. Among immigrants from Najá to Lacanjá, I observed that male Lacandonese unwaveringly controlled the economic resources of the family. Of the nine families that I interviewed who had immigrated from Najá, each of those families with a male head-of-household adhered to strict patriarchal control of familial finances. Even when women directly engaged in tourism in some way, such as the production of handicrafts, they overwhelmingly passed on the compensation to the male head-of-household.

June Nash (1993a) noted similar behavior in Amantenango. She found that although Maya women were the principle contributors to the manufacture of artisan crafts, these women "have not asserted control over the profits" (Nash 1993b:11). Nash attributes the lack of control over economic gains as "a result of socialization within patriarchal structures that encourages women to assign leadership roles to men" (1993b:11).

Although only a few families own cabañas, restaurants, *tiendas*, or taxis, nearly every family in Lacanjá participates in the production of handicrafts. Because handicrafts can be manufactured in the home with little



economic investment, many Lacandón women partake in the production process. These women sell wares from their homes, at local *tiendas*, or at one of the two women's cooperatives in Lacanjá. The presence of women's cooperatives suggests that women retain some level of economic autonomy in the community. However, both of these cooperatives are controlled by male Lacandones who oversee the finances and decide which women can participate. Many women who contribute to the cooperatives complain that they have not received payment for the goods they produced.

At the ceremonial opening of the *Ya Toch K'ak* cooperative, for which the Ambassador of Canada and representatives of *Na Bolom* were present, a number of female Lacandones came to protest that they had not yet received payment for their crafts. A representative of *Na Bolom* explained that the production of Lacandón crafts had expanded well beyond the rate of sale. *Na Bolom* and other *tiendas de artesanías* simply could not sell the crafts at the rate of production, and for that reason, many Lacandones were not receiving payment at regular intervals. Still, frustrated by their lack of control and access to the profits of their labor, many women commonly accuse male Lacandones, *Na Bolom*, and other buyers of stealing the profits.

### **Single Women and Exceptional Women**

My observations of women and their status and power in relation to tourism directly contradict Jon McGee's (2002) observations and interpretations in Lacanjá. McGee asserted that although the shift from subsistence-farming to a wage-based economy often resulted in the marginalization of women, among Lacandones, women retained active and vital roles in the new tourism-driven economy. He followed with an anecdotal story of his experiences in Lacanjá to corroborate this contention.

In Lacanha... we hung hammocks and used tents in shelters provided by [a Lacandón man], while his wife... prepared meals for the group using the foodstuffs we had brought with us from Palenque. When it came time to settle our account, [the wife] showed us an itemized bill. When we pulled out our pesos to pay, [the husband] asked if we would divide the bill into what we owed for lodging and what we owed for our meals. When I asked why, he explained that [the wife] kept the money she earned preparing our meals and that he took only what we owed for the use of the shelter and tents. In that transaction, we paid [the wife] the majority of the money (McGee 2002: 107).

As I explain below, it seems likely that the division of payment that McGee witnessed was, in this case, more likely the result of his hosts trying to fill the role expectations of Western tourists than any division of benefits within Lacandón society.

During my fieldwork, I was able to observe this same family both when tour groups were staying at their *campamento* and when no tourists were present. I found that this Lacandón family exhibited behavior that varied greatly when tourists were present and absent from the home. Having actively engaged tourism for over a decade, the husband, who not only ran a successful accommodation and restaurant but also was among the earliest Lacandones to operate a taxi service, had certainly encountered Western value systems. He was aware of certain expectations held by Western tourists for egalitarian gender relations and ideas about rightful profit for labor. I observed that this man reconfigured his behavior at times when tourists were present to meet their perceived expectations. However, when tourists were absent from the home, this man's behavior and expectations of his wife changed significantly.

A number of relatives reported that the couple was separated but remained living in separate rooms of the home for economic reasons. The wife, along with a number of other female relatives living nearby, shared that her husband allowed her to keep some money from large tour groups as long as he had ample money for his own interests. However, when this man needed money, he cajoled and even

physically attacked the wife until she relinquished her earnings.

The couple's status as separated offers a better understanding of the wife's elevated, but certainly not equal, economic status. Among community members in Lacanjá, I observed that a number of women were divorced or separated from their husbands. These single women, in some cases, exerted significantly more control over economic assets. Some of these women participated in the production of handicrafts and retained control over the profits. However, I found that younger women (from teenagers to early thirties), when divorced or separated, were often reincorporated into the parental family structure and once again relinquished their profits to the head-of-household (their father instead of their husband).

Though rare, a few Lacandón women openly defy the patriarchal structure of the community. Though male Lacandones manage economic resources among the majority of families, some female Lacandones actively engage in tourism and control the profits of their labor. I noted one case of an exceptional woman who, though married, controlled the family's tourist accommodations and actively negotiated, with her husband, continued funding from governmental and non-governmental aid agencies for improvements to the home

and tourist accommodations. Martin del Campo (2004 pers. com.) relayed that this woman's power and control within the family and the community resulted from her inheritance of valuable property along the airstrip of Lacanjá. Boremanse (1998) and Martin del Campo (2004 pers. com) noted how post-marital residence patterns among Lacandones in Lacanjá differed from patterns in Najá and how these differences yielded significantly divergent degrees of power for some women. Though post-marital locality has become somewhat unclear over the last two decades, community members in Lacanjá formerly practiced clear matrilocal post-marriage residence. These matrilocal practices enabled this particular Lacandón woman to inherit land and eventually control, to a significant degree, her marital family's wealth. However, the relative power of this exceptional woman is an anomaly in the community. The emergence of a tourist economy where women not only take on substantially more labor but lose relative status and prestige in the household and the community is the plight of most Lacandón women.

## CHAPTER VI

### AUTHENTICITY AND TRADITION:

#### CAN CULTURE BE AUTHENTIC?

Every connoisseur of anthropology department bulletin boards knows this *Far Side* cartoon (Larson 1984): A grass-skirted native man in a tall headdress stands at the window of a thatched hut. He has just spotted a couple of pith-helmeted, camera-toting creatures coming ashore and sounds the alarm: "Anthropologists! Anthropologists!" His two companions, similarly attired with bones through their noses, rush to unplug their television, VCR, lamp, and telephone and stash them out of sight" (Conklin 1997: 711).

Scholars of tourism agree that Western tourists are seeking an authentic experience (Koshar 1998; Stephen 1991), and ethnic tourists place greater value on experiences within cultures considered authentic (Little 2004b). However, the reasons *why* people long for or seek authenticity is a subject less often considered.

#### **Defining Authenticity and Tradition**

Notions of authenticity are indelibly linked to the concept of tradition. Both ideas reflect dependence on cultural continuity, not only emphasizing longevity of

being, but presumably an "unchanging core of ideas and customs [that] is always handed down... from the past" (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). The presence of tradition, an organic core that is discrete from intercultural interaction, yields authenticity. Handler and Linnekin find intrinsic flaws in popular notions of tradition because it implies "temporal continuity [as] the defining characteristic of social identity" (1984:274). Commonsense notions of authenticity follow that uninterrupted continuity shields the core from distortion. In this sense, for a culture to be authentic, it must be part of a closed system, free from the flow of ideas, materials, and practices that inevitably change the context and meaning of traditions. According to Beth Conklin, this belief "leaves little room for intercultural exchange or creative innovation, and locates 'authentic' indigenous actors outside global cultural trends and changing ideas and technologies" (1997:715).

Moreover, authenticity of practices in a popular sense requires removal from the present. In many cases, the recognition of tradition depends on the longevity of practice (Shils 1981; McGee 2002) or the loss of familiarity of its origin. Shils distinguishes tradition from fashion, suggesting that tradition requires three

generations of practice or more (1981:15). By defining tradition on a temporal basis, traditions considered legitimate are located apart from modernity in the distant past "[positing] a false dichotomy between tradition and modernity as fixed and mutually exclusive states" (Handler and Linnekin 1984:273). Because authenticity is dependent on the presence of tradition, authenticity, too, is qualified through distance from or absence of modernity.

### **Why Seeking the Authentic?**

Authenticity is a "cultural construct of the modern Western world" (Handler 1986:2). This term does not designate something that never was but rather assigns value to something that once was but has become misplaced in the modern world. Gable and Handler suggest that the modern (or postmodern) world inhabited by Westerners confers a sense of anxiety "that the world we inhabit is no longer authentic—that it has become fake, plastic, a kitschy imitation" (1996:568; Also Handler 1986:3). The authors found that because a sense of authenticity is gone from Westerners own daily experiences, people "want to find it again" (1996:568). But the ways that Westerners find authenticity reflects the conditions of their inescapably modern world. They do not want an eternal return to an



authentic existence, but rather a brief dose of authenticity. Since Westerners are trapped by a sense of fatalism in their capacity to reconfigure their own lives as authentic, they instead consume authenticity through material objects and experiences.

Richard Handler (1986) likens the ideology of cultural authenticity to advertising campaigns which promise consumers a real or authentic existence if choosing the product. The idea of lost authenticity, or the fallen condition of Western civilization, permeates consumer society so that, not only do people feel a need to buy a sense of reality, they hope to experience reality by visiting other cultures and places where authenticity is not yet lost.

However, since the modern world is too "fake" to be authentic, people (who become tourists) seek authenticity in other places. If authenticity is absent in the modern world, the idea follows that it may be present in less developed, hence less corrupted places.

### **The Problem of Authenticity**

For anthropologists and other scholars, the notions of cultural authenticity and tradition become problematic because the terms ultimately fail to explain the reality of

cultural practices, which inevitably involve ongoing innovation and exchange. The term authenticity references a "pure" or romantic past that anthropologists agree does not exist.

Culture change is not a new process. The tendency to suggest that indigenous peoples or groups were once culturally "pure" and only recently experienced a bastardization of their culture ignores the ongoing, if not eternally present, processes of culture change. As globalization has become an increasingly prevalent concept in academic press and the media, popular beliefs falsely establish a moral dichotomy of pre- and post-modern times.

Exposing authenticity for what it is and what it implies does not render the term useless but rather situates the notion as a strategic term, used by scholars and indigenous peoples alike, to gain cultural prestige and authority. Lacandones, like many other indigenous peoples, have come to recognize the value of authenticity. Lacandón men from Najá, who sell bow-and-arrows near the ruins of Palenque, divide the weapons into two sets: auténtico and inauténtico. The "authentic" bow-and-arrow sets cost nearly twice as much as the inauthentic sets. The salesmen describe to tourist why one particular set is authentic and the other is not, saying that the authentic weapons are

replicas of those used in the distant past; they are "real." The inauthentic sets are made for tourists and are not really part of their cultural practice or history; they are not part of traditional Lacandón way of life. In marketing themselves to tourists, Lacandones strategically co-opt the Western notion of authenticity.

In a similar instance, Jean Jackson describes how the Tukanoans of the Central Northwest Amazon are increasingly "folklorizing" their culture to acquire more "Indianness" (1995:19). Tukanoans, like Lacandones, were granted an enormous stretch of forest (3,354,097 hectares) and now "want to retain their Indian identity not only because they continue to value their traditions and autonomy but also because they increasingly need to demonstrate Indianness to obtain benefits from both government and NGOs" (Jackson 1995:12). Jackson finds such reconfigurations of culture unproblematic. He considers culture dynamic and adaptive and asserts that because of its nature, new and adopted cultural practices are equally genuine as practices from ancient pasts (Jackson 1995:20). Despite recognizing the bureaucratic forces guiding Indianness in Colombia, Jackson ultimately confers agency to the Turkanoans, suggesting that they are not passively accepting and incorporating Western notions of authenticity but rather "contesting and

negotiating what cultural forms they wish to retain, modify, or discard" (1995:6).

Jackson seems to understand that the Turkanoans are firmly in control of their own identities and use such identities to set their own agendas. However, among the Lacandones, I find that while they continually renegotiate their own identities, the terms of the negotiations are set by forces beyond their control. For Lacandones, access to power is available only within an extremely narrow and rigid model of representation set forth by the government, tourist industry and Western scholars. Certainly, Lacandones have the option to resist popular perceptions of *lacandonismo*, which though lucrative, are ultimately stigmatized. However, such options only exist outside the parameters of power and privilege conferred to Lacandones as an extension the imposed identities.

Lacandones are promoting an image and identity largely constructing by outsiders—anthropologists, archaeologists, travel writers, the Mexican government, the tourist industry, and popular perceptions of people in regions around the Selva Lacandona. Now, with the emergence of competing historical narratives, other indigenous peoples are questioning the authenticity, or notion of unadulterated cultural continuity, on which their

privileged status and control of the forest is based. By recognizing the control exerted by the government and other forces, Lacandón identities become a product of Western propaganda and power. Lacandones are certainly active in regenerating their identities for tourists, but even self-representations are to some measure not of their own creation. The future for Lacandones is uncertain, but their liminal position of control, insecurely situated between other indigenous peoples in the region and the government and NGOS, is anything but the idyllic, simplistic, and "pure" way of life they present to tourists.

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## VITA

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