



## Language and Culture Archives

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Making Comals  
#####  
Elizabeth Soney  
Comitán, Chiapas  
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## Introduction

In the state of Chiapas, just north of the Guatemala border, live the tribe of Tojolobal Indians, in small scattered villages. According to the official figures of the 1940 Mexico census monolinguals (that is, the population of five years or over) number 6882.

There are many Tojolobal Indians who are somewhat skilled in certain trades. The government sent in some of their workers who taught the men how to make tiles and bricks. Only two men know how to make these in the little village of Jotaná. The women and girls do lovely embroidery work. Some of them are skilled in making the ever-present comal (griddle) for their own use as well as for selling. This is what we will find discussed on the following pages.

By careful observation the writer of this article gathered all data. If the native woman, Leona by name, did something which the writer did not understand she would explain it in Spanish. The writer had spent almost three months in Jotaná, one of the Tojolobal villages.

## Making Comals

A native woman's home boasts of very few articles. These are mainly for cooking. One of the most important is the comal, or griddle. She cannot get along without this. A few of the others are a tiny three-legged stone table on which she grinds from early morning off and on throughout the day. A heavy grinding stone, the native 'rolling pin', a few crockery jugs for water, several gourds and a few baskets.

We are going to see how a Tojolobal Indian woman makes her comals. She uses a good grade of clay, a bit of water and a certain kind of rock.

This rock is found in the mountains. It contains something which looks like glass and sparkles like ising-glass. She pulverizes this rock by breaking it into very small pieces, from the size of pecans to the size of peas, finally mashing it with her grinding stone into a powder.

Now as she kneads the clay, the pulverized rock and water together she is careful to have it just exactly the consistency of dough. If there is too much clay the comals are likely to break so she tests it for grittiness by taking a little bit into her mouth and biting it. She adds more pulverized rock if necessary.

Now she takes part of this clay dough, and puts it on a wide, fairly smooth, flat board on which she has sprinkled sifted ashes to keep the clay from sticking. She pushes the

clay out from the center with her knuckles to form a round comal about 18 inches in diameter. The edges rise about an inch. She pokes around with her finger tips all over the flat center part for tiny stones or anything that might cause damage to the comal later. If she detects any she will remove them. She pats out the rough parts, continually adding drops of water to keep the clay from sticking to her hands. The final smoothening is made with a leather or rubber heel of a shoe, thinning out the center much more than the edges.

When it is all very smooth, she will put it out into the hot sunshine and partly dry it. As it begins to dry it will tend to pucker up in the center similar to a pie crust without filling, so she will place a heavy rock or two in the center of the comal to prevent this.

In the hot sun it will dry sufficiently within two hours. Now with an egg-shaped smooth rock she rubs off the sandy inside and edges to take off the extra grittiness. When the surface is very smooth it should look powdery-white. She does this to keep the tortillas, native corn patties, from sticking when she toasts them.

Now she builds a fire of corn cobs, pine sticks and wood. She places three large rocks or old bean jars upside down and sets the comal right side facing upward. She toasts it for about 15 minutes. This gives the comal a better chance to remain unbroken for the real test later.

Now she builds a bigger fire and again arranges three

rocks or old jars for the comals which are placed over the fire, one on top of the other, the top on with the bottom side up. Usually she has no more than three comals in the making at one time. Though they must be toasted separately she bakes them together. The two bottom comals are placed with the right sides facing upward.

She builds a wall of thick pine bark pieces around the comals, covers even the top of the comals with smaller pieces of bark. As the fire burns up the pieces of bark she adds more. It takes about an hour to thoroughly bake a comal or comals making them ready for use. To keep the fire going strong she adds sticks of pine, bits of bark or dry corn cobs.

When she thinks that they are ready she will scrape off the burning bark and with two sticks carefully take the comals off of the fire. They cool within an hour and are now ready for use.

The 18 inch size comal will sell for about twenty cents.