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Ms File Ethnological Notes on Chol Indians

H. W. Aulie, Tumbalá, Chiapas, Mexico

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Introduction

Topography The territory of the Chol Indians, who number approximately 25,000, is divided between whites or mestizos and Chols, and the history of the area is largely a story of the conflicts of the two groups. There are extensive coffee "fincas" and smaller "ranchos" as well as a few cattle ranches. The Chols are found on Ejidos, Hencerías, on their own land and in pueblos. The line where the mountains of Chiapas drop ~~off~~ almost abruptly into the plain of Tabasco marks the northern boundary of Chol country. Yajalón is the southernmost town where Chols are to be found. On the west the area is bounded by ~~the~~ Sabanilla and Aguas Calientes. To the east the Chols have been moving into the Bacoán and San Juan sierras and a few are to be found as far as the Palenque area.

Climate March and April are the hot and dry months of the year. It is at this time that fevers are most generally prevalent. From May to August the temperatures are moderated by the Summer showers that come each afternoon. April and May is the planting season for the Chols except in the La Trinidad and Salto areas where they may have as many as three crops a year. Beginning in August and extending through January the rains are almost incessant and the temperatures considerably lower. The coldest months are December and January. Our coldest morning during the 1946-47 season at Hidalgo was 47 degrees Fahrenheit early in February. During January the thermometer fell at night to about 60 degrees and rose on sunny days to 80.

Political organization

The Chols are not unlike other primitive peoples in their love for personal independence and genuine liberty. They prefer working their own rocky and precipitous milpas to gainful work on ranches of ladinos or foreigners even when they know the latter will give them a larger cash income. Another noteworthy element in chol life is the social tie that binds man to man without destroying individual liberty. Each man respects the independence of the other and yet there is a common bond that lies at the foundation of their living ~~existence~~ on and working land which is held in common. On the other hand they have practically no notion whatever of the idea of "state" or of the necessity for an organized authority. This is seen in the absence from their vocabulary of words for "law", "border", "justice", "society", "state", "government", etc.

Villages Most of the Indian villages were built without any apparent order. Huts are often built as close as two or three feet apart. In other locations huts are widely dispersed with grassy plots or trees and bushes between. A few villages follow the Spanish pattern- the centrally located plaza with the cabildo and school house at one end and streets running from each side of the plaza. Some of the towns carry Spanish names while others are known by Indian names.

Land A number of Indians live on ranch lands, having agreed to work for the owners a stipulated number of days each year at the prevailing wage rates. In some cases they must work as much as three days per week. Other Indians live on land they have purchased from ranch owners under a labor contract providing that they work for

the ranch a certain number of days each year until the contract is executed. By far the majority of Indians, however, live in villages which are either pueblos, ejidos or rancherías. Those living on ejidos divide up the land among themselves for the making of milpas.

Town In the typical village of Hidalgo the town officers are: the officers-presidente, tesorero, konerol, alcalde (of which there are 4), and the juez. The judge handles only minor offenses and disputes, referring more serious matters to the presidente of Tumbalá. Each officer holds office for a year and chooses his successor for the coming year. There are also six "wasiles" each year. Two serve the town's "agente" for a week in a stretch, each wasil serving one week out of three throughout the year. Every townsman is expected to serve two years as wasil during his life-time. Their principal duties include carrying wood and water for the agente, preparing his milpa and the delivering of messages.

Town elders The older men of the town are called "noxix", old. Two of them, apparently by self-appointment, have the responsibility of finding a house to provide a pig and liquor, and also of appointing annually a "motoma" whose duty it is to care for the church. The house providing the pig and the liquor entertains the men of the village in a fiesta occasion.

Church warden The "motoma" serves without compensation, keeping the church in order, opening up for fiestas and contributing at his own expense as follows:

"k'in santo"-buys bananas for all participants in the Good Friday fiesta.

"paxku"- buys atole, "cats" (tortillas with beans) and chayote. He fasts for one week prior to his induction into office in March.

Local govt. The towns in the Chol area fall under the jurisdiction of one of three presidencias: Salto, Tumbalá and Yajalón. Each presidencia has a representative in Tuxtla. Although the constitution provides for the popular vote and guarantees the Indian a vote, the representative who actually wins an election is one who is "approved" by the Governor of the state.

Physical characteristics

The average Indian is short of stature and is of a slight build. His skin is dark and his hair black. Only a few of the older men have beards. Some have ear-lobes and others have the "criminal ear". Lips are full, but not as pronounced as negro types. Baldness is rare. Although the color of hair is uniformly black, Indians have been seen with copper-colored and with brownish hair.. Many infants but far from all, are born with the Mongolian mark.

Diseases Malaria, rheumatic fever, intestinal parasites, heart irregularities, swollen legs, infected ears and skin and bad blood evident in leg sores are the more common maladies. Cases of schistosomiasis have been reported.

Material culture

Fire Each hut has one or two wood fires on the earthen floor. The smoke escapes either through an opening at the top of the wall or through the opening in the peak of the roof. It is the work of the men to cut down trees with a machete or axe during the winter months, usually on the plot to be planted to corn in the next season. Women and children help in carrying on their backs the 4 ft. pieces of

firewood to burn on their cornfields which is not needed for fuel is burned on the spot. It is the work of the women to start the fire early in the morning, with a match, a brand from a neighbor's fire, or merely by pushing the sticks together which are lying in a fan shape between stones that support their cooking pots.

The staples in the Chol diet are corn, beans, native grown coffee and salt. Corn is commonly prepared in the form of corn cakes called "waj" or tortillas and "sa" or osol which is a drink made of water and ground, cooked corn. Other common foods which supplement the diet in season, but which are not used by all are:

ajkam	camote	sweet potatoes
ajtso'	pavo	turkey
buk'ch'un		seed of calabaza
chilin		corn ground fine and roasted
chitam	puerco	hog
chay	pescado	fish
ch'un	calabaza	squash
ich'	chile	chile
ja'as	platanos	bananas
juk'	quequeste	a root
koyya'	tomato	tomatoe
koyyo'	agucate	avocado
makom	moras	blackberries
mut	pollo	chicken
ni'uk'	chayote	chayote
vanola	anela	raw brown sugar
puy	caracol	snails
sikab	caña	sugar cane
ten k'ech	seta	mushrooms
tumut	huevos	eggs
ts'ijn	yucca	a root
wajtan		corn on cob
wakax	baca	beef
welux	puerros	leeks
xu'	chinche	bugs

Hogs

The hog is perhaps the most important animal in the Chol economy. It is almost their sole source of meat. Allowed to run loose ~~xxxx~~ in the villages, the hogs serve as scavengers, since there are no sanitary facilities. One of the women's tasks is to feed shelled corn to the hogs. In most cases this is done within the hut so that neighbor's pigs don't get any of the corn. When the hogs are slaughtered all the meat is eaten within a day or two by the family and friends and lard is rendered and sold for ready cash.

Dogs

Next in importance is the dog. Almost every hut has two or three ~~xxxxxx~~ that are kept as watch-dogs against thieves who would take corn, chickens, turkeys or pigs.

Chickens

The few eggs the chickens lay are usually sold rather than eaten since their price is high compared to labor. Chicken is a delicacy the Indians enjoy as often as possible.

Turkeys

Turkeys are raised for meat. Almost every family has some of these fowl as well as chickens. Ducks may be seen occasionally, but they are not commonly raised.

Cats

No cats have been seen in the village of Aidalgo. If there were any they would undoubtedly be short-lived creatures because of the numerous dogs.

Housing

Houses are built of timber and bamboo poles plastered with mud, or of split logs placed upright on the ground and tied to horizontal supports. The roofs are thatched with zacate, alfa or corn leaves. The component parts of a mud hut are as follows:

- otot house
- ti'otot door
- oy, jorion vertical corner post
- i xujk' corner
- kukul beams resting on oy
- i na'al beams of ceiling at angles and resting on kukul
- chumte upright stakes in walls tied to i na'al and serve for fastening of bamboo poles in walls
- ximal lengthwise beams of ceiling

Building procedure:

1. Drive in 4 corner posts.
2. Lay kukul the length of the house.
3. Lay 2 ximal the width of the house.
4. Lay 1 k'iyote'el parallel to the ximal.
5. Lay 1 na'al parallel to the kukul.
6. Lay 1 na'al parallel to the ximal.
7. Drive in chumte and fasten to i na'al
8. Arrange i muchil - 5 at each end of house to support i'jol
9. Fasten sakte'el in diagonal position to i'jol above and na'al below.

Dress

White unbleached muslin is purchased in Mexican towns by the men when they go on a "paxeyal", casejo. From this material the women sew pantalons (wexal), the trouser legs of which are worn rolled to the knees by most Indian men. Long-sleeved shirts (bujla) which button in front are made after the pattern of tailored Mexican shirts.

for the men

for women

Skirts (majts) are sewn from blue denim, sometimes with embroidery. Blouses, with embroidered borders are sewn from white, unbleached muslin.

Girls wear dresses (bujkal), the same as a man's shirt, made of muslin, or another inexpensive material. Skirts of women and girls come below the knees. Skirts are also used in bathing, for bathing suits would be considered modest.

Boys wear muslin dresses (bujkal) until they are about 10 years old when they wear pantaloons and shirts as men. None of the Indians wear underclothing except a few men who are occasionally seen with undershirts.

Trade
and
money

Some of the Chols have cafetales which they either acquired through the distribution of expropriated plantation properties or by planting themselves. Those few Indians who are so fortunate in having cafetales in addition to their milpas have an annual cash income from the sale of coffee which gives them a degree of independence. The majority of Indians, however, must depend upon the staple foods grown by themselves. When in need of cash to purchase cloth, machetes, files, salt or other simple household needs they must either sell corn, beans or eggs, or work by the day on ranches or in one of the Mexican towns. The average coffee grower operates a store in connection with his ranch where he sells to the Indians on credit, binding them to work back to pay off their debts. The money in use is the Mexican currency.

Transportation

Existing mountain trails are not passable by wheeled vehicles. Transportation between Mexican towns is by horse and mule. Air service links Yajalón with Tuxtla and with Salto and Villa Hermosa. Private operators have been flying coffee and hogs to Salto and Las Casas for about the same cost as overland transportation. We have not known any Indian in Hidalgo, a village of some 700 inhabitants, to own a mule. They carry all their firewood and crops on their backs, and plant corn on mountain sides which could not be worked by animals.

Social culture.

Birth

There is no apparent separation of the mother from the society of other Indians either before or after the birth of the child. It is believed that a woman who is with child can cause the sickness (yat) of babies. The same harmful influence is attributed to the husband of a pregnant woman. Mothers continue their work shelling and grinding corn and making tortillas up until the time the child is born. Afterwards they lie down on their beds of planks for a few days before resuming their duties. It is believed some meat will not cook properly if a pregnant woman looks at it.

A special class of women perform the functions of midwifery. There is no fee charged, but it is expected that sometime after the birth of the child the family of the child will invite to their home the midwife and her family for a drinking party.

The umbilical cord is cut as long as possible and tied in a ball on the baby's stomach until it dries up and falls off. It is believed that to cut the cord short would rob the baby of its strength.

For privacy a section of the hut is screened off with a blanket for the mother. However, it appears that individuals of all ages have witnessed births. Strangers are not permitted to see babies since it is believed that an evil eye might bring sickness upon the infant.

When the baby is old enough to be taken out, the mother frees her hand for work by entrusting it to an older sister who is very often no more than 6 or 8 years of age. The sister carries the baby on her hip or in a sling on the back until it is old enough to walk. They fear that the baby will fall a prey to an evil spirit if it is left alone or falls to the ground. Although they fear falling on the ground they have no fear of dirt in their food or on their persons. Eating dirt is a vice of many children. The age at which weaning takes place varies widely. Some children are still nursing at two years of age. Posol is given as soon as the mother does not have enough milk for the child.

Since the births of Indians began to be registered, they have been taking Mexican names. And they are acquainted with so few that often names are duplicated within a family. There is no special significance attached to names aside from the relationships established when a child is named for another person. For a discussion of this please see the article on kinship terms.

The play period of the average child is short. Ten year old boys accompany their older brothers to the fields to do their bit. Even at that age they learn to carry small loads on their backs, protecting their backs with a piece of skin as their fathers do.

A wooden cross measuring about 3 or 4 inches by 10 or 12 inches is made for every new born babe in the village of Hidalgo. This practice is not observed in all villages. Hidalgo midwives initiate the practice in recent years as the belief grew that possession of the cross for the child appeases spirits who might otherwise cause the child to cry much during the first six months of its life or to bring on illnesses. If the child dies the cross is put in the grave with the body. It is explained that there is no further use for the cross and they might just as well bury it with the body.

If a mother dies leaving children (meba alal), her mother or her sister, if there are any, will take care of the bereft children. If the grandmother is not living the children are thrown upon the mercies of the neighbors. If none take them in, they die. The fact that the Indians have no special name for children who have lost a father or father and mother, other than meba alal for those with a mother indicates that they regard the father as to be of little importance in the raising of children apart from the making of corn fields.

Because parents do not trust the Mexican school-teachers who generally are young, unmarried men, few of them send their girls to school. Boys older than 12 are seldom seen in school unless in evening classes conducted by some of the teachers for adults. Older boys are needed in the fields. Many have been taught that to spend much time in school renders one unfit for a life of labor. Teaching in the schools is almost entirely limited to the Spanish

alphabet and the Spanish numerals. The school teachers, who use Spanish in classes almost exclusively, know every little of the idiom. On the other hand, the students know but very little Spanish. After two or three years in school, having learned little more than the Spanish alphabet and a few numbers, the boys leave school to work in the milpas.

Marriage Courtship as we know it has not been observed among the Indians. When a boy gets to be 15 or 16 years of age and works in the milpas as a man, he begins to think about starting a family of his own. Seeing a girl that he likes, he asks his father if he would ask the father of the girl for his daughter. The boy does not speak to the girl first. The fathers, or the respective parents, then arrange the terms of the proposed marriage. The boy must pay cash, merchandise, liquor or labor to the parents of the girl he wishes to marry. Sometimes no more is required of the boy than to furnish pan or dulces with gacinosaz for the marriage festivities. ~~They~~ The parents of the girl may ask the boy to live with them in their house for two years after marriage to work for them.

While monogamy is the general rule, cases of polygamy are frequent. In such instances the wives may live in the same hut. Only a few Indians marry legally as the fees are high in terms of the ability of the Indians to pay. The majority of married couples are tied by no other bond than the common sanctions of the community which recognizes the marriage state.

Death Burials are made the same day death occurs, or no later than the second day, to conform with Mexican law which requires interment within 24 hours. The best clothes the person had, or new ones, are put on the body and it is covered with a fresh sheet of manta. The head is wrapped, leaving the face exposed. The hands are laid across the chest. Families that can afford it purchase a simple wooden box for a coffin. Friends and neighbors of the deceased gather at the house before the body is taken away, bringing candles to burn at the head of the body or ~~cash~~ or gifts of cash with which to purchase candles or liquor. Liquor is passed around and general confusion follows, with professional wailing ~~and~~ the jabbering of those under the influence of liquor and the laughing of children. Men from the neighborhood dig the grave to a depth of six or seven feet, making a shelf at the bottom in the north wall of the east-west grave. The body is carried to the site at the head of a procession while the school bell tolls. The body is lowered with ropes and laid on the shelf with its head to the west. Candles are placed in the grave beside the body together with a moral, several tsimas and bits of salt. Then the entrance to the shelf is walled up with planks or poles and mud so that earth cannot fill in on the body. Usually the eyes of the dead are closed, although I did see a 7 months old baby buried with its eyes open. When a body is not buried until the second day, the family and friends sit up around the body through the night ~~wailing~~, dropping off one by one from sheer exhaustion from the drinking and wailing. The drinking and wailing may continue after the burial for one or two weeks.

The practice described above of burying certain objects with the body was observed in Hidalgo. In La Cueva all the clothes of the deceased are buried with the body. This seems to serve no other purpose than a sanitary one since illness usually precedes death. La Cueva people do not bury objects with their dead.

Aesthetic culture.

A few of the Indians have inexpensive banjos, ukes, or harmonicas. There is almost no singing. A kind of chant is used by mourners at funerals who continue it for some days. As often as not the chant accompanies a dance. No dance or chant other than that used for mourning has been observed. Indian boys did not whistle before the heard us whistle. Those who have instruments often used them at their fire sides in the evening hours.

The only art work observed is embroidery on women's blouses. A few of the women embroider their skirts as well. As for the men, that type of work which most nearly approaches art is really a skill- that is, the making of string (chij) from the maguey plant which is also called chij.

Religion.

Every man, and every animal, has a spirit, called "ch'uilel". Animism There are also spirits in the world, "panimil", called "xiba". By "in the world" the Indians include the air, caves, the ground and certain objects. The origin of these spirits is not explained. It is simply believed that "they always are". The powers ascribed to spirits indicate personality, for they move about freely at will, may attach themselves to an object or person and may do either good or bad. They do not have names.

The spirits are said to be controlled by God, but may be entreated and called by man. Appearances may be in a dream, or as a ghost. An acquaintance of Román Mendez reported seeing a short figure like a man's in the shadow of a wooden cross. The figure danced, talked, sat down and leaned against the cross. There is no claimed to be any connection between spirits that are in the world those which are in men and animals. The spirit which is in an animal may be identical with one that is in a man. When the animal dies, the man may die also.

Many families have a cross fastened to a wall of their hut. Believing a spirit is associated with it, they worship the object, entreating that they be kept from evil.

Spirits do not actually enter objects, but attach themselves to the objects. However, they are in the ground. They may not enter a person, but as with objects, they may attach themselves to the person. A man who professed to have 12 spirits appeared and talked as any other man.

Spirits in the ground can be offended by digging. If a child falls on the ground, a spirit in the ground might make the child ill. The spirit may be appeased by bringing herbs to the spot where the child fell.

Chusiabe in Tumbalá called a spiritist to ask him to talk to a spirit in behalf of his mother who was ill. After protests from the spirit Chusiabe persuaded him with the promise of liquor and money. Whereupon the spiritist brought and adorned a cross, entreating a spirit to come. A spirit said the woman would not die if a certain medicine was prepared. They followed instructions, placing one end of a piece of bamboo in the medicine and the other end to the woman's nose. One hundred bugs came out of the woman's nose and she got well.

Shortly before the plague of grasshoppers which devastated Chiapas, a spiritist urged the Indians to plant bananas and squash, saying that God who sends rains to bless would punish them for their sins.

Gaspar Arcos, a spiritist, told Román Mendez when he turned to evangelical Christianity that he would die within the year. While this spiritist hated the Gospel, another told Román it was a good thing to learn the Gospel.

Special functions are not ascribed to certain spirits. They do not favor either good or evil people. Their attack might be in the form of torment, through dreams, in sickness, accident or damage to house or crops.

uper-
titions

The Hidalgo Chols do not throw egg shells away, but put them on the ends of upright sticks near their huts, because they believe offended spirits will prevent the chickens from laying eggs if the shells are thrown away. This is not practiced in some other Chol villages.

La Cueva Indians used to cut wood for constructing their houses only on Fridays, averring that houses built of wood cut on other days would be plagued with spirits. The La Cueva Indians have abandoned this practice within the last two years.

hamanism

According to information gotten in Hidalgo, there seem to be two classes of shamans, brojos and spiritistas. It is believed that persons having two rings of hair on the top of the head called sutatik are brojos. They are alleged to have the power of healing and again they may cause illness. They may put what appears to be cats' hair or lint from a fed blanket in the drinking vessel of another person which causes sickness.

The spiritisto is a person who has the power of invoking the spirits, whether for good or for bad.

omen
and
eligion

The women take practically no part, either in the fiestas of the catholics or in the weekly gatherings on Sundays of the evangelicals. By nature they are of a timid and reticent disposition when in public. Few girls attend school, even in villages which have school teachers. Their non-attendance at school is due partly to their parents' distrust of the teachers who invariably are ladino men. As a consequence a literate Indian woman is a rarity. In evangelical meetings the men sit on one side of the chapel and the women on ~~another~~ the other. In some locations the men use one door of the meeting house while the women use another. There is also little social intermingling between men and women in the villages. When a number of families cooperate in the killing of a hog or beef, the men form one group while the women keep to themselves. They are followers and accept as a matter of course their tasks of grinding corn and making tortillas, carrying wood for the fire and bearing children. They seldom get to a Mexican town or to other Indian villages than their own. On the whole, they are more superstitious than the men.

Fiestas In February the fiesta called kaxturientu is held in Tumbalá. Also in Tumbalá, paxku is observed during the 10 days preceding Easter. The Chol paxku is probably a loan word from the Spanish paschua. In this fiesta there is a daily procession of men, walking very slowly, from dawn to dark, bareheaded, not looking anywhere but at their feet, neither smiling nor talking and carrying crosses. They eat but very little, but drink much liquor.

The fiesta of Miguel occurs in May, Terensa in October, k'in santo (Todos Santos) in October and Guadalupe and Presentación in December.

Musical instruments The musical instruments in common use are:
 laj te' tambor
 amuy reed instrument
 i pat ajk the shell of a turtle
 chikix a rattle