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Expressions of Time Among the Orientals

Tapotzingo, Tabasco

May, 1944

Submitted by Kathryn Keller

The Chontals are a tribe of Mayan Indians living in the lowlands of Tabasco and numbering about 16,500. They make straw hats and raise corn for a living. The Spanish influence is noticed in several phases, including the language.

This report has been written to preserve Chontal expressions of time ; also to show the Indian thought pattern along this line. It also gives an idea of their culture, as they still tell time by the sun and roosters.

Two professors of the University of Mexico have made brief studies of the language, as well as members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. To date a complete study has not been done. Material for this report was gathered with the help of Sanon Luciano, a 22 year old native of Tapotzingo, and Catalino de la Cruz, a middle aged man.

In general, the symbols used for the Chontal words are phonetic symbols. The question mark indicates a glottal stop or a glottalized consonant. The ^h is a high back open unrounded vowel.

The Ohontal Indians of Tabasco reckon time by the shadows of the sun by day, and by the shadow of the moon by night or the crowing of the roosters. Some of their expressions are quite picturesque. Following is a list, giving the approximate hour, the corresponding Ohontal word written phonetically, and its literal translation. In some cases there are alternate forms. Where these occur, the most common has been chosen.

12 midnight	t ^h nship ak ^h ap	middle of the night
1 o'clock	ump ^h e uyuk ^h e piyo ^h	the rooster's first cry
2	chap ^h ?elip uyuk ^h e piyo ^h	the rooster's second cry
3	uyushp ^h ?elip uyuk ^h e piyo ^h	the rooster's third cry
4	ch ^h amp ^h ?elip uyuk ^h e piyo ^h	the rooster's fourth cry
6	ah ^h nch ^h akni	it is getting light
5-6-7	ik ^h sapap	the darkness measures its breath
8-9	at ^h ? ^h bik ^h ?ip	the sun climbed up
10-11	at ^h ? ^h t ^h ? ^h bik ^h ?ip	the sun climbed far up
12 noon	t ^h nshipk ^h ?ip	middle of the day
1	uk ^h ? ^h st ^h ?elubak ^h ?ip	the sun is tilting a little
2	ut ^h ?elubak ^h ?ip	the sun is tilting
3-4	oohik ^h ?ip	the sun came in
5	at ^h ?oohik ^h ?ip	the sun came far in
6	pomek ^h ?ip	the sun is sinking
7-8	apomik ^h ?ip	the sun sank
9-12	ak ^h ?ap	night

There is no regular word for day aside from kʔip , meaning sun. The day is divided into two parts--sami, which means anytime before now; and dali, which means anytime after now. Thus these words do not correspond to morning and afternoon.

The Ohontals have a word for a week of six working days, (pʔtonekʔip), but use the Spanish word for our concept of a seven day week. The Spanish names for the days of the week are most commonly used, though they have their own manner of expressing each:

Monday	nahtʔkʔlkʔip	first day
Tuesday	chapiʔelip kʔip	second day
Wednesday	uyushpiʔelip kʔip	third day
Thursday	uchʔmpʔelip kʔip	fourth day
Friday	uhopiʔelip kʔip	fifth day
Saturday	uwʔkpʔelip kʔip	sixth day
	ushupiba kʔip	the days are finished
Sunday	kʔip chʔuh	Church day

The words reckoned backwards and forwards from a given date present interesting vowel changes:

	today			
tomorrow	ikʔʔ	yesterday	ʔkʔʔbi	
2 days future	chabi	2 days ago	chʔbi	
3 days future	ushi	3 days ago	yush kʔip	
	this year - hap			
next year	uahap	last year	uahʔbi	
2 years from now	yushhap	2 years ago	yushhʔbi	