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Marriage among the Zoques

by

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The following is a sketch of the chief features of marriage as it is observed among the Zoque Indians of the Copainalá, Chiapas district. A considerable number of informants have contributed to the gathering of data, the chief of whom were: Juana Vásquez, Elvira Sánchez, Teofila Sánchez and Reynalda Sánchez.

The main points dealt with in this manuscript are: the determination of mates, methods of acquiring a wife, residence and remarriage.

Marriage among the Zoques

As most societies, this people recoil from the idea of parents mating with their offspring and brothers with sisters. However marriage within one's local unit is favoured, but a mate may also be taken from a distant village as long as it is within the same dialect area. Although they do not favour marrying into other dialects, it is possible. First cousins are the nearest marriageable kin in one's own generation but first-cousin marriages are rather rare. It is preferable to marry into a family other than one's own. There is no objection however to marrying individuals of the same surname.

A girl is normally married a few years after puberty, possibly 16, 17 or 18. However it is reported that in other villages more remote and belonging to another dialect, girls are married at puberty, possibly 11 to 14. A bride should be adept at grinding corn, making tortillas, cooking and supplying water. Perhaps because of her youth at the time of marriage, she begins to learn these household duties at an early age, sometimes as early as five years.

Courting is done by the male members of society. The suitor approaches the girl's father to ask his permission to court his daughter. The father in turn asks his daughter's wishes in the matter. These first few visits of the suitor are referred to as "mekyajpa" from the verb stem meaning "to court". If the daughter's answer has been in the affirmative, then takes place what is called "emprendatsajkyaju" taken from the Spanish "emprender" meaning "to undertake" or "to engage in". The suitor brings to the home of the girl, his father

mother, godmother and one other person as witnesses to the "engagement". They come laden with gifts, bought by the young man for the girl's father, which normally include bread, chocolate, liquor, cigarettes and a turkey. The girl's godmother is the fortunate recipient of a like assortment of gifts on the same occasion. The suitor bears all the expense and in return, becomes recognized by society, as the girl's fiancé. After this occasion, the two parties concerned may delay marriage for several months or as long as a year. During this time the fiancé keeps up his weekly visits with more gifts of liquor and cigarettes for his future father-in-law. The prospective groom is also expected to work occasionally without pay for the girl's father. This work may be offered during coffee picking or other busy seasons of the year or may just mean the cutting of a load of wood each weekend.

Marriage is sometimes consecrated by religious ritual. If the prospective husband has been able to set aside enough money, he and his bride are married by the state and the church, otherwise only by the state. The church wedding is always accompanied by the ringing of church bells and explosion of fireworks followed by the customary dancing, feasting and drinking. Marriage by the state is accompanied by the same jubilation and fiesta. However there are those, as a result of poverty or by their own choice, just begin living together. The woman in the last case is sometimes referred to as "borrowed".

The groom is responsible for all the expenses

incurred by the wedding--his and his bride's wedding clothes, the calf or pig, or both, to supply a feast for the two families concerned, bread, chocolate, liquor and the marimba for a day and night of dancing after the wedding. The bride and groom receive gifts of clothes and household utensils from the two godmothers of the bride, the godmother who assisted at her christening and the other who assists at the wedding.

The residence of a newly married couple is normally patrilocal. The bride goes with the groom to live in her father-in-law's home for a year. After that time the two may set up an establishment of their own but always close to his kin. This preference for patrilocal residence is probably the reason that a certain known village of sixteen homes is peopled almost wholly by the descendants of two men, that is, their sons and grandsons with their families.

The preferred way of providing for the remarriage of widowed persons is by the levirate, but it is not too strongly enforced as shown in the case of one woman who refused to marry her dead husband's younger brother because of his reputation for laziness. But upon the death of one of the mates the bond between the two families is not necessarily broken. If the male partner dies, his widow may stay on working in his father's house along with her in-laws or may leave to re-marry. If she remarries into another family, her children by her first husband are not looked upon as favourably by the step-father.

Monogamy is the rule of the tribe but there

are a few cases where one man has two wives. However men have opportunity for sex relations outside of matrimony and have children by women other than their wives. These women are not supported by the men, although they may receive occasional help from them, but seek to provide a living for themselves and their offspring.