



## Language and Culture Archives

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A Sketch of some Zoque Ecology.

by

W. R. Harrison,  
Copainalá, Chiapas, Mexico.

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The Zoque language belongs to the Linguistic group known as the Mixe-Zoque family. It includes Mixe, Zoque, Popoluca of Vera Cruz and other minor languages. The Zoque speech community is confined mainly to the State of Chiapas, Mexico, chiefly to the District of Mezcalapa.

The following data was obtained from a number of informants from the Copainalá district, of whom may be mentioned, Selso Sánchez, Macario Sánchez, Manuel García and Rodrigo Guzmán.

This manuscript contains notes on the food, divisions in labour, structure of homes, furniture and utensils of the Zoque Indians.

Food :

The Zoque people live in the mountainous district of Mezcalapa and have as their main source of food, corn and beans. There are two kinds of beans, small black ones and a larger species known as 'Boñil'. These latter are largely grown in with the corn and do not require much cultivation. They ordinarily grow from four to six feet high. The small black ones are planted in a separate place but grow so fast the people are able to plant corn on the same ground. The beans are ready to pull by the time the corn is a few inches high.

Though civilization has brought many things to these people, it has not changed their mode of cultivation very much. They still plant corn with a dibble which may have a sharp piece of iron on one end of it. There is little or no cultivation, the main reason, no doubt, being because their cornfields are on the sides of mountains sometimes so steep one can hardly walk on them. They maintain these cornfields without cultivation by moving them from year to year. This means they often go many miles to work and so one may find a small brush shelter in the field built for temporary stays. To prepare the land they simply cut the brush and trees, leave it for a week or two, then burn it. Without any further preparation they make a hole with the dibble, drop in six or seven kernels and step on it. The reason for so many kernels is because rot and grubs may cause the loss of some of them. The corn is planted from two to three feet apart and six inches deep, the depth being to insure protection from winds and rains.

When the corn is about one foot in height they start to cut the weeds and tender brush from around it. This clearing is done with a machete rather than a hoe and involves bending over all day in the hot sun to complete the work.

Coffee is also cultivated and besides providing for home consumption yields financial gains.

#### Divisions of Labour :

The planting and cultivation of the crops, as well as the gathering of them, is done by the men, the women having no part except the shelling of the corn for planting. The men clean the brush from the coffee groves and hull the coffee while the women and children help in picking and do the sorting and drying. They also gather wild roots and fruit. In the making of pottery, the men get the materials, often carrying the clay for long distances over the mountains in order to get the right kind. They prepare the fires and do the burning of the pottery while the women form them and care for them while being sun-dried. Apart from this work the women are mainly taken up with caring for the house and children. While the women have very little part in the outdoor work they do have means of earning money for themselves. They may have their own hens and coffee, the money from the sale of which, is theirs. Some of them, especially single girls, do embroidery and crochet work to sell.

### Fire and Shelter :

Fires are a necessity to these people. They are kept going all day and at night kept alive by covering them with ashes. If one should go out a fire brand is sought from a neighbour. If one is not readily found they will resort to matches.

Their houses are long and narrow, the length usually being twice that of the width. They have rough dirt floors and walls of small poles (or canes) plastered with mud. Very seldom are they whitewashed. The roofs are usually four-sided and steep, made of cane or corn grass tied into small bundles. This is then tied onto the poles on the roof with vines, there being no nails used in the building. They always have a type of veranda in front of the house perhaps three feet wide under which they may pile wood and pound coffee. Many also keep bees in a hollowed out log under this shelter.

These houses are never completely ceiled. They have a few feet of rough ceiling at one end normally used for stacking corn and boxes. The joists, with small poles laid on them, serve for drying beans. Some of the houses have no doors, only rough hewn boards to lean against the opening at night. Neither do they have windows. Most of their houses have only one room. If a person gets sick a couple of straw mats are tied on string around the bed to shut him off from the rest of the house. The main articles of furniture are a few pieces of wood about six inches high for chairs, and a wide, thick board

on poles about two feet high on which rests the stone for grinding coffee, cacao beans and corn. In one corner of the house are two curved pieces of baked brick or three stones on which they place a large earthen kettle for cooking. Under this they build the fire. There are also a few shelves of cane on which are kept their earthen 'dishes'. If not too poor the family may have one or two rope beds and a hammock. Otherwise they sleep on straw mats on the floor. One door, a few tiny peep holes in the walls along with the smoke from the open fire, often make the house a gloomy place. Pine pitch sticks are burned for illumination at night.

#### Containers :

Although most of this people's bigger utensils are of pottery there is only one centre for making it. All their cooking is done in pottery, mostly in one big pot holding about three gallons. One household may have as many as ten of these pots, but three or four is more customary. They may also have many smaller ones. A few families have special large ones which are set up on the veranda and used for making soap. A large flat one is used for toasting corn bread (tortillas) and coffee. Small hollowed out gourds of various shapes and sizes are used for drinking cups and soup bowls. Gourds are also used for measuring corn and beans. Water is carried in a small-mouthed earthen jug holding about two gallons.