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ETHNOLOGICAL MATERIAL CONCERNING THE CHONTAL

INDIAN TRIBE OF OAXACA, MEXICO

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NAME OF TRIBE. The name Chontal is supposedly taken from the Aztec, meaning 'stranger', and was probably given to this tribe of Indians by the Aztecs as a description of their character. The members of the tribe speak of their language as lataygui?. The name Tequistlateco has been given to the tribe by anthropologists to distinguish it from the totally distinct Chontal Indian tribe of Tabasco. There are two major dialects of the tribe in Oaxaca, one is found in hot country and the other in cold country. This paper is concerned with the dialect of the hot country.

POPULATION. Both dialects of the Chontal language include between eight and nine thousand Indians spread between approximately twenty towns and their surrounding ranches. The hot country dialect includes between four and five thousand Indians between the two towns of Huamelula and Santiago Astata and the surrounding ranches which mostly belong to Huamelula.

ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS. The Chontales are located in the state of Oaxaca in the districts of Yautepec and Tehuantepec. The district of the hot country dialect is located about thirty-five miles "as the crow flies" from the larger city of Salina Cruz, going generally north along the coast. The altitude varies from 100 feet in the valleys to 1,000 feet at the

mountain peaks. Mountains cover a large part of the area, bordered on the west by the Pacific Ocean. Two or three rivers feed into the ocean, though in the dry season they practically dry up. Various lakes and lagoons have been formed by rising, then recession, of the tide. Large sandy stretches of ground from which the ocean tides have receded have been utilized as salt flats, from which the area gets its main supply of salt. There are minerals located in one of the larger lakes which has a reddish hue, but no minerals are mined.

CLIMATE. The months of June to September are generally the rainy season. In June it rains intermittently about three or four days at a time, then stops for about a week. More rain descends in July. August is generally dry but humid. Rainy season resumes in September in all its fury, when there are usually many storms and heavy rains. The winds blow from December through February, after which the weather generally increases in heat and humidity till the rains begin once more.

FAUNA. There is a tropical scrub located on the mountains, though the valleys are more green and productive. There are some light forest areas scattered nearby. Many fruits flourish: watermelon, papaya, mangos, pineapple, bananas, lemons, cocoanuts, some oranges, plums, pine nuts and nanches. Sugar cane, beans, corn and sesame are the main cultivated crops. Flowers bloom all through the towns under domestic care, as well as along the trails and fields. Some of them are: oleanders, jasmines, coral vines,

and marigolds.

In the lakes, rivers and ocean the natives find lobsters, shrimp, sardines, and many other kinds of fish. The main types of birds are: mockingbird, woodpecker, dove, pigeon, parrots (all sizes), chicken hawk and many buzzards and vultures. Mosquitoes, gnats, horseflies and flies are the main insects in the area. There is not too much wild life, although there are some wildcats, a certain kind of tiger, rabbits, iguanas and a few others. Domestic animals are: burros, cattle, oxen, dogs, goats, pigs and cats.

HISTORY. The art of story-telling has been lost in the tribe for about forty or fifty years, thus losing much of the legendary history. The Chontales are supposed to have been a wild, war-like people from Peru, who arrived on these shores and tried to find a place to live, but no one wanted them. Finally they found house room by the Mixes who are north of the present Chontal district. About 100 years ago they were subdued by the Friars, who Christianized them; made them quit being war-like and taught them many things. The Chontales then became prosperous, learned to ride horses and generally made progress.

LANGUAGE. The Chontales of Oaxaca belong to the Hokan language family. The Friars who came to Christianize the people used the Spanish orthography and translated "The Lord's Prayer", the sacraments, the church laws, "The Ten Commandments" and a few other

things. A lawyer wrote out a grammar using the same such orthography in high country dialect. At the present time the children all speak Spanish but understand some Chontal, though they do not speak it. The young people begin speaking Chontal when they are married. The people are very proud of their language.

PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. The Chontales are a decided mixture of races. The original Indians were of small stature, compact measurements, brown skin, long black hair and with Indian features. A peaceful Zapotec Indian invasion took place about 50 years ago, which probably brought an infiltration of Spanish characteristics such as lighter complexion, lighter hair, taller stature and finer facial characteristics. Possibly some Spaniards passed through or were settled in the area from time to time. There is a decided presence of Negro blood shown by kinky hair, very dark skin, broad nose, protruding teeth and large lips. These characteristics seem to be well mixed with the Indian and Spanish characteristics. Possibly Mexicans passing through the town, with their previous intermingling, left many various characteristics. The children have very white, even teeth, but the older people have many teeth missing and those remaining are very crooked, causing a "snaggle-tooth" appearance.

The women and girls generally let their hair grow very long and braid it with wide, bright colored ribbons. Generally the women wash and comb their hair regularly. Permanent waves have

been introduced by girls who have gone to the city to work. The bodies of the Chontales are generally not hairy, or just barely so.

The reaction to pain is dependent upon the individual. Some are able to bear much pain; others, very little. They are much more likely to cry from sentiment than from pain.

The people are very clean, both in body and in homes. A Chontal will go to the river for a bath every other day, if not every day. In hot weather they may go to the river two or three times a day.

DEGREE OF ACCULTURATION: The Chontales have adopted many Mexican and many Zapotec culture traits. Fruit throwing, flower throwing and type of dress are Zapotec. The piñata is an acquired Mexican culture trait. The people buy cans of Mexican chilis to eat. The men and boys wear regular trousers and shirts of Mexican style. Some of the high school age boys even wear shoes and socks. The little girls wear stylish dresses copied from catalogs. Generally, an increased number of Mexican traits are being acquired.

FIRE. Fire is used for cooking food primarily. Either matches or borrowed coals are used for making fire. On the mountainsides just outside the villages the women and children gather wood from scrub trees. The children consider this great fun.

FOOD. The men of the towns have their fields of corn and beans. The fruit trees grow near the towns. Domestic animals such as cows and pigs and chickens are killed and divided to all who care to buy. Wild game brought in from the mountainsides is sold among the townsfolk. All fresh food products are sold from door to door. Shrimp and many varieties of fish add to the diet. The Indians

use rock salt for seasoning, as well as canned Mexican chili peppers. For special occasions the people roast goat meat.

DRINKS. The water supply for homes comes from small holes dug in the sand along the river bed, kept open by rocks which line the edges, and fed by springs. The children carry most of the water in buckets; the girls with single buckets balanced on their heads, and the boys with two buckets hanging from a yoke over their shoulders. A gourd jícara is used as a dipping and drinking cup, and all water is drunk unboiled except in time of sickness. The Chontales drink a very little herb tea, but mostly native coffee and atole. Chocolate atole is a popular delicacy. Canned milk is available for babies when there is no mother's milk. Pulque, the fermented juice from the maguey, is drunk as well as mescal, which is the most widely drunk alcoholic beverage. Tepache, fermented sugar cane juice, is also widely drunk.

Cigarettes and cigars are brought in from the outside cities. A few of the old women and some of the men smoke. Cigarettes are used more for invitations to weddings and special occasions than for actual smoking.

COOKING. Most vegetables are boiled and meat is fried on the native cooking fires, either on fire tables or on the ground. Goat meat is generally roasted over a larger fire. The Indian women bake bread in large, round ovens. This is done by building a fire on the floor of the bee-hive oven, sweeping the coals to

the sides with a wet, long-handled broom, and placing the trays of baking goods in the hot oven. The dough had been worked practically all day, and due to all the labor put in, beautiful, well-browned yeast breads are produced.

Generally the people eat three main meals: breakfast, noon meal and evening meal, plus early morning coffee. Breakfast is usually a fairly large meal including fish or shrimp, meat, atole, coffee and chile peppers. The noon meal may include such dishes as rice soup, pork mole, iguana meat, fish soup or roasted meat. The evening meal, usually about seven or eight o'clock in the evening, is very light and includes possibly just beans, tortillas and coffee, or bread and coffee.

HANDICRAFTS. The Indians have no special textiles or handicrafts. A few unglazed pieces of pottery are made in one of the rancherías, and a number of Indians possess sewing machines for making most of the native dress. The women sew for women and the children; the men sew for men and boys. Some of the men know how to make fish nets and hammocks. They spin their own thread for fish nets.

TRANSPORTATION. Horses, mules, donkeys, ox carts and by foot are the most common methods of transportation. A finca owner residing in Astata owns a Jeep which is used for special occasions when it is running. Some men carry large loads suspended from their heads; others carry loads on their shoulders. Women and girls carry everything, even loads of firewood, on their heads.

HOUSES. It has usually been the custom that when a house burns down the new house is built of adobe or brick with a tile roof, because the thatched roofs burn so readily and there have been quite a number of bad fires. Thus the thatched-roof mud houses, windowless and crude, are being replaced gradually, though many of them still remain. The high roof is thatched with palm leaves from across the river. Mud is packed into the walls between the horizontal poles which are tied to the supporting corner posts. Usually the thresholds are very high to prevent the pigs or other animals from entering. Originally the more well-to-do had adobe or brick homes, many of which remain in use, having fine architecture such as columns across the front. The adobe is sun-dried; the bricks, kiln-burned locally. The bricks are mortared together, smoothed over with plaster, then white-washed. These homes have two or three rooms, usually one window to a room, this being opposite the door to produce a draft. Usually the homes are fairly cool. Ceilings are high; floors are of bricks or dirt. Most homes have porches across the front. Flat thatched roofs called enramadas are built extending out from the regular porches or edge of the roofs. These are used as shelters from the sun or rain, especially at the time of weddings, dances or other special occasions. Often homes have extra cook houses in the rear to protect their belongings from fire and smoke. Windows of the homes have either bars and shutters or bricks loosely fitted in. Bars and shutters, as well as doors, are very difficult to get due to the shortage of both carpenters and wood.

FURNITURE. The one or two rooms of the average home are considerably bare and dark. A hammock stretches across the room, usually slept in by the man of the house, as well as serving as a rocking cradle for the baby and a nursing bed for the mother, and baby. Often there is a double bed of palm^{fr}slats bound together and laid across two benches and covered with a petate. Pillows are stuffed with the cotton from ceiba trees. A water pot, sometimes on a platform, stands by the wall with a cup or jícara for dipping hanging near-by. A shelf on the wall contains a few plates, cups and possibly a pitcher. A rope or pole stretched across one wall serves as a closet for hanging clothes. On a table serving as an altar are flowers, pictures of saints, crosses and candles. Possibly somewhere in the room is a large stack of zacate, or corn-husks, for feeding livestock.

MARRIAGE. The average age of marriage is fifteen years for the girl and anywhere from sixteen to twenty-six for the boy. The affair is celebrated extensively and lavishly. The groom pays for the bride's gown. There are three main stages to the marriage. First the fellow goes to ask the girl to marry him. A couple of weeks later he gives her the rosary in agreement. The final stage lasts two or three days. In the final stage invitations to the wedding are given in the form of various foods sent out: bread and chocolate, and ²tómales and atole. About a peso payment is expected. Fire-crackers boom periodically during the last few days. The day before the main public wedding the civil cere-

mony is performed. Feasting and dancing to the band music, which may last all night, takes place at the bride's house. On the main wedding day all the festivities are: more dancing at the bride's house; a special ceremony in which all of the bride's relatives recognize all the groom's relatives; a special dance by the relatives and marrying couple, procession to the groom's house; throwing of fruit, flowers and confetti; more feasting and dancing at the groom's house. The bride and groom usually live for the first year with the groom's family, beginning to speak Chontal at this time. Then they build and move to their own home. The girls are taught nothing of married life by their parents. The husband has this responsibility, including informing the wife about childbirth.

CHILDREN. Babies are nursed by mothers until they are one to three years old, varying according to the individual cases. Children work most of the day when they are not in school, selling various foods, running errands and carrying water. Even two- or three-year-olds are employed to sell from door to door. The whole family spoils a baby, but when the next child comes the previous one is neglected and all the spoiling is spanked out of him. Adults regard children more as animals than individuals in a sense, for they do not speak to children in a conversational way, but rather simply command them. When secret business is being trans^{act}~~scri~~bed, the presence of children doesn't make any difference. All children have god-parents.

SICKNESS. The Chontales are a moderately healthy tribe. There are many of the contagious children's diseases, such as pink eye, measles, mumps and chicken pox, which go around in a routine manner. The children are not isolated but continue to live as if healthy, though a school child may be kept out of school. Due to unsanitary conditions there are cases of various kinds of worms and amoebic dysentery. Malaria is endemic, but active cases are more prevalent during the rainy season. Drunkenness takes its toll of many of the men's lives.

The Chontales may procure many medicines from either the local stores or an individual dealer.

An ill man may go to his mother's house, even if he has a living wife.

When a woman has a miscarriage, the Indians believe that something evil has gotten into the mother and they burn the fetus so it won't get into anyone else.

A mid-wife usually assists in delivering babies. The pregnant woman stoops on the floor on one knee while the mid-wife squeezes around her waist to try to induce the baby to come. Another woman may let the pregnant woman's head rest in her lap. The baby drops to the floor, and is ignored until the delivery of the placenta. This method of dropping the babies on their heads has caused many cases of epilepsy as well as mental retardation, it is thought.

WITCHES AND WITCH-DOCTORS. A witch is able to cast spells on people as well as to take them off. If a person is strong-

mind he can't be harmed by a witch or witch doctor. The witch doctors use eggs to cure people by rubbing them over the body. Eggs are broken into saucers and if a cross is formed the person will die. The first step if a person is being sold to the devil is to go to the church and hit the saints, in open defiance, though under cover of darkness. Then he goes into the woods and gets power from the devil.

RELIGION. The Lord's will and the Lord's power are well recognized but not His love and claim on the lives of the people. The Chontales are nominally Catholic, having been converted by friars which came about 100 years ago. The people pray to the saints whose pictures hang at their altars, put flowers on their altars and burn candles to the saints on special occasions. All Saint's Day is celebrated on Halloween, when the people put out food for the saints to come and eat. The Indians put flowers on the graves of their loved ones almost every day so they won't suffer. They celebrate many saint's holidays by fiestas, drinking and dancing. On more important holidays processions pass through the streets with ox carts, children carrying flowers and adults carrying images. The fiesta of San Sebastian is celebrated on January 28, in which the death of the saint is acted out. About 20 men dance to a special tune played by the pipes and drums. The main fiestas are held during Holy Week. In Huamelula the fiesta of the patron saint, San Pedro, is a very special time. In Astata the second Friday of Lent is a very out-

standing fiesta, though it is mostly commercial. The ~~first~~ Sunday ^{before the beginning of} ^{pre-Lenten} of Lent begins ~~Holy Week~~ observations by the youngsters filling empty egg shells with food coloring and then throwing them at one another, called fuchina in Spanish. On Tuesday and Ash Wednesday the children go around gathering up old palm crosses and old images, then take them to the river to burn them. On every Thursday night throughout Lent there is a procession in the middle of the night in which the people carry a life-size figure of Christ with a cross over His shoulder, stopping at all the town crosses to chant. A bass horn groans out at frequent intervals. On Good Friday the men with a crucifix figure of Christ and an image of St. John go down one street with candles and the band, while the women go down another street with Soledad, the god-mother of Jesus. The processions begin at the large church on the hill at Huamelula and go down to the other church in the middle of town where they meet. Soledad, held by the women, wipes the face of Jesus with her handkerchief. The image of Christ is put in a coffin and laid in a coffin in state in the church until Easter, during which time the people go to the casket to ask anything they want, which they supposedly will receive. On Saturday all the little children go to their god-mothers to get water poured on them and to get whipped so they will grow up well. They also pour water on the plants and whip them so they will grow well. Boys run up and down the streets whipping everyone. On Sunday a procession carries the image called the Resurrection from one church and another carries Maria Santisima from the other church. The two images meet in the

center of town, bow to each other, then are carried back to the church to go back to heaven.

During all festivities and main events such as death or marriage, firecrackers and sky rockets boom, church bells ring, and the town band plays.