



## Language and Culture Archives

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LACANDON (Mayan)

(A)

(Change spelling, present)

THE LACONDONES

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May, 1944

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mss file

## THE LACONDONES

(Note: These observations were mainly gathered while living near the caribal of ChanKin and Mateo, January through April, 1944.)

The Laccondones, or caribes, as the people around them call them, live in the Southern part of Chiapas, South of the Tenosique-Ocozingo trail, and between the rivers Usamacinta and Jatate; although there are said to also be some of them living in the Peten district of Guatemala. The terrain is a mountainous dense jungle, penetrated by few people except Chicleros and perhaps timber cruisers. The trails which quite often are nothing more than a narrow path through the jungle become practically impassable during the heavier rains in the months of September, October, November, and December. The nearest thing to a dry season is from February through April, but even then there may be periods of rainy weather. The temperature is moderate during the dry season. (During the months of February, March and April we made recordings of high and low temperature with the following results: Feb. -- high 88°F, low 54°F, average in the daytime 80°F, at night 58°F; March -- high 91°F, low 55°F, average in the daytime 81°F, at night 60°F; April-- high 91°F, low 54°F, average in the daytime 82°F, at night 58°F. However, in April, 1943, we found the weather to be much colder at times and there was also more rain.) This has resulted in rich stands of mahogany, zapote, and other commercially valuable woods.

It is in this country that the Laccondones have isolated themselves, largely due to their fear of diseases from other people and in many instances their dislike of having neighbors too close. This might be illustrated by the brother of ChanKin who at one time lived within about two hundred yards of ChanKin's house, but moved away about five hours walk because there were too many visitors. During our visit in 1943 ChanKin came down to us one evening and told us that a friend of his had just come to visit him, having walked through the jungle the entire day; however, as soon as he found that there were white people near, in fear of fever or colds, he hurried away preferring to spend the night alone in the jungle

rather than stay so close. And he had told ChanKin to tell us that if we tried to come to visit him, he would abandon his home and take his wife and children elsewhere to build a new house so great was his fear of us. This characteristic of isolating themselves and the nature of the country has rendered it practically impossible to get a complete picture of the Lacondones in spite of the fact that numerous expeditions have visited them. Naturally it is impossible to tell how many Lacondones there really are and estimates vary from 200 to 1000. From all I have been able to gather I would guess there to be about 300.

The caribal (home of one Lacondon family) of ChanKin, which I feel would serve as a good illustration, is situated on a low hill overlooking a beautiful clear blue lake drained by a small creek from which the Indians get water. Apparently there was a milpa next to the house when the caribal was first built, since



The Caribal  
of  
Chan Kin

about two acres has been cleared out of the dense jungle and is now grown up in large bushes and vines except for the small portion used for the houses and a small space for chickens. There is one main house about fifty feet in length (with rounded ends) and about ten feet wide with a palm-thatched roof and split sections of logs for a wall and a dirt floor.

Next to this is a small wall-less hut about 10 x 12 feet, which they call the "work house", where the women grind the tortillas. And just beyond this there is another long low hut which houses their gods, and where Mateo and Las sleep. The main house does not really have a door as we call it, but has four sections where the split pieces may be removed to form an open door, but which are always closed at night. On a visit to ChanKin, as we approach his house, he usually comes out and greets us in a very cordial manner and with a friendly smile, with a motion toward the door of his house he says "Come in," and we stoop to enter the door (which is low because these people are only about five feet in height) and then ChanKin very graciously asks us to be seated either in a small hammock or on a split section of a log. At this end of their home there are numerous large gourds hanging from the ceiling, blackened from the fire below. If our visit is



in the late afternoon the younger wife of ChanKin may be sitting on the dirt floor patting out tortillas about 12 inches in diameter. A few feet beyond are three small hammocks, the middle one is his and on either side one for each of his two wives. And under the middle of each is a medium sized clay bowl in which they place live coals on a cold night for warmth. About four feet beyond the hammocks is a partition in front of which is a bed, but I am not sure whether it is used for sleeping regularly or not. This "bed" is only a flat platform of straight sticks about one inch in diameter, covered with a petate. Hung along the wall and from the roof we can see netted henequen carrying bags, bundles of shafts for arrows, perhaps a bunch or two of feathers, a worn machete, a hunting knife, a shot gun, a round tray holding jicaras, seed corn hung from the roof, and perhaps ripening bananas. On the far side of the room sits a very small trunk (a gift from a visitor) on top of which is a pair of practically unworn shoes which were given to ChanKin at the time the Government of Chiapas entertained him (with others of the Lacandonos) in Tuxtla. Behind the partition is a small room in which there is tobacco hung for drying, a native loom, an axe, and an old table model victrola.

In the center of the little work house is a concave table, which is half of a hollowed out mahogany log, about five feet long, with a metate at either end. Two or three large carrying bags hang from the corners of the house or sit on the ground filled with corn or vegetables which they have brought that day from their milpas. Long handled wooden spoons are inserted between the palm leaves and the rafters. On the ground is an assortment of large ollas with wooden covers, while in one corner is a small fireplace where they cook the food that is to be given to the gods.

In order to see what is in the gods' house we have to look in from the east side, stooping down quite low. As we thus look in, directly across from us is a short wall made of layers of tough bark, giving the room a somewhat darkened appearance. In front of and just above this wall, suspended from the ceiling, are two long shelves (one for ChanKin and one for Mateo) on which are placed the small ollas they call gods. On the floor underneath these are two short planks of about four feet in length which Mateo and ChanKin used for putting their gods

on when they chant to them. Near one end of the wall is a very large olla, used for preparing food for the gods. From the roof hangs a very large carrying bag full of jicaras which are used for drinking a ceremonial beverage. On the floor in the middle of the room are four white boards about two feet square, used in their worship. On a narrow high shelf on the east side are gourds, more jicaras and bows and arrows. At the north end of this building and slightly protected by another bark wall is a crude bed on which the boy, Las, sleeps, and at the opposite end was a similar bed for Mateo before he built his one house at the time he brought home his new little girl wife shortly before we left. Beside the house on this same side are two hollow logs about fifteen inches in diameter and about ten feet long, which serve as containers for mixing the ceremonial intoxicating drink.



Log for Holding  
Intoxicating Drink  
Beside gods House



Chan Kin

In appearance the Lacondones are unusual, especially the men. They are a short people of a slightly stocky build and have a dark brown skin and jet black hair, often quite curly. These men do not wear trousers and a shirt as do most of the Indians throughout Mexico, but wear a sacklike tunic which reaches slightly below their knees. This is a homespun cotton garment, wide enough to reach from one elbow to the other, and is made of two long pieces of cloth, each half the width of the dress, sewed together down the middle, leaving a slit for the head; and sewed under the arms leaving an opening at the top for each arm. When they do not raise enough cotton they make these dresses from a fibrous bark which is pounded until soft and then bleached in the sun. This is not as durable as the cotton, lasting only about a month. The reason they give for this type of dress and uncut hair is that it would not be pleasing to the gods for them to worship otherwise. Mateo occasionally wears trousers in his milpa but said that if he should wear them while making an offering to his gods they would send him disease. The women wear their hair braided down the back with a bunch of brightly colored feathers decorating the end of the pigtail, and the men wear their hair long to the shoulders or slightly below with short bangs over the forehead. The women wear a long skirt gathered

around the waist and a hip-length tunic made with the same pattern as the men's dress. They enjoy from eight to twelve strings of brightly colored beads about the neck. These people seem to be strong, healthy and happy. They begin work in their milpas about sunrise and do not stop until midafternoon. During one day's work cutting the jungle trees to clear space for a new milpa Mateo can cut about eight giant trees four feet or more through and about 150 feet high,



Las  
Carrying  
a  
Small  
Load

which is no mean task. They walk barefooted with an easy graceful step and carry their loads in large netlike bags which are suspended from the head with a wide band of bark.

While I really do not know whether this same rule would hold at other caribals, yet I have found the members of this group to be exceptionally honest. For instance, a friend who visited with us last year paid ChanKin for a ceremonial drum that I was to bring out when we came, but ChanKin was unable to find the drum before we left. This year when I returned one of the first things he told me was that he had the drum ready for me to take to my friend any time I wished. Morally the people appear to be relatively clean.



Ceremonial  
Drum

These people live a very simple life, yet they appear to enjoy it. When visiting us they joke and laugh, and we often hear them laughing hilariously from their house on the hill. While they do not appear to have any music of their own other than a few religious songs in a minor key, still they thoroughly enjoy music and quite often borrow the records which we have.

There are five members of the group I am describing, ChanKin and his two wives who are sisters, his step-father Mateo, and an adopted nephew, Las, whom I guess to be about sixteen years of age. Mateo has only lived with them a few years having gone to be with them after the death of his first wife, ChanKin's mother. The father and mother of Las died when he was about seven or eight years old and since that time he has lived with his uncle, apparently receiving the same treatment as if he were a son.

They have a very simple but sufficient diet of tortillas, camotes, chayotes,

small tomatoes, platanus and bananas, squash, onions, garlic, several other roots, eggs, meat from the jungle and fish. They eat warmed leftovers very early in the morning, drink posol at noon, and have a heavy meal alittle after sundown. During a heavy day's work in the milpa they also drink posol at midmorning and midafternoon. Since the Lacondones do not live in villages, they need very little government. The authority seems to be vested in the head of the caribal. In the group near us although Mateo is an older man and had been married to ChanKin's mother after the death of his father, yet ChanKin very definitely, but kindly, rules; and we saw nothing to indicate discord.



Mateo (in pants)  
and has  
felling trees  
for a new  
milpa

At times it may appear that these people are indolent, but such is not the case when there is work to be done. ChanKin and Mateo together have four milpas, each about an acre or more in size, which they have cleared out of the dense jungle. After the trees are felled, the milpa is one tangled mass. This is allowed to dry for about a

month and then burned. This burning not only clears the

land of small brush but also kills all the weed seeds, making it unnecessary to till the milpa the first year.

These clearings are one or two miles from the house.

The milpas not only furnish food, but are a source of

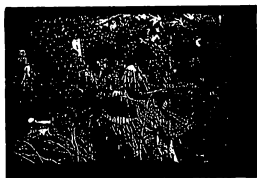
income from the tobacco which is raised in them and sold to neighboring Teslitals.

ChanKin and Mateo have breech-loading shotguns but they make sets of bows and arrows for commercial purposes. The bow is of zapote, about four and one half feet long and with about a sixty pound pull. The string is of henequin which they raise and twist by rolling strands across the knee. The arrow is really of two sections. The head end is a slender square wooden shaft about a third the length of the arrow and is inserted into a light jointless cane which is feathered with two parallel feathers wrapped to the shaft with tarred henequin cord. The point is of flint which they chip with an old knife blade, inserted into the split end of the wooden shaft and wrapped with tarred cord. They also utilize henequin cord for making their carrying bags and hammocks. These are not woven like the carrying



Mid-morning posol  
beside the  
Corncrib in the  
milpa

bags of the neighboring Tseltals or the hammocks of Yucatan, but both are of a



Chan Kin's  
Wife  
Weaving Baskets

weave similar to fish nets in the United States. These Indians also make plain baskets and unornamented pottery, including their gods. They spin their cotton by hand and make a thread similar to



Pottery  
Making

that of the ordinary white cotton twine found in the States, which the women use to weave the heavy cloth for their clothing. Their looms are very simple and the weaving is tedious. The Lacondones hew cayucas out of mahogany logs and use them for fishing. There are not very many fish in the lake located near this particular caribal, and the fish are small, but when they go fishing they usually bring back enough for a meal. However, I went with them to another lake about six hours walk distant and there I saw them really adept at fishing for where I could scarcely get a nibble they brought in six or seven nice fish.

There is considerable game in the jungle about the caribal which furnishes fresh meat for these people. There are numerous game birds, wild pigs, a few deer, monkeys, and other small animals. In years past Chan Kin and Mateo used the bow and arrow for their hunting -- as most of the other Lacondones do to this day --



After the  
Hunt

but after the Chicleros came in they acquired an old muzzle-loading shotgun and within the last year or two each has obtained a breech-loading shotgun. They reload their own shells, using black powder and shot. With these they usually bring in plenty of meat. I have hunted numerous times with each



Barbecuing  
Wild  
Pig

of the three men and have found them very good hunters with exceptionally sharp ears and eyes and a knowledge of where the game is to be found. Their meat is usually cooked on a spit over a slowly smoldering fire or hot coals, although quite often they boil the birds.

The lacondones are purely pagan, each family having its group of little clay gods which are small bowls with a grotesque head on one side in which they burn incense to that god. It appears that the men are the main participants in their ceremonies, but once I heard one of the wives of ChanKin chanting exactly the same way that the men do. In their gods' house, they have four square boards about two feet square with a handle on one side. When they are ready to chant they take one of these boards and a bowl full of "pom" which is the thick resinous substance they use for incense, and with this board in front of him he squats in



Mateo Burning  
Incense to  
his gods

the middle of the floor and molds bits of "pom" into pyramids about half an inch high, placing them on this board about an inch and a half apart in eleven rows of ten each. He performs this act slowly chanting continually. After this is completed he takes from the shelf one, two, or three of the little clay bowls which serve as his gods and with a little wooden paddle removes the "pom" from the board one little pyramid at a time and slowly burns it in the different bowls, chanting continually.

One day I questioned Mateo as to his belief concerning life after death and he told me that if a man had sufficiently paid his gods with incense and other ceremonial foods, after he died his soul would go to live with Itsonokuh, the god who is supposed to live in a large rock at Peth-ha. However, if he had not



ChanKin finishing  
the god of  
music

paid the gods, after death his soul would go into the middle of the earth. In addition to burning incense to their gods to cure ills, they have one or two hollowed logs, called "Uchemibacha", beside their gods' house in which they make an intoxicating ceremonial drink on certain occasions when they are doing honor to "Yoochkuh".

(We never were fortunate enough to see this celebration.) I have never seen any Lacondon drinking, but Mateo has told me that they do make up this drink from the bark of a tree, with a little honey or panela, and that after several jicaras of it they get drunk, but that this celebration lasts only for one day. He also told me that during this day, in their intoxicated state they dance and sing. They have no other dances.

On another occasion, Mateo came down to visit us saying that they were not working in their milpas that day because during the previous night they had heard a peculiar call which he said was a god warning them not to work that day or a snake would bite them, or a jaguar tear them, or they would cut themselves with a machete or axe. He said they hear this call perhaps once or perhaps several times during the year, and on the days following they never work except in the house. Although their worship is mostly with the burning of the incense in the clay bowls which are called "ulakikyum", they also have these other gods "Uhunchop", "Ubatikyum" and "Akinchop" who with their families live in the sky; "Itsanokuh"



*Drawing of Itsanokuh  
on rock at Peth-ha.*

who lives in a large rock at the lake Peth-ha; "Amensobok" who lives in another rock near a lake about six hours walk north of ChanKin's caribal; "Akak" (word for fire), who lives in a rock near a lake beyond "Amensobok"; "Tsibana" also lives in a rock at a lake between these other two. Near the Usamacinta, five days journey from here, there is another rock in which "Hachikyum" is supposed to live although this same god is also supposed to live in the sky with another god called "Sakhabuk"; and "Usukukyum" is supposed to live in the middle of the earth. Although they claim to have all these gods, we have never seen them worship others than the clay bowls, though quite often they make journeys to the place where "Itsanokuh" lives. I went with them there on one occasion and they showed me the rock with its Mayan drawing where they say "Itsanokuh" lives; but I saw nothing in the nature of worship although I was there with them two nights and one day. On the shores of this lake I saw evidences of ruins in two different places, where rocks had been laid to form either a retaining wall or the base of some structure. Mateo said that these had been built by men who were also gods, but that beyond that he knew nothing of their origin. Though I had very little time to do it, I cut my way through the jungle that had grown up above these ruins but could find no evidences that would indicate the type structure that has been there. However, one cannot tell just what the surrounding jungle covers and I believe that there are other ruins about the lake.

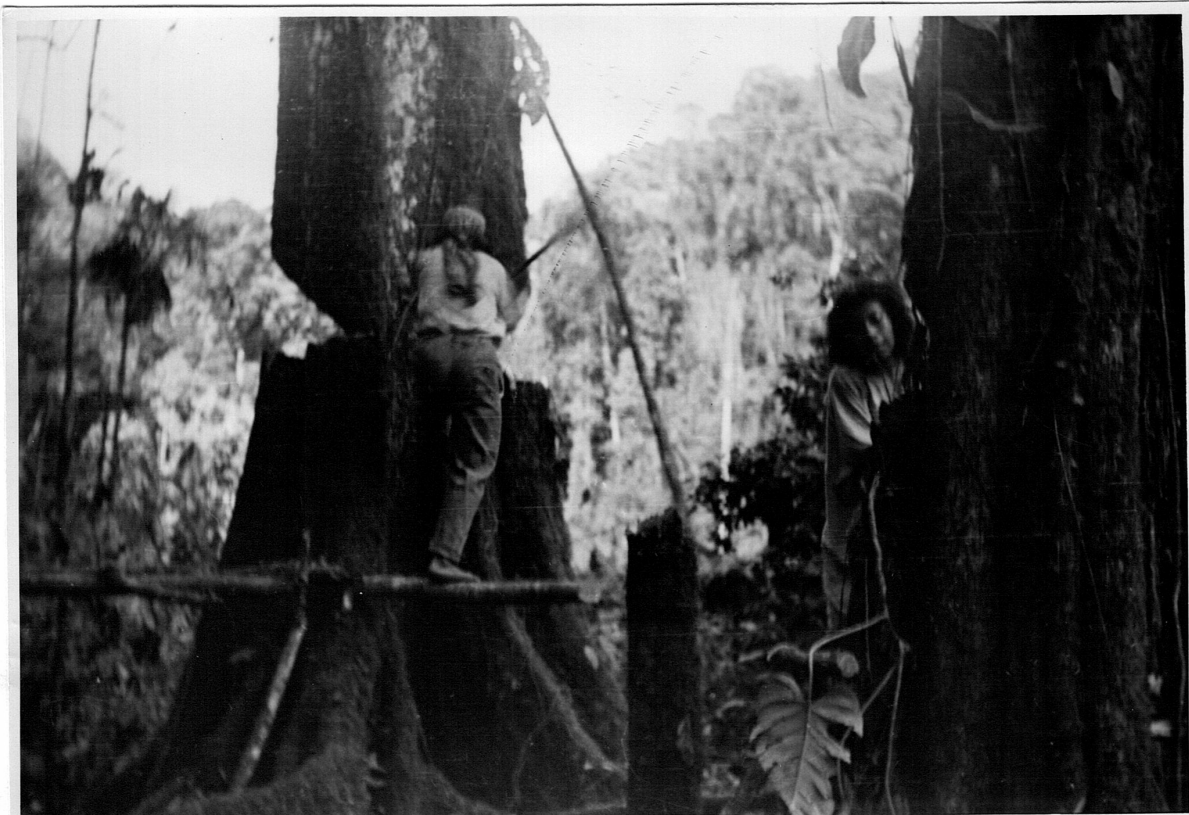
Shortly before leaving the caribal Mateo went to a neighboring caribal about six leagues away and returned four days later with a wife -- a little girl about eight

years old. We were surprised to see him return with a child instead of a woman for his wife and were even more surprised when we found he had asked for her four years previously. Of course, we were curious to know how a man obtained a bride among the Lacondones and what ceremonies, if any, were celebrated. Mateo told us that when a young man wished to obtain a bride he went out to look for one, visiting other caribals, until he found one suitable and then he asked the father for her hand. She has no voice in the matter, but her father and mother both must agree before the engagement is completed. In Mateo's instance, he had asked for his wife and had obtained permission for her, but had had to wait until her parents thought she was old enough to be married. He said that he had not given any gifts either to her parents or to her except material for a new skirt that her mother had made. However, when he actually went to claim his bride he had to carry in to her father's house two loads of a certain type firewood (wood of the bumbosh tree, which is rare). In spite of her childhood the little girl seemed quite contented. As far as we could see, he treated her in a sweet fatherly manner.



26-2

The Lacandones



The hacandonas



8-2  
The Lacandones

