Suzanne Cook

The Forest of the Lacandon Maya

An Ethnobotanical Guide

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Preface

When I first drove into Naha', in 1990, all the Lacandon men of the community of Naha' were at work in the middle of a logging road erecting electric power poles. Although electricity failed to arrive for another decade, it was clear that a dramatic shift in the Lacandones' way of life was underway.

I was inspired at that time by a book which described the Lacandones as "The Last Lords of Palenque".[1] It was a romantic portrayal of a Mayan people supposedly forgotten by time. The book has since been debunked for its premise by most scholars: today it is confirmed that the Ch'ol Mayas, rather than the Lacandones, were the builders of Palenque. Furthermore, at the time of its writing, the traditional culture has largely disintegrated, and the forest had already shrunk to a few protected reserves. When I arrived, the government-owned logging company was still extracting timber, and in its wake, immigrants were clamouring to establish homesteads.

While conservationists have made some progress towards curbing the destruction, only a few of them have considered the attrition of Lacandon traditional ecological knowledge. Gertrude "Trudy" Blom, wife of archaeologist Franz Blom and proprietor of Na Balom, a research station in San Cristobal, was a powerful voice among those wanting to save the Lacandon forest. As the trees were being felled, she alone expressed great concern for the Lacandones' emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being, believing that without the forest they would lose their culture and be forced to join the ranks of the disenfranchised, indigenous people of Mexico. Others were Nations and Nigh, who were the first to show how Lacandon traditional knowledge sustained the ecological diversity of the forest, in their paper "The Evolutionary Potential of Lacandon Maya Sustained-Yield Tropical Forest Agriculture" (1980). Their thesis was that the Lacandones' traditional agricultural practices not only preserved the forest but facilitated its regeneration, and that without the forest the Lacandones' ecological knowledge would be lost. Thus, the fates of the forest and the Lacandones were intertwined, each depending on the other to survive.

This book is an attempt to record as much of that knowledge as possible, with the hope that it will aid conservationists in their ongoing efforts to save the Lacandon forest, and that it will also interest Mayanists, Mayan enthusiasts, and most of all, the Lacandones.

The videos for this book can be accessed at:
http://www.springer.com/us/book/9781461491101

Victoria, BC — Suzanne Cook

[1] V. Perera and R. D. Bruce, *The Last Lords of Palenque: the Lacandon Mayas of the Mexican Rainforest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

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Introduction

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1.1 The Lacandones

The Lacandones comprise two ethnically distinct groups whose ancestors were Yucatec-speaking Mayas that fled into the Chiapas forest from Guatemala, Campeche, and the Yucatan peninsula between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to escape assimilation or extermination. They moved into the vacuum left by the Ch'ol Lacandones, whom the Spanish had expunged from the forest a century earlier. Arriving in separate waves, the northern and southern Lacandones established their homesteads in areas adjacent to their original homelands.

They, along with other apostate Mayas, were called Lacandones, which meant 'wild Indians, heathens'. According to Thompson (1970), the word did not designate any particular group of people; rather it was a name of a place in the Maya lowlands that was occupied by a group of Ch'ol Mayas. The origin of the word has been analyzed differently by some scholars: Bruce suggests it derives from *ah-akan-tun-oob* 'they who set up stone' (Perera & Bruce 1986: 8), whereas Tozzer believes it derives from *acan-tun* 'to groan/thunder stone' (1907: 4). The Spaniards transformed it according to the rules of their language, which resulted in *El Acantún*. The word underwent further analysis, becoming *El Lacantún* and finally *El Lacandón.* The Lacandones, however, refer to themselves as the *hach winik* 'true people'.

Although they share a common history and cultural background, the modern Lacandones comprise two distinct groups: northern and southern. These names reflect their geographical location, more than anything else. The northern Lacandones occupy the north-western corner of the Lacandon forest, while the southern Lacandones, the south-east corner near the Usumacinta River. Historical accounts, and archaeological and linguistic evidence suggest that the northern Lacandones are closely affiliated with the Itzáj Maya (in the Guatemala Petén), whereas the southern Lacandones are closer to the Yucatec Maya. More research is needed.

Traditionally endogamous, the two groups are connected through the intermarriage of some of their members. There are a number of northern Lacandones living in the southern community and a few southerners that have moved into the northern community. As such, the division that exists between the two has become somewhat blurred. Nevertheless, each group views the other as being different, which is reflected in their terms for one another. The northern Lacandones refer to their southern neighbours as the *chukuch nook'* 'long tunics', while the southern Lacandones call the northerners *naachil winik* 'far away people' or *huntul winik* 'other people' (Boremanse 1998: 8). Moreover, although they speak a mutually intelligible variety of Lacandon, each group considers the other's speech to be deficient and, at times, unintelligible (R. Bruce, personal communication, 1992).

The Lacandones were never a large group. Even today they number approximately 600 men, women, and children. There are roughly 300 northern Lacandones, approximately 250 of which live in Naha', and the rest live in Mensäbäk. The southern Lacandones constitute the other half of the Lacandon population. Although the majority live in their jungle settlements and restrict their movements to travelling back and forth among the three villages, their population numbers change during peak tourist seasons, when ten percent of the population moves to the nearby city of Palenque to peddle their souvenirs (J. McGee, personal communication, 2000).

The northern Lacandones of Naha' are the focus of this book, primarily because they retained their traditional culture longer than the southern Lacandones. Under the leadership of Chan K'in Viejo, their civic and religious leader of more than four decades, they continued to worship their pantheon of deities. But after his death in 1996, the people lost their faith, with many converting to Christianity. This, along with deforestation and increasing numbers of colonist settlements in the forest, has affected the Lacandones traditional beliefs, knowledge, and most of all, their connection with the forest.

Electronic supplementary material: The online version of this chapter (doi:10.1007/978-1-4614-9111-8_1) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users. Videos can also be accessed at http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4614-9111-8_1.

1.2 History of Research

A detailed botanical inventory of the southern Lacandon territory of Lacanha' Chan Sayab is reported by Levy et al. (2006). This adds to extensive research carried out on this community's agro-forestry methods (Levy-Tacher et al. 2000; Levy-Tacher and Aguirre-Rivera 2005; Diemont et al. 2006). Less botanical work has been conducted in the northern Lacandon territory. Nations and Nigh (1980) provide a comprehensive list of the wild and cultivated plants in both northern and southern areas along with their Lacandon names. Durán (1999) provides an extensive inventory of the plants in Naha', that forms the basis for the botanical index published by the Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (2006).

1.3 Collection Methods

Data were gathered following a qualitative approach to answer how the Lacandones perceived their natural environment, which plants they deemed important, and whether this was reflected in a conceptual framework akin to a botanical taxonomy. Attention was given to how plants were named, as a guide to uncovering their system of plant classification. For the most part, consultants provided information through informal interviews. To a lesser extent, they participated in formal elicitation sessions that involved picture recognition tasks and tasks that involved sorting plants into categories. Most plants were identified and discussed on walks through the forest with Lacandon consultants. Some plant parts were removed and taken back to the community for verification and further elaboration by other Lacandones, or for use in demonstrations.

Lacandon names were cross-checked with those recorded in the Lacandon botanical literature and published inventories, specifically, Breedlove (1986), Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (2006), Durán (1999), Levy et al. (2006), and Nations and Nigh (1980). At times, the same language consultant would give two or more names for the same plant; when this was the case other speakers of the community were asked to select the common name. Consultants who were unfamiliar with the common Lacandon name for a species provided descriptive phrases, a common practice in all linguistic communities. When species were unavailable to inspect, the Lacandon names or descriptions were cross-referenced with botanical data collected by other researchers in the area and compared with images of specimens in various electronic herbaria. Consultations were also carried out with botanists familiar with the area.

Botanical names and taxonomic information on most of the species in this work were obtained from electronic botanical databases, botanical literature, and botanists at various institutions, including the Missouri Botanical Gardens (MOBOT), Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas, Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, Dept. of Ecology, El Cologio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), Estación de Biología Tropical "Los Tuxtlas", Instituto de Biología (UNAM), and the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG). Botanists at these institutions helped identify species from photographs provided to them.

Numerous recordings and associated texts of Lacandon narratives, folklore, songs, rituals, demonstrations, and interviews are included, to illustrate the role of plants in Lacandon traditional culture. Most of the texts were transcribed in the field with trained consultants.

A number of computer programs were used to compile the inventories and analyze the texts. First, the recordings were digitized and then converted into wav and mpeg files using Cool-Edit.[1] Then, Transcriber[2] was used to segment and transcribe the recorded discourse. These transcriptions, and Lacandon botanical and ethnographic word-lists were then exported to Shoe Box 5, an integrated data management and analysis computer program developed at the Summer Institute of Linguistics.[3] This program was used to create the inventories. The transcriptions and associated recordings were then synchronized using computer programs developed at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.[4] The English translations of the texts were then added to the video files.

1.4 Lacandon Consultants

None of this work would have been possible without the support and enthusiasm of the Lacandon community. Twenty-two Lacandon consultants provided the information for this study. Chan K'in Antonio Martinez (AM) and Bol Ma'ax Garcia (BM) were field guides and teachers, providing identifications and descriptions for a majority of the plants, as well as giving demonstrations, singing songs, and narrating stories (Fig. 1.1).

A dedicated practitioner of traditional religion, AM is one of the few remaining *hach winik* 'true men' left. Born in *Sa'am* (Monte Líbano) around 1925, he was raised by his mother and grandparents. He was raised in a traditional Lacandon setting at a time before the Lacandones still lived in isolated homesteads. He can still recall the song his mother used to sing every time she ground corn on a traditional millstone, watching his grandmother weave on the backstrap

[1] Originally Syntrillium Software and now Adobe® Audition® software 2003 http://www.adobe.com/special/products/audition/syntrillium.html/

[2] Transcriber—Copyright 1998–2008, DGA http://trans.sourceforge.net/

[3] Copyright 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1996, 2000 by SIL International http://www-01.sil.org/computing/shoebox/Overview.html

[4] http://dobes.mpi.nl/