

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-6

The Lacandones of Lacanjá

Apartado 110
San Cristóbal de las Casas
Chiapas, Mexico
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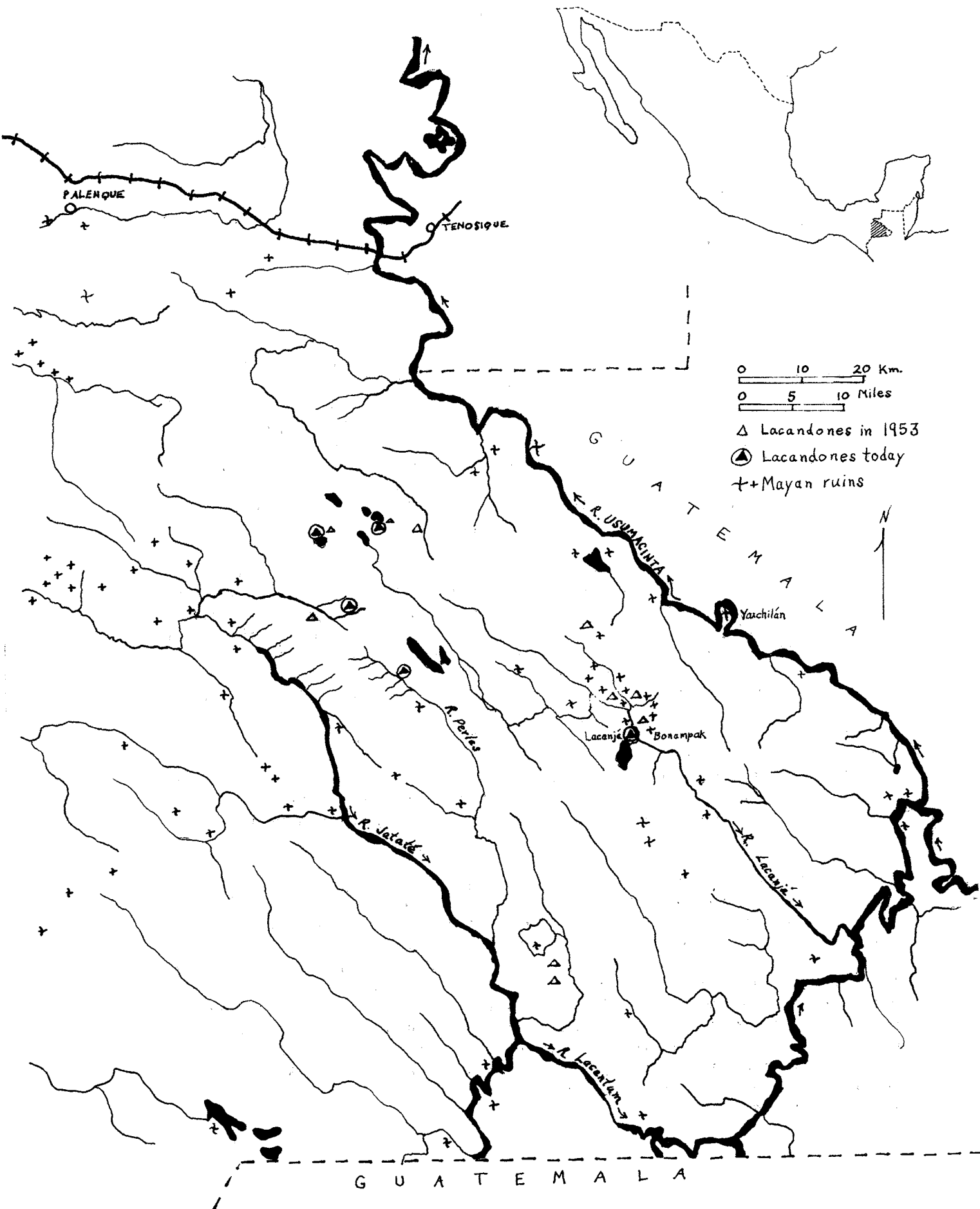
Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

About a thousand years ago, all but a few of the Mayan nation abruptly abandoned the selva of (now) eastern Chiapas and northern Guatemala and resettled in the Yucatan peninsula. Those who stayed behind survived the famine that probably caused the exodus. When the first anthropologist visited their descendants the Lacandones in 1902, he found them speaking, living, and worshipping more or less as their Mayan ancestors had. Like the altars at Yaxchilán where the Lacandones were still burning copal and offering food to their gods, this vestige of Classic meso-American culture had survived ten centuries in the protective custody of the jungle.

Industrial man entered the Lacandón selva in search of mahogany and cedar in the 1870's, and found these caribes, as he called them, throughout the area drained by the Usumacinta, the Nile of the Mayans. At that time the Lacandones probably numbered at least 1,000. By 1950 they had been reduced to 150, largely because of the introduction of the diseases of civilized man. Recently the population has risen to about 300, but the tribe is still too small and inbred to survive without the admixture of foreign blood. Parallel to the demographic decline there has occurred a steady erosion of their Neolithic customs and religion, the result of increased commerce, evangelism, and tourism. During Holy Week I visited the smaller, more accessible of the two remaining population centers, Lacanjá. Although they are materially comfortable, the people of the village seemed melancholy. They know that their lives have become distinctly less Lacandón, and that the tribe's existence is threatened. The evidence is ample.

For instance, Miguel K'in says he cannot find a wife, a Lacandón wife. Not long ago, well within the memory of the old men of the village, if a father could not find a nubile girl for his son, he would marry him to a widow and a pre-pubescent girl. The widow would make his tortillas and the girl would help the widow and, in time, bear his children. Then Lacandón men typically had three or four wives. Now the people of Lacanjá are professed Protestants, the flock of a resident missionary from the Wycliffe Bible Translators of Fullerton, California. When a Lacandón in this village wants to begin his family, he has to find one mate of a respectable marrying age, 14 to 16. The polygynous families established before conversion have not changed to suit the new morality, but Bor, the aged husband of three wives, says he thinks he is wrong to have more than one, because the Bible says so.



PALENQUE

TENOSIQUE

0 10 20 Km.
0 5 10 Miles

△ Lacandones in 1953
⊙▲ Lacandones today
++ Mayan ruins

GUATEMALA

R. USULUTÁN

Yachilán

Lacanjá

Bonampak

R. Perlas

R. Jotabé

R. Lacanjá

R. Lacanjá

GUATEMALA

There are 56 people in Lacanjá, and the chief of the Lacandones, Jose Pepe, says that there is a girl for Miguel among them. Miguel says there is not. The Lacandones do not keep track of their ages, but Miguel guesses he is about 17. By that age a Lacandón should be on his own. As the second son of a prosperous family, Miguel would be an acceptable match for any Lacandona. But, embarrassingly, he still lives with his younger brother Alphonso in a house next to his father's, and his mother still makes his tortillas.

There may be a girl for him among the more numerous Lacandones of the north, but they are four days away and traditionally estranged from those of the south. There has never been much communication between the two groups, so little that they speak distinct sub-dialects. They have diverged in their religions since 1950, when the northern group expelled the Bible Translator after fourteen years of his increasingly bold efforts to win their souls. He moved south and gathered the local Lacandones into a village around him. Eventually he converted them all. The seeds fell on good soil in the south because there the Mayan religion had not been practiced for more than ten years. When Frans and Gertrude Blom asked southern Lacandones in 1948 why this was so, they answered that the old gods were bad and had caused the deaths of many caribes. The Bloms traced this belief to a time around the turn of the century when, by the reports of the old people, huge numbers of Lacandones were dying and the monkeys were falling dead from the trees. A Catholic missionary who later gave up his work in the selva told the Lacandones that it was their gods who were causing the disease (probably yellow fever), and they accepted his explanation. Now the southern Protestants rarely have contact with the pagans to the north, and Miguel is not looking for a wife up there.

If Miguel rejects the one Lacandona that Jose Pepe says there is for him in Lacanjá, it may be he wants to marry outside the tribe. He spends most of his free time listening to the Mexican and American music over his portable radio. He likes to talk about his trips to the ladino towns he has occasionally visited, and on Easter morning he turned out in bell-bottom denim trousers, store-bought shirt, and new leather shoe boots. His father wears a hand-woven tunic down to his knees most of the time, and long hair that he has never cut. Miguel wears his hair cut in a slick pompadour. He looks ready for a foreign wife, and the village probably is too.

Already the Lacandones have abridged the traditional rules of marriage to meet the challenge of threatened extinction. Fifty years ago a man was expected to marry a girl from the other clan. Today there are no clan distinctions. A decrease in female births during a period of two or three years means critically slim pickings for someone in Miguel's place in a village of 56, if he really wants a Lacandón wife. The tribe cannot afford to limit his choices



Three daughters of Bor,
pictured on page 8.

by enforcing exogamy. Similarly, now any cousins may marry. When that first anthropologist Alfred Tozzer visited the Lacandones, cross-cousin marriages were accepted but parallel-cousin marriages forbidden. In 1948 the Bloms reported that malformed children were being born in one family, and that infertility seemed to be a problem in others. To save themselves from inbreeding, I assume the Lacandones will have to begin marrying outsiders.

Both Miguel and his father Obregon K'in seem ready for that step. With me on the trek into the Zone of the Lacandones was a fearless blond American woman of 21. Miguel and Obregon teased her continually and tiresomely for four days. They said she was going to stay in the jungle as wife to Miguel. If Pamela had taken them seriously, I think they would have made a serious proposal. In the north recently, a Canadian woman married a Lacandón. In Lacanjá everyone I talked to said she fits right in, according to reports they get from ladino loggers passing through.

If no gringa comes to the Obregon caribal (family compound) looking for a rich cross-cultural experience, Miguel could find a ladino wife in Tenosique, but she would not be likely to return with him to Lacanjá, two days by bus and then three more on foot, there to live among snakes and tigers and Protestant caribes who speak pure Mayan and pidgin Spanish. Instead Miguel would have to live among her people in Tenosique, where people in the streets shout "cannibal" when they spot a Lacandón.

* * * * *

Among the relatively prosperous Mayance tribes of upland Chiapas west of the Zone of the Lacandones, up in the tierra fria where Spanish Catholicism and aboriginal religion have blended since the Conquest, Easter is a major event. Thousand of indigenas mass in the cabecera of each municipio for a market and celebration sometimes three days long. In the plaza before the church, religious officers drink, dance, and pray according to traditional formulas. The santos (images of favored saints) are taken from their churches and paraded through the village. By nightfall on Easter Sunday, the paths leading back to the surrounding parajes are clogged with more than the usual Sunday's number of posh-bound families, mothers and children sitting patiently beside father insensate from the day's drinking. The Easter fiesta in Lacanjá this year was celebrated without music, market, liquor, or joy. The Sunday was distinguished from others only by some meat tamales.

Standing around in the center of the village under the shelter of dripping trees (it rained all day), the men talk about money, Miguel's match with Pamela, and today's fiesta. Some of the women have put on ladino dresses and shoes in place of their usual tunics and barefeet, and Miguel is there in his courting colors, but the atmosphere and talk are unenthusiastic. Only the food seems to cheer people. The women made the tamales yesterday from deer, fish, pheasant, tepeizcuinte, and armadillo brought in by the men the day before. With the tamales we drink posol, a slightly fermented mixture of ground corn, cacao, and water. Posol and tortillas are caribe staples. And there is a pot of pinole, a sweet variation on posol made from toasted ground corn, sugar, and water. It tastes a little like Cream of Wheat.

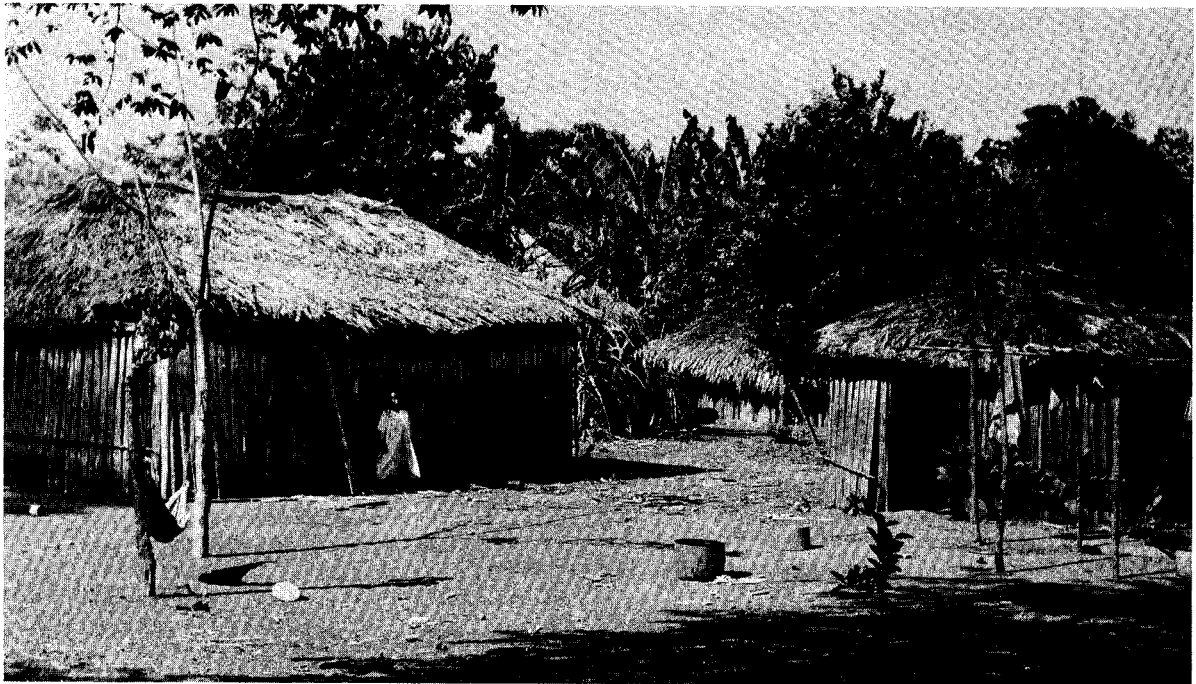
When the rain comes harder and the food is nearly finished, we retreat to the templo with a few of the men. The templo, according to Mayan custom, should be the



Jose Pepe and four of his daughters.

grandest building in the village. In Lacanjá it is just a small, thatch-roofed, dirt-floor rectangle with walls of vertical poles. Inside we ask why nobody seems festive on the day of the fiesta. One of them answers that on these days they feel sad because they have lost their maestros. The last of the old men who knew the prayers and songs died among their grandfathers. In the north, he says, they still know how to burn the incense, and they still keep up their god-houses. But in Lacanjá we have no more maestros.

Instead they have the missionary, who was in Mexico City during Holy Week, and the Gospel according to St. Mark, translated into Mayan. The service that afternoon was the same they hold three times every week. Chief Jose Pepe sits at the front of the templo in the only metal chair I saw in Lacanjá, the remains of a seat from an airplane that landed but never took off from the rough strip across the creek. (It was built to accommodate the missionary, for whom supplies are flown in from San Cristóbal.) Behind the chief on the wall where a cross might be expected hangs a color photograph of the President of the Republic. Jose Pepe reads aloud from the Gospel. Facing him on one side of the central aisle sit twelve men and boys on wooden benches. The older men, Bor and K'ayum, sit nearest the front and help with the difficult passages. The rest of the men and boys joke and laugh. Across the aisle, in keeping with the only pre-Christian custom still practiced in the templo, the 20 women and girls sit facing the outside wall, away from the men. One old woman has twisted around in her place to correct the chief's reading occasionally. After a benediction we go back out into the rain to finish the cold tamales.



The center of the village of Lacanjá.

Besides the convenience of the airstrip, one of the things that keeps tourists swooping into Lacanjá is the wealth of material culture that seems to have survived from stone-age days. Little girls sit in doorways stringing red and black seed beads from bushes near the village. In the house of K'ayum a tiger skin is hung up to dry, part of the bounty of the pre-Easter hunt. In a house near Bor's a man sits carving a spoon from red-grained caoba wood, and another is fitting arrowheads to arrows of bamboo. Like the old men's long hair and Bor's three wives, it all looks wonderfully authentic Lacandón. In a way it all is. The beads are being strung, pelt dried, and spoons carved solely for sale to tourists. The bow and arrow were replaced among the Lacandones by the .22 rifle long ago, but they still make these imitations, with brighter feathers and more gruesome points than they used when they hunted with them, because they sell well. Tigers were never killed except in self-defense until tourists began offering U.S.\$100.00 per skin. Once the Lacandones carved wooden spoons for use in burning incense, cooking, and eating. Now they use metal spoons and sell the wooden ones for U.S.\$1.60 apiece.

The village of Lacanjá is itself anomalous. As hunters, gatherers, and maiz farmers, the Lacandones lived in widely scattered caribales. Then neighboring Indians and ladino settlers began encroaching on Lacandón territory. When the missionary urged the southern Lacandones to settle together in a village, they did so more out of a need for the protection of the group than a desire for religious instruction. Now by living in a compact community and going through some motions of pre-Columbian life, they give tourists on their way to the ruins at Bonampak and Yaxchilán a convenient, one-hour glimpse of primitive Mayans, and support themselves through the last stages of assimilation. The President of Mexico Luis Echeverria last month signed an order to end the pilfering of Lacandón land. It reserves two-fifths of the land of the Usumacinta drainage for the Lacandones (an area larger than the state of Delaware for about 300 people).

But now that they are settled in Lacanjá and in almost daily contact with surrounding towns and cities by air, the people of Lacanjá are unlikely to return to scattered caribales.

Before the missionaries and the tourists came loggers in search of caoba, cedar, and mahogany, and, later, chicleros tapping the gum of the chicozapote tree. With them they brought European diseases like syphilis and the common cold, which were killing Lacandones as late as 1943. Humanitarian agencies and private individuals like the Bloms have since nearly eliminated death by epidemic disease in the selva, but the advance of commercial forest interests still figures in the changing life of the Lacandones. Themselves often the victims of gouging employers, loggers and chicleros suffer hunger and sickness in crude camps erratically supplied with stingy provisions. In order to vary their diets from the beans and tortillas that the company provides, the woodsmen continue to hunt the same game that the Lacandones depend on, causing a gradual depletion in a supply that had already been reduced by the flight of animals to higher land in response to the company's thinning of the low ground. At one logger's camp where we stopped on our way into the selva we found one man cleaning a tepeizcuinte (paca), the huge rodent that the Lacandones particularly favor, and another man hawking the feathers of a guacamayo they had eaten the day before. Guacamayos are now



Carmita, wife of
Obregon (page 12),
wearing a hand-woven tunic.

She is the mother of
Carlos (page 10), Miguel,
Alphonso, and four daughters.



Bor, husband of three wives, father of Carlos's wife Rosa (page 11), among many others.

nearly as scarce as the quetzal, the sacred bird of meso-America and half of the feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl.

A year ago, Lacanjá was four days from the nearest point served by bus. As I write, two tractors and a bulldozer are cutting the last few kilometers of a roadbed from Tenosique to the ruins of Bonampak, within a three-hour walk of Lacanjá. When the loggers first began cutting in the 1870's, they kept to the margins of the great rivers. As the supply of trees ran out, they moved to the tributaries in less travelled country, but still used the rivers to carry the logs to Gulf Coast ports. Now they cut in all parts of the selva, often far from arroyos and rivers, and they need roads. The government approved their plan for a road into the heart of the Zone of the Lacandones on the condition that it be durable enough to allow tourists to drive to Bonampak. If Miguel wants to leave the ingrown, godless living museum at Lacanjá, the compania and the federal government are making it easy for him to do so.

It seems likely, though, that most of the people will stay in Lacanjá and

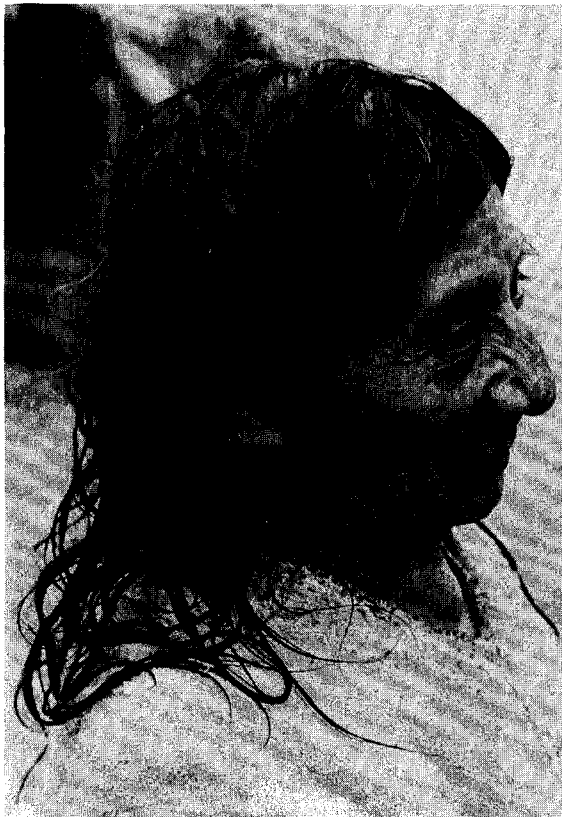
live even more comfortably once the new road begins bringing larger numbers of tourists to them. Consider, for example, the prospects of Miguel's older brother Carlos, wife Rosa, and the child they expected in the week after Easter. Carlos is the oldest of the three sons that Obregon K'in has had by his principal wife Carmita. (K'in once had four wives, now has only one.) As such Carlos will be preferred in the distribution of the Obregon land and chattel when the father dies. By Lacandón custom the other two sons will inherit less, and the wife and daughters nothing.

The Obregon caribal lies on the west bank of the Rio Lacanjá, 150 feet wide at that point and broken by a horseshoe of waterfalls that travellers can hear from two leagues away. The river provides fish and clean water and cash income from the tourists that occasionally walk between Bonampak and Lacanjá, renting Obregon's dugouts to cross the river.

The family's lands cover about four square miles along the west side of the river. The K'in men now work two milpas, and have cut the undergrowth and felled the trees for another. Next month they will burn it off and plant it. Slash-and-burn agriculture in the jungle exhausts a given plot after about nine years, but Obregon says he has plenty of land to use when these three milpas are dead. The dozen people in Obregon's caribal will not lack corn, and that is the crucial proof of prosperity. While I was living with them we often ate meals of nothing more than posol, tortillas, and elote (steamed young corn on the cob). Even when game, fruits, and vegetables are plentiful, not in the dry month of April, corn is the principal food. Besides corn, the K'in holdings produce beans, squash, onions, peppers, bananas, oranges, mameys, mangos, anonas, avocados, pineapples, and melons.



One of Bor's wives with one of his daughters.



Upper left: Early Classic Mayan profile from the ruins at Palenque.
 Upper right: Carlos K'in, son of Obregon (page 12) and Carmita (page 7).
 Lower left: K'ayum, brother of Bor (page 8).
 Lower right: Late Classic Mayan profile from the ruins at Bonampak.

Since hunger drove the Mayans out of the jungle a thousand years ago, starvation has not been a threat to the Lacandonese.

Through the center of the family's land and parallel to the Rio Lacanjá a spring-fed rillito runs along the bottom of a shallow ravine. It fills a sandy-bottom pool and then disappears into the selva that presses in all around. On the higher land overlooking the pool Obregon has cleared the undergrowth so that passing tourists may hang their hammocks. Both Obregon and Carlos seem to have developed a flare for tourism. Tourists that camp in the clearing can eat eggs and tortillas for a few pesos per person in the shade of Carlos's cooking ramada, and for a few more pesos Carlos will slaughter one of the chickens he raises for sale to surrounding logging camps and ladino families. Rosa will cook it for a long time in river water and lime juice. In his long mid-day break, when the sun is too hot for work in the fields, Carlos carves out those wooden spoons. He sends twenty at a time every week or so to San Cristóbal, where they are sold at Casa Blom. Carlos, like his brother Miguel, enjoys talking about Tenosique and the world outside, where he occasionally goes for periods of wage work, and would like to visit Mexico City the way Obregon once did for a television appearance, but he works hard and profitably to take advantage of the ever greater opportunities for profit in the Lacandón jungle.



Rosa, wife of Carlos,
making tortillas
from a bucket of masa.
She was within a week of
bearing her first child.

The older people of Lacanjá have lived through a change from stone- to jet-age in a single lifetime, but they seem just as steady and productive as young Carlos. I spent a day with Bor and Jose Pepe in San Cristóbal a few days after my return from the jungle. They had flown in to do some errands. The chief wanted to get a note from the Office of Indian Affairs of the State of Chiapas to order ladinos not to fish from his riverbank, and Bor wanted to have his radio fixed, buy cloth for his wives, and stock up on penicillin ampuls and Entero-Vioform. The shopkeepers tended to shout at them as if they were deaf, and one sales-girl asked me in a whisper if they were really dangerous when angered. Through it all Bor picked his cloth and paid for it calmly and efficiently, using the same system of counting by twenties that the ancient Mayans used in their calendars. They ate their meals and slept at the luxurious Na-Bolom, Gertrude Blom's inn-library-museum where the Lacandones are honored, non-paying guests. The next morning they flew back to Lacanjá at almost no cost with the Bible Translators' pilot. They know how to get along.

To Gertrude Blom, who has been almost single-handedly responsible for considerable national and international awareness of the situation of the Lacandones, the developments among the southern Lacandones are distressing. A photographer, writer, and lobbyist in behalf of the surviving Lacandones, and personal friend to virtually every one, she has devoted much of her long life to protecting them from the impact of the civilized world. (Contrary to what I wrote in the previous newsletter, she is not directly responsible for the tourist flights into Lacanjá. She does guide groups of visitors into the selva, usually to the northern settlements, and, she explained, she chooses her clients carefully.) Now even in the north Gertrude Blom sees discomfiting signs of cultural disintegration. She particularly agonizes over the Canadian-Lacandón marriage and the trickle of hippies into the north. She and I disagree about the desirability of this sort of culture-contact, but not about the likely effects on Lacandón life. To see the northern group before they go the way of their southern kin, I am heading for several caribales scattered through the area at the source of the Perlas River.



Sincerely,

Woodward A. Wickham

Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on May 2, 1972

Obregon K'in and WAW.
K'in wears the long tunic
when he is at home, these
clothes when he goes visiting.