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Brief Communications

CHORTÍ (MAYAN) CEREMONIAL ORGANIZATION¹

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A recent typology of the Mayas (Tax 1964) classified the Chortí of eastern Guatemala as intermediate between the Yucatec, where shamans have both individual and communal functions, and the peoples of the Guatemalan highlands, where shamans perform for individuals and communal ceremonies are performed by permanent organizations (cofradías). Reinterpreting published reports in the light of new fieldwork, the author suggests (1) that some aspects of Chortí society cast doubt on the aptness of a distinction between individual and communal functions and (2) that of the Chortí towns, all but one, Quezaltepeque, appear to fit the Yucatec pattern very closely, suggesting that Quezaltepeque has been affected by its exposure to western pilgrims passing through it en route to Esquipulas each year.

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In a survey of ceremonial organization in the Maya area, Sol Tax (1964) observed that in Yucatán the *h-men* or shaman performs both communal and individual ceremonies, there being no permanently constituted community religious organization, whereas in the midwestern highlands of Guatemala, shamans function only at the individual level and community ceremonials are the province of rather complex permanent organizations, the *cofradías*. He found that

From this point of view the Chortí towns appear to be in some sense intermediary. Jocotán and Olopa are closest to Chan Kom, since important communal ceremonies—for rainmaking—are carried out, as in Chan Kom, by unorganized professionals; but unlike Chan Kom, there does exist a permanent organization (the *cofradía*) performing other important communal ceremonials. In Quezaltepeque this permanent organization, or a similar one, takes on at least some of the

functions in the rainmaking ceremony; and Quezaltepeque from that point of view is farther from Chan Kom and closer to western Guatemala [Tax 1964:296].

These conclusions are interesting, since Chan Kom, in the lowlands of Yucatán, is several hundred miles north of the Guatemalan highlands, whereas the Chortí inhabit a small area around Jocotán, about a hundred miles east of the highlands and only some twenty miles west of the ruins of Copán. Thus, the territory of the Chortí lies well to one side of the routes between the highlands of Guatemala and the lowlands of Yucatán. Moreover, the Chortí area is so compact, in relation to the distances separating it from the other Mayan peoples, that it is not easy to explain substantial differences within it. Most of the Chortí-speaking Indians live around the valley town of Jocotán, about twenty miles north of Esquipulas. Olopa, a mountain village, is about halfway between these two towns. Quezaltepeque (the official spelling) is about eight miles southwest of Olopa and eight miles northwest of Esquipulas (Fig. 1).

Information gleaned from texts and linguistic field notes collected in Jocotán in 1964 and 1965 suggests that in matters of ceremonial organization the differences between Quezaltepeque and Jocotán are much greater than has been supposed. Although only a careful field study could do justice to the subject, I will try to show some of the striking similarities between Jocotán and the lowlands and to clarify certain passages in published accounts of Chortí culture. Finally, accepting the reports and interpretations of those who know Quezaltepeque at first hand, I will suggest one factor that points toward an understanding of the western highland traits detected in that community's religious organization.

The Capitán and the Padrino

Tax's interpretation of the Jocotán community hinges on the importance of the local *cofradía* and ultimately on the role of its

officers, the *capitán* and the *mayordomos*, in the religious life of the community. He wrote of Jocotán that

only padrinos can perform two community functions, those of "Rainmakers" and those of *Mayordomos*. The latter are four men who serve indefinite periods—even for life. . . . One of their number, or much more probably any padrino, is chosen annually to hold the office of *Capitán*, and he is steward of the *cofradía santo*; he has no assistance except from the *Mayordomos* [Tax 1964:282].

This finding appears to rest on Charles Wisdom's usage of the term *padrino*, presumably referring to the Chortí in general, in an ambiguous manner:

Almost any old man who is much respected in his community and whose moral life is acceptable can consider himself and be considered a *padrino*. The *padrinos*, including the rain-makers, the "captain," and the *Mayordomos* are the leaders of all the community religious activity, as only they know how to recite the prayers and perform the ceremonies. They are distinct from the sorcerers, curers, and diviners, who are endowed with a knowledge and power all their

own, although the Indians are inclined to consider any person with esoteric knowledge and power as a *padrino* [Wisdom 1940:373].

Now, in Chortí curing, a relatively simple ceremony performed on short notice, the same person commonly performs first as diviner (*ah ?kin*), and then as curer (*ah nirom*) and prayer-sayer (*ah ?kahpesiah*); this is the *padrino* (Chortí *pagrino*), in the strict sense of the term. The more elaborate agricultural ceremonies are also performed by a *padrino* (as *ah ?kahpesiah*) on behalf of a patron (*ah ium noh ?kin* 'the proprietor of the festival'). For the latter ceremonies, however, the preparation of the site and the festival foods requires several days of work by a number of men and women, and thus necessitates planning and supervision by a respected older man and by one or more women; these are the *capitán* and *capitanas*. Although the *capitán* may well be a *padrino* in the loose or "courtesy" sense, he has no properly ceremonial role and need not be a true *padrino*, or *padrino de agua* (a rain-maker). Indeed, because his duties overlap in time with those of the true *padrino*, the *capitán* could not play both roles in the same ceremony. In an agricultural ceremony, the *capitán* is chosen by the patron, but usually there is unanimity among the workers, the *padrino*, and the patron; a few individuals are chosen again and again, whether for ceremonials or for some secular task requiring coordination of efforts.

Some Chortí-Yucatec Parallels

The annual festival of a village's patron saint is organized in Yucatán by a *cargador*, whose duties appear to correspond closely to those of the *capitán* of the Jocotán *cofradía*. Indeed, there are a number of elements in the report by Villa Rojas of the annual festival in X-Kalakdzonot (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:153-158)—elements like the *enramada* or canopy, the dancing, and the distribution of food—that are also found in the Jocotán festival.

The *padrino* of Jocotán and the *h-men* of Chan Kom are so strikingly alike in their powers and duties that this passage, except perhaps for the last detail, would serve for either:

The *h-men* leads in the Maya ceremonies; he recites the prayers, offers the food to the

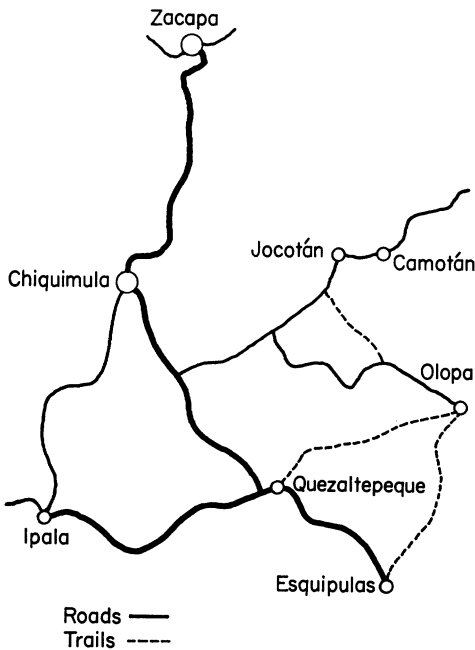


FIGURE 1

gods, and directs his lay assistants. He diagnoses illness, predicts its outcome, and effects cures, partly by performing propitiatory, expiatory, or exorcistic ceremonies, partly by administering herbal medicine, and partly by bleeding and cupping. The priestly and therapeutic functions are thus closely inter-related [Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:75].

Further similar traits include the custom of training new shamans by apprenticeship, usually to a close relative, and the relationship, the same in both societies so far as I can judge, between benevolent shamans and malevolent sorcerers. Moreover, the officers of the *cofradía* in Jocotán—the *mayordomos*—had essentially the function of the administrative *capitán* of an agricultural ceremony (and thus were comparable to the Yucatec *cargador*), rather than the priestly duties of a *padrino*, as I will now try to show.

The Cofradías

Much of Wisdom's discussion of the Chortí *cofradías* deals with one in Quezaltepeque, that of San Francisco el Conquistador, which as Tax remarked "appears to correspond to nothing in Jocotán and Olopa" (1964:282–283). It may have been Wisdom's preference for describing "the best example in the entire region" (1940:384), together with his ambiguous usage of the term *padrino*, that led Tax to conclude that in Jocotán and Olopa

we have what appears to be the beginnings of a religious hierarchy. The four *mayordomos*, selected from the *padrinos*, combined with the system of electing a *capitán* from among the *mayordomos* to serve as the chief steward for the year, all suggest an incipient hierarchy [Tax 1964:315].

But there is nothing in Wisdom's discussion of their duties (1940:376–377) to suggest that the *mayordomos* had any ceremonial duties beyond assisting the priest and tolling the church bells. They never conducted mass in the years before Jocotán had resident priests. The *mayordomos* acted as supervisors of the festival of the local patron saint (Santiago, July 23–25), apparently the only public activity of the Jocotán *cofradía*:

A group of about fifty women, appointed by the *mayordomos*, are busy at the *cofradía* [house] making *chilate*, *atol*, coffee, and *tortillas* in the large ovens and fireplaces of

the *cofradía* courtyard. Long benchlike tables are covered with gourd bowls filled with the *chilate*, which all the Indians drink free of charge. Most of the maize and coffee thus used is contributed by the Indians themselves, but a great quantity is purchased by the *mayordomos* with the contributions which had been left for the patron saint during the previous year [Wisdom 1940:449–450].

Sr. Isidro González, a Chortí of Jocotán and my principal informant, confirms that the duties of the *capitán* of the *cofradía* were essentially those of any *capitán*: supervising the preparation of the food to be consumed during the festival. It is interesting to note that this office may not have entailed a great financial sacrifice, as comparable positions often do in western Guatemala. In effect, the community played the role of the festival-giver, and the Catholic priest, with the assistance of a troupe of dancers, played the role of the *padrino* of an agricultural ceremony.

Today there is no *cofradía* in Jocotán. It never recovered from the effects of a severe famine in 1915, when the prosperity of the region began to decline. In 1920 or 1923 the *cofradía* house was sold, and in 1933, the year of Wisdom's last field season (in Olopa), the Jocotán *cofradía* disbanded. Its last *capitán* was one Nicolás Ramírez; of the two *capitanas* at that time, Antonia López and Feliciano Súchete, the latter was my informant's grandmother. The house still stands, but it is a private residence now; the dancers still perform the dance of the Huastecs each year, but now they are given their free food by the parish.

Quezaltepeque and Jocotán

Quezaltepeque differs from the other Chortí towns in the number and importance of its *cofradías*. There are a number of these in the surrounding settlements and two in the town itself. One of these, San Francisco el Conquistador, is rather western in structure (Tax 1964:282–283); its leader, who is both a *padrino* and a *capitán*, has as his duties the performance of the annual rainmaking ceremony and the stewardship of the *cofradía's* patron saint (Wisdom 1940:375–377). This *cofradía* was active at least as recently as 1959 (Girard 1962:291–297). Its combination of pagan and Catholic observances is a key element in

Tax's interpretation of the local system as showing western highland characteristics. My only objection is to extending this interpretation to the other Chortí towns, for Wisdom's account of the Jocotán rainmaking ceremony (1940:437-439) shows quite clearly that the *padrino*, who is chosen each year by his fellows, had no connection with the appointed *capitán* of the *cofradía*. In Jocotán, as in Chan Kom, there is voluntary individual stewardship of saints' images. One of my informants spontaneously revealed this during a work session devoted to a linguistic problem. Obviously, the present stewardship system in Jocotán can not be related to a *cofradía*, but I do not know how it works.

Quezaltepeque differs from Jocotán also in the composition of its population. In the 1950 census, its inhabitants were listed as 8,872 "*indígenas*" and 2,091 "*ladinos*," compared to 16,173 "*indígenas*" and 1,053 "*ladinos*" in Jocotán. Wisdom found other contrasts as well:

The Quetzaltepeque Indians are much more Catholic, having always had resident priests. Many of their native ceremonies differ greatly in detail, although they are fundamentally similar to those of Jocotán and Olopa. There is not much contact between the two groups. Jocotán Indians are seldom seen in the Quetzaltepeque plaza, and vice versa, and trips to visit friends and to attend festivals are rarely made [1940:210].

Summary

To sum up, I will repeat five diagnostic questions from Tax's survey, outlining the position of the Chortí in relation to the extremes of Chan Kom (Yucatán) and the midwestern highlands of Guatemala and indicating the revisions I would suggest for the Chortí area.²

(1) Is there a permanent "constitutional" ceremonial organization? There is none in Chan Kom, though Redfield pointed out that other nearby towns, like X-Kalakdzonot, have a loose but self-perpetuating system which seems to me very like that of Jocotán (Tax 1964:301 note). In the mid-west of Guatemala, a single organization ties together the civil authority, the church, and the *cofradías*. These last two are also merged in the Quezaltepeque *cofradía* men-

tioned above. Like Chan Kom, Jocotán has no *cofradía*.

(2) Does the shaman-priest perform rituals for both the community and the individual? In Chan Kom, the shaman functions at both levels, while in the midwestern highlands, he functions only for individuals. Tax found that among the Chortí, curing and divining were solely individual ceremonies and that rainmaking was a community function. Here I disagree. In the normal course of events, divining (as a diagnostic technique) and curing are naturally performed for an individual patient. In one legend text, however, the elders of the community turn to an old woman diviner for guidance in their supernatural difficulties, just as the Chortí today turn to a *padrino* for rainmaking or to a skilled builder for supervision when constructing a house. A typological classification of Maya structures should somehow accommodate the especially fluid pattern of relationships linking neighboring families together for specific purposes. Since Chortí settlements are widely dispersed through the steep and wooded countryside, few if any other houses can be seen from a family's clearing, and one's near neighbors—even if they belong to another *aldea*—are seen far more often than the distant inhabitants of one's own officially delimited *aldea*. *In the absence of any permanent community organization, the Chortí habit of ad hoc administration makes it seem arbitrary to separate the individual and the community as sharply distinct functional levels.* Only the rainmaking and patron saint's festivals in Quezaltepeque have become institutionalized, as Tax pointed out, in a manner and within an organization that are suggestively western.

(3) To what degree can we consider the religious and secular organizations to be connected or separated? The Chortí, like the Yucatec, have separate organizations; the Guatemalan highlanders have one organization combining both functions, as Tax reported.

(4) To what degree is the communal-ceremonial organization tied to the church in the stewardship of the saints? There is no connection in Chan Kom or in Jocotán, since both towns lack a permanent organization and both allow voluntary individual

stewardship. In Quezaltepeque, the *cofradía head* is the chief steward, and in the mid-west all stewardship is apparently regulated by the *cofradías*. Here again, Jocotán resembles Chan Kom rather than Quezaltepeque.

(5) To what degree can we speak of pagan ritual versus Catholic ritual? As far as I can judge, in Jocotán, Catholic ritual is conducted by the resident priests for a core of believers little larger than the small Protestant community. The great majority of the Chortí practice a predominantly pagan religion that incorporates a few superficial Catholic elements. In this regard as well, Jocotán is perhaps more like Chan Kom, and Quezaltepeque, again, shows a more western pattern of merged pagan and Catholic ritual.

Conclusion

Important differences in local ceremonial organizations set Quezaltepeque apart from the rest of the Chortí community. There is one factor in this differentiation whose contribution should not be overlooked: Quezaltepeque lies on the main road leading from the highlands through Chiquimula or Ipala to the great pilgrimage site of Esquipulas, whereas Jocotán and Olopa do not. For centuries, Quezaltepeque has been exposed each year to the ebb and flow of pilgrims from the west. It seems plausible that these pilgrims, many of them members or officers of western *cofradías*, would in time influence the local system in the direction of a highland pattern of convergence of native and Catholic religious organizations. From Jocotán, on the other hand, pilgrims travel south to Olopa and pass to the east of Quezaltepeque before joining the main body of pilgrims at Esquipulas itself. For Jocotán, off the main road, contact with highland influence, being confined to the Jocotán pilgrims themselves, would be brief and relatively superficial compared to the annual inundation of Quezaltepeque.

NOTES

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together with Dell Hymes and Andrew Sihler, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this study. I assume full responsibility for its accuracy and for its conclusions.

²The sixth question, concerning the sacred or secular nature of personal relations, is outside my competence. The other five are here worded as they appear in Tax 1964:311-327, together with the original answers. Since Jocotán and Olopa always agree exactly in the original survey, no effort has been made to separate them here.

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SOME COMPARISONS BETWEEN GYPSY (NORTH AMERICAN *rom*) AND AMERICAN ENGLISH KINSHIP TERMS¹

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The semantic structure (in the area of kinship terminology) of the language of certain North American Gypsies is compared to that of North American English. The resemblance is great, but there are certain important differences, particularly in the terminology for affines. These differences are related to cultural differences and can be seen most strikingly by a study of the Gypsy institution of the bride price.

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This brief communication reports on some differences between Gypsy and English semantic slots in regard to kinship terms. The Gypsies to be discussed are speakers of two subdialects: *mašvaia* 'from Mačva [in Serbia]' and *kalderaš* 'coppersmith.' These two subdialects have coalesced a great deal within the last generation, and, in any case, none of the considerations to be discussed