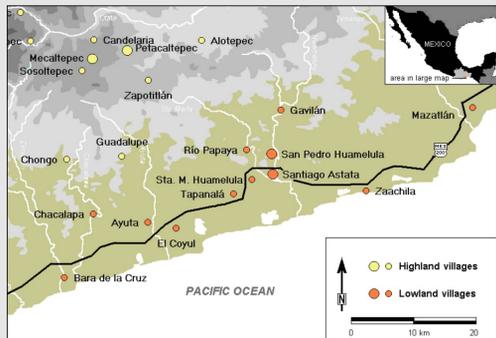




Documentation of the Cultural Heritage of the lower Chontalpa, southeastern Mexico

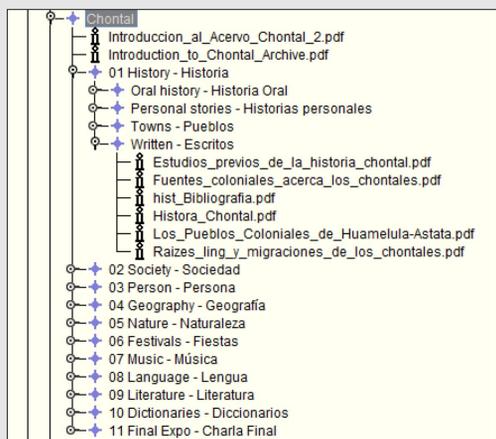
The Chontalpa is a region in the Yautepec and Tehuantepec districts of the state of Oaxaca in southeastern Mexico. Comprised of a highland area (2,000 km²) in the sierras and a lowlands area (870 km²) along the coastal plain, it is the Mexican homeland of an estimated 15,000 ethnic Chontals.



Chontal Communities of Coastal Oaxaca, Mexico. The project focused on the lowland communities, depicted in orange.

History

The few descriptions of Oaxaca Chontals in colonial ethnographies famously depict the community as barbarous savages living in caves, accounts that surely arose from their firm and sometimes violent resistance to subjugation by other Mesoamerican groups, Spanish tax collectors, or the Catholic Church. Modern studies paint a very different historical picture, of a prosperous people with sociopolitical hierarchy and extensive commercial relations with the surrounding region. One goal of the project was to document and archive corrected versions of Chontal history. The DoBeS archive includes a series of contemporary interviews by collaborator Sara de León Chávez, recordings of personal stories in Chontal by members of the community, and an extensive compilation of written materials to unite a fuller picture of the social history of the people. We also published on aspects of the physical and symbolic landscape of the lower Chontalpa [Ref 1].



Confusion about the Chontals persists in the literature because the ethnonym 'chontal' comes from a Nahuatl word meaning 'stranger', a term also applied to ethnic groups and languages in the Mexican states of Tabasco and Guerrero, unrelated to the Chontal community in Oaxaca.

No one knows exactly when Chontals arrived in the region. Archaeological sites near the Huamelula River as well as small figures and other artifacts found nearby suggest that settlements date from the Classic Period of ancient Mexico (300-900 CE). During this time, art forms emphasized social status, seen in detailed hairstyles, headdresses,



Danzantes: Turkish pirates and Catholic kings

and other ornaments, alongside more abstract representations of anatomy. Masks may have played roles in pre-Columbian worship of ancestors or gods.



Language

One major clue to the history of the people lies in the prominent cultural treasure of their language. This project focused on the documentation of Lowland Chontal of Oaxaca, an endangered language with fewer than 100 elderly fluent speakers and many hundreds more who speak with less fluency. Together with sister language Highland Chontal, equally endangered, it comprises the small family of Oaxaca Chontal. A third Chontal variety, once spoken near the town of Tequisistlán, is already dead.

There are no known relatives of Oaxaca Chontal nearby; instead, this small family is often associated with the proposed Hokan stock of mostly North American languages. The connection was investigated during the project, and it seems likely that the Chontal people migrated to southern Mexico from a region in northern California [Ref 2].



Transmission of the language was actively discouraged in the education system, and despite recent efforts at bilingual education

in some primary schools, future prospects for the language are not bright. Our project has preserved hundreds of recordings and transcriptions of personal narratives, folktales, daily life, and linguistic research in the archive; we contributed a grammatical description to the *Archivo de Lenguas Indígenas de México* (www.colmex.mx/alim/) and produced a dictionary with paper and online versions.

Contemporary Culture

Traditionally subsistence farmers and merchants, the Chontal community today is internally cooperative and self-sufficient. As is the case with many Mexican groups, the Chontalpa has suffered greatly due to migration to urban areas and to the US. Even so, the region is renowned for an ongoing commitment to elaborate festivals and traditional cultural practices, which include dancing with an alligator princess and re-enacting historical encounters with Huave neighbors, Turkish pirates, and Spanish Catholic kings.



Estéfani López López



Inez Zavaleta Robles

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CONTACT ADDRESS

Loretta O'Connor, linguist
ltoconnor@gmail.com

Peter Kröfges, anthropologist
ocep333@yahoo.de