



The documentation of a Lacandon (Maya) culture and language



LACANDON CULTURAL HERITAGE

Our project focuses on the Lacandones, a Yucatec speaking people who are the descendants of refugees who fled from Guatemala in the 17th and 18th centuries into Chiapas, Mexico.

The term Lacandon is a Spanish corruption of the Maya word Ah-acun-tun-ooob which roughly means "they that set up (and worship) stone". It was a pejorative term used to identify the un-Christianized Mayas in the forest. The people call themselves the Hach Winik "true people".



Cattle graze in part of the Selva Lacandona after deforestation.

Lacandones make up two small groups, referred to as the northern and southern Lacandones. Each group - whose populations number no more than 350 - share similar cultural patterns and histories, and they speak mutually intelligible dialects; yet they are ethnically distinct.

The northern group, in the village of Nahá, is the focus of this project because, unlike the southern group, people in the north never converted to Christianity and they have retained most of the traditions of their ancestors. However, their culture is now rapidly disintegrating.



Koh Paniagua with her daughter and daughters-in-law and grandchild

There is a strong, traditional connection between the Lacandones' religious and cultural practices, and their environment. Because of this, deforestation and the influx of homesteaders from other parts of Mexico are factors that have contributed to the decline of the Lacandon culture and, consequently, the richness of its language. In response, the Lacandones have now provided their own "forest ranger" to prevent further exploitation of resources and encroachment by outsiders. However, most men have already stopped farming in the traditional way.



A group of Lacandon children at school

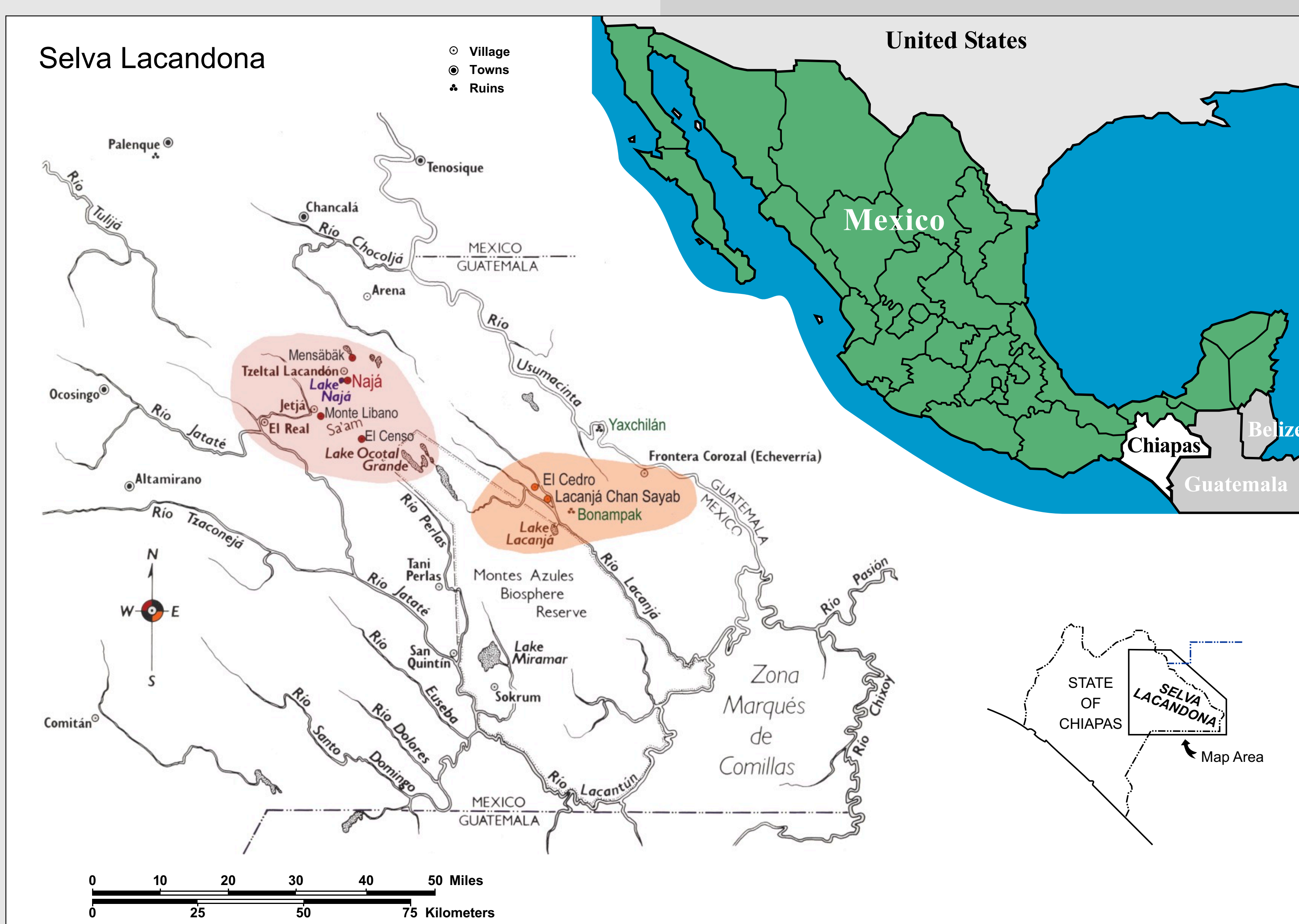


The late Chan K'in Viejo, the last traditional leader of Nahá

The pivotal event in the current decline of the Lacandon culture, was the recent death of Chan K'in Viejo in 1996, who was their traditional civic and religious leader for many years. With his passing, the Lacandones have become more vulnerable to outside forces and as a result have been abandoning their traditional religious ceremonies. Now, only two individuals practice the Lacandon religion and most of the community has begun the process of converting to Christianity. This makes our documentation all the more urgent.

Recording carried out by the project field team has been comprehensive. Collected material includes the following categories:

- songs (12)
- chants (16)
- traditional stories (28)
- personal histories (32)
- conversations (15)
- rituals (5)
- ceremonies (3)
- ethnological descriptions (33)



The northern Lacandones in Nahá, Chiapas, Mexico, are the focus of this project.



Back (L-R): K'in, Sakol, Cook, Koh Maria, Carlson, Chaxnuk, Koh Paniagua. Front (L-R): Leandro, Rosa, Chanuk, Daniel.

CONTACT ADDRESS

Suzanne Cook
Lacandon Cultural Heritage
University of Victoria
scook@uvic.ca
<http://web.uvic.ca/lacandon/>