

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY  
BULLETIN 143

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HANDBOOK  
OF  
SOUTH AMERICAN INDIANS

JULIAN H. STEWARD, *Editor*

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Volume 4

THE CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN TRIBES

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Prepared in Cooperation With the United States Department of State as a Project  
of the Interdepartmental Committee for Scientific and Cultural Cooperation



UNITED STATES  
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON : 1948

## The Post-Conquest Ethnology of Central America

### THE POST-CONQUEST ETHNOLOGY OF CENTRAL AMERICA: AN INTRODUCTION

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By FREDERICK JOHNSON

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Previous to the arrival of the Spaniards the culture of the Indians of Central America had been modified by the infiltration both of isolated culture traits and of complete complexes. It is probable that some of these modifications were forced upon the region by conquests, that is, by armies or at least by powerful bands of people. This influence was not overwhelming, however, for, regardless of its extent, the innovations were American in character and could be assimilated without disrupting the major trends of local developments. The Spanish Conquest was different, being carried on by means of an unprecedented military organization and involving a radically new economic system. Furthermore, its expressed intent was to mold the aboriginal culture into a form that could be dominated and controlled by Europeans.

Under Spanish influence a mixed culture developed, consisting of indigenous traits which the Indians could not or would not give up, together with a number of traits of foreign origin. Some of the latter were sought by the aborigines, for example, metal tools and other articles, which replaced the aboriginal ones as fast as the supply permitted. Many domesticated crops, especially bananas, sugarcane, rice, coffee, and oranges, and animals, particularly pigs and chickens, were quickly adopted. Some features, including social and religious concepts, were forced upon the Indians. The process of mixing and adjustment was not the same everywhere, however; each tribe reacted in its own peculiar manner, and the various Spanish leaders utilized different approaches. Moreover, some Indian groups submitted to Spanish domination more readily than others. The immediate result was a confusion, which is reflected, perhaps, by the contradictory information in the early documents. Once a relationship tolerable to both the Spaniards and Indians had been established, the progress of acculturation proceeded with less difficulty. However, in spite of 400 years of European aggression, some tribes still maintain many of the features of their aboriginal cultural tradition. As the contact between the Indians, Mestizos, and Whites of Central America

becomes more intense, these features will be further modified; in fact, acculturational changes are now taking place with an impressive rapidity.

The most striking influence on the Indian culture is that from the Spaniards, but Negro elements, to which too little attention has been paid, are also present. In the early mid-16th century, African slaves escaped from the Spaniards and organized communities as discrete enclaves, which promptly established intimate contacts with the Indians. The possible effects of the Negroes upon aboriginal culture should not be minimized. Another source of cultural influence came from the *Carib* Indians who, in the 18th century, were transported in considerable numbers to the Bay Islands and subsequently migrated to the mainland. They are probably responsible for some Central American culture traits which have been labeled "West Indian." It is necessary, however, to distinguish between West Indian traits that were brought by the *Carib* and those that may have reached Central America before 1700.

The role which geographic factors played in the development of Central American culture was vital, but unfortunately it has not been studied. Each cultural division has a few traits of restricted distribution which are obviously conditioned by the environment. It was probably in part for environmental reasons that the route of invasion taken by Meso-American tribes paralleled the Pacific coast and crossed sections of the Highlands. The few colonies which the Meso-Americans sent into the Tropical Forests were mere outposts, some of which succumbed to the environment, while others, probably under environmental influence, adopted the indigenous culture. The colonies which retained their Meso-American features were evidently not established long enough before the Conquest for local environmental and cultural influences to have changed them.

Environment was, however, only one of many factors responsible for the distribution of aboriginal culture. Exclusive of the Northern Highland and Meso-American Divisions, each culture in Central America is distributed over the Tropical Forests, the Pacific Borderlands, and the Highlands. Social and political organization are much the same everywhere. It is these cultures, especially among the tribes of Darién, the *Talamanca* Division, and the tribes of the northern and eastern coastal regions of Honduras and Nicaragua, which have a majority of traits of South American origin and which seem least affected by the differences in environment. They differ from one another only in detail.

The Spanish Conquest completely disrupted the trend of aboriginal events. During the past 400 years some tribes have become extinct and new tribes have developed out of the remnants of former organizations. Their territory has changed greatly. (Cf. map 5, for the period 1700-1900.) It seems possible that geographic factors have become more important than at any previous time. When the Spaniards landed they had to plunge into the Tropical Forest, an environment which they did

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not understand very well. They attempted to subdue the region but they were not wholly successful. Through military action and political intrigue they were able to conquer some tribes and to obliterate others, but there always remained aboriginal nuclei on the flank of their lines of communication through the Forests to the Highlands and the Pacific Borderlands. In these latter areas the Spaniards found themselves more at home, and, in spite of temporary setbacks, the expeditions sent west of Panamá City and south of ports of entry on the Caribbean were successful.

After conquering the Highlands and the Pacific Borderlands, the Spanish conquistadors transferred their interest from the Tropical Forest to the riches of México and Perú, making certain only that areas around the ports of entry and lines of communication were safe from any threat from the aborigines. The remainder of the Tropical Forest was virtually ignored, partially because it was useless to them. The remnant Indian groups were thereafter able to preserve their isolation in the Tropical Forest. Some tribes had not moved from their native haunts, but many others had been shifted about because of the military campaigns and the colonizing policies of the Spaniards. Despite the vagaries of history, which resulted in contacts of varying intensity with Europeans, these tribes still exist as cultural and, to a limited extent, as political entities in the Tropical Forest. The very small refugee enclaves and the partially Hispanicized *Lenca* now inhabit the more remote regions of the Highlands, but the bulk of the population which retains an Indian culture is found in the Tropical Forest and along its inland fringes.

It is obvious that the preceding hypothetical and speculative observations oversimplify a complex development in a region where all features are highly variable. Nevertheless, such a statement serves to combine possible interpretations of previous sections with the description of specific culture traits included in the present section. Before this statement can be greatly improved we need more accurate and more comprehensive geographic studies and also more detailed studies of the native and mixed populations of Central America. This latter includes further research into their territory.

In the following descriptions an attempt has been made to indicate the possibilities of such a study. Where feasible, the descriptions of 16th-century culture are separated from modern observations. If this were done in more detail and for all areas, the course of acculturation over the past 400 years would be more clearly brought out. Even as it is, what is often called the degeneration of culture is quite apparent.

Native industries have been choked out by the influx of European goods, which were often better suited than native objects for certain purposes. The native ceramic industry, once a significant outlet for artistic expression, produces only utilitarian wares, and these are now made in insuffi-



cient quantity to meet the demand. Only rarely are ceremonial vessels made, and even more rarely are wares decorated. Similarly, the weaving industry now produces only distinctly utilitarian fabrics, in contrast to the textiles, particularly those made on the Pacific coast, which the Spaniards admired. Metallurgy is no longer practiced, even by the descendants of tribes which had been most expert. Other industries have similarly declined, and only items of definite utility value are now made. In some cases, even the latter are no longer identical with the aboriginal ones, for they include innovations introduced by Europeans.

The changes in size and distribution of the population have affected the manner of living. Village or community life has taken on certain aspects of European tradition. Communal houses have been broken up. Single-family houses are now more common, and there is a tendency toward the reduction in number of house types. The "el" roofed house with or without walls may now be the most common type. These developments have had far-reaching effects upon the social customs of practically all tribes. The zeal of the missionaries has destroyed much of the ancient religion, but the more conservative groups retain many aboriginal features. It would be interesting to discover how many Christian and African concepts have been incorporated into these Indian religions and to determine the number and character of the Indian beliefs which have been adopted by the Church.

The present survey and tentative comparisons of early and modern culture traits bring to light several hypotheses which merit much future study. The aboriginal cultures of the Pacific Borderlands have been practically obliterated, and those of the Highlands have been superseded by a culture which is largely of Spanish origin. Of extreme interest, however, is the strongly Hispanicized culture of such tribes as the *Lenca*. In these a great many aboriginal features are still recognizable. In the Tropical Forests the Indians have become restricted to isolated regions, but their culture appears to retain much that is aboriginal. The culture traits first recorded after the Conquest reveal a number of local cultural divisions, but data collected during the past 50 years suggest greater homogeneity. The striking fact of the Tropical Forest people is that since the Conquest their culture has been simplified or decultured, rather than Hispanicized. During the past 400 years the more sophisticated aboriginal traits have disappeared; art, some industries, special costumes, the class system which supported a leisure class of nobles, and such are gone. The surviving culture is largely that concerned with subsistence and utilitarian pursuits, but even these have been modified by Spanish influence.

# THE MESO-AMERICAN DIVISION<sup>1</sup>

By FREDERICK JOHNSON

## INTRODUCTION

A satisfactory description of this Division is prevented by the contradictory and fragmentary nature of the data. The Central American culture traits which appear to have originated to the north and west of the eastern boundary of Guatemala<sup>2</sup> cannot, for various reasons, be ascribed with certainty to the tribes which have been identified.

Ferdinand Columbus and other early explorers of the coasts of Honduras and Nicaragua describe clothing, ornaments, body decoration, weapons, and such which are Meso-American in character, but it is questionable whether the *Paya*, *Jicaque*, *Sumo*, and *Mosquito* possessed them. Actually these traits may have occurred only among the enclaves of immigrants who came from the lands to the north and west. Or they may have diffused into these regions and been adopted by the ancestors of the present tribes, who subsequently lost them. Records of Meso-American traits in the scattered localities in Central America which were not, as far as we know, inhabited by tribes of Meso-American origin are difficult to evaluate. These traits may have come through diffusion or they may have been actually carried in by small groups of travelers or traders.

The data on identifiable tribes can be treated with more confidence. Three groups of tribes living in Central America at the Conquest have, through their characteristically Mexican dialects, traditions, and culture elements, been identified as immigrants from México (maps 2 and 5). On the basis of traditional history, tribes of the *Nahuatlan* Group have been identified either with the *Toltec-Chichimec*, speaking the *Nahuatl* language, or with the *Aztec*, speaking *Nahuatl* (Mason, J. A., 1940; Johnson, 1940). It is probable that the *Toltec-Chichimec* tribes left Mexico during the 12th-century revolutions and migrations. The *Aztec*, on the other hand, appeared in Central America in the 15th and 16th centuries, having been sent out from México on trading and colonizing expeditions. The history of the *Maribio* and *Chorotega* Groups is controversial if not obscure. The languages and some culture traits are closely related to those of México. It has been postulated that these two groups of tribes

<sup>1</sup> For a definition of Meso-America, cf. Kirchhoff, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> Kirchhoff (1943) includes the *Lenca* in his Meso-American area. In the Handbook the *Lenca* are included in Central America, because they have many features which are common to the Central American region. The existence and significance of traits suggesting relationships to the north and west have not been emphasized.

represent earlier migrations to the region. Many of the traits of recent "Mexican" origin may, however, have developed in South America and spread northward, so that the Meso-Americans borrowed certain traits before they disseminated them.

After examining the historical data and making first-hand field observations himself, Lothrop (1940, p. 427), commenting on the culture of the *Nahuatlan* Group, exclusive of the *Nicarao*, says that, "they had abandoned anything recognizable as Mexican except their religion and speech and, in western Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica, some rare polychrome pottery patterns. Instead they adopted the manner of living practiced by their neighbors, Chorotegan and Talamancan tribes, probably as a result of intermarriage. In other words, the southward drift of the *Nahua* [*Nahuatlan*] from the 12th to 16th centuries did not, so far as we know, influence South American culture and by its nature could not be expected to do so." To a lesser extent this statement applies also to the *Chorotegan* and *Maribio* Groups.

An account of the culture of the Meso-American Groups is hampered by the lack of knowledge of the different tribes. With few exceptions, available data pertain to the *Chorotega* and the *Nicarao*. Oviedo y Valdés (1851-55), by far the best source, segregated some of his descriptions into these two divisions but all too frequently used the term "Nicaraguan." This term may have originated from *Nicarao*, but certain cultural items appear to have been *Chorotegan* or, perhaps, ascribable to other tribes. There is virtually no information on *Maribio* culture and on most of the *Nahuatlan* settlements.

## CULTURE

### SUBSISTENCE ACTIVITIES

Agriculture was highly developed among all these tribes. The slash-and-burn type common to the region must have been universally employed. The most important of the many crops were maize, cacao, and tobacco. Hunting and fishing supplied important additions to the diet.

### VILLAGES AND HOUSES

Houses of the common people were thatch-roofed. Possibly the tree houses found on islands and along rivers were also those of the common people. The early writers devoted considerable attention to the "palaces" of the kings and nobles. These were composed of several varieties of rectangular houses each with a special use and all arranged about a rectangular plaza. Some had porticos. Temples were structurally similar to houses. Both temples and palaces were often built upon low earth mounds. Towns consisted of temples and palaces scattered about the countryside, each surrounded by houses apparently laid out along streets. Little or nothing is said about the location of the houses of the common people.

## DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

*Nicarao* men wore sleeveless tunics of woven cotton cloth and breechclouts made of a long strip of cloth wound about the body and passed between the legs. Sandals were made of deer hide and tied on with straps. Women wore skirts reaching to the knees. Women of high rank wore ankle-length skirts and "neck-cloths" which covered their breasts. The costume of *Orotiña* men was very similar to that of the *Nicarao*, but the former tied a thread to the prepuce. *Orotiña* women were said to wear an elaborately decorated breechclout, the ends of which passed over a narrow belt and hung down to form small aprons front and back.

According to Oviedo y Valdés, the *Nicarao* and the *Chorotega* took great care of their hair. They decorated it in many ways and wore combs in it. A man shaved his head in various fashions to indicate his social position and his success in battle. Men were said to pierce their tongues and ears, and some were said to scarify (?) the penis. Women also pierced their ears and wore quantities of necklaces, some of gold beads and medallions.

Body painting and tattooing were common. The followers of the caciques bore identifying marks. Elaborate body painting was used on ceremonial occasions. Cranial deformation was common.

## TRANSPORTATION

Dugout canoes were used, and a type of raft is described. Paddles were made by fastening large pearl-oyster shells or pieces of board to the ends of a shaft.

## MANUFACTURES

**Weaving.**—Textiles were made by all tribes. Thread was spun from cotton, agave, and palm fibers. The Spaniards greatly prized these textiles, particularly those made by the *Orotiña*, who dyed their threads with purple obtained from a shellfish (*Purpura patula*). Mats and hammocks were woven of threads made from the coarser fibers.

**Ceramics.**—One of the greatest industries was pottery making, which the explorers and travelers praised highly. Oviedo mentions particularly the black ware made on Chira Island in the Golfo de Nicoya.

**Metallurgy.**—Goldworking is mentioned, but it may not have been a major industry among the peoples of "foreign origin," i.e., the Meso-Americans. The industry is more completely described for tribes of the *Talamanca* Division. Early records and subsequent archeological work indicate that a center of the industry may have been in western Panamá and southwestern Costa Rica. At any rate there was an extensive trade in objects made in this region and also in the raw materials.



## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

**Social organization and marriage.**—The social organization of the people in Nicaragua was characterized by three hereditary classes. A person could improve his status, however, by acquiring wealth. The priests, who were usually nobles, were in a class more or less by themselves. "Slaves were usually prisoners of war, and their lot was a hard one, for, after a period of toil, they were often sacrificed to the gods and eaten" (Lothrop, 1926 b, p. 47).

According to Oviedo y Valdés (1851–55, bk. 42, ch. 1), marriage among the *Nicarao* might be arranged in several ways. The first is reminiscent of the *Astec* custom. The fathers of the couple which wished to marry agreed to the union and the man's father gave a large banquet. The marriage ceremony was performed by the cacique, who joined the fingers of the left hands of the couple by slipping a little sheath over them. The couple then sat in silence beside a small ceremonial fire until it was "consumed," when the marriage was considered sealed. Feasting and the presentation of gifts were then in order. Theoretically, a woman should remain a virgin until married, and the bridegroom was permitted to reject a woman who was not a virgin.

In a second form of marriage a prostitute might acquire a husband. Oviedo implies this to have been characteristic of the *Nicarao*, but Lothrop (1926 b, p. 59) believes that it may have been a *Chorotega* custom, which perhaps was adopted by the *Nicarao*. If an unmarried woman became a prostitute and, despite supporting her progeny, acquired wealth, she might build and furnish a house on land obtained from her father and her consorts. She then chose one of her consorts for a husband, and after a marriage feast the couple lived together as man and wife. This feast was sometimes prolonged by the eating of the corpses of the rejected suitors, who, having helped provide the house, had committed suicide.

Nobles were permitted to have one wife and several female slaves. Bigamy is not defined, but it was punished by expropriation of property and exile. An adultress was beaten and returned to her father, who claimed her property. The woman was disgraced; the man was beaten by the husband but not otherwise penalized.

There were a number of general rules, which were possibly *Nicarao* customs, though some may have been *Chorotega* practices. Marriage was permitted with anyone except a member of one's immediately family. Intrafamily marriage was encouraged on the grounds that it strengthened family ties. A man convicted of rape had to ransom himself from the girl's family or become its slave. When a slave had relations with his owner's daughter, both lovers were buried alive. The position of women seems to have been good. They exercised considerable authority in the house, having the power to punish their husbands and to make them pro-

vide food and perform many household tasks. One of the principal duties of the women was to barter and sell the goods, usually in the markets.

*Chorotega* customs have not been described specifically. The common people were apparently monogamous, but the upper classes might be polygynous. *Orotiña* caciques had the right of *jus primae notis*.

Prostitution was a recognized institution among the *Chorotega* and *Nicarao*. Also, there were recognized periods of sex license, particularly during certain ceremonies.

**Political organization.**—There were two types of government among these tribes, but the information does not permit a description of the type found in each tribe. A democratic form, perhaps characteristic of the *Chorotega*, has been described, particularly by Oviedo y Valdés (1851–55, bk. 42, ch. 1). A council of old men was selected by popular vote. It chose for its supreme head a “captain general,” who acted as chief, particularly in war. If he were killed in battle another chief was chosen. Apparently the council had considerable power, for it could kill the chief it had elected and choose another. This system was so strong that the Spaniards had to abolish it. They dissolved the councils and established *repartimientos* governed by appointed caciques, thus creating a sort of feudalism which they could control.

A feudal form of government is also described by Oviedo y Valdés (1851–55, bk. 42, ch. 12). Lothrop (1926 b, p. 48) summarizes this: At the head of the state was the cacique (called *teyte* by the *Nicarao*), who probably came by his office through a hereditary-elective system. In addition, there was a council (*monexicos*) composed of various elders (*guegues*), who were elected for a term of four moons. The cacique theoretically could not act unless supported by the council, which could not meet unless he summoned it. The council appointed various officials, presumably from their own number, and these were paid for their services in maize, cacao, or mantles.

The laws of the *Chorotega* and *Nicarao*, reported mainly by Oviedo y Valdés (1851–55, bk. 42, ch. 3), concerned adjustments made personally between an offended person and the criminal. This legal system, as Lothrop (1926 b, p. 63) says, was on a different basis from that of the *Aztec*, among whom “there existed a complicated system of tribunals, each with its particular composition and jurisdiction, and the right of appeal to a higher court was acknowledged.”

#### ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

*Chorotega* and *Nicarao* commerce centered in the markets. Each town had a market in which all commodities, even slaves, were traded. A special official enforced all its regulations. Cacao was employed as money in the markets as well as outside them, and maize and cotton were also bases of exchange. Men were forbidden to enter the market of their native towns, for these were run by the women and boys. Strangers, however, could enter them to trade.



## WARFARE

These tribes were continually at war, and the art of warfare was highly developed, particularly among the *Chorotega* and *Nicarao*. The young men were carefully trained and organized in companies which stood regular watch and were constantly ready for battle. The principal cause of war, said Oviedo y Valdés (1851-55, bk. 42, ch. 3), was boundary disputes, but the desire to obtain slaves for sacrifice probably also was a motive. War was declared through a messenger, who followed standard procedure (Lothrop, 1926 b, p. 50). Usually the cacique did not accompany the army, a war leader being appointed by the council or by the cacique with the approval of the council.

## CANNIBALISM

"Cannibalism was widespread. Although of ceremonial origin, it appears that the taste for human flesh had become highly developed, and that slaves were bred in captivity for consumption just as any other domestic animal might be; also there is evidence that raids were conducted in hope of plunder and high living in the form of human flesh" (Lothrop, 1926 b, p. 35).

## ESTHETIC AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Two *Chorotega* and *Nicarao* games are described. One, *voladores*, is still known in México. The other was a sort of seesaw, two men swinging from the end of a beam which revolved upon a horizontal pole, supported on two crotched uprights. (Cf. illustrations in Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55; also Lothrop, 1926 b, p. 53.)

Many beverages, some highly intoxicating, were used. Coca mixed with lime was chewed, particularly by the *Nicarao*.

## RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY

Religious practices were marked by several types of human sacrifice and various observances to celebrate different cults. The *Nicarao* and the *Chorotega* had a number of gods, each with distinctive attributes. Priests formed a special caste and officiated at the ceremonies held at the temples. Ceremonies to the various gods celebrated the cacao harvest, the holy days in the calendar, and such occasions as birth and death. Various types of witchcraft and divination were practiced.

The mythology of these tribes centered about the gods. There was a creation myth, various beliefs concerning the soul and death, and explanations of several natural events. (Cf. Lothrop, 1926 b, for an excellent discussion of religion.)

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