

## PREFACE

The Lacandonese of southern Mexico are well known and yet, in a real sense, remain unknown. Much has been written about them, but few accounts are based on an intimate knowledge of their way of life. All manner of tourists and self-styled romanticists visit the Lacandone forest for a day or two and return home to publish fanciful stories which have little foundation in fact. There is thus a continually growing bibliography on the Lacandonese<sup>1</sup> (cf. Robles et al. 1967), but little in the way of substantive material about their culture. There are exceptions, but a fair statement on the subject would require a separate monograph.

The habitat of the Lacandonese ranges from tropical rain forest in the north to low-lying jungle in the south, in which the altitude drops from three thousand down to a few hundred feet above sea level. The area lies between 16° and 17° 15' N, and between 91° 36' W. It is bounded naturally on the west, south, east, and north by the Santo Domingo, Jataté, Lacantún, Usumacinta, and Chocoljã rivers respectively.

The Lacandonese themselves may be divided into two main groups, which we here will call the Northern and the Southern Lacandonese. Each of these main groups is scattered over a large area and includes smaller local groups which have varying degrees of contact with one another. The division into the northern and southern groups is made on both linguistic and cultural grounds.

Until very recently the Lacandonese have remained as isolated from western culture and as conservative in their retention of indigenous life-ways as any people native to Middle America. In this respect, however, the two groups

differ considerably. Northerners continue to eschew acceptance of western ideas. Material items such as rifles and radios are accepted, but native terms are coined to name them; and beyond simple material goods of this type which have an obvious value, there is extreme reluctance to accept anything.

In the south, on the other hand, there is an almost overwhelming desire on the part of the young people to acculturate to the Mexican way of life and to find acceptance among outsiders. The word 'acceptance' is a key to understanding the Southern Lacandone young people. They have discarded their native tunic and men's long hair styles; they have donned sun glasses; and, in general, they desire to throw off all their old ways without considering whether some of these, such as certain social restraints, may not be important to their survival.

This difference in stance towards innovation is only one of many cultural differences between the two groups. There are linguistic differences as well. Baer (1955) has reported the differences he found between the San Quintín dialect (in the south) and that of Najá (in the north). Morris Swadesh studied the material collected by Baer at that time and placed the separation of the two dialects at about three hundred years ago, or roughly from the time of the conquest. Further contact by Baer since 1955 has shown that the Lacanjá dialect is the same as that spoken at San Quintín, and that there has been a great deal of intercourse between the several southern settlements from Lake Santa Clara south to San Quintín, although much less between these subgroups and the northern settlements.