

THE *BALCHÉ* RITUAL OF THE LACANDON MAYA

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INTRODUCTION

According to early 16th century Spanish historical sources, the ritual use of *balché* (a mildly alcoholic beverage) was a common feature of religious life among the Precolumbian Maya Indians. As the *balché* rite involved ritual inebriation and offerings of the beverage to traditional pagan gods, it was not long before missionaries attempted to terminate the practice of this ritual. The Spaniards' strong disapproval is reflected in the following description of the rite written by Diego de Landa, one of the first bishops of the Yucatán (Tozzer 1978: 92):

And they make wine of honey and water and a certain root of a tree, which they cultivate for this purpose, by which the wine was made strong and stinking . . . And after the repast the cup-bearers, who were not accustomed to get drunk, poured out drink from great tubs, until they [those celebrating] had become as drunk as scimitars, and the women took it upon themselves to get their drunken husbands home.

Despite the religious prohibitions against the beverage, ritual use of *balché* still continues throughout the Maya area, and the *balché* rite forms the basic framework around which Lacandon Maya ritual behavior revolves.¹ Lacandon rituals are

¹ See Love (1984) for a detailed description of the use of *balché* in a Yucatecan Maya agricultural ceremony conducted in the community of Becanchen. Though not about *balché* per se, Love's article describes the brewing of *balché*, and its use as an offering during the course of a Wail Kol ritual held in April, 1978.

not differentiated so much by form or ceremonial actions as they are by the psychological motivations of individuals or environmental situations which necessitate the appropriate ceremonies. In this context, the *balché* ceremony is a key ritual, for it provides the ritual structure central to virtually all Lacandon ritual interactions with the gods. The objectives of this paper are a description of (1) the *balché* ritual, and (2) the functions it serves in Lacandon society, for the *balché* rite acts not only as a model for other rituals, but also as a vehicle for the transmission of traditional songs and stories, and to monitor and correct deviant behavior.

Ethnographic Background

The Lacandon are swidden horticulturalists who live in the rainforest of southern Chiapas, Mexico. Numbering almost five hundred people, the majority of Lacandon reside in three communities: Lacanha, Chan Sayab, Mensäbäk, and Najá. Although the *balché* ritual was practiced by the majority of Lacandon until the 1950's, virtually all members of the first two communities have undergone conversion to Protestant Christianity and have now abandoned their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Only the people of Najá still believe in the traditional pantheon of Mayan gods and continue to worship their deities with rituals that have direct parallels to the religious practices of the Prehispanic Maya.² One such parallel is the *balché* ceremony. Drunk in large quantities, *balché* is believed to be both physically and spiritually purifying. It is a means for achieving a transcendental state during rituals, and may be used medicinally as a treatment for disease. Together with *pom* (copal incense), *balché* is a favorite offering to the Lacandon gods. The gods partake of their offerings through the medium of the *läkil k'uh* (godpot), clay incense burners, each with an upturned face modeled on them. Painted white, with red and black stripes, the godpots are not believed to be actual gods, nor are they even considered accurate representations of the

² For a comparison of Prehispanic Yucatecan Maya religion with contemporary Lacandon religious beliefs and practices see McGee (1983) and (1984).

gods. Instead, they are the receptacles in which an offering is transmitted to a god for consumption.³

Prior to making an offering, an individual will pray, inviting the god to his godhouse (the ritual hut apart from the village). The god is asked to sit on his godpot, and partake of the offering about to be provided. Typically, incense offerings are burned in the bowl of the godpot where they are believed to transform into *wah* (tortillas) for the deity to eat. *Balché* offerings are dripped into the mouth of the figure on the godpot. In this fashion the gods are able to eat and drink their offerings.

A *balché* ceremony may be initiated in a variety of circumstances, but usually is held when asking the gods for a favor in the face of serious misfortune such as sickness or crop failure, or as a thanksgiving rite (*bo?ot-ik k?uh*, literally to "pay the gods") when they have granted a request. Lacandon men are the spiritual caretakers of their families and the relationship between them and their gods is based upon the fulfillment of mutual obligations. Men believe they must feed the gods *balché* and ceremonial foodstuffs, and burn incense in their godpots in order to insure the benevolence of their deities. The Lacandon believe that the gods impose disease, death, poor harvests, and other misfortunes should they be neglected and become angry. Men, therefore, make *balché* for the gods when asking a favor or sponsoring thanksgiving rituals, such as the *u ts?a-ik u ho?ol* (literally to "give the head" i.e. first fruits) ceremony, where *balché* and the first of the harvested crops are offered to the gods. There is no ritual or calendrical cycle to determine the timing of *balché* ceremonies. Most *balché* rites take place when individuals feel the physical or spiritual wellbeing of their families is threatened. On the average, these rituals are conducted every four to six weeks, but may occur more often. For instance, I once participated in three *balché* rites in one week.

All *balché* ceremonies are held in a thatched roof ritual hut called the *yatoch k?uh* (godhouse). The *balché chem*, a special

³ The function of the Lacandon godpot is very similar to that described by Vogt for crosses (1970: 13-14) among the Zinacantan Maya in the highlands of Chiapas.

dugout canoe in which the beverage is brewed, is set on the east side of the godhouse (see figure 1). Although an observer may be misled by its mundane appearance, a godhouse is the site where secular space is transformed into a sacred precinct. The godhouse is built in a clearing apart from the village. It serves not only as a ritual meeting site and shelter for the storage of religious paraphernalia, but also as a symbolic imitation of the Lacandon gods' own houses. Whereas, a Lacandon man may build a house with a cement slab floor, board walls, and tin roof, the godhouse is always built in the style of the traditional Lacandon house, with its low thatched roof, dirt floor, and no walls. Red circular designs (a red circle with a solid red dot in the center) are painted on specific posts and beams inside the godhouse with *k²uxu*, a dye made from annatto. These designs recall the ancient past when the creator god Hachäkyum (Our True Lord) sacrificed human beings, collected their blood in a gourd, and asked the god T²sibatnah (Painter of Houses) to paint his dwelling red with human blood.⁴ Even the *balché chem* is patterned after the divine dwellings. It is covered with thatch when not in use, similar to the roof of the godhouse. In addition, the same red circular designs are painted on the ends of the dugout canoe. Thus, when you approach the godhouse you enter a sacred precinct. It is the meeting place between gods and humans, where deities will sit in your presence, partake of your offerings, and listen to your prayers.

The Balché Ritual

There are several distinct stages in the *balché* ceremony. They include incense offerings, feeding *balché* to the godpots and drinking by ritual participants. Though distinct activities, the sequence of these actions is not predetermined and varies widely from ritual to ritual. Despite this variability, the initial step of the rite is always the production of *balché*. This is done in the early morning, a day or two before the ceremony.

⁴ For the complete text of this myth in Lacandon with a Spanish translation see (Bruce 1974: 151-153).

The Lacandon have no formal ritual leaders and there is no set ritual schedule. Because each man is responsible for the spiritual well-being of his own family and close relatives, a *balché* ritual will be held when the head of a household feels it is necessary. The individual who sponsors the ritual prepares the drink with the help of one of his sons or sons-in-law. Although *balché* is a sacred drink, the brewing process is not secret and the recipe for *balché* is common knowledge. First, the *balché chem*, turned upside down when not in use, is righted and filled in ten trips with water carried in the *pak*, a large clay jar with the face of Bol, the Lacandon god of *balché* modeled on it. Then a sweetener, usually 5 liters of honey but also sugar cane or granulated sugar, is added to the water. Long strips of *balché* bark (the drink is named after the bark of the *balché* tree, *Lonchocarpus longistylus*) are laid lengthwise in the *chem* and held under the surface of the water with short wooden rods wedged into the sides of the dugout. The mixture is stirred, and the top of the *chem* is covered with palm and banana leaves to protect the beverage from rainwater and insects during the short fermentation period which lasts only the rest of the day and overnight. Finally, the host of the ritual conducts a short divination ceremony in which the gods are invited to participate in the next day's rite.⁵

The *balché* ceremony is usually held the following day, although the host may postpone the rite for a second day if the beverage is judged to be too sweet (and thus not fit for the gods to drink). Although participants usually arrive at their own convenience, the rite's beginning is signaled by several long blasts on a conch shell horn which summons the gods to the godhouse. Older men usually arrive at the godhouse first, often around sunrise, to arrange the first rounds of *balché* offerings in front of the godpots of those deities who chose to participate in the rite during the previous day's divination

⁵ Although I have listened to Lacandon divinations, I was never allowed to watch them occur. Davis (1978: 261) reports that the Lacandon practice three types of divination. The first involves connecting the tips of the fingernails together, another by scratching the inner arm and watching for welts to develop, and the third (and one most commonly described to me) consists of rolling a palm leaf around its stem and watching the pattern in which it unrolls. During each type of divination the petitioner chants his question as the procedure is conducted.

ceremony. These godpots, normally stored in the rafters on the west side of the godhouse, are removed and placed on a row of flat wooden boards facing the east (godpots always face the east, the direction of the rising sun—see figure 1).⁶ Gourds of *balché* offerings are placed on a bed of palm leaves, in front of the godpots. A *suhuy k'ak?* (virgin fire) is kindled with a wooden drill to provide embers for lighting the offerings of incense placed in the bowls of the godpots.⁷

Once the godhouse and godpots have been properly prepared, the initial ritual action in the *balché* rite usually involves incense offerings. The Lacandon use copal incense, *pom*, called *yo'och k'uh* (god's food), because they believe it changes into tortillas for the gods to eat. Using small wooden spoon-like paddles, a man places bits of incense into the bowl of the incense burner. He then lights the incense with an ember from the virgin fire, and prays while squatting behind the godpot with the smoke and sparks of the burning incense billowing around him. Lacandon prayers, usually structurally simple but metaphorically complex, are recited in a stylized, nasal, sing-song chant. The content of these prayers are usually requests for aid, an apology for neglecting the god's welfare, and promises of future offerings should the god's aid be granted. For instance, the following is part of an incense offering prayer recorded during a *balché* ceremony in Najá. In this prayer the recipient of the offering is Itsanok'uh, the Lacandon god of hail, lakes and alligators. The man praying is providing incense in exchange for Itsanok'uh's future protection from misfortune, in particular, from encounters with snakes and back pain. Items in brackets are my additions to the text.

⁶ When asked why the godpots must face the east, Lacandon men answer simply that this is what their fathers taught them. Though not explicitly stated by any of my informants, the general ritual importance various mayan peoples associate with the cardinal directions is well known. In this case, east is usually related with life, resurrection, heat, lighth. maleness, and strength, while the west is conceptually linked to death, coolness, darkness and femaleness. Thus, it is not surprising that a ritual implement, which only males may utilize, must always face to the east.

⁷ *Suhuy k'ak?* and *suhuy ha?* (virgin fire and water) are elements of Pre-hispanic Maya religion which have survived in contemporary Lacandon ritual. The term "virgin" in this sense refers to ritual purity. As elements of offerings to the gods these items were required to be ritually pure.

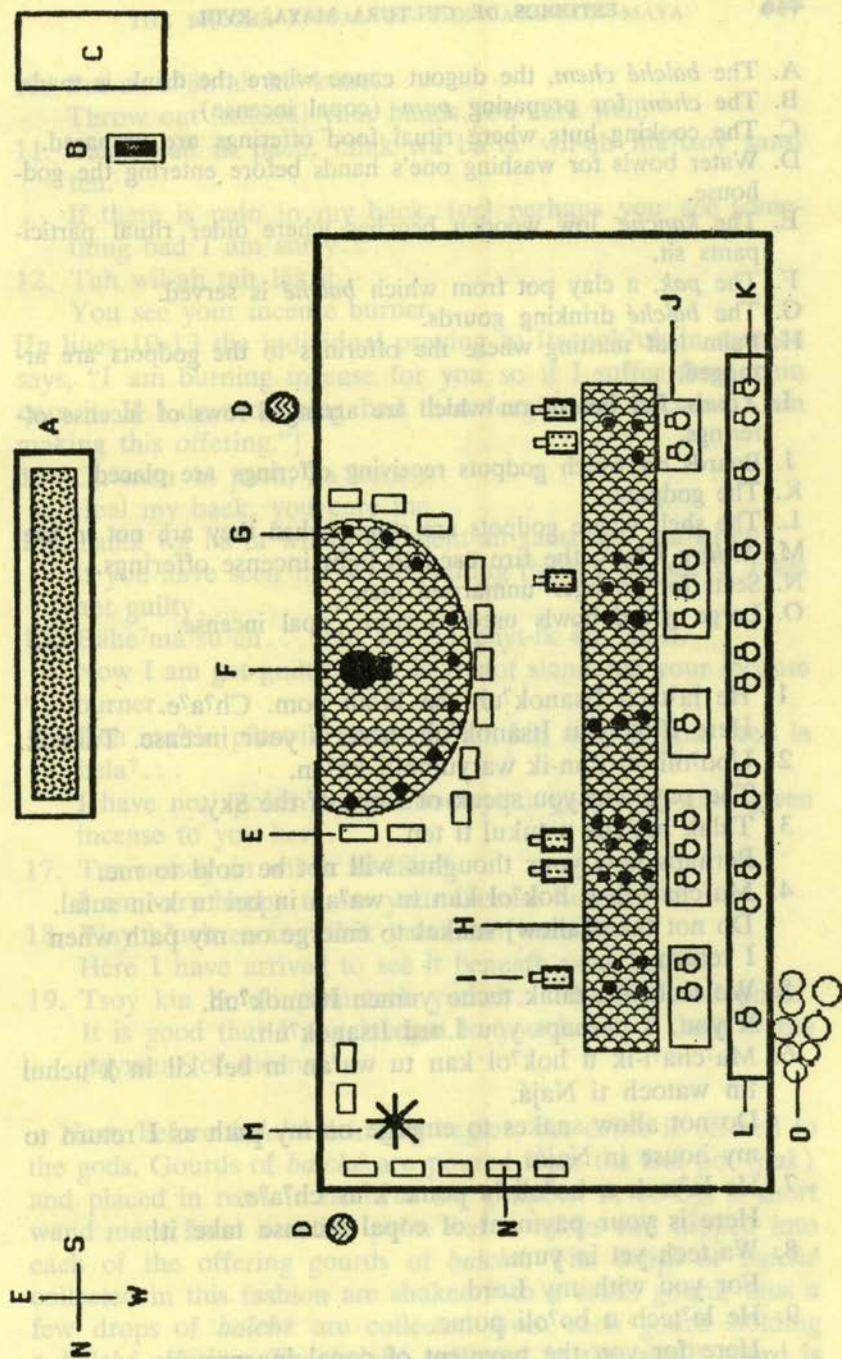


Figure 1. Diagram of a Lacandon Godhouse.

subsequently fed to the godpots, literally dripped into the mouths of the figures modeled on the godpots. In this fashion the gods drink *balché* as a supplicant chants, asking that they accept his offering. The following prayer was recorded during a *balché* ritual as one individual fed his offering of *balché* to a series of godpots, apologizing for possible transgressions, and asking specific gods to heal a sick family member named Chan K'in.

1. He? tech yumen, he tech ch'ulha?ki.
Here Lord, here is your good sacred water [this term usually refers to atole].
2. Ileh yet in yum u na?il Äk?inchob.
See this with my Lord the wife of Äk?inchob [god of the milpa].
3. Saasi-ten talak wa tah wuy-ah ba'alba.
I am sorry if perhaps you hear things [you do not like].
4. Mäna?in pach?-ik ah läk-il.
I have not abandoned your godpot.
5. Ten tan in t'an-ik ah läk-il.
I am calling your godpot.
6. Talak wa ba'tah wil-ah ma'tsoy, saasi-ten.
Perhaps if you have seen bad things, I am sorry.
7. Way yan-en, in ts'ai-ik tech balché.
Here it is, I give you balché.
8. He'tech Äk?inchob, he tech ch'ulha?ki.
Here you Äk?ilinchob, here is your good sacred water.
9. He'tech Säkäpuk, he tech ch'ulha?ki.
Here you Säkäpuk, here is your good sacred water.
[Säkäpuk means "white hill". He is an assistant to Hachäkyum, the Lacandon creator god].
10. Kune in yum Chan K'in.
Cure my uncle Chan K'in.
11. Lati u yumbili-ech ah läk-il. Kunen u satal yol.
You are the Lord of this incense burner. Cure him [Chan K'in] of dizziness.
12. Lukse! U sutuknak u yol, tian chäk yol.
Drink! He is dizzy, there is anger [or fever].
13. Tah wil-ah to'on mäna? äk bubu'uk-tik balché...

You saw that none of us drank balché [without making proper offerings...]

14. U tet in yum Chan K'in, mäna?äk bubu?k-tik balché.

His father, my uncle Chan K'in did not drink balché without making offerings.

15. Tech ka?-tunt-ah uch-ik.

You tried it long ago [you previously sampled balché].

16. Talak wa ba?tah wil-ah, saasi ti in yum Chan K'in, saasi-ten.

If you saw something [bad] my uncle Chan K'in is sorry, I am sorry.

17. Wa u ch?enen ti in yum Chan K'in la hela?yetel ch?ulha?ki.

With sacred water [balché] it can cure my uncle Chan K'in.

18. Ah ka?-il-ik uhel balché, he tech yumen.

You see again balché offered here to you Lord.

19. He?tech ch?ulha?ki...

Here is sacred water for you...

After the *balché* offerings have been given to the godpots the host takes a second gourd full of *balché*, steps outside of the godhouse, and offers a libation of *balché* to all gods by sprinkling the *balché* into the air with his palm-leaf wand, facing, in turn, the four cardinal directions.

At the conclusion of this libation and prayer, the host of the ritual invites the assembled men to take a seat around the Bol pot. Space in the Najá godhouses is divided between the two oldest men of the community. During ceremonial activity these two men sit in the middle of the godhouse, directly in front of the Bol pot. Seating of other ritual participants is then structured by age and kin relationship to these two elders, based on patrilineal or affinal ties. The closer one's relationship to one of these two elders, the closer you sit to him during the *balché* ceremony. For instance, directly beside each elder sits the man's first son by their first wives. Other men are then ranked by their relative ages and degree of kinship, with son-in-laws at the outer end of the semicircle. Once everyone is seated, the host offers each a drinking gourd (*luuch*) full of *balché* which he has ladeled from the Bol pot. When

everyone has accepted a gourd of *balché* the host addresses each man by a kinship term (only parents use given names with their children) saying for instance, "*tech yum, tech mäm*" (you uncle, you brother-in-law), to which each recipient replies, "*bay*" (good). The host then invites those present to begin drinking. Finally, each participant makes a small libation to the gods from their drinking gourd by dipping their finger into the gourd and flicking the liquid into the air. *Balché* drinking then commences.

From this point on the formal order of ceremonial events is abandoned. Rounds of *balché* and incense will be offered to the gods throughout the day, but only when participants are inclined to do so. There is no set sequence of offerings; men pray, burn incense, and feed *balché* to the godpots at their discretion. Some men may make no offerings at all, simply spending the day in the godhouse drinking *balché* conversing with other men, and becoming intoxicated.

It is the host's responsibility to bring *balché* from the *balché chem* to the godhouse, serve the men attending the rite, and ensure that everyone keeps drinking, for the ceremony continues until the *balché chem* is empty. When the *balché* has finally been consumed (usually at about 5-6:00 p.m.), the gourds of *balché* offerings in front of the godpots are poured back into the Bol pot and the men finish the last of the drink. With the *balché* gone, the Bol pot is turned upside down, the drinking gourds are rinsed and stored in net bags hanging from the rafters of the godhouse, the *balché chem* is turned upside down, and the host cleans up the godhouse, throwing away the banana and palm leaf mats where the *balché* offerings had rested in front of the godpots.

The Balché Ceremony as a Rite of Intensification

While the ceremony has a serious ritual purpose, it is not a solemn event. Men gather to joke, exchange news, and get drunk. Though intoxication is generally met with disapproval in Lacandon communities, it is considered a transcendental purifying state in the context of the *balché* rite. This attitude towards drunkenness in the course of a *balché* ceremony is neatly

characterized by the following conversation between a Lacandon man and an American journalist (Bruce and Perera 1982: 143):

Chan K'in passes me a cigar and accompanies it with a little homily on smoking and drinking. 'After you smoke a cigar you get dizzy and have to lie down', he says. 'After you drink *balché* you are content and can still walk around. If you smoke a cigar and drink *balché* together, you are content and a little dizzy, and you can sit or walk around as you wish. It is perfection'.

Young Chan K'in adds pointedly, 'And *balché* does not give you a headache and hangover like whiskey'.

I ask, 'And what if you drink too much *balché* and smoke too many cigars?'

'Ah then you get sick and vomit and piss all night until you pass out', Chan K'in replies. 'The next day you feel like newly born.'

The *balché* ritual is a very informal. Men come and go as they please, stopping in the god house to drink *balché*, then leaving to eat, run errands, or work in their milpas. After completing their business they return to the godhouse to continue their participation. Attendance at the ritual is not required, but invariably every man old enough to drink *balché* (over about 13 years of age), attends the ritual.⁸ Even boys not yet old enough to drink *balché* come to sit in the godhouse and watch and listen to the older men. In fact, it is common to see small boys sneaking puffs off discarded cigars and draining the dregs from unattended *balché* drinking cups in imitation of their fathers and older brothers. In essence, they are learning the behavior and etiquette appropriate to the ceremony.

Unless he is ill or away from the village on the day of the ceremony, it is unusual for an individual not to attend a *balché* ritual. In those situations, *balché* will be brought to one who is sick or saved for a man absent from the village. In Najá, of the twenty one men old enough to drink *balché*, nineteen habitually do so when provided with the opportunity. The two men who do not drink must refrain for medical reasons. One has

⁸ It is not appropriate for an individual to participate formally in the *balché* rite until they have been sponsored in their *mek'chul* ceremony, an initiation into adulthood, which is usually conducted in early adolescence.

tuberculosis, the other is taking medication to prevent epileptic seizures. Though they do not drink *balché* they still attend the ceremony, sitting in the godhouse and talking with other men, thereby participating in the social aspects of the ceremony. Women do not participate in the mechanical aspects of the ritual such as making offerings and reciting prayers, since they are excluded from the godhouse.⁹

Although prohibited from entering the godhouse, women are not isolated from the ritual event. Women often go to the godhouse clearing during the course of a *balché* rite, sit in ritual cooking huts built around the godhouse, and talk and joke with their husband drinking *balché* in the godhouse. In turn, the men bring gourds full of *balché* out of the godhouse for their wives and daughters to drink. In effect, the *balché* ritual is a good example of what A.F.C. Wallace (1966) termed a "rite of intensification". He writes (1966: 30):

Just as nature requires ritual attention in order to assure that its fertility and benevolence shall not flag or fail, so the community of people from time to time needs to be restored in its attachment to the values and customs of its culture.

The *balché* ritual can be seen primarily as a reassertion of faith in the traditional Mayan gods for the rite is primarily a ritual payment to those gods. But the rite also serves as a stage for the performance of traditional songs and stories, and as they are allowed to wath, children begin to learn about the *balché* ritual at a young age.

After the ritual offerings of incense and *balché* have been made to the godpots, the men spend the rest of the day in the godhouse drinking and talking. The duration of a *balché* ceremony varies, for it lasts until the *balché chem* has been emptied of the beverage. It is during this final stage of the ritual, when the men are drunk and the *chem* is almost dry, that the performance of traditional songs occurs. Although Lacandon men enjoy music, they are usually reluctant to perform by them-

⁹ Women are allowed in the godhouse only on one occasion, when acting as sponsors for a young woman in the *mek?chul* ceremony which is a rite of initiation into adulthood, and a payment to the gods for allowing your child to survive.

selves. But when men are fortified with *balché* the rite can become a forum for the performance of songs not usually sung in public, covering a wide range of topics. Only in the context of the *balché* rite have I heard songs such as the song for "when you are in the forest at night without a fire", the Bol song (in honor of Bol, the Lacandon god of *balché*), and the "Song to the Gourd".

The Balché Ritual as a Mechanism of Social Control

One of the more unusual songs, *u Kay-il ti' Box*, the "Song to the Gourd" is named after the *balché* drinking gourds. This song is of particular interest to anthropologists for it contains several layers of symbolic meaning. On the surface, the song is a Lacandon "love" song—a man singing to a woman. The symbolic meaning of the song refers to *balché*. Lak Chan-eh, the "Little Woman" actually refers to the ritual drink. Finally, the song also refers to the role that the *balché* ritual plays in controlling deviant behavior. When the *balché* rite is conducted for this purpose, the song is called "The Liar's Song". Though I have analyzed a much longer version of this song elsewhere (McGee:1987), I will quote Bruce's (1976:39) translation of the same song.

The Song to the Gourd (or Little Wife)

Once again I have wanted you, oh little woman. One of your [measures.

Do not leave me, oh little woman.

Once again I have seen you little woman.

Like ripe custard apples are your breasts, oh little woman.

Once again I have wanted you.

I will not leave you, oh little woman.

I feel completely undone little woman.

Do not leave me little woman.

My mind clears well little woman.

Do not leave me little woman.

Embrace me well little woman.

Once again I have wanted you. Do not leave me little woman.

Your breasts are custard apples. One of your measures little
[woman.
Call me well little woman.
My mind has cleared now little woman.
Do not cast me down oh little woman. One of your measures.
Once again I have wanted you.
Like ripe custard apples are your breasts little woman.
I embrace you tightly, oh little woman.
Oh I will not leave you little woman.

This song, which appears to be a love song to a woman, is actually about the ritual beverage *balché*. The drink is personified as a "little woman", and the metaphor of *balché* as a woman is followed throughout the song. The phrases, "I feel completely undone, little woman", "Do not cast me down little woman", and "I embrace you tightly, oh little woman", all refer to the metaphorical meaning of the song and indicate that the singer is drunk. In general, the song is sung to prevent vomiting after the singer has consumed a large quantity of *balché* and is feeling nauseated. Thus, the phrase "Do not leave me little woman" actually refers to the singer's desire not to vomit the *balché* he has drunk and thereby lose the transcendental and purifying state of intoxication that the beverage confers. The phrase "one of your measures" repeated throughout the song, refers to the gourd cup which is used to ladle *balché* into drinking gourds.

The Song to the Gourd is also called the "Liar's Song", which highlights the use of the ritual as a mechanism for social control in Lacandon society. Whereas, the occasions which necessitate the *balché* rite are usually requests for favors or payments to the gods, it can also be used as a form of public punishment. Called *chun luch-t-ik* (to give the "base" of a drinking gourd) in this aspect, the ceremony is an occasion where one is ritually punished for minor transgressions, in particular, lying. This use of the rite differs sharply from other occasions which inspire gifts of *balché*, namely, asking a favor from a god (*tʔän-ik kʔuh*) and payment to a god (*boʔot-ik kʔuh*).

The Lacandon conceive of lying as a form of illness (Bruce 1976: 108). *Balché* taken in large doses is thought to cure illness as well as being physically and spiritually purifying. Thus,

the drink has a physical effect beyond inducing intoxication in that it acts as both an emetic and a purge. If someone is behaving in a negative manner and ignores the remonstrations of his family or community elders, he may be subjected to the *chun luch-t-ik*, pressured into drinking *balché* until he vomits, and in this fashion punished for his misbehavior, purged of his illness, and spiritually cleansed.

The *chun luch-t-ik* rite is conducted in a manner that is virtually identical to a regular *balché* ritual, the principal difference being the motives for holding the ceremony. An individual who feels he has been wronged prepares the *balché* and arranges the godhouse in exactly the same fashion as he would a regular *balché* ritual, but mentions his ulterior motives to no one. Secretly in his prayers prior to the ceremony, he asks the gods to make the wrongdoer vomit as punishment for his offense.

The ritual is conducted as usual, with the men going to the godhouse to participate. After everyone has been given a first round of *balché* to drink, the offender is offered a second round of *balché* and then another, until he is thoroughly drunk. If this man refuses to drink he will be accused openly of his transgression, subjected to teasing and criticism, and pressured to keep drinking. This goes on until the culprit vomits and is thus cured. If the suspect does not vomit, he is assumed to be innocent of the accusation.

Conclusion

Due to its diverse nature and multiple levels of symbolic expression, the *balché* ritual continues to be a viable medium of religious expressions which serves both the social and ritual needs of this Lacandon community. Characterized here as a key ritual, the rite forms the basic framework upon which virtually all Lacandon ritual action is structured. One ceremony can serve alternately as a form of ritual payment, a vehicle for requesting a favor of the gods, or as a form of ritualized punishment for deviant behavior. Further, the communal nature of the ritual provides some measure of community cohesion as it is a forum for the performance of traditional songs and stories that reinforce the continuation and acceptance of traditional

Lacandon lore. The rite's success in this role is evidenced by the fact that the people of Najá continue to practice the traditional Maya form of worship while the Lacandon communities that have converted to Protestant Christianity have abandoned their traditions. In addition, the *balché* ritual provides a non-violent procedure for the correction of deviant behavior which other Lacandon communities lack. Although many details of the ancient mayan *balché* ritual are not known, in contemporary Lacandon society it remains a multi-purpose institution which continues to service the religious as well as social needs of the people of Najá.

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