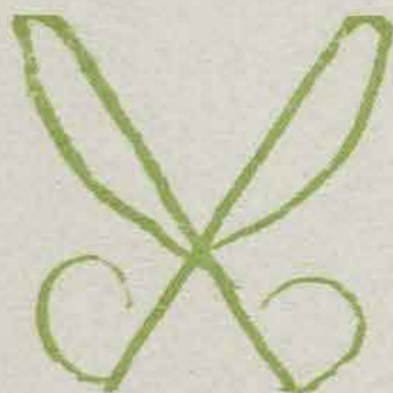

SLOVENSKÝ NÁRODOPIIS



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PODOLINSKÁ, T. – KOVÁČ, M.: Daughters of Luna. Ritual Status of Woman in the Mayas-Lacandons Society

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**DAUGHTERS OF LUNA –
RITUAL STATUS OF WOMAN IN THE MAYAS-LACANDONS
SOCIETY**

**TATIANA PODOLINSKÁ
MILAN KOVÁČ**

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Key words: feminine ritual taboos, Mayas-Lacandons

Luna is Akna - “our mother” and, therefore, she protects us - her daughters. If a woman cannot conceive a child, she asks Luna, our mother, for help. Luna then visits this woman at night and helps her. Luna takes care of us because we are her daughters.

Chan Nuk, 45 years old woman, Nahá, Chiapas, Mexico, 01/21/2001

I. Introduction

We were invited to stay with the Mayas-Lacandons by the *Departamento de Etnología y Antropología Social* in Mexico City. Charged with the task to study religious life and how it has changed over time within the most conservative Mayan ethnic group - the Lacandons, we concentrated on issues concerning preservation of their religious identity in the changing

social and cultural environment. Between August 1999 and February 2000, we had a great opportunity to work not only on this central issue but also with several other themes of our interest which had not received attention before. First of all, we were attracted to ways in which the ritual status of woman in the Lacandon society was manifested. In this study, results of our research will be partially presented.

The Lacandons originally lived in the Yucatán Peninsula and still speak a dialect of the Yucatec language. After the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, they did not wait to be completely annihilated or enslaved by the conquerors as other Mayas did. To escape their domination, they fled to the vast pristine forests of Chiapas and lived there in seclusion for several centuries. Some of them met white people for the first time only at the beginning of the 20th century and others as late as in the 1960s.

The Lacandons still live in the Lacandon Rain Forest, to which they have adapted their way of life. In comparison with the post-classical period of Mayan history, which was put an end to by the arrival of the Spanish, it has not changed very much. The Lacandons still produce flint tools, cultivate maize fields, and hunt game in the jungle.¹ Also their religion, the most important feature of their life from our point of interest, has not changed at all. They believe in the same gods as the Mayas² did and they did not accept any missionaries. Seen from this point of view they have remained the only ethnic group in Central America whose religious life has not been influenced by Christianity.³ In the original Lacandon religion, *Hachakyum* is the principal god; goddesses occupy only subordinate positions. Only men can perform rituals and participate in religious life. Women play a marginal role in spiritual life and are also strictly prohibited from entering local temples.

Because of their status in religious life, women have been paid very little attention up to now. Even women researchers who managed to reach the Lacandons, preferred studying dominant male ritual practices to marginal female roles (which are only seemingly unimportant) in Lacandon religious life. None of those we mention here was successful: whether it was Gertrudy Blom, a Swiss matron, who influenced the life of the Lacandons of Nahá,⁴ or Graciela, a Canadian, who even got married to a Lacandon, but ran away after two years.⁵ There were several other women who undertook several, rather amateurish attempts to study the Lacandon culture. Nevertheless, their attempts to penetrate this peculiar female world failed as it remained closed before them as it did to men.

Relatively greater progress in this field was made by the Mexican researcher Marie-Odile Marion. She examined in detail the world of Lacandon women at Lacanjá. However, at that settlement the status of women was slightly different owing to the influence of Protestant missions operating there. The only place where this ritual sphere of life of the Lacandons was preserved intact and unspoiled by outer influences is at Nahá. As Marion did not concentrate on this key settlement, many of her conclusions concerning the ritual sphere of life appear rather superficial or tendentious when compared to those drawn from our own research. For instance, we cannot identify with her conclusion that Lacandon men consider women as “feeble-minded” creatures.⁶

Since no man is allowed to talk to a foreign woman (i.e. Lacandon woman), male researchers were unsuccessful in studying their way of life. It is necessary to underscore that such communication is strictly punished in the Lacandon community and the violation of this rule is considered as adultery. It is a grave moral sin not tolerated even with single women. For this reason, it is completely impossible for a man to obtain information concerning a woman, no matter whether she is married, single or a widow.

Having all these rules in mind, we decided to form a small research team consisting of

a man and a woman and then to start the examinations of the ritual status of women. Our approach proved to be a good idea: after several months of close friendly contacts, a woman started confide to a female-researcher more or less willingly; on the other hand, men who spoke to a male-researcher revealed much about women's ritual status. Being acquainted with the ceremonies, they were able to explain their content: what they were not willing to say about these sensitive topics to a woman they told a man. The strategy we adopted enabled us to slowly produce a more complete picture of Lacandon woman who, in no way, is that "feeble-minded" creature depicted by previous researchers; on the contrary, is someone who has great spiritual power.

II. Three altered states of woman: menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth

Lacandon society is, first of all, a society of men. When a Lacandon man is asked about how many people live in the village, he will give an incorrect answer as no Lacandon is good at counting. It is because their way of counting reflects their concept of society: only men are taken into account. This openly declared male dominance can also be clearly seen in the ritual sphere: women are strongly prohibited from entering the dwellings of gods (*una i ku'*) under the threat of death. It is here where many taboos relating to women in general may be encountered. Very special taboos concern women during menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. What should be highlighted is that the Lacandons consider woman to be a carrier of potential contamination. Furthermore, it should also be noted that according to their concepts she carries negative energy. However, anyone wishing to better understand how the Lacandons themselves view woman has to approach them without any implementation of our cultural values. Only then it is possible to recognise that the Lacandons do not consider their women to be negative or contaminated creatures: the Lacandon men just take their presence during religious rituals as harmful and believe that it will impose sanctions upon them.

According to the Lacandons, the personality of a woman is altered during pregnancy, then at the time when she is expected to deliver the child and also when she has her period. It seems that other expressions possibly "altered" or "other" rather than contaminated may describe these conditions of woman. The altered personality of woman can be described as her ability to influence her husband. On these grounds, he is automatically excluded from taking part in any ritual because the presence of an altered woman (or a man) may impair the effectiveness of the ritual. When rituals are being performed, everyday life of the community is always disturbed as a result of the direct communication with gods. The rituals have very strict rules, which, if not rigidly observed, may become dangerous: any deviation from the rules will make the gods angry or cause the death of the participants in the ritual. As woman in the critical periods in her life is altered or other, she becomes extremely dangerous for a smooth performance of rituals.

There are a number of taboos relating to menstruating and pregnant women: there are fewer of them concerning women at childbirth - they are usually confined to their homes and so have no power to endanger the purity of the ritual.

As the man is in contact with his altered wife, he is not allowed to take part in the religious practices of their family and the community, either.

Explanations why it is so appear to be interesting though diverse. The Lacandons themselves are not able to shed some light on this problem as most of the taboos concerning women have been passed over from generation to generation for centuries. Moreover, they are not inclined to cast doubts on these prohibitions or to logically reason over them. Their

typical answer to questions from “our world” is usually again a question “Who knows?” accompanied by an innocent smile. The explanations provided by anthropologists refer to the wide-spread idea of menstruation blood as a source of contamination.⁷ However, in case of the Lacandons most of the taboos concern pregnant women, who do not menstruate. Many taboos concern women as such, without any distinction being made between a little girl and an old woman.

Drawing on the bits of information given by the Lacandons, we came to a conclusion that woman from the point of ritual, and especially of the more important ones, is perceived as a disturbing element in communication with gods diverting the thoughts of men in undesirable directions; she prevents them not only from communicating with gods but also prevents the gods from coming to the meeting place with men. For this reason, at times of all important rituals, men practise sexual abstinence. This ability of woman to disturb the ritual practices is much enhanced during any of her altered states.

Ila. Menstruation

Lacandon girls become sexually mature approximately between 11 and 13 years of age. At that time, they usually get married and have their first child. Girls who are 12 or 13 years old have, as a rule, one child. Despite this, the girls are neither prepared for menstruation nor for sexual life. They know nothing about conception, pregnancy and childbirth. They learn everything only gradually when “the right time comes”, which means in fact that no one gives them any advice before the situation occurs in their lives. However, in everyday communication there are certain codes by means of which sexual themes may very indirectly be referred to. Women usually say: “I have a headache”, or “Have you already taken your bath?” or “Have you washed our dress yet?”, which they will understand among themselves as: “I’ve got menstruation”, or “Is your menstruation over?” or “Have you got menstruation yet?”. In the past women wore a strip of folded and sewn-together cloth the ends of which were held by her skirt belt - one on her stomach and one on her back. She had two such pieces of cloth; she washed them daily. During menstruation the woman was not allowed to take a bath and was allowed to wash herself only after menstruation. What is really peculiar is that she always took the bath together with her spouse.

There are many taboos on menstruation and they range from the most complicated ones dealing with rituals in the houses of gods to various constraints in women’s everyday activities. For example, a menstruating woman is not allowed to leave anything belonging to her on the floor in a Lacandon dwelling.⁸ First of all, she is prohibited from participating in rituals of the gods and from approaching near to sacred places. However, the most important taboo is on entering the caves which are taken as the seats of the gods. The taboos associated with menstruating women are identical with those concerning pregnant ones.

Ilb. Pregnancy

In the Lacandon society, the period of pregnancy in a woman’s life is considered to be very peculiar. First of all, pregnancy is not a matter of the woman only but, in an explicitly stated way, it concerns her spouse or the father of the child as well. Although there are rules directing the behaviour of the mother-to-be to her future child, most of them deal with the behaviour of the woman and her spouse to the rest of the community and, similarly, of the community to the parents-to-be. With reference to these rules, it is necessary to state that none of them bears a secular character. For this reason, it would be enormously difficult to

discover among them any “rules on a healthy diet” during pregnancy in the widely accepted meaning of the word. All rules about which we had the chance to learn were of magic or cult character.

During pregnancy a woman seems to be isolated from the Lacandon society or rather, her situation may be denoted as ambivalent. On the one hand, a pregnant woman is ascribed healing powers and is considered to be “hot”. For instance, when someone cuts his/her finger, it is sufficient for a pregnant woman to take any leaf of a plant into her hand and cover the wound with it. As a result, the wound will immediately stop bleeding and will also soon heal up. Another example of her special abilities at this period is a thin cotton fibre called *k'uch* which is believed to have an enormous healing power when rolled up by a pregnant woman. In the past such fibres were used by the Lacandons for making their typical cotton clothes - *xikuls*. For the healing procedure, a short fibre is bound around the ill person's neck. The *k'uch* itself possesses a strong healing power irrespective of who rolled it, whether it be a woman who is not pregnant or even a man. In the event that there is no woman nearby, a man can make a *k'uch*. Nevertheless, the healing power of this fibre is not so strong as when made by a woman, and the most effective *k'uch* is always made only by a pregnant woman. For this reason, if there is one in the village, messengers are sent to her with a request to roll up a *k'uch* for the ill person. This request is never declined.

A woman wears the same cotton fibre *k'uch* around her neck as an apotropaic means when she is pregnant. It is interesting that the right time for binding the *k'uch* is not determined: some women already wear it in the first or second month of gravidity, others only shortly before the childbirth. One of our respondents explained it to us saying: “The child in the woman will decide, it will ask for a *k'uch*.” The pregnant woman then asks another woman - most frequently her mother-in-law or mother, which depends on in whose household she lives, to prepare the *k'uch* for her and to bind it around her neck. Pregnancy appears to be the only case in which she cannot roll up the *k'uch* for herself - even the woman who is asked for this service must not be pregnant, otherwise, such a *k'uch* would no power because “it is from the same woman and as such it will not function”.

On the other hand, according to the Lacandons, the period of pregnancy, multiplies the “disturbing” elements in woman. A pregnant woman or, more exactly, the child in her is believed to be able to bewitch a just born baby or other little children who cannot talk yet. Lacandon women say that the unborn baby can talk to these little ones. For this reason, when a pregnant woman meets another woman carrying a little child in her arms, this child will burst into tears without any reason and will not want to stop. Another consequence of such an incident is that the child's head will also heat up. Nevertheless, Lacandon women know a special treatment against these negative magic effects on the child: it is necessary to wash his/her head in a concoction/brew-up of chilli paprika leaves and crashed garlic. But although they know how to suppress all these symptoms, they are still frightened when meeting a pregnant woman and, if possible, attempt to avoid her.

According to some Lacandons, every pregnant woman contains poison in her body and, therefore, her mere presence strengthens the effects of snake bite in the body of the victim. It is reported that snake bite is the most frequent cause of unnatural death among this population. The explanation to this phenomenon is readily available: everybody walks barefoot, there are many snakes and all are poisonous. Although the Lacandons know of medicinal plants for snake bite, they are persuaded that if a pregnant woman enters a house in which the bitten person is lying, then he is bound to die despite the application of healing herbs. Nevertheless, the pregnant woman can eliminate her negative influence by offering

the ill a spoon of *maatx*, a traditional Mayan drink (*pozol* in Spanish) brewed from maize and used daily in every Lacandon household. Only then will the victim of snake bite not die. We were told a story by Chan K'in Jacobo from San Javier (about 25 years old man) based on his personal experience. When he was lying home in bed because he had been bitten by *hach kan* (the rattle snake), a pregnant woman entered their house. He got very frightened and thought he would die. But the woman realised her fault and hurried to give him a full spoon of *maatx* and thus saved his life.

When pregnant the Lacandon women are guided by certain rules on eating habits. There are several taboos associated with the category of imitative magic. For instance, they do not consume peanuts as they believe that their child will have a scaly head. They attempt to avoid eating chilli pepper and spicy meals although it is very difficult for them to respect this taboo because one of the favourite Lacandon meals is a cut salted lime with chilli pepper, or not yet ripe chilli peppers (which are even hotter than the ripe ones) boiled with crushed garlic. The result of violating this "no spicy meals" taboo is a child born with small red spots on his/her face, mainly on the forehead. As these spots disappear after a short time, this taboo on eating habits is not so strictly preserved.

Another imitative taboo concerns making arrows. In the community of the Lacandons at Nahá the production of arrows is one of the main male-dominated manufacturing activities. Moreover, the sale of arrows at Palenque, the nearest ruins accessible to tourists, is an essential source of income to local families. When his wife is pregnant, no Lacandon man is allowed to produce arrows. If he trespasses the prohibition, the child will be born with bulging outgrowths, similar to those harpoon-like arrows used when hunting for monkeys, on his/her temporal bones or on the nape of the neck. Our respondent K'ayum Paniagua violated this rule and, as a consequence, his daughter was born with two bulges on her right temporal bone and one bulge on the nape of her neck. After some time they vanished and nothing peculiar from this point of view could be seen on Nuk Rose, who was at the time of our stay at the village three years old. The same K'ayum violated other rules - the ones associated with behaviour of the husband of a pregnant woman and, moreover, that associated with the pregnant woman herself. When the woman is pregnant, her spouse is not allowed to climb a tree because it will turn dry or stop bearing fruit. At that critical period, K'ayum climbed up an orange tree growing in the yard of his house and which was yielding much fruit at that time. In order to confirm his words, he showed us dry branches in the middle of the crown just where he had climbed up. Despite his words, the half-dry tree was full of oranges.

Another notable ritual requests that the process of making a new canoe should be kept secret from a pregnant woman. The canoe is usually dug out of one piece of mahogany tree trunk. As it is a very hard and exacting work, it is usually done by five men. It is vital that a pregnant woman should not have the slightest idea that the men are just making a new canoe: if she learnt about it, the canoe would crack and all those hard days of toil would be in vain. For this reason, none of the Lacandon men would even allude to the fact that they were making a canoe. They argue that they can never be sure that some women may be pregnant although she knows nothing about it yet. There are many taboos associated with this process that have to be strictly respected: to conceal the process of making a canoe from women is thought to be one of the most important. No pregnant woman is allowed to enter a cave nor is the man whose spouse is with child. As Lacandon men really feel horrified at violating this taboo, they dare to enter a cave, for example, only when they are hunting a large rodent called *hare* (*tepeizcuinte* in Spanish) in situations where they are absolutely

sure that their spouse is not pregnant. However, menstruation has a similar effect as a similar taboo prevents them from entering the cave. Our visits to secret caves in which particular ceremonies are performed, where old god pots are stored or which are inhabited by malicious creatures known as *Xtabay* had always the scent of great adventure. It was not only because of entering a mysterious sacred place but especially because of the fact that our guides really trembled with the fear that the cave opening would close and imprison us. Such imprisonment would be a punishment sent by the gods for having violated the taboo on pregnant or menstruating women and their spouses on entering. We remember our guide Chan K'in Antonio Ramo, who after leaving a cave supposed to be the home to a dog that every evening descends as a star to earth, gave a great sigh of relief and wiped sweat from his forehead. What surprised us most was the finding that thoughts of the mysterious dog paralysed our guide much less than the "uncertain" female companion did: he appeared to have totally lost his senses and was constantly giving quick looks at the opening to see if the cave was closing "its mouth" and swallowing us.

Another elementary taboo is the prohibition imposed upon touching sacred god pots. For instance, no pregnant woman is allowed to cross over such a pot. If she really does, she will deliver a handicapped baby. These taboos as well as many others should be understood at the level of mere declarations as it is highly improbable that a pregnant woman would touch these pots or cross over them: firstly, it is entirely unthinkable and, secondly, completely impossible: there are so many prohibitions, barriers and taboos protecting the places where these sacred pots are stored that there is no chance for a pregnant woman to desecrate such a place even by accident.

Pregnancy of Lacandon women is not only complicated by ritual prohibitions. It is not ideal and smooth as a natural biological process, either. Although Lacandon women are most of the time left to themselves, their own experience is admirable and they are able to provide help in some specific situations. For instance, Lacandon women know how to find the position of the child in the mother's womb. To discover its position, they cover their hands in hot lard and then palpitate the pregnant woman's abdomen. According to the movements of the foetus they can ascertain the position of the head. In the case the baby is in the turned position - legs down - they know of herbs which are able to turn the child to the right position - head down. They also know herbs against women's infertility, painful and strong menstruation, swollen and hard womb as well as against ovarian cysts. In the community of southern Lacandons at San Javier, girls 12-years-old were able to inform us about these herbs. At Nahá the knowledge of them is slowly vanishing and, as a result, women there rely on 70-years-old Petrona, a herbalist from a Mayan tribe of Tzeltals. She regularly visits the households at Nahá and brings the herbs needed by the local women. As a Tzeltal woman she can freely move around Nahá and visit all Lacandon houses, which no women of Nahá is allowed to. This may also explain why Petrona's presence is so much needed at the village despite the fact that Lacandon women know many medical plants for women's illnesses. In order to shed more light on this problem, it is necessary to say that every woman is acquainted only with the properties of those plants about which she has learnt in her home or in the house of her husband. Although there exists something which may be denoted as standard knowledge, it is not disseminated throughout the community because every home (family or extended family) is a unit closed off from the outer world. This is why Lacandon women do not have any opportunity to compare their knowledge with other Lacandon women and extend it in this way. We were also told that this skill may be very dangerous and, therefore, many women do not feel like learning or improving their

skills in this field. In general, most Lacandons are very fatalistic about their lives and illnesses. As a result, they do not know how to cure themselves in the classical way, i.e. by medical plants. Instead, they rely on various prophecies, dreams and god's manifestation of good will, which can, in no way, be interfered with or influenced by mortals.

The Lacandon women are very traditional in their attitudes to any similar situation and give themselves into to god's hands saying: "If Gods will ...". Although no local health statistics exist on these subjects, Petrona told us that Lacandon women suffer from a great variety of serious problems in old age and, on that basis, help from an experienced herbalist is much sought after. Petrona is able to recommend appropriate treatment even in complicated cases where Lacandon women's general knowledge of healing is useless. For instance, she cured Chan Nuk, our host Chan K'in Mate's wife, of a so-called false pregnancy: not only was she able to make the diagnosis but also by means of "seven cups of concoction brewed of the leaves of one tree" delivered her of water gathered in her womb. Later, by means of other herbs, she helped this woman to conceive a child. More importantly, she also warned her that a child conceived with the help of these herbs would be born prematurely. And as predicted, a baby-girl was born after a seven-month pregnancy. Petrona helped Chan Nuk to deliver the child, and what is even more interesting, she also saved this baby's life. She kept the little girl in an oven in warm ash, and as the little one was refusing her mother's milk, Petrona gave her tea prepared with her own herbs. Today, Xaoch Susita is no little girl but a thirteen-years-old "young lady".

The final piece of information concerning pregnancy is that the parents-to-be are able to determine the sex of their unborn baby according to their dreams and that they themselves can influence the sex of their child: if they consume more male portions - *ton* - of a plant called *ch'ib*, then the newborn baby will be a boy; if they eat more female portions, they will have a girl. Usually, the parents-to-be will learn the baby's sex in particular dreams while the wife is pregnant. So if one of them dreams of doing household chores, such as making dresses or pancakes - *wah*, the baby will be a girl. But if they dream of performing men's duties, such as making arrows or cutting wood, the baby will be a boy. They believe in this dream symbolism⁹ and demonstrate the true meaning of dreams by providing examples of those which they had had before their children were born. Chan K'in Juan Carlos told us that he was dreaming when his wife was in her second month of pregnancy that he was cutting wood. Showing his three-years-old son Chan K'in Alberto, he said: "My wife wished a girl, but I knew it would be a boy; dreams can never deceive you." His wife, who comes from the southern Lacandon community at San Javier, added: "My mother used to warn me that if I said that I longed for a girl, I'd have a boy." In the Lacandon community at San Javier we also discovered that women wished to have a girl as their first child so they would grow old much more slowly. If the first child is a boy, then the woman turns old very rapidly. Nevertheless, they are expected not to have such wishes, but, according to their customs, give themselves over to god's will.

Iic. Childbirth

Thus completely entrusted to gods' care, Lacandon women give birth to their children. These days, as in the past, they most frequently deliver their child left only to themselves somewhere in the jungle. Even a woman who is delivering a baby for the first time has not been instructed beforehand what to do in labour. This may be because her mother always went to a secluded place in the jungle and brought home a newly-born child with the explanation, "I found him in the jungle", or possibly "I bought him in the jungle". Since the

Lacandons spend their lives in yards closed-off from the rest of society, the function of midwife or obstetrician has not developed with them. If the woman did not deliver the baby completely by herself, she was assisted by another, more experienced woman from the same household, or by her husband. What we really felt was a paradox was that men were able (or more willing) to convey more details to us than their wives could or wanted to. On the other hand, they say that not every man is strong enough to witness the childbirth and assist his wife. As a result, only strong men can help their wives. In that case, the spouse goes first to the jungle and finds there a place which is remote enough from the hut but not so far so that the woman can reach the place easily and leave it after the baby is born. He carefully clears the place with his machete so that there will be no snakes to bite his wife and so endanger her life. Then he brings there three stones and dry wood. After that he arranges a typical three-point fire over which he hangs a cauldron with water. Having completed this part of his task, he erects a wooden construction similar to a horizontal bar, a so called *ko go che wi*, or only *che*, which means wood. This consists of two forking branches and a pole which is put into the forks; then they are bound together by a springy bast of a *tsu tok* tree and a kind of primitive horizontal bar is ready. The supporting poles are made of very hard wood of a *ya* tree (*chicle* in Spanish), at San Javier of *m'h'che* tree. The horizontal branch is approximately 50 cm above ground level so that a kneeling woman can hold it in her hands and lean her abdomen against it just below her breasts. In order to make the position more comfortable for the woman, the horizontal branch is usually wrapped in cloth.

The woman goes to the place prepared by her husband after *yoch ha* – the amniotic fluid – is expelled but before the first contractions. When childbirth starts, the woman kneels astride under the construction and reposes on it. During the whole event she is not allowed to put her knees together or to sit on her heels under any circumstances. If the delivery takes twenty-four or more hours and the woman is no longer strong enough to lean against the construction, her husband must hold her in the required position embracing her from behind below her breasts, thus supporting her. During an extremely long delivery, she woman is allowed to have a sip of water and eat a tortilla. In order to accelerate the delivery, she can suck two raw hen's eggs.

Women usually complete the delivery with bleeding knees and chin (when they no longer can hold on to the horizontal bar by their hands, they lean against it with their lower jaw). If the mother-to-be is very weak or if the man decides to erect the construction in the house, he will rivet the poles immediately into the earthen floor inside the dwelling. The procedure is then identical. A present, this construction is still used at Nahá, Metzabok and San Javier. In the case of young mothers, they are sometimes delivered of the child when lying on their back assisted by a doctor.

When the delivery is in the traditional way, the woman has to entirely rely on herself or on her husband's assistance. Chan K'in Jacobo told us about his wife and the extremely difficult delivery of their son. Chan K'in decided on building the construction in the hut. When his wife Koh Chabela was in labour, it became clear that the child was in the reversed position. As it had not been recognised beforehand and they had therefore not used herbs to change his position in adequate time, Chan K'in Jacobo himself attempted to turn the child head-down directly in his wife's womb trusting only on his intuition. This totally amateur endeavour, performed without any medical knowledge and without observing any rules of elementary hygiene, was, fortunately, successful and now, both his wife and son – about three years old, enjoy good health.

III. After the delivery

After the delivery, the woman can under no circumstances wash herself (This seems to correspond to the habit of not washing herself during menstruation.). Only the child is washed, then wrapped in a blanket or immediately dressed in the traditional Lacandon tunic - *xikul*; sometimes the baby is dressed in it after the arrival home. The exhausted woman is wrapped in nine special leaves of *xibi*, a plant similar to the banana tree, then small pieces of coal made from the wood of the *chak'ya* are also wrapped in leaves and put on her abdomen.

After the placenta is delivered, a ritual starts about which, as the men say, "women don't know". The woman's husband takes the placenta, called *witzin* in Lacandon, meaning the younger sibling, washes it; dries it and then wraps it in a banana tree leaf. The next day, early in the morning - at four or at five o'clock so that nobody can see him - he takes the "banana package" and goes to the jungle to a place "where people do not go". There he digs a pit in the earth about a meter deep. He lays the placenta on the bottom of the pit, covers it with about a twenty-five centimetres layer of ash on the top of which he puts three to five grains of maize. To complete the ritual, he covers the pit with clay.

This burial ritual of the "younger sibling" is performed so that *Kisin*, the god of death, would not eat *pixan*, i.e. the soul of the child and harm his/ her parents. As the placenta was connected with both the mother and the child, it is very dangerous because if ill-treated, it may affect the mother, the child and the father. For this reason, the man remembers very well the place where he buried the placenta of his first-born in order to bury the placenta of any future children in the same location. This "private family graveyard" is a place where he will also bury any prematurely born child. As research has shown, the Lacandons distinguish very strictly a prematurely born child delivered dead from a child who dies during or shortly after birth. The criterion according for a decision is "whether it looks like man". It is interesting that they do not consider a prematurely born baby as a full human being so they do not bury him/her at their normal cemetery but only at that secret place known only to the father of the baby. A mature baby who was born dead or died at or after the delivery is considered a "fully valued" human being and may be buried according to local custom at the village cemetery.

This ritual associated with the burial of placenta (or the pre-maturely born child) was recorded at Nahá and at San Javier; it seems to be also performed at Metzabok and, probably, at Lacanjá. Another important feature of this procedure is the distance at which the placenta is buried from the hut: at San Javier they believe that if the placenta is buried close to the hut, the next baby will come soon, but if it is buried farther, it will take a much longer time before a new baby comes. They also believe that this may be the way to regulate the size of the family.

Another set of after-delivery rituals is associated with the umbilical cord, called *tuch* by the Lacandons. The umbilical cord is cut off by a sharpened stalk of a plant called *och*, which is similar to the reed from which arrows are made. The stalk is hollow and when split the edges are very sharp. The Lacandons would assure us that these split stalks are much sharper than a knife or razor and so the umbilical cord when cut does not bleed very much. The maintenance of this custom was recorded not only at Nahá but also within the community of northern Lacandons at Metzabok and at San Javier. The umbilical cord of the child is always dried up and retained in safety. At San Javier it is usually put under a stone close to one of the poles supporting the hut from outside. It may also be kept in a safe place somewhere

inside the hut so that it will be protected from insects or animals. This procedure prevails at Nahá.

Although we knew that our respondents were keeping the dried umbilical cord of their approximately two-and-half-year old son somewhere in the hut, we felt that they had no intention of showing us the place as they only pointed to some indefinite place above us. When inquiring about where they kept it, we were only given a vague answer, "It depends, some may keep it in a box". We feel that at Nahá a particular myth is related to the umbilical cord but, unfortunately, we could not completely decipher its meaning. Our respondent Chan Kin Juan Carlos always opened and closed his narrative by a formula, "It's a secret...".

Nevertheless, we were able to compile the following bits of information into a story: after a period from three to five years, the mother of the child plants the umbilical cord with three grains of maize into the soil somewhere near the hut. When the maize growing from these "umbilical" grains is ripe, they break the stalk at about the middle and the cobs are left on the cob for two or three months. The envelope of maize, so called clothes - *nok*, has apotropaic meaning. The mother of the child puts it under her head at the place where she sleeps; the envelope then protects her from evil powers, especially from *Kisin*. Grains of this "umbilical" maize are very important. They are not consumed but planted together with ordinary grains. The procedure during which one "umbilical" grain is always put into a hole with two ordinary ones ensures that the new maize will grow very high and beautiful. "Umbilical" grains are strongly believed to have a magic influence on the crop.

The period after the delivery is full of protective rituals as both the mother and the child are thought to be endangered not only by demons but people as well. For this reason, there are various ways of announcing that the baby was born. In this situation, a wide range of symbols may be used. Some of them are very ancient; others may be quite individual and relate to the fear of black magic, and, therefore, of a later date. For instance, at Nahá, the parents spoke about their child in a reversed sense in an attempt to keep the sex of the baby secret. The situation may be illustrated by way of this example: "She told me that she gave birth to a girl and only later I found out that it was a boy. Perhaps she did it for fear of me." At San Javier one family did not let the father's parents know that they had their first child although they lived only a half-an-hour walk from them and usually they saw each other before the baby was born. This situation lasted approximately a month. When asked why it was so, the baby's father gave us an indefinite answer: "Well, perhaps I was very much worried ...". After the baby is born, women from the family and the wider community come and see the mother. Each of them brings the cotton fibre *k'uch*, which is rolled up specially for this occasion. After arrival, each of the women binds this cotton fibre around the mother's neck, as well as around both wrists and ankles. They do the same with the child. When they leave both the mother and the baby have about a four-centimeter layer of cotton fibres around their limbs and necks (one cotton fibre is approximately from 0.5 to 1 millimeter thick). These cotton fibres are to provide a kind of general safety to the mother and the child guaranteed by the female part of the community. The apotropaic effect of every *k'uch* multiplies and the total sum of their effects thus creates a very powerful protective zone around both of them.¹⁰ Each of the *k'uches* also helps heal wounds in a short time. It is important to note that the delivery of a baby is the only moment in the life of the Lacandon community when women from separate yards are allowed not to observe the "visiting taboo". This visit to the mother may be classified as an important female ritual through which women express their feelings of ties among themselves while practising exclusively female

rituals of apotropaic magic. Although men may be present at these rituals, they cannot actively participate in them. The roll of cotton fibres *k'uch* is worn by the mother and her child for two or three months, until "they decay". After that the woman clears all fibres from herself and the child and hides them in a safe place somewhere in the hut, together with the dried up umbilical cord of the baby, and retains them for two or three years. Only then can she throw them away, or if she wishes, keep them for the future. However, if the mother throws these fibres away immediately after the delivery, she will become lazy and do nothing in the household.

Usually the Lacandon women take up their everyday household chores very soon. "An hour after the childbirth, you can stand up and walk slowly." As the Lacandons only take care of their own household, it is not generally accepted to assist the mother. For this reason, any help is considered as something more than expected and, as a rule, the mother starts to take full care of her household on the second day after the baby is born: she grinds the corn, makes tortillas and washes the clothes. If someone is helping her, she returns to her usual duties on the fourth or fifth day.

Nevertheless, there is a tradition of preparing the first meal for the mother, which is made by her mother or mother-in-law. The very first meal is roasted young stalks of a plant called *ch'ib* because, according to the Lacandons, it has a very strong regenerative power. It is even said not to decay because, when cut off and taken into the hut and left there without water and soil, it will produce new shoots in three days. It is interesting that consumption of this plant is not limited while unroasted: it is available to men, women and also to children. When roasted, it is reserved only for women and men who already have children. Roasted *ch'ib* is said to be so strong that it heals up all wounds very soon. But only a woman who has already given birth (and a man who already has children) is able to resist its strength. From this dietary ritual it is possible to infer that the main attribute of adulthood, respectively the coming-of-age, is, according to the Lacandons, neither the initiation ceremony - *mek'chur* - taking place in childhood nor the marriage, which is also concluded at childhood, but the delivery of a child. As a result, only a woman who has delivered a baby is considered adult.

The roasted *ch'ib* and tortillas are the main dishes of the mother for approximately twenty days following the delivery. Another component of the food for that time is strong chicken soup. It appears that also the kind of poultry is important: it is generally believed that soup made from a cock is much better than that made from a hen because "a cock is more powerful". For this reason the best soup is made from fighting cocks that have no fat and only very tough meat. On the contrary, entirely unsuitable for the purpose are ordinary meaty hens sold at markets because they can hardly move due to their fat. According to the Lacandons, this kind of hen has no power or "vitamins". It is accepted that clear soup made from a fighting cock is full of "vitamins" and, therefore, highly convenient for the mother. If the family does not breed any hens and does not have money to buy one, fish soup will do as the alternative to poultry soup. This custom seems to have survived in the Lacandon environment from much more ancient times. The first drink of the mother is *atole* in Spanish and *sak ha* in Lacandon, which means "white water", a drink made from water and freshly ground, nearly raw maize. This drink is traditional for all Lacandon households and is usually reserved for children. The Lacandons ascribe the drink some healing power. The mother has to drink up a great quantity of the liquid after childbirth so that she will have enough milk for her baby.

IV. Opossum and Jaguar

Before a Lacandon man constructs the delivery stand, he reacts to inquisitive questions from his fellow men, "Where are you going and what are you going to do there?" by a formula: "*T'u re ha och*", or "*In re hik och*". His reply means "to catch och" or "I'm going to hunt och".

Och is opossum in the Lacandon language. It is not possible to determine why the Lacandons compare young children just to this skunk-like animal. It is considered a pest and is hunted but the flesh is not consumed, except by extremely phlegmatic individuals. Most probably, it is necessary to seek the explanation in animal symbolism, which may be studied with the Maya Quichés at Popol Vuh, where the opossum - och or *vuch* in the Quiché language - is the Master of Sunrise.¹² In the Lacandon vocabulary, the word "och" exists as a proper name. It often refers to young girls who are called "Xa Och", which is a contraction of Chan Och - "Little Och", which will change to "Och" after she becomes adult. This denotation is predominantly associated with the feminine world although it may also refer to all children, without discriminating between their sexes. In general, "och" is used to speak about a child.

A very ancient formula is associated with the birth of a son. When the father is asked about his offspring, he traditionally answers: "I was delivered a jaguar. "If a girl is born then the answer sounds more indefinite: "I've caught an och." The announcement that a jaguar was born belongs to the very ancient world of the Mayas. First people created by gods were given the attribute "Jaguar" at Popol Vuh. As a result, the first ancestor of the dynasty of Yaxchilán, nowadays the most sacred place of the Lacandons, was called "Forefather Jaguar", which was also confirmed after the hieroglyphs had been deciphered.¹³ Even without knowing about these hieroglyphs, the Lacandons used to say that their forefathers were not humans but jaguars. For this reason, to call a newborn baby-boy a jaguar is of great importance for understanding the meaning of the traditional symbolic "felinisation" in the Mayan culture in general. On the one hand, animals as symbols and interpretations of the fact that a new baby is born signify closeness of the Lacandons to the natural world and, on the other one, they confirm that these people are real heirs to the ancient Mayan civilization, in which childbirth, creation of man, and social organisation resulted from activities of various deities exhibiting numerous animal attributes¹⁴.

V. Strength of Luna's Daughters

The Lacandon women, whatever their status, do not take part in ceremonial practices devoted to deities. They are not allowed to touch the god pots, which play the key role in their rituals, and are not allowed to cross the boundary of the god houses, either. Nevertheless, their powerlessness in rituals is only seeming: women are present at the rituals and their activities cannot be considered to be meaningless. First of all, they work in the women's house, which is, in fact, the shrine kitchen situated on one side of the god house. There they prepare ritual meals which men feed to the gods. The meals do not become contaminated because any pregnant, or menstruating women have no share in the process of food preparation.

The women know secret recipes, magic formulae and songs without which the food will not be suitable for the gods, or will be totally ruined. As a result, the preparation of food is strongly influenced by rituals and, moreover, is entirely the domain of women. In order to shed more light on this activity, we may describe our experience with the magic formula

which must be sung when a drink of cocoa is being brewed. The preparation of cocoa is a top secret known only to women. It took us months to understand its core. After all we realised that the whole process rests on a magic song dedicated to gods and without which, as they are persuaded, the cocoa will have no effects. They sing: "*Watch out, I'm looking after my cocoa, I'll pay for it to Master Hachakyum, I'll pay from a small luch (a small bowl made of pumpkin), it tastes good, My Lord, it is sweet, Chob, Humbrikan, it so good, Humbrikan, it really tastes delicious. I'll look after it, baked cocoa, ground cocoa ...*" These magic songs appear to be of very old because of *Humbrikan's* name mentioned several times in this song. This is a deity whose cult is not being practised with the Lacandons and who is not part of their pantheon any more although *Humbrikan* used to be one of the most important deities of the classic Mayas. Under the name of *Huracan*, he is still mentioned at *Popol Vuh*. The language of songs is difficult to understand for the contemporary generation of women. It is especially so for the names of secret plants, which are referred to by new, very often symbolic names. Women sing these songs very monotonously, again and again, till the sacramental meals are ready. The singing of these songs has apotropaic and magic effects - they deter demonic *Kisin*, and lead to safe completion of the dish. The texts of these songs are actually sung precipices by means of which women explain to the gods what they are doing and, at the same time, entice the deity to come and watch what they are doing. The Lacandon women know tens of magic formulae concerning preparation of various meals. Even the most important beverage *balché*, which, as a prerequisite for communication by classic Mayas with their gods, is already mentioned with irony by *Diego de Landa*,¹⁵ is not unavailable to them.¹⁶ During the ceremony men bring the *balché* in bowls hollowed out of pumpkins to the shrine kitchen, where women can also enjoy having a drink of *balché*. Besides this, there are other evidences of a particular status of women in ceremonies. One of them is a special ritual paint which only women can wear. During the initiation ceremony of children called *mek'chur*, they paint dots on their clothes with *k'uxu* (*achiote* in Spanish) to imitate blood stains. Women, together with men, paint a similar decoration on their clothes on the occasion of the grand ceremony *nahwah*. Both men and women also decorate their faces during this ceremony with the *k'uxu*: women paint a red spot on their chins and men on their foreheads. Knowledge of these myths and ritual prescriptions is not an exclusive property of men. *Chan K'in Antonio* from *Nahá*, possessing a vast knowledge of religious myths, was often interrupted by *Koh*, his wife, who, even while we were present, give him a piece of advice and, moreover, correct his words when he erred in his explanations.

In social life women do not lag behind men in terms of rights and duties. Labour is strictly divided between men and women although women clearly have a lower status. Nevertheless, if a married woman decides to abandon her husband and children, she can do it of her own free will and without sanctions. A man can marry more women, and a woman can have more husbands (the authors recorded several examples of polyandry). If a woman suggests the imprisonment of her husband in the community jail, her husband will be imprisoned only on her evidence, without further investigation. Perhaps as a result of this, we could see men sweeping the village; we also saw men wash their own clothes.

Even in case of ritual taboos, women are not second-rank beings. We have already mentioned the consumption of roasted *ch'ib*; similarly, another Lacandon meal consisting of boiled fruit called *pix* (*chayote* in Spanish) is consumed mainly by women. Its most tasty part - the core called *bat* - is reserved only for women because on eating it men would lose

their strength. Women sometimes demonstrate very ostentatiously that they enjoy their meal in order to provoke their husbands. However, ritual taboos are directed against pregnant and menstruating women. As already mentioned above, every woman is considered to be potentially dangerous. For instance, men very strongly feel themselves at risk when they renovate god pots. At that time, they seek seclusion in the forest where they usually spend from six to eight weeks. Not only is this a period of total sexual abstinence but it is a time when they are not allowed to look at a woman, either. Paradoxically, every woman knows where the hiding place of her husband is as she brings him his daily meal. She first calls from a distance that she is bringing the meal; then she approaches with her back to the place, puts the food down and leaves quickly. Any exchange of looks with her husband will be disastrous for his several weeks of effort in making new clay god pots to may host some of their gods. Interestingly, the punishment for violating any taboo is not ordained by the community: it is believed that the culprit will be severally punished directly by the gods. For instance, women are prohibited from participating in the pilgrimage to Yaxchilán, an extraordinarily sacred place for the Lacandons. Once one of Chan K' in Viejo's wives violated this taboo and although it was only for one day, the punishment which naturally followed was very cruel: she lost the baby she was with.¹⁷

The Lacandons are also persuaded that when the last day of the Earth comes, a giant animal called *Nukuxbak* will devour all sinners. Among them there will be liars, those who committed incest or sodomy, but also pregnant and menstruating women. One may only ask what is the source of such an extremely negative attitude to women who appear in a reversed state? It would be rather superficial to refer only to that menstruation taboo, because pregnant women are mentioned much more frequently. Taboos concern women in general, including young girls before puberty as well as old women after menopause. On the other hand, women play an important role in the performance of rituals. It is possible to mention that during the most sacred ceremony nahwah men paint breasts in a red dye made of the k'uxu on their ceremonial tunics. This procedure reminds of the rituals of androgynisation which were already dealt with by Eliade.¹⁸

To sum up, to cast any doubts on the meaning of the women element of the Lacandons is meaningless. A great number of measures which help identify the ritual status of woman in Lacandon society are most probably rooted in archaic mysteries concerning woman.¹⁹ Woman can give life, deliver a new human being, which is an ability exclusively attributed by natural peoples to gods. Seen from this point, both her power and secrets are due to her ability to produce new life. It is believed that at rituals those creatures endowed with this power are able to impact the process of communication with gods in a negative way. As a result, the status of woman does not mean that she is an inadequate or inferior being but reflects her spiritual and symbolic power. Exaggerating a little, it is possible to say that the position of woman when examined against a background of rituals appears to be of greater importance than that of man. For this reason, she is paid such enormous attention in rituals and religious practices, because any reversed state of woman destabilises the sacred status of the community.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The traditional life of the contemporary Lacandons has been treated by several authors, e.g. a chapter *The Faith of Real People: The Lacandons of the Chiapas Rain Forest* by Didier BOREMANS (In: GOSSEN, G. H. (ed.) *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*. New York 1993, pp. 325 - 351) is considered as very convenient and instructive. Another important source dealing with Lacandons is a survey including essential bibliography by Enrique Erosa SOLANA, *Los Lacandones*. In: *Etnografía contemporánea de los pueblos indígenas de México. Región Sureste*. Mexico 1995, pp. 53-85.
- 2 A comparison and a basic list of these deities is in: Roberto D. BRUCE S., *Jerarquía Maya entre los dioses Lacandones*. In: *Anales I. N. A. H.*, Tomo XVIII, México 1965, pp. 93-108.
- 3 A history of the Lacandon resistance to the efforts of the colonial government and missionaries to convert them to Christianity has been dealt with in an outstanding way by Jan de VOS: *No queremos ser cristianos*. México 1990.
- 4 The settlement at Nahá was established thanks to her initiative to stop assimilation of the dispersed Lacandon families. She also had a great share in maintaining the cultural awareness and the traditional way of dressing and its slight transformations. One of her classic studies written in co-operation with her husband Frans BLOM is: *The Lacandon*. In *Handbook of Middle American Indians. Part one - Ethnology*. E. von Z. VOGT (ed.), Austin 1969, pp. 276-297.
- 5 PERERA, V. - BRUCE, R.D., *The Last Lords of Palenque*. Berkeley 1985, pp. 303-304.
- 6 MARION M. O., *Identidad y ritualidad entre los Mayas*. México 1994, p. 147.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Cf. BRUCE, R. D., *Lacandon Dream Symbolism. Dream Symbolism among the Lacandon Mayas of Chiapas*. Mexico. México 1979 in order to read more about Lacandon dream symbolism.
- 10 Marion associates these cotton fibres and the magic functions they have for the mother and child with symbolism and the protective function of the goddess Luna. MARION, M. O., *Lunar Iconography in Lacandon Mayan Cosmology*. In: *Cosmology of the Sacred World*. SARASWATI, B., GONZÁLES, T. Y. (eds.). New Delhi 1999, p. 107.
- 11 This type of initiation is dealt with by R. J. McGEE, *Life, Ritual and Religion among the Lacandon Maya*. Belmont 1990, pp. 99 - 106. Much information on this ritual can be found in the thesis by Enrique Erosa SOLANA, *El Sistema simbólico de los Hach Winik*. México 1992, pp. 108-156.
- 12 EDMONSON, M. S., *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala*. New Orleans, 1971, p. 125.
- 13 Sotelo SANTOS, L. E. - Valverde VALDÉS, Ma. del Carmen, *Los señores de Yaxchilán. Un ejemplo de felinización de los gobernantes Mayas*. In: *Estudios de Cultura Maya*. Vol. XIX. México 1992, p. 1988.
- 14 Animal mythology of the Lacandons, especially that concerning the origins of matrimony is associated with their social organisation, cf. e.g. Didier BOREMANS, *Mitología y organización social entre los Lacandones (Hach Winik) de la selva Chiapaneca*. In: *Estudios de Cultura Maya*, Vol. XV. México 1984, pp. 225-249.
- 15 LANDA, Diego de. *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*. Mérida 1993, p. 44.
- 16 McGEE, R. J., *op. c.*, p. 80.
- 17 MARION, M. O., *op. c.*, p. 147.
- 18 ELIADE, M., *Mefisto a androgyn*. Praha 1997, pp. 63-100.
- 19 See also: MARION, M.-O.: *El poder de las hijas de Luna*. INAH - México D. F. 1999.

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