“We are the Hach Winik:”
Politics of Representation and the “True”
Lacandon People

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February 28, 2014
“Culture is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.”

—Clifford Geertz
Abstract
The Lacandon Maya, who inhabit part of the Lacandon jungle, are depicted as the only Mexican indigenous people who escaped Spanish conquest. They lived isolated in the Lacandon jungle for centuries until they were “rediscovered” by researchers who were fascinated by their supposed connection to the classic Maya. However, the Lacandon have been misrepresented throughout history: idealized as “savages” or “sages.” Based on five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork, I found that contrary to popular perception and anthropological literature, the Lacandon are not an idealized monolithic people. The modern Lacandon are a heterogeneous community that is continually reinterpreting their cultural identity in conversation with the world around them and with themselves.
Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank the Lacandon people of Nahá for welcoming me into their community and sharing parts of their lives with me. I also want to acknowledge Aliche, for being my anthropologist superstar and mentor when I thought that my research was falling apart. Thank you to the Richard J. Salisbury student fellowship for facilitating my research.

I am also immensely grateful to Jay Levi, with whom this whole project began. Thank you for fostering and encouraging my interest in the Lacandon, in visual anthropology, and for always providing tough love when I needed it. And thank you for picking up the phone after my first trip to Nahá (it was well worth the money).

I am so grateful to Constanza for helping me to make sense of my research and encouraging my ideas. In addition to the incredible encouragement from the entire Carleton College Sociology and Anthropology department majors and faculty, I must thank Amelia, Truc, Gaby, Emily, and Cara for their comments and incredible listening skills.

I would also like to give thanks to my parents, my number one editors and the eternal optimists who always knew that I could complete this when I did not. Finally thank you Simon, for supporting me and listening to me for over a year about this project.
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Introduction

During my first couple of days in Nahá, a Lacandon Maya community in the Lacandon jungle of Eastern Chiapas, Mexico, I found respite at a tourist hotel at the end of a long and dusty road that divides the town in two. The Centro (what they call the hotel) would ease my nerves about finding someone to interview that day because I knew there was always someone watching over it and thus I was guaranteed company and conversation. In fact, I became friendly with a young woman named Maria, who cleaned the hotel rooms and looked after it most days. One afternoon, Maria frantically told me about an unexpected visit earlier in the day from the President of Ocosingo, (the city of which Nahá is a municipality). Interested in the success of the hotel and its role in facilitating tourism, he asked Maria many questions, such as how many people had been there in the last month and how much revenue the Centro had made this year. Maria could not answer any of them. He continued: what does it mean to be a Lacandon? Once again she could not answer his question. He teased her, pulled on her cheeks and then instructed her to focus on her studies. She was upset that no one had taught her how to answer these questions.

At the time, I could not imagine why it was so difficult for her to articulate what it means to be a Lacandon. I incorrectly assumed that I had developed a pretty good understanding after only being in Nahá for one week. But neither the President nor I knew what it meant to be a Lacandon nor the implications of his questions. Maria is a 21-year-old single mother of two who never finished elementary school. While she desperately wishes that she could “just focus on her studies,” she has to work at the Centro from 8 am to 3 pm to support her family. Maria obeyed her parents and followed traditional Lacandon marriage customs, but is now anxious to leave Nahá to finish school and support herself. Maria is a poignant paradigm of the contradictions between the “traditional” Lacandon life and the outside world.
Maria’s situation is not isolated; the Lacandon with whom I spent this past summer are a complex heterogeneous society comprised not of essentialized images and stereotypes but of people. K’in Garcia has three cars and two televisions. Erika reads the young adult book *Twilight* in her spare time. K’ayum Ma’ax has travelled the world to display his oil paintings. Antonio still works every day in his *milpa* (field). K’ayum Guerra’s home is always shaking with loud Spanish pop music. Juan relies on the help of tourists and researchers to buy his heart medicine. Bor enjoys watching the movie *Iron Man* on his iPad. And Alberto believes his long fingernails help him navigate the jungle. Each of these people I interacted with are *Hach Winik*, meaning the “the true people” as they call themselves in Mayan, and they represent the reality of modern Lacandon life.

During my five weeks of ethnographic field research, I discovered that no one I met adhered to the quintessential image of the Lacandon Maya: long-haired tunic-wearing men who hunt with bow and arrows, practice ceremonial rituals, and rarely interact with people outside their community. I began to ask: what is a modern Lacandon? Where did these monolithic representations come from? Why do they persist?

I propose that the depictions of the Lacandon as a monolithic community are creations of writers, anthropologists, and photographers who have studied and visited these people. In print and in photography, the Lacandon are depicted as biological entities averse to cultural change and subject to the representation of others, mediated through language and discourse (Csordas 1994:2). The dominant anthropological discourse turns the Lacandon people into merely “bodies” that perform a self (Csordas 1994:2). Given the prevalence of representing the Lacandon through the vision of others, it becomes necessary to interrogate the politics of representation in conversation with the Lacandon themselves. These discussions should also
recognize that the Lacandon – like other anthropological subjects – are agents of self-creating processes that exist within a constant flux of change (Csordas 1994:3). In addition, the process of engaging in conversation with the Lacandon also provides an opportunity for them to be their own agents of self-representation. I hope that the result of this process, one that carefully considers the different dimensions of the modes and politics of representation, will yield a paper that uncovers a complex depiction of contemporary Lacandon lives and identities. In particular, I aim to shed light on a series of questions: why has Lacandon culture been depicted as a bounded fixed entity? What do these monolithic representations entail and why have they persisted? And finally, what is a modern representation of the Lacandon?

**Critiques of Culture**

Like many other anthropological subjects, the Lacandon have historically been depicted within a framework that assumes that culture is a hegemonic entity with systematic ideologies. Representations like these have led anthropologists to debate the definition of culture and the implications of anthropological study. This section addresses several of the main critiques of and possibilities for redefining the notion of culture. This debate is crucial because the portrayal of Lacandon culture is heavily dependent on representation from outside researchers.

The earliest definition of culture and the point of departure for modern social anthropologists was in the early 1900’s by anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor: culture is a complex whole that includes any capabilities and habits acquired by man (Barfield 1997:98). Tylor’s definition was expanded and altered greatly over time because, while anthropologists differed in their theories, everyone agreed that different peoples created their lives through
“culture.” However, in the 1970’s, the once progressive idea of culture was critiqued as a repressive method for establishing colonial power (Wright 1998:8). Culture was described as an “anthropological abstraction” that intends to establish order by privileging coherent, balanced, and authentic aspects of life (Brumann 1999:S2).

One of the most common critiques of culture is that representing and categorizing people establishes a hierarchal power dynamic between the subject and the anthropologist (Abu-Lughod 1995:138). The field of anthropology was constructed on the notion of difference, specifically on the divide between the West and the non-West. This is comparable to the study of Orientalism, a style of thought that focuses on the “false cultural assumptions of the Western world that there is an ‘Orient’ that has definite differences” (Abu-Lughod 1994:144). In his essay on Orientalism, Edward Said breaks down the long-held stereotypes and cultural prejudices of the Middle East that were “particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridical discourse about the Orient (Said 1978:6).” In the same manner, anthropology establishes an “other” by imposing certain categories based on apparent cultural differences, and as a result is able to define the self (Abu-Lughod 1994:139).

Writing about these cultural differences becomes problematic especially when it leads to assumptions that a culture is ahistorical and stagnant. Societies are not bounded and self-contained but rather exist in conversation with colonialism, capitalism, international agencies, and global communication networks (Wright 1998:9). Anthropology as its focus of study necessitates traditions and preserves them in books and journals. However, when we learn and read about these traditions, we assume that they are defining characteristics of a specific culture, rather than temporally specific features.
The cultural theories follow the “hegemony of the distinctive other tradition” (Morsey 1988:78), which often generalizes an already marginalized group of people. Writing about culture as a hegemonic entity assumes that the entire culture shares a coherent, systematic ideology (Wright 1978:8). However, there are no underlying “authentic cultures” of shared beliefs. Culture is constructed of cultural identities that are fluid and situational and are constantly being negotiated and reinvented depending on the day and hour that they are perceived (Wright 1998:9).

As an alternative to exacerbating a tired critique of culture, anthropologists have sought ways to deal with this problematic concept. Many have suggested rather than using the word “culture,” which suggests essentialism, “cultural” should be used to emphasize differences and contrasts (Appardurai 1996, Barnard and Spencer 1996 as cited by Brumann 1999:S3). Others have suggested abandoning the concept of culture entirely and instead focusing specifically on defining events, acts and people, and processes (Barth 1994 as cited by Brumann 1999:S4).

Brumann, who assembled a collage of quotes explaining the debate against culture, believes that the critiques all address one usage of culture and not the concept itself. Cultures are always being constructed – not because they are being documented but because culture is an abstraction based on observed instances. The problems regarding culture in anthropological literature arose from the popularization of the concept of culture. Culture provides a framework and a vocabulary for people to conceive of their experiences and the experiences of others in terms of difference (Brumann 1999:S6).

Abu-Lughod (1995) suggests another strategy: that of writing “against” culture. As its current participants define culture, Abu-Lughod employs a method of writing “ethnographies of the particular” that describe how experiences are constituted by individual people who have
histories and circumstances that are very specific to them. By refusing to make sweeping generalizations about an ethnic group, the “other” is transformed into actual “people going through life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness” (Abu-Lughod 1994:146). I will employ Abu-Lughod’s “ethnographies of the particular” to present my informants as individuals with different backgrounds and ideas. I do so to avoid making generalizations about and assuming homogeneity of the people that I encountered. However, in order to understand the variety of portrayals of the Lacandon, it is necessary to provide a general historical background.

The Historical Monolithic Depictions of the Lacandon

The Lacandon Maya are often depicted as one of the few indigenous people in Mexico to have essentially escaped Spanish conquest. They are said to have “essentially” escaped because the post-colonial Republics of Mexico and Central America invaded the areas in northern Chiapas and Guatemala in the nineteenth century (Palka 2005:19). When the Lacandon were faced with full-scale colonization – governmental control, economic changes, and cultural suppression – they were forced to submit to Spanish rule or find other means for survival (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992 as cited by Palka 2005:8). Those who resisted entirely fled farther into the jungle where they lived in relative isolation throughout the colonial period.

In 1947, explorers discovered the ruins of the classic Maya City of Bonampak, with the help of the Lacandon, who guided the expedition though the jungle (Palka 2005:1). The recent discovery of these classic ruins and the rediscovery of Lacandon people gave impetus to scholars
and writers to overemphasize the relationship between them. It became widely theorized that the Lacandon were direct descendants of the classic Maya. However, later research shows that the classic Maya were Chol Maya, while the Lacandon were actually refugees from the Yucatan Peninsula who dispersed into the forest due to colonization (Palka 2005:25). Despite these findings, the erroneous connection persists and continues to influence perceptions of the Lacandon.

Many scholars attribute the preservation of the Lacandon to their isolation deep in the Lacandon Jungle (Blom 1964, Bruce and Perera 1982). However, the Lacandon have been seeking out and trading with other indigenous groups for nearly 300 years (McGee 2002:78). Such misconceptions have come to define the historical memory of the Lacandon and have influenced the dominant discourse, which today can be divided into two distinct categories. At an earlier time (during the colonial period until the late 1800’s) they were perceived to be a “barbaric” “primitive” people; later (early 1900’s until present), they were depicted as heirs of the ancient Maya and spiritual and environmental protectors of the jungle.

The work of Brian Gollnick, a scholar of Mexican culture and subaltern theory, *Reinventing the Lacandon: Subaltern Representations in the Rain Forrest of Chiapas* thoroughly illustrates how the western world has created essentialized depictions of the lives and conditions within the Lacandon jungle. Specifically, Gollnick’s chapter “In the Mirror of Production: Reinventing the Lacandones” describes and characterizes the dichotomous depictions of the Lacandon as a transformation from “savage” to “sage” (Gollnick 2008:72-94). I found this depiction to be both accurate and useful and will be using these terms to characterize this transformation. I have also employed a similar theoretical subaltern framework to Gollnick’s that uses novels and photography as well as anthropological studies to examine the Lacandon from
the perspective of popular perception. In my own research, I expand upon Gollnick’s explanations for the inceptions of cultural and historical representations and engage in conversation with the Lacandon. This section of the paper examines how the Lacandon transformed from “savage” denizens of an impenetrable jungle to environmental and spiritual “sages”.

The “Savage”

When European conquerors first discovered the Lacandon, they were met with fascination and fear. The “otherness” that startled and unsettled the Europeans was soon understood as horror and exoticism. Ramos (1998) explains:

Too much was at stake in terms of their own identity for Europeans to acknowledge the existence of a whole universe of differences that had not been conceived in Europe…the more degraded the image of the Other, the more elevated its creators would see themselves to be. (Ramos 1998:59)

The Lacandon were originally characterized by European popular perception based in ethnocentric fear.

The Lacandon, who are the descendants of Yucatecan refugees, were feared greatly in the early colonial period. They had a reputation for being the most primitive and violent Mayas because they had the least contact with other people (Gollnick 2008:76). Even in the ritual dramas of other Mayas – such as the Tzotsil in the Chiapas highlands – the Lacandon are portrayed as longhaired “wild men” of the forest (Gollnick 2008:78). This characterization of the Lacandon is reminiscent of the stereotype of the _auca_, a Quechua term used in South America to refer to the remote and socially isolated tribes that reside in the Amazon (Taussig 1987:97-99). Michael Taussig, an Australian anthropologist, explains that the _auca_ stereotype originated from pre-colonial Incan prejudice, which portrayed native peoples as violent and primitive but also
who embody spiritual power (Taussig 1987:97). Taussig refers to this reemergence of the *auca* stereotype as the colonial mirror of production: an image that “fulfills an ideological function for colonial discourse by reflecting ‘the barbarity of [the colonists] own social relations, but as imputed to the savagery they yearn to colonize’” (1997:100). Thus the Europeans perceived that they were justified in colonizing the savage violent people because the native’s spiritual power would absolve their sins.

Even the name “caribes,” as scholars sometimes call the Lacandon, came about because of the Spaniards’ confusion. In an attempt to categorize the recently colonized people, the name “caribes,” which originated from Columbus’ discovery of the Arawak people on an island called “carib,” also came to characterize the Lacandon (Berkhofer 1979:6). The Arawak people were “regarded as fierce and eat human flesh” and “have the custom of wearing their hair long like women, and they use bows and arrows of the same cane stems…owing to their lack of iron which they do not possess” (Berkhofer 1979:6-7). When the Spaniards came to Chiapas and found a similar looking “ferocious” people with long hair who use bows and arrows, they likewise called them “caribes.” The Spaniards’ assumption of cultural homogeneity between two entirely different people had severe implications for the Lacandon. They became known as a violent barbarous people based on a misconceived first impression. The Lacandon grew accustomed to the name, sometimes referring to themselves as “caribes” and their settlements as “caribales” (Blom 1969:282).

Another reason that the Lacandon were viewed so negatively was because of popular European novels. In particular the *Jungle Cycle* novels by Bruno Traven, perpetuated this negative perception. Traven, a German novelist who lived the majority of his life in Mexico, wrote about fictional adventures in the Lacandon jungle in the 1930’s. He describes the jungle as
a chaotic, living-hell inhabited by people with a penchant for insurrection and overexploitation of workers (Gollnick 2008:81). He compared it to a torture chamber: “The dark green twilight, which never grew any lighter, weighed heavily on mind and spirit and gave one the melancholy feeling that everything on earth was pointless” (B. Traven as cited by Gollnick 2008:112). These critically acclaimed novels, which were widely distributed throughout Germany, America, and Mexico, fundamentally declared the Lacandon jungle as an impediment to all progress and a haven for rough, uncivilized men (Gollnick 2008:80).

The “Sage”

Early ethnographers found parallels between the Lacandon and classic Maya religions and reinforced the image of the Lacandon as the survivors of the ancient Maya. However, when scholars discovered that the Lacandon are in fact descendants of Yucatecan refugees, the idealized image of the Lacandon changed to portray them as environmental protectors rather than heirs of the classic Maya. This section details key sources and scholars in each of these bodies of literature.

Frans Blom, a noted Danish archeologist known for discovering many Maya sites, was instrumental in changing the popular perception of the Lacandon by providing an alternative view of their home in the Lacandon Jungle. Blom originally led treks through the Lacandon jungle to look for oil drilling sites; however, he and his wife, Gertrude Blom, became enthralled by the Lacandon people and the jungle. Franz Blom’s first book, I De Store Skove (In the Great Forrest 1923) describes the Lacandon jungle as “so large and rich and also well-ordered in its totality, that the individual is drawn to his forebears. Personal tragedies and worries seem less important, one’s thoughts open to greatness to what is universal and personal” (Blom 1923 as
cited by Gollnick 2008:74). *I De Store Skove* was also the first scholarly work to describe the environmental perspective of the Lacandon jungle. In the years after its publication, Frans Blom continued to write about the jungle in personal journals and in scholarly publications. Blom created a new image of the Lacandon jungle directly opposed to the hellish environment that Traven had described. It became a place of extreme spiritual power, renewal and contemplation, and isolated from modernization (Gollnick 2008:73).

*Descendants of the Classic Maya*

In 1832, the first European written account of the Lacandon declared them the only remnants of the ancient Maya (Kashanipour 2003:18). Based on what they had gathered from colonial depictions, travelling writers expected to discover a very different type of people. The Lacandon underwent what might be characterized as a political makeover:

> The Lacandones…are well formed…but their flesh is flabby, their teeth decayed, and they look anaemic, owing probably to their forest life…Nevertheless, they are far from being as savage as supposed…They are extremely diffident and will hide in the woods at the approach of strangers.” (Charnay 1857-1882:435 as cited by Kashanipour 2003:101)

It was the initial misrepresentations of the Lacandon by the colonial Spaniards that then fueled the fanciful exaggerations of the Lacandon as the last vestiges of a prehistoric past. The Lacandon have been depicted as such since they were first studied in the early 1900’s.

The first modern ethnographies of the Lacandon focused almost exclusively on the parallels between Lacandon religion and that of the classic Maya. Alfred Tozzer, who conducted the first modern ethnography of the Lacandon, inspired scholars to study the essential elements of classic Maya that were preserved in Lacandon culture (Sapper 1891, Tozzer 1907, Soustelle 1933, Arman 1942, Blom 1949). These works are extremely important because they provide some of the first anthropological accounts of the Lacandon and are still highly utilized despite being based on a falsehood.
Robert Bruce, an anthropologist and linguist, and Victor Perera, a writer, depict the Lacandon as they title their work – *The Last Lords of Palenque* (1979). This work popularized the Lacandon to the world because it provided a personal account of the Lacandon as the only link to the classic Maya (Slinker 2002:295). The authors assert that the book was not intended as an ethnography and thus took liberties in explaining the Lacandon history and culture. For example, they state that the Lacandon are direct descendants of the ancient Maya and that Nahá’s spiritual leader at the time, Chan K’in Viejo, is not only a lord of Palenque, but the last of the *Hach Winik*, the “true” Lacandon people. The work was seen as a record of the Lacandon way of life. Bruce began his field research in 1960’s and spent most of his life studying and becoming extremely close to the Lacandon. He embraced the Lacandon religion, learned the Lacandon Mayan language, and adopted their way of life. His writings praise the people with whom he spent so long and declares the conservation of Lacandon religion and culture imperative “not only for their sake but for our own as well” (Bruce and Perera 1979:23). Bruce introduces the book by admitting that even “years later [after his field research], one or another professional colleague will say of me, ‘Bruce is no linguist. He is a Lacandon informant’” (Bruce and Perera 1979: 4). His narration is strongly personal and evokes a sense of guilt about the emergence of modernity (Gollnick 2008:85).

Gertrude Duby Blom, a German photographer, activist, explorer, and wife of Frans Blom, is often attributed as a major factor in the political makeover of the Lacandon people. She visited the Lacandon for the first time in 1941 and soon after dedicated her life to documenting and advocating for the cultural preservation of the Lacandon and the environmental preservation of the Lacandon jungle (Palka 2005:22). Blom perpetuated the idea that the Lacandon were direct descendants of the classic Maya through her writings and, most notably, through her
photography. Her iconic images fortified and expanded an idealized portrayal of the Lacandon because of the accessibility of photography as a medium. Her romantic portraits of the Lacandon reached a larger audience than the early ethnographies of Maler, Tozzer, and Arman. Blom’s use of:

Foregrounding of subjective and human elements [in her photographs] is a dramatic intellectual and artistic advance...[that] tell over and over: the story of closeness between the photographer and her subjects. But this same feeling of closeness can also produce the impression of a world uninterrupted by the act of representation. (Gollnick 2008:79-80)

Furthermore, her photographs never depicted any influence of the outside world on the Lacandon people. Blom did not like to be referred to as a photographer (she had no formal training) because she believed that her images merely captured the spirit between her and a person she cared for deeply (Harris, Sartor 1985:11).

In addition to her photographs, Blom’s writings also perpetuated the ideal that the Lacandon are pure links to ancient Maya untainted by modern society. Blom, affectionately known as Trudi, stayed with the Lacandon for extended periods of time and provided some of the most vivid depictions of Lacandon life during the twentieth century (McGee 2002:40). However, Blom wrote about the Lacandon as if they were frozen in time because of their perceived isolation. Many of the changes that she recognized and condemned actually began taking place centuries before she arrived. She wrote about the recent emergence of products such as steel, machetes, and manufactured cloth. Yet, the Lacandon had acquired materials like steel and glass to make everyday items in the late 1700’s, machetes by the 1800’s, and started to make use of manufactured cloth in the early 1900’s (McGee 2002:43). Her works provide a wealth of information about the Lacandon, but also were often written for the purposes of “preserving” the Lacandon culture and traditions. She believed that the purity of the Lacandon was important for
the world to recognize: “many of us are not interested in this small group yet, but how much could we learn from them. Stop, meditate and look back. We are all related” (Blom 1944:18). Blom depicts the Lacandon culture as a stagnant entity and does not allow for the community to exist temporally or situationally (Wright 1998:8).

Many scholars echo similar sentiments regarding traditional native cultures, known as the allegory of redemption: being concerned with the salvation of a traditional native community absolves the dominant society of its transgressions against native communities (Gollnick 2008:85). Maintaining the traditions and culture of the Lacandon, who became “the standard of Indianness” because of their isolation from the outside world relieves western society of its guilt and transforms it into a savior. Like Blom, many other scholars also write about the importance of saving the innocent, untouched Lacandon. Carlos Margain, in his memoir from Bonampak, writes that:

“those who have lost faith in the present, who fear the state of rational man in our current ‘atomic’ world of the mid-twentieth century, can recover their hope, their faith in man himself, by living with the Lacandones…defending tenaciously once again against the domination of nature” (Margain as cited by Gollnick 2005:81).

These writers and scholars also enforce a common belief that the Lacandon culture is disintegrating and will soon be lost forever (Bruce and Perera 1988, Boremanse 1981, and Blom 1944, 1979).

According to the allegory of redemption, the fate of the western world is inextricably tied to that of the Lacandon. Author Bruce explains to his co-author Perera that “experience has taught me that Chan K’in is no idle prophet, and I do not take lightly his pledge that when the last Lacandon dies, the world will come to an end” (Bruce and Perera 1988:304).
**Spiritual Sages and Environmental Keepers of the Lacandon Jungle**

As well as documenting her personal interactions, Gertrude Blom was an environmental activist who devoted her life to preserving the Lacandon jungle. Blom vehemently opposed governmental intrusions by chicle and latex gatherers, cattle and hog raisers, and loggers and road builders into the Lacandon jungle because of its adverse effects on the environment and the Lacandon people (Woodward and Woodward 1985:232). She established a tree sanctuary to combat deforestation and lobbied for a large grant of land for the Lacandones that, although passed, was never actually signed and appropriated (Woodward and Woodward 1985:233). A portion of her writing focused on the capabilities of the Lacandon to care for the jungle and thus limit the intrusions and succeeding changes. Her essay “The Lacandones: Their past and present” provides a general historical background of the Lacandon. When describing their contact with modernization, Blom very passionately blames the thousands of Tzeltatles, Tzotziles, Tojobales, and Choles who had moved to the Lacandon jungle. She likens them to Spanish conquerors that introduced illness and cattle and cut down large plots of land for livestock (Blom 1944:22).

However, the Lacandon are also responsible for the deforestation of thousands of mahogany, tropical cedar, and ceiba trees in the Lacandon jungle. The Lacandones themselves did not cut down the trees, but rather exchanged the destruction of the jungle for a large sum of money (Harris, Sartor 1985:14). While the exact circumstances of the sale are debated, scholars such as McGee and Nations firmly believe that the Lacandon are environmentalists and assert that the Lacandon were tricked. Nations explains that Chan K’in Viejo, the Lacandones’ spiritual leader at the time, told the logging company contractor that they were not his trees to sell so he should ask Hachakyum, the creator god of the Lacandon, for permission to cut the trees (1985:36). Yet, Chan K’in Viejo’s eldest son, Chan K’in Primero, later signed the contract and
allowed the deforestation to begin despite his aging father’s seeming resistance. Blom blames the Lacandon’s courteousness and generosity, explaining that the Lacandon would never turn down something that was offered to them, even if the proposal could negatively affect them (Blom 1944). Whether or not the Lacandon were tricked or persuaded with money, this issue demonstrates the different representations of the Lacandon based on their image as environmentalists.

Another similar instance is in the Lacandon system of slash and burn agriculture, or the *milpa*. The *milpa*, the land that is currently being farmed (as opposed to the *acahual*, a fallowed *milpa*), can produce over 80 types of crops in one field (Nations and Nigh 1980:8). It is maintained by felling the forest, burning the dried cuttings, and planting selected species in the clearing (Nations and Nigh 1980:8). Nations and Nigh conducted a thorough study of the Lacandon strategies of sustained-yield food production, wildlife management, and forest maintenance. They posit that the Lacandon practice one of the most productive swidden systems in the New World and that this system offers an alternative to a monoculture farming system (Nations and Nigh 1980:26). Cattle production is now the main form of land utilization and is depleting the jungle of natural resources. Nations and Nigh suggest that in order to maintain the tropical plants and animals in the jungle as well as boost the Central American economy, cattle production and Lacandon crop production should be intensified in pre-established areas (1980:27). However, they reported that only 20% of Lacandon men still practice these traditional techniques. They claim the solution is relying on the Lacandon because they would be placed “in leadership positions and aided in efforts to improve their own traditional techniques in order to teach new colonists the art of living in the tropical forest without destroying it” (Nations and Nigh 1980:27). While they address the governmental, religious, and commercial programs have
changed the Lacandon traditional practices, Nations and Nigh refer to these changes almost independently of the Lacandon people themselves. The agricultural practices of the Lacandon have changed immensely as the needs and livelihoods of the people have changed. Yet, there is also debate on the actual conservation potential of these traditional systems.

In a classic series of articles, scholars debate indigenous people’s capability to conserve biodiversity in the Amazon Basin (Redford and Stearman 1993, Alcorn 1993, Redford and Stearman, 1993). Redford and Stearman, and Alcorn address the recent global concern for biodiversity and the increased interest in relying on the indigenous people of these regions to preserve it (Redford and Sanderson 19920). One side argues that while relinquishing control of the land to the native indigenous people is a romantic idea, most indigenous groups are in the processes of modernizing their lifestyles (Redford and Stearman 1993:252). Increased engagement in the market economy has led many indigenous groups to focus on new methods of making money and has changed traditional methods of food production and conservation (Redford and Stearman 1993:252). For instance, many Lacandon people have become invested in other more profitable ventures such as selling tourist goods. They also began to hire Tzeltal and Tzotzil Maya farmers to work in their milpas who use common pesticides and herbicides that in turn increase soil erosion and nutrient depletion (McGee 2002:96). While traditional environmental practices offer a good model, it is impossible to deny the changes that have taken place and will continue to take place. Even when indigenous groups express direct interest in leading conservation in their home communities, they often define the concept of biodiversity differently than do biologists. Preserving biodiversity from an indigenous point of view may mean preventing large scale destruction, building dams, and restricting oil exploration and gold mining rather than focusing specifically on species diversity and richness in certain environments.
Redford and Stearman (1993) were critiqued for generalizing indigenous people and practices in the Amazon and upholding a strict definition of the word conservation that does not allow for a diversity of perspectives (Alcorn 1993). Clearly, the “noble savage debate” is unresolved. However, articles like Nations and Nigh’s reflect a strong sense of the allegory of redemption. It suggests that in order to rectify the environmental problems caused by intrusions from the West, we must let the pure and untainted practices of the Lacandon to save the jungle. However, the “untainted” time that Nations and Nigh refer to does not exist. Furthermore, recent literature has shown that adaptive hybrid systems that combine traditional agricultural practices and direct engagement with the market economy are the most successful swidden systems (Ocampo-Raeder, personal communication, February 26, 2014).

The Lacandon specifically have been accused of assisting in the biopiracy of the jungle and therefore further depleting its resources. This issue is beyond the scope of this paper and I cannot claim that this is a widely held belief, however, The Maya Museum of Medicine in San Cristóbal has a large and long-standing exhibit (January 2012 to current) that extensively details these claims. It defines biopiracy as the appropriation, theft or patent of natural resources on the part of researchers, universities, laboratories, pharmaceutical companies and governments (especially of developing countries) for the commercial exploitation without authorization from the creators nor just compensation proportional to the benefits of said natural resources and collective knowledge (Maya Museum of Medicine). Upon entering the exhibit, visitors are greeted by a cardboard cut-out of a Lacandon man with a word bubble that states “the land is for whoever pays,” upon his tunic, he wears CONANP, World Wildlife Fund, Proárbol, and other stickers of prominent organizations, and in his hands, he holds a large sum of money. The exhibit uses statements from the Mexican and United States governments and media sources to confirm
that the Lacandones (as well as many other indigenous groups) in fact sell resources in the Lacandon jungle to chemical companies, universities, and large corporations such as Bayer and Monsanto. Rather than making a grand statement about the commodification of the jungle, simply the fact that the Lacandon are engaging with a market economy bolsters Redford and Stearman’s argument that the Lacandon are no longer exclusively engaged in traditional Lacandon agriculture and food production practices. Yet, interestingly, we continue to depict them as sages, like Nations and Nigh do, in a monolithic manner.

The Current Effects of Monolithic Representations

While current discourse and literature are beginning to detail the Lacandon cultural, economic, and social changes, the Lacandon have historically been written about as if they exist in a vacuum. In the 1940’s, the Lacandon measured zero degrees on an anthropological scale of acculturation and were thus defined as the standard of “Indianness” (Gollnick 2008:77). Scholars such as Blom—in an attempt to preserve the “traditional” Lacandon culture—renounced any of their contact with the outside world. Blom stated that “now the best way to help [the Lacandon] is to defend them from the negative sides of our culture and to defend the jungle (Blom 1977:18). She achieved this in part by establishing a museum and cultural center at Na Bolom, her and her husband’s former home, which is dedicated to the protection of the Lacandon Maya culture and the preservation of the Chiapas rain forest. For over fifty years, Na Bolom has maintained a relationship with the Lacandon. While this relationship is enduring, it is also a very complicated one. All but one person that I spoke to in Nahá remembers Trudi Blom adoringly for her kindness and service to the Lacandon. One woman said that she lived at Blom’s camp when she was visiting and considered Blom to be her mother.
After Blom died in 1993, the management and the relationship between Na Bolom and the Lacandon people changed. In their mission statement, the Na Bolom foundation states that all profits from the museum and hotel go to programs and services for the Lacandon people in Chiapas – services that range from cultural preservation to environmental and sustainable development (Na-Bolom.org). I was guaranteed a room at Na Bolom to do my research with the understanding that I would be also be a volunteer and take photographs of their projects. However, when I arrived, I was informed that there were no current projects underway and that there was nothing for me to do. Intrigued by Na Bolom’s current involvement with the Lacandon, I asked my interviewees about the relationship between Nahá and Na Bolom. K’in Garcia explained that while they need support, they have recently received nothing from Na Bolom. “They formerly sent medicine and money, but since Trudi’s death they don’t care.” He explains in reference to the service at Na Bolom: “I told them I would pay. We’re not animals, we’re humans. We’re equal humans, they need to understand that.”

When I returned to Na Bolom, I began to understand how the museum and center presented the Lacandones as historical specimens, not as equal humans. During museum hours, Na Bolom requires that no Lacandon enter the institute unless he or she is wearing traditional clothing (Slinker 2002:195). The museum at Na Bolom commemorates and attempts to preserve the memory of who the Lacandon were, rather than embracing the reality of who the Lacandon have become. However, it is evident that Na Bolom’s mission has not changed; they still care deeply for the people to whom Trudi Blom was devoted. A room and a meal are always free for a Lacandon and while I was there, many Lacandon (from Lacanja and Mensäbäk as well) were staying at the hotel. Bor Max, the commissioner of Nahá – who like K’in Garcia, expressed dissatisfaction with Na Bolom – visits the hotel frequently to do business in San Cristóbal and
with Na Bolom specifically. However, it is very telling that projects aimed at rescuing or preserving the Lacandon culture were constructed from Blom’s foreign notion of their culture.

*Government Intervention*

The Mexican Government and the regional government in Ocosingo also provide support to bolster revenue and the tourist market. However, there seems to be a general misunderstanding about what would be the most effective way to help the people of Nahá. Recently, a representative from CONANP (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protejidas) facilitated resource management and jungle safety workshops. All men were required to attend, but the workshops were unnecessary as nearly everyone already knew the different types of wood in the jungle and which frogs are poisonous because these are skills that are needed to survive in the Lacandon jungle.

Typically, more projects are devoted to helping the women of Nahá because they are less likely to obtain jobs to support themselves. One such project was to teach the women and girls of Nahá how to make a new style of jewelry from San Cristóbal. The necklaces that are now marketed to tourists are not stylistically Lacandon and are the same that many other indigenous groups in the area are selling. Maria and her mother greatly appreciated learning these skills, but are too hesitant to sell their goods to tourists and thus have made very little income.

When I asked my interviewees what would be most helpful in Nahá, the unanimous answer was repairing the road. The road from Palenque and Ocosingo is rocky, rough, and takes nearly 5 hours to traverse. Bor Max, the commissioner of Nahá, explains that even though they submit requests for the road to be fixed, it never happens. To him it is simple: “without tourists, there is no money; if the tourists can travel easier to get here, there will be more money, we do not need anything else.” This demonstrates that because the Lacandon have historically been
misunderstood by both researchers and the government, the aid extended to them has often been ineffective.

**Methodology**

This section of the paper details the methodology I employed to answer the questions: what is a modern Lacandon? What are the monolithic images of the Lacandon and why do they persist? First, I explain the details of conducting archival research at Na Bolom in San Cristóbal. I then explain the processes I went through in photo-interviewing and participant observation in Nahá. Finally, I comment on my role as a young American female researcher and begin to postulate how it affects my data and results.

**Archival Research**

I conducted archival research at Na Bolom, Blom’s former home, from June 23-30, 2013 and July 13-16, 2013. I stayed at Na Bolom and had access to do my research because I agreed to also be a volunteer. However, there were no projects for me to help with so I was able to devote all of my time to researching and utilizing Na Bolom’s valuable resources. The center boasts the most comprehensive library on the Lacandon and houses over 50,000 of Blom’s images. Since my research relies heavily on the scholarly work of others, using the Na Bolom library allowed me to examine how the Lacandon have been portrayed in popular culture and anthropological studies. I am still very far from being an expert on Lacandon literature, especially because of the vast quantities of works that were written in Spanish. However, I can say that I have developed a general understanding of much of the dominant discourse on the Lacandon.
Conversations about Change

I chose to do ethnographic field research in Nahá, Chiapas because this was one of Blom’s favorite Lacandon villages. I also had previously visited Nahá on my study abroad program during the winter of 2012. Although most people did not remember me specifically from my previous visit, it was helpful to remind them of my group and of my professor, Jay Levi, who visits Nahá every other year with this program. I stayed in Nahá for the entirety of my trip, instead of visiting other Lacandon communities because I was limited to five weeks of research. I conducted 15 initial photo-interviews with Lacandones in Nahá from July 1, 2013 to July 10, 2013 to gain an understanding of the Lacandones’ personal historical memory. Interviews lasted between 15 and 90 minutes. Interviewees gave me permission to use their names exclusively for my research. I conducted photo-interviews because photography is an accessible medium to discuss representation, especially with the added complication of language barriers. My methodology parallels Vila’s (2005) concept that the photograph structures the interview itself. Statements and questions are in direct response to graphic probes, creating a semi-structured interview that encourages interviewees to produce knowledge. Photo-interviews also mitigate the hierarchical tension between an interviewer and interviewee (Vila 2005:52). I included a list of the general questions that I began the photo interviews with in the appendix on page 57.

The photo-interview methodology is theoretically based on the idea within visual anthropology that an image is a three-way process of communication between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer (Collier 1886:8). History conditions us to view photographs as unmediated documentations of the world, but images are abstractions that are highly influenced by the photographer and the viewer. Through discussing specific images with multiple
participants, it becomes apparent that as viewers, the way that we see images is as a function of our culture, beliefs, predilections, and narrative (Vila 2005:55).

In the first part of the photo-interview process, I presented each interviewee with two different portrayals of the Lacandon. I first presented four photographs taken by Tozzer, an anthropologist who documented the Lacandon between the late 1890’s and the 1930’s. I presented the image below of a man handling a large monkey from Tozzer’s 1904 collection of photographs (figure 1).

![Image of a man handling a large monkey from Tozzer’s 1904 collection of photographs.]

Figure 1. “Indian Holding Chimp or Monkey.” Tozzer (1904)

I then presented the interviewees with four of Gertrude Blom’s photographs that were taken between 1940’s and the 1970’s. On the following page is one Blom’s images I used, “Kimbor,” taken in 1959 (figure 2). See the appendix of images on page 52 for the complete set of photographs that I used during photo interviews.
These images stimulated conversations about the “traditional” Lacandon and helped me gain an understanding of how my interviewees viewed the past. I was also able to gauge how much people knew about these time periods because of the temporal differences between the two groups of images. I have included two images, one from Blom and one from Tozzer to illustrate the types of photos that I used.

Throughout my stay in Nahá, I recorded my own experiences with my personal camera. I also gave a camera to Alberto, a 20-year-old Lacandon, so that he could document his own life. After the first part of the interview process, I returned to Na Bolom in San Cristóbal to reflect on my findings and continue research at Na Bolom. I returned to Nahá from July 15, 2013 to July 25, 2013 to begin the second part of the photo-interview process and used the photos that Alberto and I had taken from the previous trip. I conducted ten photo interviews with some of the same people who I had already interviewed and some new participants, continuing with Vila’s methodology. The second set of photos that I presented to my interviewees captured some of the
modern contradictions that I had encountered during my stay in Nahá. For example, I presented the photo below of Pepe Vasquez, who makes arrows for tourists, pretending to shoot an arrow into the jungle while a professional photographer took a picture of him (figure 3).

I also showed my informants a photo that Alberto took of his CD collection in his house. By using recent photographs I was able to gain a better understanding of how the Lacandon presently view their lives in Nahá.

To begin, my first interviewees were people I had met on my study abroad program. I then used snowball-sampling to meet other potential interviewees (Seale 2012). I interviewed a demographically diverse group of Lacandones that represent a broad sample of the population. Although the sample was not statistically representative of Nahá, it incorporates all different kinds of people who can speak to many different Lacandon identities. For example, I interviewed Antonio, who is between 80-90 years old and a Lacandon spiritual leader, and Erika, a 17-year-old girl who works during the week so that she can attend high school in Palenque on the weekends.
During the formal interviews, I used an electronic MP3 recorder, which allowed me to concentrate on the conversation, without worrying about taking highly detailed notes (Weiss 1995). I later transcribed the interviews in order to analyze my data. Several interviewees conversed in both Mayan and Spanish, and a few spoke only Mayan. For these interviews I elicited Alberto’s help with either listening to the recordings and dictating to me the main points of the conversations, or with translating the entire interview as it took place. Two of my interviewees preferred to not be recorded and in these circumstances I took very detailed notes.

Participant Observation
Because qualitative research is inductive, my research was also a product of my experiences and interactions in Nahá. I did not develop my research question until after returning to Carleton College and analyzing my interviews and field notes. I used issue-focused analysis to evaluate the specific issues of representation that arose from the photo-interviews (Weiss 1995). I gathered very diverse stories and organized them into themes that focused on the diversity of people in Nahá. I relied heavily on my field notes because I often worried that what people told me was not truthful. Participant observation provided some of my richest data because it can provide a more realistic view of culture than accepting a person’s word at face value (McGee 2002:169).

Positionality
As a researcher and writer, I have a responsibility to acknowledge how my own relationship with the Lacandon affected my data. My research presents only partial truths of what it means to be a Lacandon because of who I am (Abu-Lughod 1994:138). Borke et al. surmises “we as
researchers cannot separate ourselves from that space. Who we are, how we are on that particular day and all that, has moulded us into that person that now sits ‘within’ the ethnographic space will influence the outcome of whatever material we produce” (2009:103). The first word that I learned in Lacandon was *shuna*, or *gringa*, a somewhat derogatory term used to describe white foreigners who don’t speak Spanish (or Lacandon) very well. While I never expected to blend in with the Lacandon people, it was evident that more time was necessary to build trust within the community. During the first week of my stay, Alberto explained that he would stay for my interviews with men because all *gringas* were perceived to be husband-stealing threats in Nahá. Of all my interviewees, I became the most comfortable with two young women who, ultimately because of our ease with each other, I felt were the most honest with me.

I was also very aware of my role as a privileged Western researcher. My camera, recorder, and even my clothing were typical discussion points. People would ask me how much everything costs and how I am fiscally able to travel to Mexico to conduct research at my age. It was difficult to answer their questions truthfully without creating divisions between us. Inevitably, I have a responsibility to accept how inextricably connected I am to the research that I produce.

*Data and Results*

When I began to formulate my interest in the Lacandon into a research question, I thought I would be answering how the photography of Gertrude Blom transformed the popular perception of the Lacandon from “savages” to “sages.” Even when I arrived in Nahá and began my first round of interviews, I expected to discuss different modes of representation in conversation with
the Lacandon. However, after spending time in Nahá, the representations of the Lacandon that I had studied so thoroughly began to seem less important than getting to know the Lacandon people themselves. I no longer wanted to know how they perceived what was written about them; I wanted to know them as people. I miss my long afternoon talks with Maria and Erika; I still worry whether about Alberto will return to Nahá or not; and I feel so grateful that Adriana and Ofelia took me in and fed me chayote and yak tea every time I was caught in the rain.

Nonetheless, using visual anthropology as a starting point allowed me the opportunity to delve into collective processes of identification. The narratives that people construct while making sense of images are the narrative identities that structure people’s lives (Vila 2005:53). This was extremely apparent in the case of Alberto, a 20-year-old man who makes his livelihood assisting researchers with their projects. When I gave a camera to Alberto to document his life, he created his own visual narrative. He photographed what was most important to him: his CD collection, the Centro, pictures he collected, me (his work at the time), and the road (figure 4). When I asked him why he took the photographs, he explained that these were some of the few things that offered him solace in Nahá. He disappeared from Nahá shortly after he took these photographs.

Figure 4. “Untitled” Alberto (2013)
Shapiro 30

I have divided my analysis into four realms, beginning with the one aspect of Lacandon life that I found to be homogenous: their romanticized historical memory of the past. I then explain three distinct heterogeneous qualities of the Lacandon: religious ritual and spirituality, familial and gender relations, and social organization.

Preserving the Romantic Past

When I presented Tozzer’s and Blom’s photographs, everyone I interviewed unanimously agreed that the photos represented “the real life of the Lacandones, the first of the Lacandones.” They referred to the time of Tozzer and Blom as the beautiful and peaceful antes (before). The majority of people that I talked to even said that they would prefer to live in the antes as opposed to now. Erika, a 17-year-old high school student, explained that it was a more beautiful time with more trees and vegetation and less contamination and garbage. She also said it was a more pleasant time because there were less people and everyone was much nicer and more helpful.

According to the Lacandon people I interviewed, the past was as pristine and perfect as the early writers and ethnographers had described. There was no deforestation, the culture was more original, and the Lacandones were Hach Winik, pure Maya. However, while everyone praised the antes, there was a great deal of confusion about when it actually occurred. Maria, a 21-year-old mother, thought that Trudi Blom’s photos could have been from 12 years ago. Whereas Bor Max, the commissioner of Nahá, could not believe that they were less than 200 years old.

Additionally, none of the 15 people who I interviewed could tell that there was a large time difference between Tozzer’s and Blom’s photos (nearly 50 years). In fact, the majority of people mistook Blom’s images for being older than Tozzer’s because they were more romantic and beautiful and thus reminiscent of an untainted time (see figure 5). The Lacandones that I met
envision an untainted, romantic Lacandon past much like what Blom and other scholars described. Erika explains that the images of Blom and Tozzer reflect the lives of her grandparents, the way life should be: bows and arrows and men with tunics.

After the excitement of viewing these images and remembering the past, the interviewees would often offer explanations for the changes that have occurred in Nahá. People usually blamed the younger members of the community for not being interested in cultural knowledge and stories. However, the most interesting part about this excuse was that often those who were blaming the younger generation had not been interested in learning themselves. K’in Garcia and Bor Max, both sons of Chan K’in Viejo, never learned the stories from their father. It is important to note, however, that Chan K’in Viejo had 23 children and it was unlikely for them all to learn. Whether he taught some of them and not others, I do not know. K’in Garcia explains
that Chan K’in told him to learn stories and secrets of the past, but he never wanted to. After his father passed away, K’in Garcia wished that he had embraced his father’s teachings. Just like many scholars, many Lacandon believe that the preservation of their culture is dependent on passing down the stories and teachings of Chan K’in Viejo and their ancestors. Erika questions whether or not the Lacandon culture is disappearing because no one is interested in learning or even talking about the past anymore. However, Erika and other Lacandon who do not see themselves as active creators of culture are doing themselves a disservice in accepting that culture can be lost over time.

Another common explanation for changes in Nahá was the intrusions of other indigenous groups in the Lacandon jungle. In the 1930’s and 1940’s agrarian reform laws made unsettled land in the Lacandon jungle available to immigrants such as Tzleltal, Tzotzil, and Chol Maya people. These policies encouraged settlement in the Lacandon jungle until the 1970’s (McGee 2002:74). These recent indigenous immigrants were encouraged to use their land to raise cattle, farm coffee, and grow corn. As a result, major problems with deforestation and erosion occurred (Nations and Komer 1982:13-14). Blom, as well as other scholars such as Nations and Komer, blame the destruction of the jungle on the “intrusion” and practices of other indigenous groups. Blom asserts in Corta Historia de los Lacandones: “I acknowledge the stereotype in defense of this colonization that I call criminal – that ‘people have to eat,’ but it is precisely what the people do not eat, and the whole nation loses wealth!” (1975:6). Blom asserts that the marketization of traditional agrarian food production by other indigenous groups is responsible for the depletion of resources (Blom 1975:6). It is crucial to note that it was the policies of the Mexican government that led people to migrate to these areas and farm cash crops for export. On the other hand, “intrusions” in the jungle and contact with the Lacandon people are not recent occurrences.
Boremanse reported that the Lacandon initially made substantial contact with the outside world in the 1790’s with people in Palenque (1998:4). Since then, the Lacandon have been the main initiators of contact with neighboring people (Slinker 2002:294). These interactions, as well as other factors have led Nahá to be a religiously diverse Lacandon community.

Religious Ritual and Spirituality
Religion is inextricably tied to the Lacandon image. Many anthropologists, such as Tozzer, Soustelle, and even McGee (1990), focused their research exclusively on religion and thus observed and wrote very little about the everyday lives of the Lacandon (Kashanipour 2003:20). Current popular perception of the Lacandon, developed from tourism strategies and common knowledge about Lacandon history, claims that the present-day Lacandon are still extremely traditionally religious people. However, this could not be farther from the truth. There are many different religions in Nahá, and only one man still practices “traditional” Maya religion. I have placed traditional in quotations because traditional Lacandon religion has commonly been thought of as non-Christian religious rituals that were practiced by most Lacandon men until the 1950’s (McGee 2002:44). However, because it has been more than 60 years since this was a common custom, I question whether the same definition of traditional still applies to Lacandon religion. Not to mention that there seems to be an emphasis on rituals and male led practices, which is a very narrow definition of religion.

In the 1990’s, Chan K’in Viejo, Nahá’s spiritual and ritual leader, died, and as a result, most people in Nahá stopped practicing Lacandon rituals (Slinker 2002:297). Currently Antonio Martinez, Chan K’in Viejo’s nephew, is the last Lacandon in Nahá still practicing. When I visited Nahá for the first time in 2012 with my study abroad program, we were able to participate
in a balché ceremony led by Antonio, in which participants drink balché, a fermented tree bark, to purify the spirits and induce a state of consciousness that allows them to communicate with the gods (Slinker 2002:297). Many men came to participate and drink with us, which led me to think that most men in Nahá still believed in their Maya gods. This contradicts what my interviewees told me, as most claimed to not have any religious associations. After spending time with these people it became evident that while they did not formally practice a religion, they maintained a fairly traditional Lacandon system of beliefs. I recognized a clear distinction in Nahá between “belief” and “ritual practice,” although I must again emphasize that Lacandon religion is not tied to ritual. During the five weeks that I was in Nahá I was unable to gain a complex understanding of religion as something other than ritual and general spirituality due to time restrictions and language barriers.

My introduction to Lacandon ritual, the balché ceremony, was tainted when I learned that we paid between 100 and 200 dollars for our ceremony and that they typically only occur when tourists commission them (Slinker 2002:297). Advertisements promote Nahá as a place where tourists can experience “traditional” Mayan religion by participating in a balché ceremony. However, Antonio is the only person in Nahá who profits from the ceremonies because he is the only one still practicing. This led me to doubt the legitimacy and existence of traditional balché ceremonies in Nahá until I spoke with Antonio. Most people in Nahá say that he is 80-90 years old; he speaks with a frail voice but he has sparse gray hairs and looks very healthy. People worry about what will happen to the tourism industry as well as to their conception of culture when he passes. Antonio explains that while no one else communicates with the gods anymore, he just wants to teach others about their customs to perpetuate Lacandon traditions. People in Lacanja (another Lacandon settlement) and other indigenous communities sell their ceremonies
to tourists and the like, but he never could. He accepts payments because fermenting tree bark is an expensive process as it requires a great deal of sugar, but he would never require money in order to perform the ceremony. He claims “I never could, not before my death. I can’t sell a ceremony. That isn’t right, it’s just to show.”

The next day Antonio showed me his god house and spoke with pride and affection for “Freddy” (Alfred Tozzer) and other men he taught in the ways of traditional Lacandon religion. I began to see that even if ritual had become a commodity, he really believed in the product he sold. When I returned to Nahá for my second visit, someone told me about the time when Antonio lost his faith in Lacandon religion. His favorite wife (until the 1990’s polygamy was practiced in Nahá) fell in the jungle and died instantly. He could not understand why the gods would want to punish such a devout man like himself. Losing his faith he searched for something to offer him comfort and began attending Catholic mass. Soon after, he tripped and injured himself and concluded that the gods must be angry with him. He resumed his traditional practice and has continued ever since.

Although I was originally convinced that ceremonies only happen when tourists paid, a balché ceremony took place during my second stay in Nahá. It was not for my benefit or that of the other researcher who was in Nahá at the time, since neither of us was invited to attend or had even been informed about it. I did not realize there had been a ceremony until after I left the Centro at the end of the day when there were more people outside of their homes than I had ever seen. Young children and teenagers were holding large mugs of balché that they had taken from the ceremony, and there was a distinct tension in the town. As I hurried home, I witnessed a man slapping a woman, and a fight ensued. When I made it back to the house I was staying in, Maria, the woman of the house, warned me to stay inside. I suppose she wanted to protect me from the
K’ayum Guerra, a soft-spoken, recently married albino Lacandon, explained that most Lacandon men today do not believe in the Lacandon gods and only attend the ceremonies led by Antonio to drink balché. He, however, does not attend the ceremonies at all. K’ayum Guerra admits that he does not know if he believes in Hachakyum (the creator god of the Lacandon people). And yet, after talking to him for a while, his spirituality became very evident. He considers ceremonies a venue for speaking to the gods, and encourages sick people to attend because the gods can always identify a person’s illness. Nahá has a federally funded medical center, but it has very limited access to resources and medicines. K’ayum explains that he always first asks the gods what his ailment is so that he can more effectively ask for treatment at the medical center.

I met a number of people like K’ayum Guerra who were not religious, but who were extremely spiritual. Ofelia is a single mother who works in her milpa during the day and believes that her dreams predict the future. I tried to talk to her one day but was turned away because she was extremely distraught over a dream that predicted a death in her family. Later when I returned to speak to her, I listened to her berate her brother for abusing their family dog and sealing his fate in the afterlife. She explained that dogs are a humans’ guide to the afterlife and if a person mistreats their dog, they will no longer help them. I began to find that many people still believed in the “traditional” sense, but did not practice or have the means to practice. For example, women are never allowed to enter the god house (thatched huts where rituals take place) and thus cannot communicate with the gods.
There are five churches in Nahá, a town of nearly 250 people. Between five to ten people consistently attend gatherings at each small church and religious leaders travel amongst the neighboring indigenous towns to preach. I was shocked to discover that one man who typically attends mass at the Catholic Church is Pepe Vasquez. Pepe is the only man in Nahá who still makes and sells “traditional” arrows. Many people call Pepe “the hunter in the community,” although the arrows he makes are now purely a source of income. He dresses in a traditional tunic and his hair falls at his shoulders. Pepe does not pretend to be anything he isn’t; he describes himself as “pure Catholic and pure Hachakyum. They are the same.” Pepe exemplifies the ease of syncretism in Nahá. Like many people, Pepe converted to Catholicism at one point in time, but he integrated their teachings with his own traditional system of beliefs. I asked Antonio Ramos about why he thought people started to convert and abandon traditional Lacandon practices and he replied that gods must die as well.

Most people I interviewed in Nahá did not identify with a specific religion like Pepe did, but they believed in something. Erika is still trying to make sense of religion. When I asked what she believes in, she explained, “I’m confused because I don’t know whether or not gods exist. Yes, they do, I think. Religion depends on the person and everyone has the right to practice their own religion. In part, churches and all are good, but I don’t know if we are losing our customs.” Maria too has been taught to view traditions and culture as entities that can be lost and gained, rather a fluid concept that adapts situationally and temporally.

Familial and Gender Relations

I encountered drastically different familial and gender relations during my stay in Nahá. In order to understand the changes that have taken place in Nahá, it’s crucial to have a general
understanding of traditional Lacandon gender roles. Although the main focus of his research was religion and its parallels to classic Maya, Tozzer is the main source of information about everyday life among the Lacandon in the early 1900’s. At that time, people lived in multifamily compounds. Marriage was practically universal because it was most efficient to divide the large amount of daily work between the man and woman (Tozzer 1907:65). Men would wake early and work in the milpa until it was too hot at midday, and women would work the entire day involved in some aspect of making tortillas or doing other household duties such as laundry, collecting firewood, and caring for their children (McGee 2002:105). Traditional Lacandon families were typically very large due to the amount of labor that was necessary to keep a house functioning. Chan K’in Veijo, who had three wives and 23 children, still had children living with him and helping him in his milpas until he died at the age of 100 (McGee 2002:104). The practice of polygamy was common among the Lacandons and there has been one report of polyandry (Slinker 2002:298). Men with multiple women were assumed to be more powerful due to the arduous process of wife-requesting (“ritual humiliation with the potential father-in-law”) (Slinker 2002: 298). Girls as young as five were required to leave their homes to live with their much older husbands, though they did not consummate the marriage until the girl reached puberty (Boremanse 1998:88).

The traditional marriage laws of the Lacandon have trapped Maria, the young woman who works at the Centro. One day when I was visiting her at the Centro, her mother and her three-year-old daughter, Nuk, stopped by to say hello. Her mother seemed very surprised to see me, but happy that someone was with Maria during work. Maria explained to me that during the “antes” women helped their husbands in the milpa because they did not know what money was and had no need for it. But now that everything has changed, women need to find money
themselves to support their family. Maria is a 21-year-old single mother, who was married when she was 12 and had two children. When she was 18, her husband left her for a wealthier woman in Nahá and took their son with him. Her parents forced her to marry as young as possible because Maria’s family was struggling financially. She said, “My parents follow the customs from before. Not everyone does. I am happy that it is changed. I am happy, so women aren’t stuck.” As I explained earlier, Maria is hoping to move to Ocosingo to attend an elementary school for adults and also find a job to support Nuk and herself. But for now, she is heavily dependent on her family for childcare and support.

Miguel, an official for CONANP (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protejidas) is one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Nahá. During my stay, I lived in a guest room on his father’s property. Miguel does not look like a traditional Lacandon: he has short hair and wears hiking boots and weather resistant clothing. His works requires him to travel to Ocosingo and San Cristóbal for large periods of time and thus he is more frequently exposed to outside experiences and interacts with a greater number of people. For example, the first time I met his son, Bor, who is 7-years-old, he was watching the movie Iron Man in English on an iPad (figure 6). He did not understand it, but it is still one of his favorite activities. His mother and Miguel’s wife, Veronica is Tzeltal, not Lacandon. Maria explains that because there are so few women in Nahá, Lacandon men often spend one to two months in neighboring indigenous towns searching for a wife. Due to the Lacandon marriage policy, the woman is required to return to the man’s hometown. However, it is also widely known throughout the community that Miguel has another wife and family in San Cristóbal. Extramarital affairs are not publicly accepted, but their prevalence has mitigated the consequences (Slinker 2002:299). Veronica does not leave Miguel
because she lives a comfortable and individually successful life because of her job at the Centro, but in Miguel’s community, not her own.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 6. “Bor and his iPad.” Shapiro (2013)

There is no apparent tension between the men and women in Nahá, however, a somewhat “traditional” gender separation exists. Most notably, three times when I tried to interview a couple, the women would almost instinctively leave the room. I encouraged them to sit and participate but they would leave and possibly return later to listen. This occurred for other researchers (McGee 1990, 2002, Boremanse 1990), but they were male and I expected that I might have a different experience. During the first interview I had with K’ayum Guerra, his wife left the room immediately but later returned to listen for the last 20 minutes. When I directly asked her a question, she didn’t answer, except for once when she whispered in K’ayum Guerra’s ear and he spoke for both of them. In Paco and Maria’s home (a different Maria than the one who works in the Centro), I had opposite experience. Maria dominated the interview and...
often interrupted her husband when he did speak. Maria demonstrated that instances of non-traditional gender roles exist, however, they are rare.

Adrianna, Ofelia’s mother, sees gender inequality in the lack of monetary support that women in the community receive. I was unsure what she meant until I discussed with her an interview I had with Bor Max, the commissioner of Nahá. I thought that it had been an engaging and successful interview until he explained to me that “yesterday the men gathered for a meeting and decided that if you wanted to give something to the community, not a lot, what you want, a piece of your heart, like a gift, we could use this money to help us a lot.” I was leaving that day and explained truthfully that I did not have money to give him, but would bring some when I returned. When I did return to Nahá, I asked Adriana about this uncomfortable request. I wanted to know that if I gave money to Bor Max that it would support Adriana and the women in Nahá. She was ashamed that he asked me in the first place, and was very upset to hear that researchers were “giving their hearts” to a fund she had never heard of and would probably never benefit from.

This conversation with Bor Max pointed to another aspect of life that is not generally discussed in Nahá, the political system. Most people simply told me that no system of government was in place. However, the meeting of married men that Bor Max described is the closest form of government. They gather in a large open house in the middle of the town and discuss tourism, beneficial projects, problems in the community, etc. Non-married men are allowed to join and listen but cannot voice their opinions, and women are not welcome. While Adriana wants to contribute her loud and passionate opinions, she worries that even if women had the opportunity to speak, that they would not be educated enough to present themselves effectively. On the other hand, her son, Pablo, who just graduated from high school, thinks that
the system works really well and that men should be able to propose projects on behalf of women, so that they don’t have to. However, after talking to a number of women, single and married, it became very clear that there were issues regarding childbirth and adoption practices that married men in the community were not addressing. Many women in Nahá now believe that it is safer to give birth in hospitals in near-by cities, but it is a very expressive process. At least two families in Nahá in the last two years had their babies taken from them until they could provide a larger sum of money for hospital services. In both cases, the families were unable to do so and the infants died. Also, within Nahá and neighboring indigenous towns, it is common practice for mothers to sell their child if they are unable to care for the infant. This is in most cases due to the young age of the mother or the child’s mental/physical disabilities. This results in mothers who change their minds and return to take their children away from their new homes. There are law enforcers in Nahá, but without any protocol set by the community on how to handle these situations they are unable to make judgments. The contradictions within the political system arise from contradictions between “traditional” practices, such as marrying and giving birth at a young age, and more modern notions of selling children.

Social Organization

The community of Nahá has spread out linearly down the road that was built in the summer of 1980. The road is everything in Nahá: source of food, income, medicine, education, and entertainment. Vendors drive down it daily screaming their products: cans, fish, corn meal, etc. The Lacandones previously sought out contact with others when they needed something, but now the road allows the world to come to them. The man from whom I rented my room, K’in Garcia, moved closer to the road when it was constructed because he knew that it would provide
opportunities for him and it has. He owns the restaurant at the top of the street and is the
president of the Centro at the bottom of it. I began to realize that nearly all of the people who I
interviewed lived very close, if not directly on the main road. Maria explained that this is what
most researchers’ experience; the people who do not want to communicate with tourists and
researchers still live deeper in the jungle.

Maria also elaborated on another social dynamic that I was beginning to notice myself:
that of the economic differences between the people who live at top of the street and those at the
bottom. Maria, who lives at bottom of the street, tried to explain it to me: “well the people are
just different. They have a different mode of life. They don’t talk to us, they pass by as if it’s
nothing…They have more money, they work with tourists.” The longer I stayed in Nahá, the
more I began to about hear about and notice its economic disparities. The room that I rented in
K’in Garcia’s house is at the topmost point of the road. He owns three cars, all of his children
have been to University or graduate school, and he owns a convenience store and the only
restaurant in Nahá. His sister, Juana Koh, lives near the middle of the road, and cares for their
brother, Juan, who is mentally disabled. Last year, there was a terrible hailstorm that tore down
Juana Koh’s home. She asked for help from a researcher who was in Nahá because she was
unable to fiscally and physically repair her roof. The researcher spoke to K’in Garcia on her
behalf and he refused to help.

K’in Garcia is an extremely interesting man. He welcomed me when I showed up at his
door unannounced one evening and I am so thankful that he took me in. But it was obvious that
he was hiding things. There was an entire room in the house that I was not allowed into; inside it
there was at least one television and a photocopy machine. It was also evident in the way he
spoke to me, asking before our interview “what do you want me to say, what do you want to hear
tonight?” and by admitting “if you ask me some things, I can lie to you, you know that right?” I still have trouble making sense of who K’in Garcia is. He makes all of his money from tourism, as the president of the Centro and owner of the restaurant, and is able to send his children to school so they do not have to engage in tourism in Nahá. He keeps his hair long and wears a white tunic, except on the weekends when he dons western clothing to visit his children in Palenque. After an interview, he asked me for copies of Blom’s photos that I used in my first round of interviews because he wanted to display images of his father, Chan K’in Viejo, around his home. The day after I gave them to him, I found my poorly printed images in a glass case being sold at the Centro. K’in Garcia is deeply entrenched in the tourist and market economy, but in addition to selling culture, he strives to preserve it. He explained: “we don’t want to forget it either, the tourists want to see how the Lacandones were. But if I put on pants, we have lost it. It could be that only the elders like my brother know…it’s beautiful to show people how our culture was.”

Does tourism perpetuate traditional culture in Nahá? Or does it encourage exploration and education? While the presence of tourism enables traditional aspects of Lacandon life, tourism itself has become an integral part of the modern Lacandon culture. Lacandon culture is not inherently “traditional” and does not remain constant amid flux, but in fact it epitomizes that constant flux (Csordas 1994:6). Adriana explained this notion perfectly when were discussing technology and its supposed impact on the Lacandon people. Most people I talked to told me about how television and CD’s were changing childhood in Nahá because children were no longer interested in helping their families, exploring the jungle, or school. However, Adriana posits that “there are a lot of people with CD’s right now, yes, but before CD’s there were black and white televisions and before that there were cassettes. There is always something. So yes, I
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guess childhood has changed, but when hasn’t it been changing?” The Lacandon and their culture have been changing since they began interacting with people outside their community at least two centuries ago (Slinker 2002:293). While scholars posit that the changes perpetuated by the outside world are eroding the Lacandon culture (Boremanse 1993:2), these changes are actually what continually prove its’ strength and resilience.

**Conclusions and Further Research**

More recent research focuses on another image of the Lacandon: the Lacandon as a savvy capitalist engaging with the tourism economy. I applaud the fact that academic discussions are now actively studying the Lacandon’s engagement with the outside world; however, many scholars still do not accept that they are continually adapting and reinterpreting their cultural identities. Lacandon scholar Jon McGee admits that while “In the 1980’s, I looked at the Lacandon as if they existed in a vacuum,” his most recent work addresses the changes that have taken place and the connections to political and economic issues at the time (2002:71). And yet, the undertone of his writings suggests that he has not fully accepted who the Lacandon have become. He comments on the commodification of religious ritual that “on the occasions when I have seen younger men paid by tourists to make balché, I have asked some older men what they think. No one has reacted strongly to this situation. And to be fair, it is their heritage. They have the right to do what they want with it” (McGee 2002:48). Others state that intrusions like tourism are what put the Lacandon “on a path toward extinction” (Boremanse 1993:1)

I would argue that within the past 20 years, tourism has become an integral part of the Lacandon cultural identity. Even Chan K’in Viejo, the former spiritual leader of Nahá, as a
young man supplemented his work in the *milpa* by selling bundles of tobacco and bows and arrows to tourists (McGee 2002:61). And yet, the Lacandon have changed even since the most recent ethnographies have thoroughly explored their engagement with tourism. I experienced a very different level of tourist interaction than McGee (2002) details. He explains that in 1997, most families in Nahá were heavily invested in selling bows and arrows in Palenque, but still lived in Nahá (McGee 2002:91). Of my 16 interviewees, only one person was selling bows and arrows in Palenque, and most people claimed that those who do sell items relocate to Palenque or other neighboring cities. With further research, I could examine why this change has taken place, how families are generating income at this present time, and the recent literature on tourism in Nahá. The Lacandon are in a constant state of change and the works written about them exemplify the notion that “Any piece of anthropological research is out of date the moment it is done” (Turnbull 1883 as cited by Boremanse 1998:13).

In America, we are propelled and fuelled by the notion of change. We are continually being introduced to new products and processes that will improve our lives and that in turn change our culture. Why do we not accept that indigenous people like the Lacandon change as well? The Lacandon are just like us. I believe that Pepe Vasquez may have best defined who the Lacandon are presently. During our interview, I asked Pepe about his religious beliefs. I was shocked to hear that the “traditional hunter” in Nahá who poses with his arrows for tourists is Catholic. He explained it to me: “I am pure Catholic. Pure Hachakyum. They are the same. I am *Hach Winik*”. Each Lacandon that I met, like any human being, is an accumulation of their history, family, experiences, outside influences and all the contradictions that are associated with them. The idea of a “traditional” Lacandon is pure fiction, based on the representations of ethnographers, writers, and photographers, who, fascinated by the Lacandon that they
encountered, depicted them as a stagnant people averse to cultural change. Thus the Lacandon have embodied a double consciousness, acting the role of whatever the world demands of them, whether that is savage or sage, or capitalist, and also their own cultural identity. The Lacandon that I met embody and reinterpret their cultural identities continually – abandoning, preserving, and questioning traditional religious values, gender and familial relations, engagement with tourism and the market economy and more. To me, this is culture. This is the *Hach Winik*.
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Appendix of Images Used in Photo-Interviews

“Indian holding large chimp or monkey” Tozzer (1904)

“Incense burners” Tozzer (1904)
“Young Child” Tozzer (1904)

“Men working along the tracks” Tozzer (1904)
“K’ayum Ma’ax” Blom (1977)

“Kimbor.” Blom (1959)
“Deforested hillside between El Real and Naha” Blom (1982)

“Naha, Chan K’in Viejo with his oldest wife, Koh, and his son Chan K’in Tercero” Blom (1974)
“Untitled” Alberto (2013)

“A templo in Nahá” Shapiro (2013)

“Construction in Nahá” Shapiro (2013)
Appendix of General Questions Used in Photo-Interviews

Part one of photo-interviews (July 1, 2013 – July 10, 2013):
I asked these questions in reference to all of Tozzer and Blom’s images.

1. Is there anything you recognize or remember in these photos?
2. What is this person doing/what is happening?
3. Do you think that these photographs represent Lacandon life?
4. Which images do you like best? Why?


Photo of CD collection, Alberto (2013)
   1. What can you tell me about this photo?
   2. Do many people have things like these?

Photo of Centro (Nahá sign), Alberto (2013)
   1. What can you tell me about this photo?
   2. Is the Centro popular for tourists? Do the people in Nahá like it?
   3. What is it like often having researchers and tourists here?

Photo of the road, Alberto (2013)
   1. What can you tell me about this photo?
   2. Do the people in Nahá like the road?
   3. How often do residents leave Nahá? And outsiders enter?

“A templo in Nahá” Shapiro (2013)
   1. What can you tell me about this photo?
   2. What religion do you practice? What do you believe in?

   1. What can you tell me about this photo?
   2. Do things like these happen often in Nahá? Why?

“Construction in Nahá” Shapiro (2013)
   1. What can you tell me about this photo?
   2. Who organizes work like this in Nahá?