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On the History of the Chol Language

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My intention in this brief presentation is to review several facts concerning the Chol language, which is spoken by several thousand people who live here in the municipality of Palenque. But rather than comment on the language itself, I would like to make some observations on the history which is implied by its presence in this region.

Today Chol is spoken by some 65,000 people, of whom almost half are monolingual in this Indian language. The majority of these Chol speakers live in the north of the state of Chiapas: in the highlands of Chiapas, in Tila, Tumbalá and Sahaniilla; in the lowlands, in the municipalities of Salto de Agua and Palenque. Generally, Chol speakers are peasant farmers whose livelihood depends on agriculture supplemented by occasional wage labor in the local agricultural economy. The highland Chol towns follow the patterns of “traditional” settlements in this area, and were mostly founded during the sixteenth century (Villa Rojas 1969). But the Chol settlements in the lowlands are more likely to be ejidos or collective farms, established during the last thirty years.

Before speaking further of the history of the Chol language, it should be noted that Chol is very closely related to the Chontal language of Tabasco, and to Chortí and the now extinct Cholti, languages of Honduras and Guatemala. Together, Chontal, Chol, Cholti and Chortí constitute the linguistic group known as Cholán. Linguistic studies permit us to speak of a language referred to as Proto-Cholán, spoken during the Classic period some thousand years or more ago, which was the common ancestor of the four languages of the Cholán group (Kaufman and Norman, n.d.).

During the Colonial period the Cholán languages were distributed in a continuous band of territory which extended from Comalcalco, near modern Villahermosa, through the region of Palenque and up the Usumacinta River and its tributaries all the way to the base of the Guatemalan highlands, and along the foothills and adjacent lowlands into the Copán region in Honduras (Thompson 1938). To the south of the Cholán languages were found the Mayan languages of the Chiapas highlands (Tzotzil, Tzeltal and Tojolabal) and the Mayan languages of the highlands of Guatemala (principally Chuj, Ixil and Kekchi). To the north of Cholán were found Mayan languages pertaining to the Yucatecan group (Maya or Yucatec: Mopán, Itzá, and Lacandón). These were located around the Laguna de Términos and in Trenosique, and from there eastwards, around Lake Petén and on into the south of Belize. From this line northwards, all of the peninsula of Yucatan was occupied by Yucatecan Mayan languages.

The early Spanish chroniclers speak of various distinct groups of Cholans and Chols (Thompson 1938, De Vos 1980b). The Chontals occupied the zone of rivers and swamps from Comalcalco through the region around Macuspana and from there to the Laguna de Términos, that is, more or less what is now the state of Tabasco. The first group of Chols were found inland from the Chontal area, around Palenque and in the Tulújil River valley and its surrounding uplands; these were called the Palencano Chols. To the south and east of these Palencanos were found a series of groups all called “Lacandóns”: those of Pochutla, those of the lakes of Topiltepec, and those of Dolores (Sac Bahlum), at the foot of the Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala. It is important to remember that these so-called “Lacandóns” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries spoke Chol, and thus are not the forebears of the modern-day Lacandóns, who speak a Mayan language belonging to the Yucatecan branch of the family. Thus, during Colonial times the Chols stretched in a continuous chain from Palenque to the border with Guatemala, principally to the west of the Usumacinta River and reaching more or less to the Chixoy River in the south.

To the east of the Chixoy River, more or less in the zone of the Pasión River, there was another Cholán group, the Acala, whose language was either Chol or Choltí. To the east of them were found the Manchí, certainly speakers of Choltí, whose territory extended all the way to the Sarstoon (or Sac Tun) River in the south of Belize. Further east still, along the Motagua River, were found the Toquegua, speakers of either Chortí or of Choltí.
And finally, from the eastern fringes of Guatemala to the region of Copán, Honduras, one encountered Chortí speakers.

There is a good deal of evidence that the Yucatecan Mayan languages which are today found on the northern edge of Cholan distribution actually entered that region relatively recently (Hellmuth 1970, 1971; De Vos 1980b). Thus it is possible to assert that during earlier periods, specifically during the Classic period of Maya civilization, the Cholan languages occupied a considerable part of the Classic Maya zone, from Comalcalco to Copán, and that the Yucatecan Mayan languages were then found only in the central and northern parts of the Peninsula of Yucatan.

Relations Between Languages

If we think of the languages of the Mayan group as members of a "family", then we can express the relationship between them in the following manner: Chontal, Chol, Cholti and Chorti are brothers and sisters, all children of Proto-Cholan. Their first cousins are the languages of the Chiapas highlands, Tzeltal and Tzotzil. Their more distant cousins are the languages of the Cuchumatanes (Yucatec, Itzá, Mopán, and modern Lacandón); Eastern Mayan (found in highland Guatemala, and including Mam, Quiché, Kekchí, etc.); and Huastec, which is found in the northern part of Veracruz and in adjacent parts of the states of San Luis Potosí and Hidalgo. Thus the Maya family tree has four principal branches: Western, Eastern, Yucatecan and Huastecan (Kaufman 1978).

Besides these genealogical relationships, there are other kinds of relations between these languages, which derive from cultural contact or social interaction. To take a pertinent example, modern Chol has a special relationship to Tzeltal because of culture contact, due to the fact that their territories are not only adjacent to one another, but actually overlap, and there is considerable bilingualism between Chol and Tzeltal. The result is that there is a certain amount of exchange of vocabulary between the two languages. There are also evidences of a similar relationship, probably during the Postclassic period, between speakers of Chol and speakers of Nahua, since there are various words found in Chol which derive from this central Mexican language. And there is considerable evidence of a former close cultural relationship between the Chols and the Yucatecs, probably during the Classic period, since not only specific words, but even grammatical elements and features of pronunciation have been exchanged between these languages (Hopkins 1981, 1982).

Once the facts of genealogical relationship among languages have been established, it is the relationships resulting from cultural contact which are the more interesting, since each element which passes from one language to another constitutes a datum which must be understood in terms of the history of the groups and the contacts between them. The detailed study of these languages contributes to a fuller reconstruction of the history of their speakers, and if these results can be coordinated with those of other lines of historical investigation, then it will be possible to capture a more ample vision of past happenings.

It is possible, then, to develop a perspective on the history of Chol and its close relations within and outside of the Cholan group by correlating linguistic, archaeological, ethnohistoric and ethnographic data. Here, we will limit ourselves to the last two thousand years, even though the techniques of prehistory might allow us to understand certain elements of the history of the Mayans over a period of some three thousand years earlier still.

The Protoclassic Period

On the eve of the Christian era, perhaps 150 years before Christ, an archaeological period which the prehistorians call the Maya Proto-Classic began along the coast of Belize. There was a sudden prominence of a group which brought with it distinctive cultural elements, among these being polychrome pottery. Certain of these elements did appear within the Maya lowland zone during earlier periods, but now they entered with greater force, and this new group rapidly established its presence throughout the southern half of the Yucatan Peninsula, from Belize to the tributaries of the upper Usumacinta River. It seems that their presence implied a greater social stratification, because the elites of these sites were more strongly associated with these new cultural elements than were the common people, who continued to retain earlier local cultural traditions.

There are reasons for believing that this new group corresponds to what we have called Proto-Cholan (Jossendar 1975). Given that the antecedents of the ceramics which they brought have been found in the Highlands of Central America, it is logical to think that they may have come from that zone. And it is precisely in the region of their purported origin, and approximately at the same time, that there was a very disruptive volcanic eruption in El Salvador, that of the Ilopango Volcano, which devastated and left uninhabitable a great part of this highland region. Thus it has been suggested that the Cholans were a group of people who originally inhabited parts of eastern El Salvador, adjacent to the regions occupied by the Chortis during historic times. Their culture developed in that zone for many years, partly influenced by contacts which they had along the Pacific coast with the Olmecs (whose presence in that zone during the Preclassic period is shown by the existence in the area of petroglyphs in Olmec style). But the eruption of Ilopango forced many to flee the zone and look for new territory. They were displaced towards the north, to a region with which they seem to have had earlier relations — the coast of Belize, where they entered as a new group, carriers of new cul-
tural elements. And if the region of their origin is only now being studied, to investigate Cholan antecedents, it is because their remains lie beneath several meters of volcanic ash, which certainly inhibits investigation.

The people who lived in the region of Belize and throughout the Peninsula of Yucatan when the Cholans arrived must have been the ancestors of the Yucatec Maya. These were pioneering agriculturalists who introduced maize agriculture into the zone centuries earlier. About 1000 years before Christ these people began to colonize the lowlands of the Peninsula, in small settlements which were culturally very conservative. Little by little, they occupied all of the Peninsula during the Preclassic period. They were the resident population over which the new population was distributed. It is likely that for a long time after the arrival of the Cholans not all the Yucatecan settlements were affected. The situation must have been one of coexistence of monolingual Yucatecan villages alongside bilingual Cholan-Yucatecan towns.

The Classic Period

The Classic period (A.D. 300-900) witnessed a dynamic interaction between these two populations - the Yucatecan Maya peasants already established in the zone and the Cholans who entered the region after abandoning their native lands, which were decimated by volcanic action. Thus, the development of Classic Maya civilization took place in a bilingual and bicultural context. Social stratification and regional cultural differences in Classic Maya civilization were both related to language distribution. Vertically, in a single community, not only economic differences could be seen, but cultural ones as well. Following the hypothesis of this paper, the major differences were between the Yucatecan peasants and the Cholan elite. Horizontally, across the length of the Peninsula, other differences can be detected, from region to region. In the north, groups of Yucatecan Maya persisted, untouched by the introduction of new elements, and these are the direct ancestors of the Yucatec Mayas of today. Along their southern frontier, more Cholan influence was felt, ultimately resulting in languages like Mopán and Itzá. To the south of these unaffected (or mostly unaffected) Yucatecs there was an ample zone of synthesis between Yucatecan and Cholan traits in all of the south of the Peninsula. This is the territory of the ancestors of the modern Cholan languages. And along the southern and western margins there were other groups related to the Cholans but who did not participate in the interaction of Chol with Yucatecan; these would have been the ancestors of the Tzeltals and Tzotzils.

The linguistic structures of these languages reflect a process of historical development which agrees with that proposed here for the Classic period. A Yucatecan Mayan language which shows few influences from Cholan is spoken in the north of the Peninsula of Yucatan. This language descended directly from the ancestral Maya spoken outside the zone of Cholan intrusion. Somewhat more to the south one finds varieties of Yucatecan Maya which do show Cholan influence: Mopán and Lacandón, for instance, which share with Cholan the development of a new vowel, in the same words and in the same phonetic contexts.

At the same time, Cholan itself, especially in its central variety, Chol, shows the effects of the bilingual-bicultural situation between Cholan and Yucatecan Mayan. Chol proper, as it developed in the Classic zone, is almost a synthesis of the two languages; it is basically Cholan, but took its pronominal system from Yucatecan, as well as many words of basic vocabulary and many other grammatical elements. And there is no doubt that the writing system which is characteristic of the zone and of the Classic period reflects both Yucatecan and Cholan Mayan, and has elements derived from both languages.

According to this model, Mayan civilization, without doubt the most advanced in all of the New World during this epoch, was developed through a synthesis and fusion of two ethnic groups, in a bilingual and bicultural context which contributed to the dynamism of the society.

The Postclassic Period

After some 600 years of prosperity, from A.D. 300 to 900, Classic Maya culture began to disintegrate. Between A.D. 900 and 1500, during the period referred to as the Postclassic, there were strong invasions of various groups foreign to the Maya zone, influenced by the militarized cultures of central Mexico, the Toltecs and their successors. In the north, they invaded Yucatan and established themselves at Chichén Itzá. In the central area, their incursion was felt throughout the jungle, in the Petén and as far as the Chiapas highlands. In the south, they established themselves as the lords of the Quichés.

The presence of these foreigners caused the disruption of interregional contacts, and this resulted in the fragmentation of the Cholan languages. The regions of Cholan speech became more and more distinct in their linguistic characteristics as there was less and less communication between the various regions. One variety of Cholan developed to the east of the Chixoy River; this is referred to as Eastern Cholan, and it was the direct ancestor of Choltí and Chortí. To the west of the Chichén another variety of Cholan developed which is referred to as Western Cholan, and it was the direct ancestor of modern Chol and Chontal. Later, during the Postclassic period, Western Cholan also diversified: along the Gulf coast, under strong Nahua influence, Chontal of Tabasco developed. In the jungle zone, along the Usumacinta and its tributaries, Chol proper came into being. To the east of the Chixoy River Choltí and its companion language Chortí developed, influenced by the languages of the adjacent Guatemala highlands.

But besides the fragmentation of sociocultural relations during the Postclassic, and perhaps even more important, there was also a marked reduction in the Cholan population. The great urban centers of the Classic period disappeared from the jungles, to be replaced by small agricul-
tural settlements. And this was the situation which the Spaniards encountered upon their arrival during the sixteenth century.

The Historic Period

Even though the Spanish chroniclers spoke of the Chols as “primitive farmers”, their conquest was not so easy. During the period when the Spaniards had already dominated the Chiapas highlands, the eastern limit of Spanish control was precisely the border between Tzeltals, already subjugated, and Chols, still free from domination.

The pacification of the Chols (De Vos 1980a, b) was begun around 1536, from the Spanish seat of power in the Chiapas highlands (Ciudad Real, now San Cristóbal). By the middle of the sixteenth century, the northeast was pacified, from the zone of Palenque to Pochutla, a Chol center located in the jungle to the east of Ocozocoautla. But the Chols who lived further to the south and east still held out. Within the pacified zone, the Spaniards followed a policy of resettlement called “reduction”, whereby the Chol populations were obliged to leave the jungle and establish themselves in the highlands, under the control of the Spaniards. Thus during the decade of the 1560’s, the Chol population from the north of the Province of Tzetimes was moved to Tila and Tumbalá. The Chols from the north of the Lacandón jungle were moved to the new town of Palenque, founded in 1567. And the Chols from Pochutla were moved to Ocosingo. But for more than 100 years, the Chols to the south and east continued their resistance to pacification, from their center in Sac Bahlum, or Dolores, near where the Ixcán and Jataté Rivers join.

The next wave of attempts at pacification was based in Guatemala, and began at the opening of the seventeenth century. The Chol towns resisted Spanish rule, and three times during the seventeenth century they burned churches and killed Spaniards during rebellions. Finally, in 1690, the Manché Chols were removed from their zone and relocated in Rabinal. Five years later the Spaniards conquered the Mopans and Itzáes, and then they broke the back of Cholan resistance. The Chols of Sac Bahlum (Dolores) were relocated in a series of movements, first to a site near Comitán (probably Lagartero), and later to Retalhuleu, in Guatemala.

Thus, by the end of the seventeenth century the Chol region was not only pacified but very nearly deserted. Between the process of pacification, the relocation of towns, and the plagues and sicknesses introduced by the Spaniards, the Chol population of the Maya lowlands was effectively eliminated. And of all the Chol populations relocated in the highlands, the only survivors today are those of the region of Tila, Tumbalá and Sabanilla, along with their descendants who now occupy parts of the municipalities of Salto de Agua and Palenque. Of the other groups there are no remnants.

The jungle zone which the Chols occupied before the pacification and reduction of towns was later repopulated by other Indian groups. In the eastern Cholan region, earlier occupied by Choltis, the Kekchis began to invade unoccupied and abandoned territories by the eighteenth century (Thompson 1938). In the same manner, the modern “Lacandones” (speakers of a Yucatecan Mayan language) began to occupy territory which once belonged to the Chols (Hellmuth 1971).

With the exception of this minor recolonization, the jungle remained practically unpopulated until the twentieth century. To the south of Palenque, for example, there was only untamed rain forest all the way to the foot of the highlands. Stephens and Catherwood, the famous travelers who passed near San Pedro Sabana around the middle of the nineteenth century, following their extraordinary trip through Central America (Stephens 1841), held the opinion that this was one of the most primitive zones they had seen. And in the first decades of the twentieth century, Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge (1926-27) traveled from Palenque to Bachajón, and reported a jungle with no more population than a few plantations and a single town, San Pedro Sabana, in the Tulijá Valley.

In the highlands, in the towns of Tila, Tumbalá and Sabanilla, the remaining Chols passed some 400 years, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. During this period, several varieties of Chol developed, corresponding to each of the municipalities where it was spoken, following the pattern of other Indian communities in the highlands. The differences between these varieties of speech are more than anything a matter of vocabulary – the words vary slightly from town to town, but there is no great loss of mutual comprehension.

Recently, over the past 30 to 40 years, the Chol population has begun to reoccupy the lowlands. This expansion of their territory is a result of agrarian reform following the Mexican Revolution, which established a mechanism for the formation of ejidos, or communal farms, in vacant lands. Today there are hundreds of Chol settlements in the municipality of Palenque, more in Salto de Agua, and the ejido population has even extended to the banks of the Usumacinta River. The modern distribution of Chols in Palenque is a result of this same agricultural colonization.

Conclusions

Thus there are two phases in the history of the Chol language and people which are integral to the Palenque of today. One is the phase of Proto-Cholan, manifested in the Classic Maya ruins which today carry the name of the town (and which was reported in antiquity by the name of Cangabanal, see De Vos 1980a:81). And in these ruins we find historical texts written by Chols, concerning Chol affairs. The other phase herein represented is that of the modern Chols, inhabitants of the Palenque ejidos and other agricultural communities.

These two Chol elements form an integral part of the cultural, social and economic life of the municipality of Palenque; both are part of the dynamic of modern Palenque. And they are, as well, important elements for the study of the past, a study which has been the motive for organizing these Palenque Round Table meetings.
On the one hand, the remains which the ancient Chols have left us in the archaeological zone of Palenque and in other sites give us direct evidence of the Classic Maya civilization – their art, their architecture, the zenith of their culture. And the ancient Chols have left us a record of the major events of their history in their hieroglyphic inscriptions.

On the other hand, the modern Chols and the present­day Chol language constitute another important source of information about the past. And by saying this, I must insist that it is not the case that we are dealing here with a conservative culture, carriers of a culture and a language mired in the past since the Classic period. On the contrary, nothing could be further from the truth. We are dealing with a dynamic population, with a language which develops continually, with a culture and society which fight to adapt themselves to the incessant changes which they must confront in order to survive and advance.

But in the same manner in which a knowledge of modern English is useful for understanding the writings of Shakespeare, or a knowledge of modern Spanish contributes to the reading of Cervantes, it is also true that to know the Chol of today will give us a firm foundation for investigating the Chol of yesterday. Thus, the history of the Chol language is one of the elements which can shed light on the history of the Classic Maya culture of Palenque, which is the theme we treat in one or another of its manifestations at the Palenque Round Tables.

In order to advance this study of the ancient Maya, we are conscious that nothing would be possible without the cooperation and participation of the inhabitants of the modern community of Palenque, who have welcomed us with open arms, from whose enthusiasm we take nourishment, and whose support makes the Palenque Round Tables a reality. Thus we thank you for the opportunity of being with all of you, and we hope that our presence here will be as pleasant for you as it is for us. Thank you very much.

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