

An Excerpt From *San Pedro Chenalhó: Something of its History, Stories and Customs*

Jacinto Arias

This late 19th or early 20th century episode in the history of San Pedro Chenalhó, a village in the highlands of Chiapas, is told by one a scribe, Manuel Arias. As a village scribe, his role is to chronicle events and transmit written communications between relatives, between community members and between the local village and the outside authorities. In this fragment, he recalls a village scribe who abused this power and betrayed his community, a familiar theme in the history of the subjugation of Native American cultures.

Throughout the period of Spanish domination, natives had to endure being treated like children by the *Kaxlanetik* (the descendants of the Spaniards). The image of the Spanish master was glorified in San Pedro Apostol, father of the Pedrano people. San Pedro is not a native but a European god. The relationship between the patron saint and his children crystallizes the one between *Kaxlanetik* and natives during the time when they felt like the domestic animals of the Spaniards.

For a long time after the Spanish arrived, the Pedrano territory was free from incursions. As early as 1850, there were only two ranches. It was during the Porfirian era that most of the plantations were established, and the Pedrano people started to feel the brunt of slavery. To continue working the land they had owned for generations, peasants had also to work three days a week for the landowners.

The central authority of the native parish (*lum*) did not allow the *Kaxlanetik* to live in the community. They could visit the town only as merchants during holidays and weekends; the rest of the time they lived in their homes in the town of San Cristóbal (*Jobel*). The lands surrounding this town provided firewood only to the native parish. The *Kaxlanetik* had none of the rights to the lands that they have today.

During the Porfirian era the best ally of the *Kaxlanetik* against the natives was a Pedrano scribe named Antonio Bótaz, who instead of protecting his own people, helped the Spaniards acquire land within the *lum* to build houses and sell merchandise. The town was thus profaned, but no

one protested because Bótaz had a lot of power. He threatened and abused the people extensively. In a conspiracy with the Presidential office, he gave Spaniards the lands surrounding the town.

This is when the Pedranos began to feel estranged from the land that gave them their identity, security and protection. They assembled with apprehension on Sundays and holidays, for their authorities had not been able to defend the *lum*. Before, a single *Kaxlanetik* gave orders, but now many wanted power. It was not the same to take orders from them when they lived outside in San Cristóbal, as to watch them stroll arrogantly in the middle of the native parish. It was far less humiliating to carry the Spaniards' suitcases when they were only travelers than to carry packages for their wives and daughters, who daily mistreated them.

Pedranos surely felt neglected by their protectors: Why — if they were gods — did they not destroy these people who made them suffer? Were they also weak and afraid like their own sons? But they continued to pray at night, for the night has hidden forces to help the neglected Pedranos gain courage. They prayed and asked for courage from their scribes. They said to their gods:

If you have not given our authorities
Enough courage in their hearts,
If you have not given them
Enough cleverness in their heads,
Let someone rise among your children
With a strong heart
To face the *Kaxlanetik*.

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