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## Book Review

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James D. Nations, *Lacandon Maya in the Twenty-First Century: Indigenous Knowledge and Conservation in Mexico's Tropical Rainforest* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2023), 292 pp., \$100.00 (hbk), ISBN: 9780813069784.

This book is an excellent treatise of Lacandon Maya religious beliefs, knowledge, and practice related to the tropical rainforest environment of lowland Chiapas, Mexico. It is an essential text for readers interested in Maya culture and Indigenous views of nature. The author, who has lived with Lacandon people since the mid-1970s, provides detailed information on Indigenous insights regarding forest ecology, animal behavior, hunting strategies, and horticulture, all of which revolve around the use and management of natural resources. Nations' remarkable work is the result of his close attention to Lacandon lifeways over decades, skilled observations on culture, extensive ecological training, and abilities in the native language. The author does not extol an Indigenous harmony with nature, but focuses on the cultural conservation of the forest and their practical use of its resources.

Much of the book treats Lacandon mythology and how it incorporates Indigenous religious beliefs and knowledge of the natural world. It also contains discussions of Lacandon archaeology, history, Mexican land reform, national conservation efforts, and culture change. Chapter One gives an abbreviated but precise summary of the history of Lacandon populations, outside influences, and culture change in Chiapas up until the late twentieth century. A chapter on Lacandon relationships with dogs through stories is squeezed in as a lesson on their timeless protection of animals before we return to Lacandon origins in Chapter Three. The next four chapters provide detailed analyses of the archaeology, history, and Lacandon insights on their past. Highlights of these chapters include Lacandon beliefs in the formation of landscapes, deities living inside lakeside cliffs, and the lifeways of their ancestors and other past Maya ethnic groups.

The next section covers the creation and maintenance of Lacandon culture in the forest. This text begins with descriptions of Lacandon slash-and-burn agriculture, crops that thrive in the tropical environment, and their cultivated landscape. Indigenous lifeways include the rotation of fields and settlements—in addition to growing different useful plants—that help to enhance the natural rainforest ecology. Chapter Eight begins with a series of Lacandon short stories and perspectives on people's interaction with the forest, plants, and animals. Leaf cutter ants, according to Lacandon, are like people: they have houses, leaders, and

consume the same foods. Rituals must be carried out to live harmoniously with the ants so they don't harm crops. Additionally, ant nests near fields are not destroyed, but they are forced to relocate away from crops when Lacandon make clearings to allow the sun to overheat the ants' home. The next chapter recounts how the Lacandon make canoes from large trees and how crocodiles and turtles teach the newly launched canoe to swim after given offerings of fish.

Chapter Ten outlines how the gods created plants, animals, stone, earth, water, and fire for Lacandon to survive. The author discusses many plants that provide food, shelter, tools, and other necessities for Indigenous lives. Additionally, the importance of rubber sap mixed with water and juices from morning glory (moon flower) vines in making human figurine offerings to the gods is a fascinating comparison to the manufacturing of rubber tires. This chapter also presents extensive Lacandon knowledge of and traditional uses of stone for grinding food, the making of bows and arrows from natural materials, and the utilization of different firewood for cooking and light.

The next two sections on spirits and gods include interesting Lacandon religious beliefs related to nature and humans. The stories teach young Lacandon to care for the rainforest and its creatures. Chapters Eleven to Fourteen include mythological stories told to family members about not harming certain animals, especially if they are not eaten. These tales contain lessons on the preservation of species important to Lacandon, such as monkeys, but to avoid them if they afflicted with disease. Interesting vignettes regarding nature in the stories include how woodpeckers help people find honey and people leaving parts of their fields for scavengers so the rest is preserved.

Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen are the center pieces of the book. They describe how Lacandon gods were created from the tropical forest and how beliefs in them help people inhabit this environment. Gods related to rain, agriculture, and hunting reflect Lacandon knowledge of their physical world and how beliefs in these deities guide people in daily life. Lacandon religion helps explain births, deaths, and seasonal changes as the gods' will. Additionally, learning specific stories and chants teaches children about rainforest ecology and animal behavior, such as how trogon birds eat wasp larvae from nests. Some communal rites are instructive about plants, including the use of *balché* (*Lonchocarpus longistylus*) bark to flavor a fermented beverage or as fish poison.

Chapter Seventeen focuses on Christian influences on Lacandon beliefs. One example of this is how the afterworld is populated with fish that people do not eat, traditional healing practices should be replaced by Western medicine, curative *balché* ceremonies have to be eliminated, and how forest should be cut for cattle pasture. This discussion of changes in Lacandon lives leads into the final three chapters on the history of shifting ecological policies in the Chiapas rainforest and how people have adapted. Lacandon lands have been used for extensive logging of mahogany and cedar across time, for example. Agrarian reform encouraged other Maya to populate the rainforest and cut it down for agriculture and pastures. However, policies allowed Lacandon to retain large rainforest territories. Hence, while the forest has been negatively impacted, Lacandon still maintain it through Indigenous practices and government incentives, including jobs as guards for the natural reserves. Interestingly, Lacandon have shown other Maya communities that land parcels can be set aside for reserves for their resources and to offset regional

warming and drying trends.

The book contains many vivid photographs of Lacandon people, forest materials, and crops in Indigenous daily regimes mentioned in the book. The reader should check the endnotes for intricate insights on the local environment, Indigenous culture, and the author's interpretations. The bibliography lists essential readings on Lacandon culture, the cultural history of Chiapas, and Mexican rainforest ecology and conservation. The basic index helps the reader find most of the central topics, terms, plants, animals, people, places, and organizations given the chapters. In its totality, this book is a wonderful read on Lacandon culture and its relationship to nature, which would be of general interest and essential for Maya scholars.

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