

Part One

Chiapas



# The Battle of Sumidero

## A History of the Chiapanecan Rebellion Through Spanish and Indian Testimonies (1524-34)

JAN DE VOS\*

### The Two Chiapas

The modern state of Chiapas took its name from two cities that in the colonial period were the capitals (*cabeceras*) of the region's two most important ethnic groups: the Chiapanecans and the Spanish. Of the two, the first and oldest was Chiapa de los Indios, which after 1552 was also known as Chiapa de la Real Corona. Since time immemorial, this had been the capital of a particularly enterprising people. Located on the right bank of the Chiapa River, the town is today the city of Chiapa de Corzo.

The second, generally known as Chiapa de los Españoles, was founded by the conqueror Diego de Mazariegos on March 5, 1528. Though he first intended to locate the settlement on the same side of the river one league upstream from Chiapa de los Indios, on March 31, Mazariegos moved his capital to the Jovel valley, in the heart of the unconquered provinces of the highlands. Besides this name, Chiapa de los Españoles, the new capital was successively named Villa Real de Chiapa (1528-29), Villaviciosa de Chiapa (1529-31), San Cristóbal de los Llanos de Chiapa (1531-36), Ciudad Real de Chiapa (1536-1829), San Cristóbal (1829-44), San Cristóbal Las Casas (1844-1934), Ciudad Las Casas (1934-43), and finally San Cristóbal de las Casas (since 1943).

The fates of the two cities would diverge throughout the colonial period. From the start, Chiapa de los Indios was the largest and most prosperous of the two, with four thousand families in 1524, according to

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\* CIESAS Tlalpan  
Hidalgo y Matamoros  
AP 22-048  
14000 Tlalpan DF  
Mexico City

Bernal Díaz del Castillo.<sup>1</sup> In the sixteenth century, its population plummeted at a dizzying rate as epidemic diseases spread throughout all of Mexico and Central America. However, according to the testimony of Fray Tomás Gage, by 1630 the city again had a population of four thousand families.<sup>2</sup> And at the end of the seventeenth century, Chiapa de los Indios was still considered the most important Indian community in the *alcaldía mayor* (district) of Chiapa, if not in all of New Spain. The *cronista* Antonio Vásquez de Espinosa called it, "one of the largest and most beautiful Indian cities not only in New Spain but in all the Indies."<sup>3</sup> Though its Indian population declined during the eighteenth century with the increasing mixture of races (*mestizaje*), the city's fame continued until the end of the colonial period.

The fate of Chiapa de los Españoles was very different. Founded in 1528 with a population of less than fifty *vecinos* (Spanish citizens), a half a century later in 1579, "it only had one hundred of them," according to Pedro de Feria.<sup>4</sup> And by the end of the sixteenth century, Andrés de Ubilla tells us, there still were only "120 *vecinos* in the city, people of all kinds but all of them very poor."<sup>5</sup> By 1611, Chiapa de los Españoles had a Spanish population of 198, among whom were fifty-eight *encomenderos*.<sup>6</sup> A judge from Guatemala who visited the city that same year reported, certainly disappointed, that "there was neither fort nor slaughterhouse; it had only one bridge [...] but no jail and neither enough butcheries nor many other indispensable things in a Republic."<sup>7</sup> Besides suffering an endless state of poverty throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the citizens of Chiapa de los Españoles also gained a reputation as quarrelsome people. The antagonisms among them originated with the two rival groups of conquerors, one from Mexico and one from Guatemala, who populated the town in 1528.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the colonial period, Chiapa de los Españoles remained a small provincial city without significant commercial or industrial activities. Most of the city's inhabitants were poor people, though they tried to conceal their limited economic means behind the mannerisms of proud gentility (*hidalguía*).

### The Legend of Sumidero

For many years, it was thought that both Chiapa de los Españoles and Chiapa de los Indios were founded in 1528. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Chiapanecans were believed to have lived in a fortified city in the Sumidero canyon. After their defeat by Diego de Mazariegos in 1528, it was understood that they were forced to move one league upstream, settling in an open field by the river. That story was so popular that in 1928, four centuries later, the state of Chiapas commemorated the anniversary of the foundation of both cities. There were many speeches and public tributes during those events, including the composition of epic poems by Angel María Corzo and Galileo Cruz Robles.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the birth of the two Chiapas, the poems celebrated in verse an ancient legend that in Chiapas had been passed down from father to

son. According to this tradition, the ancient Chiapanecans heroically resisted the Spanish conquerors, until finally they consummated that resistance with a collective suicide in the waters of Sumidero canyon. That sublime act ended the hostilities and ushered in Spanish control of Chiapas.

This legend, which we will call the *Legend of Sumidero*, narrates an episode of the Conquest. According to the basic elements of the tale, the Chiapanecans fought bravely against the invaders but were easily defeated because of the military superiority of the Spaniards and because their traditional enemies aided the European conquerors. Facing an imminent defeat, the Chiapanecans retreated to their ancient capital in Sumidero canyon, where from a high cliff they could watch the river and hope to more easily defend their city. After a fierce battle, the city fell but its defenders did not surrender, preferring to throw themselves, together with their women and children, down the precipice. According to a colonial source, as many as fifteen thousand died in that collective suicide, and less than two thousand survived.<sup>10</sup> The survivors were forced to abandon the city, and its strategic location, and move to the new site upstream, Chiapa de los Indios, where today the descendants of those Indians, the *Chiapacorceños*, still live. In 1535, a depiction of the battle of Sumidero canyon was included in the coat of arms given by Charles V to the Spanish town of San Cristóbal de los Llanos de Chiapa, the modern city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.<sup>11</sup>

The collective suicide of the Chiapanecans is without doubt a legend, but this is not to say that the whole episode is an invention of the imagination. A legend always is tied to a real historical event, to something that happened, but the event itself is customarily concealed by novelistic accretions to the narrative. To rediscover the historical fact, it must be distilled from the added details and the divergent accounts that accumulate in the oral tradition over many years. The legend of Sumidero is not an exception to this rule. If we want to know what really happened to the Chiapanecans who were defeated in the canyon, we must turn from the poets to the historians. Let us see what they have said and written.

Here a surprise awaits us, for the legend has not only seduced the poets. Various historians also have been enchanted by its charm, and they have been the ones primarily responsible for convincing the general public that the legend represents an actual historical event that can be precisely located in the past. Most notable among them are Vicente Pineda, author of *Historia de las sublevaciones indígenas habidas en el estado de Chiapas* (1888), and Manuel Trens, author of the monumental *Historia de Chiapas* (1957), the classic work on the history of the state. Accepting the legend as fact, these two historians as well as many others relied almost exclusively on one primary source, a 1619 version of the Sumidero battle included in Fray Antonio de Remesal's *Historia General de las Indias Occidentales y particular de la Gobernación de Chiapa y Guatemala*.

However, Remesal's chronicle does not deserve the credence that

modern authors have blindly given it. First of all, Remesal wrote his *Historia* almost a century after the events. In addition, he spent only a few days in Chiapas and had no time to collect concrete evidence about the first battles between Spaniards and Indians. Regarding the Sumidero episode, the friar simply plagiarized the 1601 version found in Antonio de Herrera's *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Océano*.<sup>12</sup>

Where did Antonio de Herrera learn the legend of Sumidero? How did he know about it? These questions are impossible to answer. The only thing certain is that Herrera never was in Central America, and that he likely did not have access to any official documents about the Sumidero battle except for the coat of arms given by Charles V to San Cristóbal de los Llanos de Chiapa in 1535. Perhaps he heard an oral tradition that circulated among the conquerors who returned to Spain, although there is no evidence of that, either. Nonetheless, even if Antonio de Herrera did not create the Sumidero legend himself, he certainly was responsible for its publication in Spain and Mexico. Fray Antonio de Remesal did nothing more than help him in this work.

Now, of what historical value is the version promoted by Herrera and Remesal? Is it true that the ancient Chiapanecans lived in the Sumidero? Is it true that they ferociously resisted the attack by the troops of Diego de Mazariegos? Is it true that most of them flung themselves into the deadly waters of the Rio Chiapa? If we are to believe the official historiography written by Pineda, Trens, and others, the answer is, "yes." Nonetheless, serious doubts remain. These doubts were initially expressed by the German archaeologist, Enrique Berlin, and the historian, Eduardo Flores Ruíz, himself a native son of Chiapas.<sup>13</sup> Later, they were raised again by Carlos Navarrete in his excellent study of the history and culture of the ancient Chiapanecans.<sup>14</sup>

Enrique Berlin was the first to call attention to Remesal's plagiarism of Herrera's work. Thanks to careful analysis of certain documents preserved in the Archivo General de Centroamérica, in Guatemala, Berlin reached quite different conclusions than Pineda or Trens. First of all, he wisely recognized that "about the supposed military actions of 1528 [which is to say the conquest by Diego de Mazariegos], we do not have reliable data," but he did surmise that between 1528 and 1535, a portion of the Chiapanecans staged a rebellion.<sup>15</sup> According to Berlin, it was then that the Indians of Chiapa retreated into Sumidero canyon and, rather than surrender, leaped from the high rocks of the canyon into the river below. Berlin suggests that the royal *merced* granted in 1535 did not allude to the conquest in 1528, but rather to this rebellion some years later.

Eduardo Flores Ruíz also tried, for his part, to reduce the account of Herrera and Remesal to its historical dimensions. He was the first who dared to use the term 'legend.' Using the same documents that Berlin would examine a year later, the *chiapaneco* historian arrived at slightly different conclusions. There were two cases of collective suicide in the

Sumidero Canyon according to Flores Ruiz: the first one took place in 1528 during Diego de Mazariegos' military campaign, and the second one occurred in 1533 when the Chiapanecans rebelled against the encomendero Baltasar Guerra. However, the heroic, massive suicide of fifteen thousand referred to by Remesal never occurred. Approximately six hundred died in 1528, and no more than hundred-twenty in 1533. As for their motive, Ruiz concluded that the Chiapanecans died in a panic-stricken attempt to run from the Spanish.<sup>16</sup>

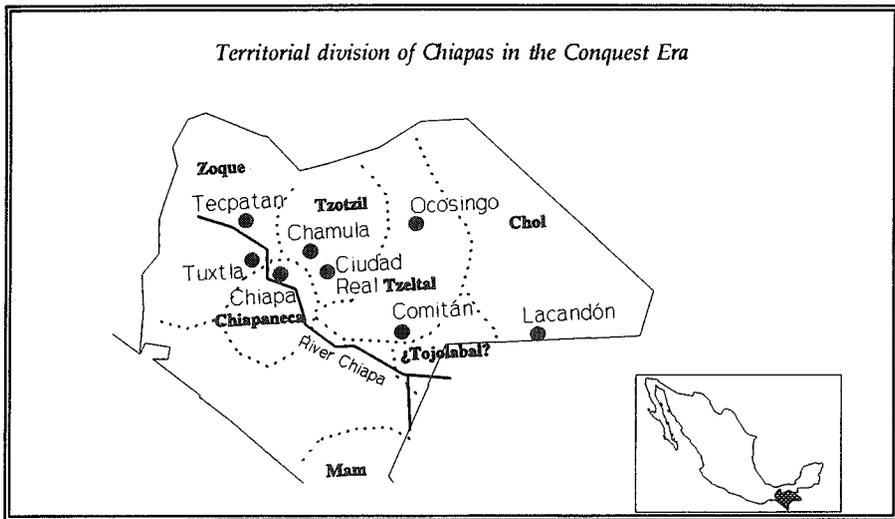
Unfortunately, Enrique Berlin kept to the middle ground in his analysis, while Eduardo Flores Ruiz committed several errors in his interpretation. Consequently, we decided to reexamine the legend of Sumidero, with more careful study of the documents that they utilized and with a search for new material. The result of this search is a series of twenty-five documents, many unpublished. Among them figure several *probanzas de méritos y servicios* of Spanish conquerors, which, though previously unknown, we were lucky to find in the Archivo General de Indias (Seville, Spain). These documents, among all the rest, have enabled us to lift the veil surrounding the legend of Sumidero. At the same time, the new evidence helps us understand what really happened to the Chiapanecans, from their first attempts at armed resistance in 1524 until their final surrender in 1534.

Before we look at the panorama of those ten dramatic years, it is necessary to introduce the chief protagonist of this story, the people of Chiapa de los Indios. Let us see who those Indians were whose name was given to the state of Chiapas, and what their small but powerful empire along the fertile banks of the majestic Chiapa river was like. Later we will consider the military struggle between the Spaniards and the Chiapanecans that took place 1524 and 1528, as well as the two occasions — 1532 and 1534 — when the Indians rebelled, without success, against the yoke of colonial domination.

### The Ancient Chiapanecans

During precolumbian times, most of the territory of modern-day Chiapas was inhabited by Maya Indians. We can distinguish five large groups among them, based on the languages they spoke: the Choles from the jungle, the Mames from the Gulf Coast, the Tzotziles, Tzeltales, and Tojolabales from the highlands and plains. A sixth group, the Zoques, occupied the western region of the state closer to the Mixes from Oaxaca than to the Mayas from Chiapas (see map on next page).

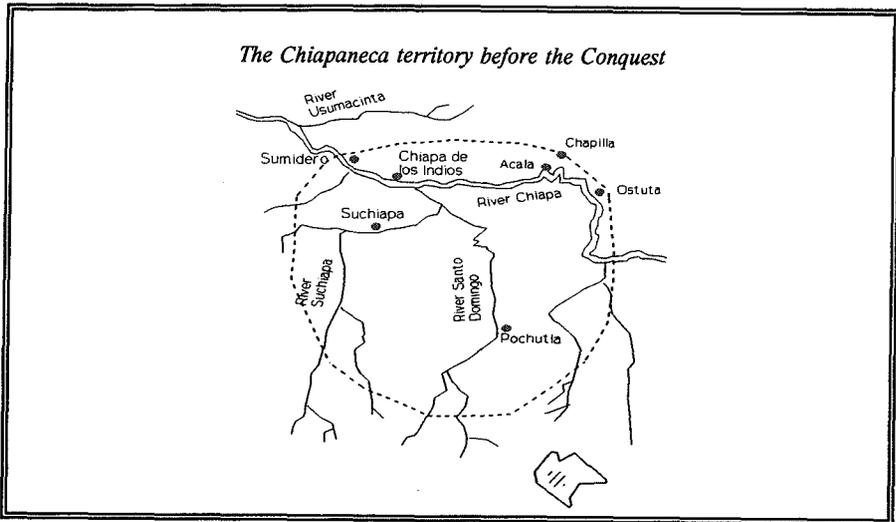
Among these six groups, more or less linguistically linked, lived a nation that was racially and culturally distinct from the others, the Chiapanecans. There has been a good deal of controversy regarding their origins. The Chiapanecans themselves believed they were "*natives from the province of Chiapas from time immemorial.*"<sup>17</sup> However, their neighbors and adversaries, the Tzotziles from Zinacantán, insisted that "*they were newcomers, natives of the province of Nicoya as far as three*



*hundred leagues from the province of Chiapas.*" This debate, summarized by Carlos Navarrete in his cultural history of Chiapas, commenced in the colonial period and still continues today.<sup>18</sup> According to Navarrete's conclusions — certainly provisional — the Chiapanecans probably came from the Mexican highlands, emigrating to Central America through the coastal corridor of the Soconusco. They arrived in the central valley of Chiapas during the sixth century A.D., from Soconusco, according to some, or more circuitously, from Nicaragua, according to others.

If we are to believe the colonial chroniclers, the Chiapanecans were a particularly aggressive people.<sup>19</sup> Upon their arrival, they expelled populations of Zoques and Tzotziles from the banks of the Chiapa river. By force of arms, they also established themselves along the tributaries of the river, in the southern valleys of the Macatapana, the Cutilinoco, and the Nejundilo (today Frailesca) rivers. From there, they expanded their military power to include the mountain passes that connected Chiapas with the Soconusco and the isthmus of Tehuantepec. The Chiapanecans imposed a regime of terror upon their neighbors, especially the Zoques and Tzotziles, whom they continuously attacked in their search for slaves and victims for human sacrifice. Some of these neighboring communities were forced to pay heavy tributes as well as to work in their fields as servants. Chiapanecan military might was so strong that it is doubtful the Aztecs ever conquered them. Bernal Díaz del Castillo called them, "*the most powerful warriors in all New Spain, including the Tlaxcalans and Mexicans.*"<sup>20</sup> They were, beyond doubt, the most powerful and best organized Indian kingdom in southeastern Mexico at the arrival of the Spaniards in 1524.

The bellicosity of the Chiapanecans was not the only thing that impressed the Spanish conquerors. They also admired the stately character of their capital. As Bernal Díaz del Castillo reported, it was the only

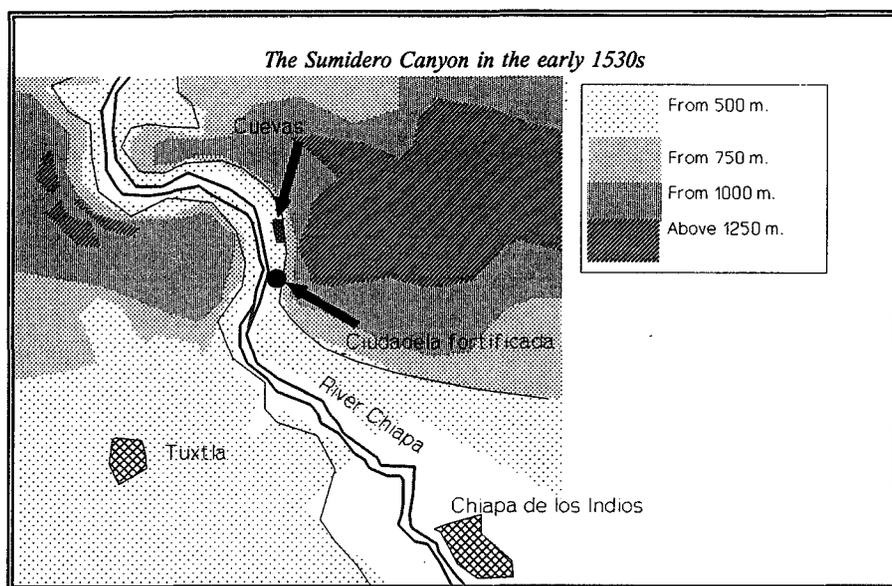


Indian *cabecera* (head town) in the entire region that deserved the name of 'city.' As we said before, the Chiapanecan capital was located on the right bank of the Chiapa river. Its official name was the same as that of the majestic river that bathed its ramparts, Chiapan, or 'water where the chía grows.' Chía (*salvia chian*) was a medicinal herb used as a remedy for coughs and spitting-of-blood. Chiapan was known by this Nuhua name throughout the Aztec realm, and called so by the Mexican merchants and soldiers who traveled through the region in their travels to Central America.<sup>21</sup> The Chiapanecans used a name from their own language, most probably Napiniaca, meaning Pueblo Grande (from *napijuá*: pueblo, and *yaka*: grande).<sup>22</sup> The city well-deserved the name, for when the Spanish arrived it was home to more than four thousand families, who inhabited well-built houses laid out in an orderly way along, to use Bernal Díaz' words, 'harmonious streets' ("*calles muy en concierto*").<sup>23</sup>

This grand city, however, was not the Chiapanecans' first capital. In a document from 1571, they themselves recorded that they had come from the east, descending the Chiapa river little by little, settling various sites along the way before finally establishing themselves in the location where the Spaniards found them.<sup>24</sup> They also established other, smaller towns, including the colonial-period villages of Chiapilla, Acala, and Ostuta to the northwest, Suchiapa to the south of Chiapa, and Pochutla, on the southern border of Chiapanecan territory. Of these, probably only Suchiapa and Acala were prehispanic settlements; the others were founded by Dominican friars immediately after the conquest. However, there is no doubt that the territory surrounding these new towns belonged to the Chiapanecans long before the Spaniards arrived, for the rivers, hills, and valleys of the region have Chiapanecan names (see map above).

This overview of the Chiapanecan's territory would not be com-

plete without reference to the canyon known as the Sumidero. Until very recently, this gigantic canyon, a true wonder of nature, looked exactly as it did at the Conquest. The Chiapa river flowed through the deep and narrow bed of the canyon in an impressive series of torrents and rapids. So great was the power of the turbulent waters that the noise could be heard from the heights of the cliffs, in places more than a thousand meters above the river. On its narrow, steep river banks, a combination of vegetation and animal species unique in the world co-existed. The almost vertical walls sheltered thousand-year old caves, some with the remains of ancient human occupation, including prehistoric paintings and mud earthenware (*tepalcates*).<sup>25</sup> The canyon was so narrow that there was not enough space for building a road along the river. Only on the right side of the canyon entrance, before the first



rapids, did the riverbank open onto a sandy area of any size. Here, the Chiapanecans built a small religious center with pyramids, temples, ceremonial plazas, and other buildings for their devotions. They never thought to build permanent houses in that place, because there was not enough space to grow the crops they needed to sustain themselves (see map above).

This ceremonial center was probably consecrated to Nandada, the Chiapanecan god of water, as suggested in an 1836 document, a copy of an idolatry case dated 1597. In this document, one of the accused confessed that an idol representing Nandada was worshiped in the fields (*milpas*) "within the hill cut by the river."<sup>26</sup> Around 1580, the idol was destroyed by the Dominican friars, and its remnants thrown into the river. However, the Chiapanecans continued to hold secret celebrations

in the Sumidero to honor Nandada, *"when the rainy season began and when the last great flood had passed."*<sup>27</sup> The customary offering was *"to behead a couple of roosters and chickens, and a little dog, and spill their blood into the river."*<sup>28</sup>

The Sumidero ruins were mentioned by the archeologist Hermann Berendt in 1869 and explored during this century by Marcos Becerra (1923), Enrique Berlin (1946), Carlos Navarrete (1966), and Alejandro Martínez (1982). According to the studies done by these scholars, the occupation of the ceremonial center began toward the end of the classic period, around the ninth century after Christ. These excavations confirmed the religious significance of the site, which was already evident in the 1597 idolatry document. However, we cannot discount the possibility that the ancient Chiapanecans also used the ceremonial center in the Sumidero for military purposes. The sand bank could well have served as a refuge whenever the population fled the danger of an invasion.

In fact, the Chiapanecans employed this defensive strategy during the four years that they resisted the Spanish invaders. If we believe their own recollection of that period, the Chiapanecans lived in the ceremonial center of Sumidero between 1530 and 1534, the four years that led up to their definitive defeat by captain Baltasar Guerra: *"We all hid together in a rock located at the river, under the so-called town of Chiapa, and there we fought a four-year war."*<sup>29</sup> Thus, they transformed the ceremonial center into a military camp, constructing fortified barriers that extended from the canyon walls to the river. The Chiapanecans also built an additional fortification on a nearby rock out-cropping. From this almost impregnable stronghold, they schemed to attack their aggressors with stones, arrows and spears, in the event that the enemy took control of the temples and plazas of the ceremonial center.

What did the Chiapanecans look like? We may get an idea of their physical appearance and the impression that they made on the Spaniards, by reading a description by Fray Tomás de la Torre. This Dominican arrived with Fray Bartolomé de las Casas on his first visit to Chiapas in 1545. De la Torre described the Indians in this way:

*"The [Chiapanecans] have the ability to pick up various flowers and make beautiful decorations with them. When it is possible, they walk with flowers and other fragrances in their hands because they like to smell good [...]. They wear a piece of rock like amber that keeps their noses open wide, and they proudly showed this to us [...]. The people are astonishingly tall, thus both men and women seem to be giants [...]. The [Chiapanecans] go naked. It is almost impossible to find a blanket or a shirt in town. Only the principales wear a blanket across their chest, knotting it on their right shoulder. Some women dress as the Yucatecan women, with the blanket over both shoulders and tied over their arms as the men do with their coats. They adorn their hair with fancy braids around their heads without any other ornament."*<sup>30</sup>

Tomás de la Torre also tells us about agriculture and domestic industries among the Chiapanecans:

*"They have many of the best lands found in the Indias from which they extract cacao. The [Chiapanecans] plant twice a year but it is possible to sow up to seven times in such a good land. A few rainy days are sufficient to get all the water they need for agriculture which is done along the river banks. The land is not plowed or dug and their only preparation for planting is to clean the plot with fire. They store corn in its cane and pick up what they need without thinking that somebody could steal it [...]. The fruits of the land are abundant: pineapples, bananas, jicamas, sweet potatoes, avocados, prunes, and many other things. They satisfy their needs from these plots. The [Chiapanecans] are hard workers. Lights can be seen in their houses at night while the women are weaving. They produce the best cotton blankets in all the Indies [...]. I also have to say something about the pumpkins we found. They are of different proportions and the [Chiapanecans] use them as baskets and dishes by cutting the pumpkins through the middle. They look as beautiful as the dishes from Valencia when they are painted and decorated."*<sup>31</sup>

Little information exists about the religion of the ancient Chiapanecans. From Fray Tomás de la Torre we learn only that:

*"Their ancient god was a unique creator of all things and lived in the sky. The idols represented good things for them. Before dying, the [Chiapanecans] confessed themselves before the god they called Nombobí."*<sup>32</sup>

This information is confirmed by the proceedings of the 1597 idolatry trial. In it, the Indians say that *"Nombobí was the Sun, which they worshiped as their creator"* and that the other gods were *"Nombobí's servants living in the hills, caves, and crop fields."*<sup>33</sup> We have already seen that one of these gods was Nandada, god of the water. Among the others, Mato-ve or Mohotove, the god of fertility, occupied a privileged position in the Chiapanecan pantheon. The priest who served him also wielded great power at the political level. As Ximénez wrote, he was *"obeyed as another God by the Chiapanecans, and he held political authority within the community because they did not have caciques"* (caciques were Indian nobles).<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Chiapa was an authentic theocracy. However, the *principales* also had a place in the structures of power. They formed a privileged class, differentiated from the rest of the community by their nobility and their wealth. The *principales* were led by eight lords, each one the head of a Chiapanecan *calpul*, a sub-group defined by ties of kinship and territoriality. We know the name of six of these *calpules*: Caco, Ubañamoyy, Candí o Candilú, Moyola, Nanpiniaca, y Nipamé.<sup>35</sup>

The native tongue of the ancient Chiapanecans no longer exists. We know a little bit of it through the reports written by the Dominican friars who lived among them during the colonial period. A grammar book (seventeenth century), five catechisms (seventeenth century), a treatise on confession (nineteenth century), and a Passion-book (eighteenth century), have been preserved until the present. The grammar

book and one of the catechisms were published in Paris by A.L. Pinart (1875). L. Adam, a French scholar, published another vocabulary based on the contents of the other two catechisms in 1887. Thanks to these two publications, it has been possible to establish close ties between Chiapanecan and the Mangué language of Nicaragua. Today, the language of Chiapa survives only in the last names of some people and in the geographical names of the region. The Chiapanecans apparently lost their tongue during the course of the nineteenth century. The great nineteenth century specialist of indigenous Mexican languages, Father Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg compiled a small *vocabulario* during his visit to Chiapas in 1859, with the help of some informants who still spoke the language. By 1871, as Brasseur de Bourbourg wrote, these informants were just "three or four elderly Indians, the only ones who remained among an indigenous population of ancient origins, that had certain knowledge of their tongue."<sup>36</sup>

To suggest how the Chiapanecan vocabulary sounded, we have copied one of the two calendars transcribed by Brasseur de Bourbourg from the 1691 grammar book. These are the names of the eighteen months as used by the people from Suchiapa. The list also gives us a good introduction to the Chiapanecan agricultural cycle:

1. <i>Numaha yucu,</i>		June 4.
2. <i>Numaha ñumbi,</i>	in which the maguey is sowed,	June 24.
3. <i>Numaha muhu,</i>	mosquito season,	July 14.
4. <i>Numaha hatati,</i>	beginning of the windy season,	August, 3.
5. <i>Numaha mundju,</i>	when the chile is seeded,	August, 23.
6. <i>Numaha catani,</i>	end of water,	
	beginning of the corn,	September, 12.
7. <i>Numaha manga,</i>	the fish is raised,	October, 2.
8. <i>Numaha haomé,</i>	the river waters descend,	
	the fish returns,	October, 22.
9. <i>Numaha mahua,</i>	the peak begins,	November, 11.
10. <i>Numaha toho,</i>	end of the sowing time,	December, 1.
11. <i>Numaha mua,</i>	the sweet potatoe is sowed,	December, 21.
12. <i>Numaha topia,</i>	the humidity intensifies,	January, 10.
13. <i>Numaha tumuhu,</i>	nothing is left,	January, 30.
14. <i>Numaha ?</i>	February, 19.	
15. <i>Numaha cupamé,</i>	the <i>coyol</i> matures,	March, 11.
16. <i>Numaha puri,</i>	the <i>jocote</i> matures,	March, 31.
17. <i>Numaha puhuari,</i>	April, 20.	
18. <i>Numaha turi,</i>	maturity,	May, 10.
<i>Numaha nbu,</i>	(five additional days)	May, 30.

Another example of the Chiapanecan vocabulary are the numbers one to twenty, copied by the German researcher, Karl Hermann Berendt when he visited Suchiapa in 1869:

1. <i>títché, ndítché</i>	11. <i>jenda-mu-ndítché</i>
2. <i>jómiji</i>	12. <i>jenda-kikáu</i>
3. <i>jímiji</i>	13. <i>jenda-mui</i>
4. <i>jámiji</i>	14. <i>jenda-makuá</i>
5. <i>jaómiji</i>	15. <i>jenda-mú</i>
6. <i>jambámiji</i>	16. <i>jenda-mume-ndítché</i>
7. <i>jindámiji</i>	17. <i>jenda-mu-kukáu</i>
8. <i>hajúmiji</i>	18. <i>jenda-mu-nui</i>
9. <i>jilímiji</i>	19. <i>jenda-mu-makuá</i>
10. <i>jenda</i>	20. <i>jájua</i>

## The Years 1524-34

We have designated the collective suicide of the Chiapanecans a legend, and identified Antonio de Herrera and Antonio de Remesal as its first propagators. Unfortunately, this was not the only error committed by the chroniclers, but one among a series of mistakes. To sketch a general overview of the conquest in Chiapas, the errors of these two colonial authors first must be corrected. Only then is it possible to reconstruct events and understand them.

The first inaccuracy introduced by Antonio de Herrera and Antonio de Remesal was to attribute the first conquest of Chiapa, in 1524, to Diego de Mazariegos. This error was first detected at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Fray Francisco Ximénez. In *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*, Book two, Chapter 41, Ximénez pointed out that "it is known that our [Fray Antonio de] Remesal is wrong when he said that the first conquest was carried out by Diego de Mazariegos"<sup>37</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Hubert Bancroft (1883) and Vicente Pineda (1888) reached the same conclusion: the first military expedition to Chiapa took place in 1524 and the captain of conquest was Luis Marín. Diego de Mazariegos only headed the second expedition in 1528.

The key document used to refute Herrera and Remesal, for Ximénez and the two nineteenth-century authors, was Chapter 166 of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España*. Herrera and Remesal did not know the work, because it was not published until 1632. Bernal Díaz remarked in Chapter 41 that "Cortés sent captain Luis Marín to conquer and pacify the province of Chiapa. He sent me along with him." Since Bernal Díaz was an eye-witness to these events, his testimony is the most credible. He challenged Herrera and Remesal on various other points besides the issue of Diego de Mazariegos' supposed leadership. According to Bernal Díaz, the Chiapanecans did not live on a fortified rock within the Sumidero canyon but in an open place along the riverbank. He also reported that they resisted the Spaniards from outside their city, not from within the canyon. Finally, this resistance in no way culminated in a retreat into the Sumidero, much less a collective suicide into the waters of the Chiapa River.

If the collective suicide did not take place in 1524, perhaps the legend originated with an episode of the conquest in 1528? Unfortunately, we do not have a first hand account of the second expedition. The report of the second military campaign that Diego de Mazariegos probably wrote is lost and only a series of *probanzas de méritos y servicios* submitted to the Crown between 1540 and 1570 remain.<sup>38</sup> In none of those *probanzas*, requested by Spaniards and Indians who participated in the 1528 military campaign, is a battle between Spaniards and Chiapanecans mentioned. On the contrary, in one of them, it is explicitly stated that the Chiapanecans surrendered to Diego de Mazariegos without any resistance.<sup>39</sup> Those documents also speak of three rocky (*empeño-*

*ladas*) strongholds that Spanish had great difficulty seizing. However, these three rock fortress (*peñoles*) — Suchitepeque, La Coapa, and Maquil Suchitepeque — had nothing to do with Chiapa. The first, Suchitepeque, was located in the province of Tehuantepec. The second, La Coapa, was in the province of the Zoques. And the third, Maquil Suchitepeque, was a Tzotzil pueblo subject to Zinacantán. The 1528 conquerors would have not failed to report a battle against the Chiapanecans, but an absolute silence prevailed regarding those events. Hence, in 1528, on the part of the Chiapanecans, there was no retreat into the Sumidero, no collective suicide in the Chiapa River, no battle whatsoever with the Spaniards.

Does this mean that Herrera and Remesal just invented the Sumidero legend? No. There was a battle between Chiapanecans and Spaniards at the Sumidero canyon, but it took place some years later between 1532 and 1534. The Indians from Chiapa rose up in arms not during the time of conquest, but after being subjected to colonial rule. Thus, it was not resistance against an unknown invader — as occurred in 1524, but a genuine revolt against Spanish domination.

We do not know for certain the motives of the rebels who participated in the uprising. However, it is possible that the obligation to pay exorbitant tributes and to provide excessive forced labor to their *encomendero* led to the turmoil. Immediately after the conquest, Spanish settlers committed all kinds of excesses, and the Chiapanecans were likely to have suffered especially hard under this regime of terror. Almost every year, new *encomenderos* arrived, all disposed to raise new demands for tribute and labor. Luis Marín arrived first in 1524, Juan Enríquez de Guzmán in 1526, Diego de Mazariegos in 1528, Juan Enríquez de Guzmán again in 1529, Francisco Ortés de Velasco in 1530, and Baltasar Guerra de la Vega in 1532. The last one came from Guatemala with the title of 'lieutenant governor of the province of Chiapa' granted by the *adelantado*, Pedro de Alvarado, obtained with the help of his cousin Francisco Ceynos, an influential judge on the second Audiencia of Mexico.

According to Guerra de la Vega, the Chiapanecans had already risen up when he arrived to take office — at the beginning of 1532? — in the town of San Cristóbal de los Llanos.<sup>40</sup> The new lieutenant governor managed to smash the rebellion with the aid of the Spanish settlers and their many Indians allies, but only after a hard struggle that lasted several weeks. The Chiapanecans did not confront the enemy openly, but left their city and retreated to the Sumidero. There, they occupied an old ceremonial center located on the right bank of the river and protected by several trenches (*albarradas*). Pushed by the Spaniards, the besieged Indians soon abandoned the site and escaped to a nearby fortress built on a rocky ledge. Finally, they also abandoned this stronghold and sought refuge deeper in the canyon, in the caves where their women and children were hiding. At those caves, beyond the first rapids, the dramatic pursuit by the conquerors ended. The Chiapanecans, to avoid

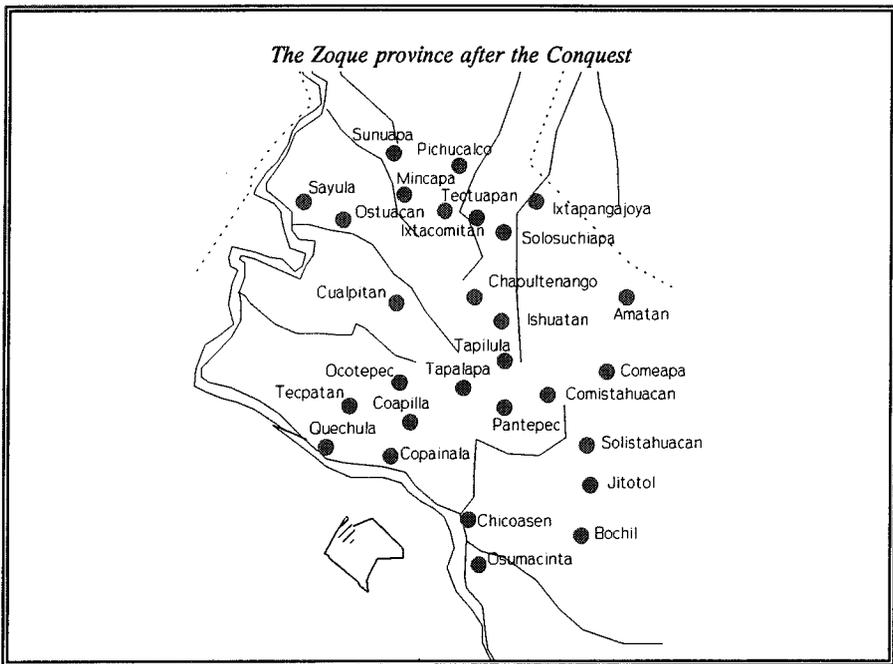
falling into the vengeful hands of their enemy, tried to escape any way that they could. At that moment, some lost their footing and fell. They met a horrible death upon the rocks and turbulent waters of the rapids. In his final report on the conflict, Baltasar Guerra said that he prohibited his comrades in arms from pushing their pursuit, doubtless because he feared losing a large portion of his Indian tributaries.<sup>41</sup>

Once the Chiapanecans were dominated, the victorious captain extended his military campaign north to the province of the Zoques. In this region, on the border with Tabasco, which had been in a state of continual unrest since 1524, several pueblos had followed the example of Chiapa de los Indios and also risen up against colonial rule. According to the available documentation, there were nine rebel communities: Ixtacomitán, Ixtapangajoya, Comeapa, Solosuchiapa, Mincapa, Ostuacán, Cualpitán, Zozocolapa, and Suchitepeque.<sup>42</sup> The pacification took several months, for there were no battles. The rebels fled into the forest as soon as the conquering army crossed into their territory. Many days later, after exchanging messages and negotiating terms of surrender, they finally returned to their villages and reconciled themselves to colonial domination. With this campaign, which took place in the first half of 1533, the northern region of the Zoques was definitively integrated to the colonial province of Chiapa (see map on next page).

When Baltasar Guerra returned from Zoque territory, he designated two governors for the vanquished community of Chiapa de los Indios, choosing them from among the *caciques* of the pueblo. Those two leaders were given responsibility to collect the tribute and promote the conversion of their subjects to the Catholic faith. Their names were don Diego (Guajaca) Nocayola and don Juan (Ozuma) Sangayo.<sup>43</sup> But Baltasar Guerra seems to have been a particularly demanding *encomendero*. According to his adversary, Juan de Mazariegos, the eldest son of the founder of Villa Real, Guerra's lieutenants imposed excessive tribute and labor obligations on the Chiapanecans, including forced labor in the recently discovered mines in Copanaguastla, more than thirty leagues from Chiapa.<sup>44</sup> The Indians were obliged to get themselves to the town and to work as miners in groups (*cuadrillas*) of two hundred.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that at the end of 1533 part of the Chiapanecan community again turned to rebellion, this time not only against their exploitive *encomendero* but also against their two Indian governors. The rebellion was headed by a *principal* named Sanguieme, together with hundred-twenty other *principales* and their followers (*séquito*).<sup>45</sup> After killing Juan Sangayo — Diego Nocayola escaped to San Cristóbal — the rebels retreated anew to the Sumidero site. There, they established a new community, breaking all contact with the other Chiapanecans who remained loyal to the Spanish government.

This second revolt was more easily accomplished because Baltasar Guerra was outside his jurisdiction at the time. Pedro de Alvarado had called his lieutenant to the port in Nicaragua, where he was building an armada to sail for Peru. Notified by messengers, Guerra immediately



returned to San Cristóbal to prepare a new punitive expedition. This time he was escorted not only by Spaniards and Indians from the Jovel valley but also by loyal Chiapanecans. The campaign followed the same pattern as the previous one. When the rebels retreated to the fortress and the caves in the Sumidero, the army of pacification pursued them once more. According to an Indian source, some of those trapped were again driven into the chasm. On the other hand, no Spanish source mentions any leap into the void (*desbarrancamiento*).<sup>46</sup> Finally, the rebels surrendered. A number of those considered to be leaders were put to death in the plaza of Chiapa de los Indios, among them the principal leader, Sanguieme. Don Diego Nocayola, a pro-Spanish *cacique* played an important role in the executions in his capacity as Balthasar Guerra's *justicia mayor*.

That second revolt was, according to the same Indian source, the last one attempted by the Chiapanecans. After that, they became loyal friends of the Spaniards. They lent their services to all of the armed expeditions the colonial government organized later against other rebel communities in Chiapas. They participated as 'friendly Indians' in the military campaign against the *Lacandones* in 1559, 1586, and 1695, and in putting down the revolt in the province of the Tzeltales in 1713. They linked themselves so closely to the Spanish, in cultural and racial terms, that they gradually lost their original identity and became a *mestizo* community. Today, the descendants of the Chiapanecas live in Chiapa de Corzo. Memory of the conquest and of the rebellion survives in the dance of the Parachicos and in the mock naval combat that is celebrated

each year on the river. The Sumidero battle also has survived, in the form of a legend. But the *Chiaparcorceños* no longer tell it in their original language. That, too, the legend itself has become *mestiza*.<sup>47</sup>

## Endnotes

1. See Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, pp. 386,397.
2. See Gage, *Nueva relación*, pp. 148-150.
3. Vásquez de Espinosa, *Descripción*, p. 183.
4. Feria, "Memorial," p. 459.
5. "Relación de los pueblos que forman la diócesis de Chiapa, por el obispo Andrés de Ubilla," Archivo General de las Indias (AGI), Audiencia de Guatemala, 161 (1598).
6. "Censo de los habitantes de las provincias de Chiapa y Soconusco, mandado redactar por Frutos Gómez y Casillas de Velasco, deán de la catedral de Ciudad Real," AGI, Audiencia de México, 3102 (1611).
7. "Informe del oidor Manuel de Ungría Girón sobre el estado de la Alcaldía Mayor de Chiapa," AGI, Audiencia de Guatemala, 44 (1611).
8. Remesal, *Historia*, Vol. 175, p. 394 and Vol. 189, p. 64.
9. Corzo, *Nandiume*; Cruz Robles, "Sumidero."
10. See Remesal, *Historia*, Libro V, Capítulo 13, y Libro VI, Capítulo 16 (1619).
11. "La Real Merced de un Blason de Armas a favor de la Villa de San Cristóbal de los Llanos, 1 de marzo de 1535," Biblioteca Manuel Orozco y Berra, Archivo de Chiapas, Tomo I, Doc. No. 1.
12. Herrera y Tordecillas, *Historia*, Tomo IV, p. 291 and Tomo VI, p. 123.
13. Berlin, "Asiento"; Flores Ruiz, "Sumidero ante la Historia."
14. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*.
15. Berlin, "Asiento," p. 30.
16. See Flores Ruiz, "Sumidero," and "Sumidero ante la Historia."
17. "Pleito entre Chiapa de los Indios y Zinacantán sobre la posesión de unos terrenos cerca de Totolapa," Guatemala, 6 de junio de 1571, Archivo General de Centroamérica (AGCA), A1. 18-6074-54880.
18. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, pp. 5-7.
19. Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, p. 387; Remesal, *Historia*, p. 376; Ximénez, *Historia*, p. 363.
20. See Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, pp. 386-397.
21. See Ross, *Codex Mendoza*.
22. Becerra, *Nombres geográficos*, p. 72.
23. See Díaz, *Historia verdadera*, pp. 386-397.
24. AGCA, A1. 18-6074-54880.
25. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, p. 32; Gussinyer, "Pentures."
26. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, p. 23.
27. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, p. 23.
28. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, p. 23.
29. AGCA, A1. 18-6074-54880.
30. Ximénez, *Historia*, pp. 376-378.
31. Ximénez, *Historia*, pp. 378-379.
32. Ximénez, *Historia*, p. 379.
33. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, pp. 20-21.
34. Ximénez, *Historia*, p. 278.
35. Navarrete, *Chiapanec*, pp. 105-106.
36. Brasseur de Bourbourg, *Bibliothèque*, p. 5.
37. Ximénez, *Historia*, p. 362.
38. "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de Luis de Mazariegos y Diego de Mazariegos, su padre," Ciudad Real de Chiapa, 29 de marzo de 1573, AGI, Audiencia de Guatemala, 118; "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de Juan de Mazariegos y de Diego de Mazariegos, su padre," Gracias de Dios, 4 de enero de 1547, AGI, Justicia, 281-1; "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de los principales y del común de Zinacantán," Ciudad Real de Chiapa, 23 de abril de 1625, AGI, Audiencia de Guatemala, 123; "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de Juan de Morales y de Cristóbal de Morales," Ciudad Real de Chiapa, 13 de enero de 1573, AGI, Audiencia de Guatemala, 57.

39. AGI, Audiencia de Guatemala, 118.
40. See "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de Baltasar Guerra," Ciudad Real de Chiapas, 17 de septiembre de 1554, AGI, Patronato, 60-3-1; "Real Merced de un Blasón de Armas a favor de Baltasar Guerra," Madrid, 19 de enero de 1571, in López Sánchez, *Apuntes históricos*.
41. "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de Baltasar Guerra," San Cristóbal de los Llanos, 10 de septiembre de 1532, AGI, Justicia, 281.
42. AGI, Justicia, 281, 10 de septiembre 1532; "La Real Merced de un Blasón de Armas a favor de la Villa de San Cristóbal de los Llanos," 1 de marzo de 1535; "La Real Merced de un Blasón de Armas a favor de Baltasar Guerra," 19 de enero de 1571.
43. AGI, Patronato, 60-3-1; "Probanza de Méritos y Servicios de Rodrigo Ponce de León Cabeza de Vaca, cacique de Mayola, calpul de Chiapa de los Indios," Guatemala, 1609, AGCA, A1.1-6935-57603.
44. "Proceso de Jn. de Mazariegos y Jn. Guerra sobre el derecho a la encomienda de Chiapa de los Indios," Gracias a Dios, 4 de enero de 1547, AGI, Justicia, 281-1.
45. AGCA, A1. 18-6074-54880.
46. AGCA, A1. 18-6074-54880.
47. Cruz Robles, *Sumidero*.