

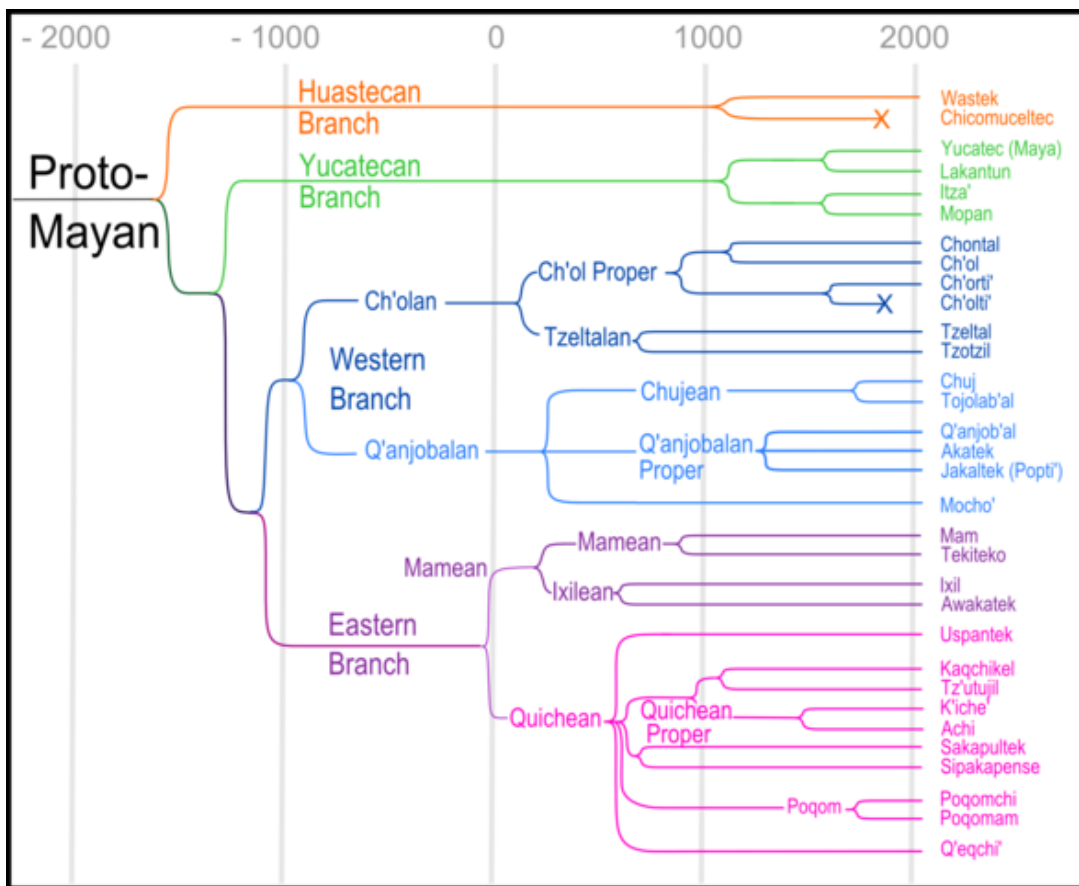
Chontal, Tabasco

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Alternate name: Yocot'an (1). Classification of language: Mayan, Cholan-Tzeltalan, Cholan, Chol-Chontal (1). "Chontal of Tabasco is a [Mayan](#) language not to be confused with the [Hokan](#) language [Chontal of Oaxaca](#), to which it bears no similarity other than a similar name bestowed upon both by the Aztecs (*chontalli* just means "foreigner" in the Nahuatl language.) Tabasco Chontal is spoken by more than 50,000 people in Mexico today" (7).

"The word "Chontal" is derived from the Nahuatl word for "foreigner" or "stranger," *chontalli*. This term was originally applied to the Tabascan Maya by the Aztec, whose language, Nahuatl, was used as a lingua franca in many parts of Mesoamerica before and after the Spanish Conquest. The Spanish adopted this term in spite of the fact that it was also applied to different peoples in southern Oaxaca, Mexico, and in Nicaragua whose languages and cultures were unrelated to that of the Chontal of Tabasco. In this article, the word "Chontal" is used to refer only to the Chontal of Tabasco" (2).

"In the image [See Below], all the language family of Meso American Mayans are explained in detail. In the past Cholan Mayan language was much more widely spoken in Meso America than it is today. These Mayans speaking Cholan language extended from the coastal region of Tabasco along the valley of Usamacinta river to Belize. This is the region were the great classic cities of Maya were built. Most of the inscriptions written in the monuments from the Classic era of Mayans are written in Cholan language. Today two of its sister languages Tzotzil and Tzeltal are spoken around the city of San Cristobal. Despite centuries of exposure to Christianity, people who live here has preserved Mayan traditions. Most of their women continue to wear Mayan national dress with their embroidered dress. Another sister language of Cholan, viz. Chol is used by the Ch'ol people in the Mexican state of Chiapas with two dialects Ch'ol of Tila and Ch'ol of Tumbalá. Ch'ol along with its two closest relatives the Ch'orti' language of Guatemala and Honduras, and the Chontal Maya language of Tabasco are believed to be the modern languages that best reflect their relationship with the Classic Maya language. Thus it can be said that there is substantial connections between Cholans of Southern India and the Cholan language of the Mayans" (3).



(Diagram from Source 3).

1.2 ISO code: **chf** (1).

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): North central and south Tabasco. 21 towns (1). "The Chontal-Mayan-speaking area of Mexico has shrunk since the pre-Columbian period from an area that included most of the state of Tabasco and western Campeche to just the central part of Tabasco" (2).

1.4 Brief history: “We have already seen that Maya is mentioned in Silappatikaram as the architect of many architectural structures found in Chola kingdom. Thus Indian Mayans and Cholas are inseparably linked. Cholan language is a prominent language spoken by the Meso American Mayans. Thus we see a Cholan-Mayan connection in Meso America as well. It is not a coincidence that the name of the dominant language spoken by Mayans of Meso America bear the name of this dominant southern kingdom of ancient India by the name Chola. The kings of Chola country assumed the title 'Cholan' (alternatively 'Chozhan'). Their capital was the city named Puhaar (alternatively Pukaar, Kaveri-pum-pattanam, Pum-Puhaar etc). It was situated at the mouth of river Kaveri in Tamilnadu state of India, a southern state. Cholan territory extended along the northern shores of Kaveri and spread further to northern Tamilnadu. During their golden periods the Cholans ruled whole of eastern Indian sea shore up to Ganga river in the north. They were also the foremost naval power in Indian Ocean. Cholan kings had fleets of giant ships each of them capable of carrying 500 people. They were protected by strong Navi. In these ships trade goods of various kinds were transported across Indian Ocean to Chola kingdom as well as to South East Asian countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia (Sumatra, Java), Papua-New-Guinea, Philippines and China. They established many historical kingdoms in South East Asia. Indirect evidence points that they went further east from South East Asia following the equator, reaching South America and Meso America. Thus their culture spread to Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia and Ecuador” (3). **(For more historical information, visit site marked as source 5).**

“In the century prior to the Spanish Conquest, the Chontal Maya were prosperous, and the area was well populated. The Chontal occupied a strategic economic position, playing an important part in the trade carried on between the Gulf coast and the Caribbean, across the base of the Yucatán Peninsula. Yucatan traded salt, cotton cloth, and slaves. In exchange, cacao, obsidian, precious metals, feathers, and other luxury items were imported by the Yukateko from Tabasco and the Caribbean coast to the southeast. Tabasco's population included not only native Chontal Maya but also representatives from other Mesoamerican cultures. For example, Nahuatl speakers from central Mexico established several commercial centers in Tabasco, and many Chontal speakers were bilingual. Zoque- and Yucatec Maya-speaking towns were also present in Tabasco.

After the Spanish Conquest, Tabasco lost its strategic economic position. Instead of being prosperous traders, the Chontal became peons, paying cacao, maize, and chickens as tribute to their Spanish overlords. As the Tabascan population declined, so did tribute income, agricultural production, the labor supply, and trade. Tabasco's economy suffered an economic depression that lasted through most of the colonial period and well into the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been a period of continuous growth in population, territorial expansion, settlement, and economic activity in Tabasco. Economic prosperity returned to Tabasco with the exploitation of petroleum in the twentieth century. The ratio of Chontal speakers to the total population in Tabasco is steadily declining, however, and areas inhabited by the Chontal Maya in Tabasco have shrunk considerably in the last hundred years” (6).

Language Distribution Chart: (Source 4).



1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: 38,000 (2000 census) (1). “The first Spanish chroniclers, such as Juan de Grijalva and Hernán Cortés, left us with only a vague idea of the population of the Chontal Maya; however, by extrapolating from the data that are available, scholars have estimated that between 135,000 and 240,000 Chontal Mayan speakers lived in Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest. In examining tribute lists of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, scholars have discovered that Tabasco and Campeche suffered a rapid population decline during that period. Like other indigenous populations in the New World, the Chontal Maya were not resistant to European diseases such as smallpox and measles. Tabasco's population had fallen to only 8,500 by 1579, and by 1639 amounted to just 4,630. After this severe decline, the population of Tabasco began to recover slowly: by 1794, Tabasco had a population of 35,805 (55 percent Indian, 38 percent mestizo, and 7 percent European). It was not until the twentieth century, however, that the population of Tabasco began to grow rapidly. Mexican census data from 1960 and 1970 indicated a Chontal-speaking population of approximately 20,000. In the 1990 census, Chontal Mayan speakers older than 5 years of age numbered 30,143 in Tabasco” (2).

“The first descriptions of Chontal settlements were recorded by Spanish chroniclers. As early as 1579, Tabasco was described in two reports written by Alfaro Santa Cruz and other officials of the Villa de Tabasco. Their reports included a detailed map of the province. At the time of the Conquest, the most heavily populated part of Tabasco was the Chontalpa, a region that included a group of twenty-three Chontal-speaking towns. Other Chontal towns were located by the coast and along rivers, grouped together in provinces. Each province had a center surrounded by subordinate hamlets.

Another key region of Chontal speakers was the province of Acalan, located on the Río Candelaria where it flows into the Laguna de Términos, in the modern state of Campeche, Mexico. With its seventy-six towns and villages, the province of Acalan was well populated. The late pre-Columbian and early colonial history of Acalan is described in the Maldonado-Paxbolon Papers.

The colonial period produced not only a population decline but also a change in population distribution. Most of the coastal areas were abandoned during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, because of raids and looting by pirates. During the height of the pirates' power, most of the people in Tabasco lived in the sierra region and in the Chontalpa. As pirate incursions ceased in the second half of the eighteenth century, many inhabitants of the sierra region returned to the coastal areas.

Today, Chontal speakers are clustered in the Tabascan *municipios* of Centla, Macuspana, Nacajuca, and Tacotalpa, and the indigenous language that is spoken in western Campeche is Yucatec Maya” (6).

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): “Prior to the Spanish Conquest, Tabasco was a major agricultural and commercial area. Farmers raised not only subsistence crops (maize, beans, squashes, sweet potatoes, and manioc) but also commercial crops, such as cacao. The majority of Chontal subsistence farmers still till their land in the same slash-and-burn manner as their pre-Columbian ancestors. They grow most of the same subsistence crops, as well as plantains and rice. Modern commercial farming is limited largely to the production of tropical and subtropical crops, such as cacao, sugarcane, bananas, and coconuts. Cattle raising is also an important commercial enterprise. From 1625 to 1925, the exploitation of tropical-forest products was next in importance to farming and cattle raising. Today the lumber industry is of minor importance, because of overcutting. Commercial fishing, particularly of shrimp, has increased in importance since 1950. Beginning in the 1950s, Tabasco's economy grew astronomically, based on the exploitation of petroleum and natural gas. Consequently, the Chontal are prosperous, compared to most Mayan groups in Mexico and Guatemala, primarily owing to the petroleum industry. The modern economy of Tabasco and the Chontal is tied to the economy of Mexico and the world” (6).

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: “Raising household animals, hunting, and fishing help to supplement the Chontal diet. Commercial fishing, particularly of shrimp, has increased in importance since 1950” (6).

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production: **See 2.6 “Land Tenure” (6).**

2.6 Land tenure: “Traditionally, the Chontal Maya have been subsistence farmers or ranchers. Chontal communities are surrounded by farmland owned or rented by Chontal Maya. Some communities were established as *ejidos*, settlements formed around the new lands that were created by land reform. As the Tabascan economy has boomed, however, so has the number of wage jobs increased.

Chontal men are the traditional breadwinners of the family, either as subsistence farmers or as wage earners. The women are responsible for domestic chores and child rearing. More and more Chontal women are becoming wage earners, however, as Chontal communities become part of mainstream Mexico” (6).

2.7 Ceramics:

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

2.9 Food taboos:

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females

4.22 Evidence for couvades

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships?

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? **See 4.30 (6).**

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin): "In the past, it was the custom for parents to arrange the marriages of their children. The young man's parents would visit the young woman's parents several times to discuss the marriage. If the marriage was agreed upon, a date was fixed, and a more formal ceremony was held with the young woman's relatives. The groom would bring gifts—candles, maize, beans, cacao, and turkey—to make a large meal to celebrate the wedding announcement. A civil wedding ceremony, occasionally followed by a religious ceremony, would take place several weeks later. Often, the couple would remain at the young man's parents' house until they were able to build their own.

Modern weddings are less formal. The couple, often after a furtive relationship, decide to get married. If the parents do not agree to the marriage, the couple may run away and live together. Common-law marriages are accepted by the community. Most households consist of nuclear families. Land and property are usually transferred from parents to children in accordance with Mexican law and parental wishes" (6).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide: "Social control is maintained through familial constraints and by Church officials and the Mexican legal systems; however, the 1990s have been characterized as a period of increasing social unrest among the Chontal Maya. The economic crisis in Mexico, the civil war in Guatemala, and the rebellion of the Mayan Indians in the neighboring state of Chiapas are all contributing factors" (6).

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): “The formal government is run by officials of the municipio, who are periodically elected according to Mexican federal laws. For the most part, elected officials are Ladinos. In some Chontal communities, traditional officials—elderly men who have held religious posts—are still being elected” (6).

5.4 Post marital residence:

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): “Within Tabascan society, the Chontal Maya (as well as all other Indians) are at the bottom of the social scale. The desire for higher status is a major reason for the assimilation of Chontal Maya into Ladino society. Among the Chontal Maya, status depends on economic success, particularly in communities in which political, religious, and traditional avenues to advancement no longer exist” (6).

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

5.12 Trade:

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR): “Social control is maintained through familial constraints and by Church officials and the Mexican legal systems; however, the 1990s have been characterized as a period of increasing social unrest among the Chontal Maya. The economic crisis in Mexico, the civil war in Guatemala, and the rebellion of the Mayan Indians in the neighboring state of Chiapas are all contributing factors. Since the 1940s, however, a growing number of Chontal Maya have converted to Protestantism and no longer participate in the religious festivals for saints. As the religious competition between Catholics and Protestants increases, more Catholic priests and nuns and Protestant missionaries are visiting Chontal communities. The net result is that more adults and children are learning modern Catholic and Protestant doctrine and are being taught to reject traditional rituals. The traditional *recomendores* (religious petitioners) and *patrones* (church officials) are losing influence” (6).

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): “Traditional folk practices coexist with Western medicine in most Chontal communities. Most Chontal Maya seek medical help for serious injuries and illness. *Curanderos* (folk healers) are frequently consulted, however, particularly by older, more traditional Chontal Maya” (6).

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): “The Chontal Maya believe in an afterlife in which one is rewarded or punished for having led a good or evil life. Traditional Catholic Chontal Maya believe that communication with the dead is possible and that dead friends and relatives can function as intermediaries between the living and the saints. Consequently, formal petitions to the dead are an important part of traditional Chontal ritual. Such petitions are offered during novenas (nine-day mourning periods) for the dead and during the month of October, climaxing on the second day of November. The petitions are usually offered by a Chontal *recomendor*, a ritual specialist who is hired to pray and petition the dead and the saints, although laymen occasionally offer the petitions. During these rituals, food, beverages, incense, candles, and skyrocketers are offered to the dead and/or the saints, together with requests for aid” (6).

6.4 Other rituals:

6.5 Myths (Creation):

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): “Among the Chontal Maya, expressive culture is focused primarily on religion. Music, drama, and art are part of all religious and ritual events. Churches and saints are decorated during the festivals, which culminate in elaborate processions, often with music and dancing” (6).

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

6.8 Missionary effect: “Chontal-speaking communities are in a state of rapid change. Traditional values and rituals are being replaced with working-class Ladino values. Children are being exposed to mainstream Mexican and Catholic church values and culture through priests, nuns, missionaries, schoolteachers, radio, and television. In many communities, children are being taught Spanish instead of Chontal” (6).

- 6.9 RCR revival:
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy?
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint:
 - 7.2 Piercings:
 - 7.3 Haircut:
 - 7.4 Scarification:
 - 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):
 - 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:
 - 7.7 Sex differences in adornment:
 - 7.8 Missionary effect:
- 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: “For many years, the hat industry was the most important enterprise of the Chontalpa; Chontal Maya men, women, and children used their free time to weave long strips of palm leaf. As the demand for these hats has diminished, and as opportunities for wage labor have increased, the hat industry has lost its importance. Many traditional arts—such as hat weaving, gourd carving, embroidering, and some types of pottery making—continue to be of primary importance because of the tourist market” (6).

8. Kinship systems: “The Chontal Maya kinship system is now bilateral, and Spanish kin terms are often used. Chontal kin terms differ from their Spanish counterparts in that they often stress age relative to Ego. Ritual kinship, *compadrazgo* (coparenthood), is widely practiced in baptisms, weddings, and other key events in the life of the Chontal Maya” (6).

- 8.1 Sibling classification system:
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate:
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Underground Cave Systems: “We have also seen that the Maya's Underground Cave Networks inside of which he constructed underground buildings and dwelling places (much like the Maayns of Meso America), described extensively in Ramayana and Mahabharata begins at the interlocked mountains (Giri-jaala) starting at Vellore in northern Tamilnadu. It passes through Selam, Madurai and reach up to Kanyakumari, the southern tip of India from where Indian Ocean and Malaya Mountains (southern parts of Western Ghats in Kerala-Tamilnadu boarder) can be seen. With this geography, the northern parts of Maya's underground cave network lies in the Chola kingdom (from Vellore up to Selam). This is yet another connection of the Indian Mayans with the Cholans in India itself” (3).

Linguistic Affiliation: “Chontal is one of the approximately thirty related languages that form the Mayan Language Family. The parent language of all Mayan languages, Proto-Mayan, was last spoken approximately forty-one centuries ago. As time passed, two major language branches appeared: Western and Eastern Mayan. About nineteen centuries ago, Western Mayan split up into Greater Tzeltalan and Greater Kanjobalan. Greater Tzeltalan further divided into Proto-Cholan and Tzeltalan Proper. Chontal, together with Ch'ol, Ch'orti', and Cholti, descended from Proto-Cholan. These four languages form the Cholan Subgroup of the Mayan Language Family. Chontal, or Yokot'an, as it is called by those who speak it, plays an important role in the sociocultural life of the Chontal community. Unlike many other Maya groups, the modern Chontal Maya cannot be distinguished from Ladinos (non-Indian Spanish speakers) in appearance, occupation, economic level, or place of origin. Knowledge of the Chontal language is therefore the most important social indicator of Chontal ethnic identity. Chontal Mayan has many dialects. The oldest known dialect of Chontal is exemplified in the Maldonado-Paxbolon Papers (Scholes and Roys 1968; Smailus 1975), which were written between 1610 and 1612. Today, each Chontal-speaking community has its own variety of Chontal; these dialects are mutually intelligible. Since 93.2 percent of Chontal speakers also speak Spanish, the relationship between Chontal and Spanish is an important one. Spanish, as the more prestigious language, is used in the domains of established religion and education and in the workplace. Chontal is spoken primarily with friends and at home. Although almost all Chontal speakers are bilingual, the level of fluency varies among the population, based on age and gender. In general, the men and the younger generation (men and women under 50 years of age) speak better Spanish than the women and the older generation (men and women over 50). Just as knowledge of Spanish varies within the Chontal community, so does knowledge of the Chontal language—the children in many communities speak less Chontal and more Spanish than the adults do. As more children are taught Spanish rather than Chontal, Spanish is assuming a greater role in Chontal communities, replacing Chontal even at home and among friends. Chontal Mayan is a dying language” (2).

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