

Ch'orti'

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family: “The Ch'orti' language (sometimes also *Chorti*) is a Mayan language, spoken by the indigenous Maya people who are also known as the Ch'orti' or Ch'orti' Maya. Ch'orti' is a direct descendant of the Classic Maya language in which many of the pre-Columbian inscriptions using the Maya script were written. This Classic Maya language is also attested in a number of inscriptions made in regions whose inhabitants most likely spoke a different Mayan language variant, including the ancestor of Yucatek Maya. Ch'orti' is spoken mainly in Guatemala, and it is also indigenous to the adjacent areas of Honduras and El Salvador, where it is nearly extinct” (2). Alternate names: “Mayan, Cholan-Tzeltalan, Cholan, Chorti” (4). From the Cholan language family (5).

1.2 ISO code: **caa** (3). **caa** (4).

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Eastern border with Honduras (4).

1.4 Brief history: Many Chorti Indians were massacred in the political violence in the 1960s-80s (5). “We have evidence that “the Chorti” existed as “a nation” or ethnic group prior to Spanish invasion, such that we can only speculate about the linkage between the Chorti language, cultures, and political affiliation. The archaeological sites of Copan, Honduras, and Quirigua, Guatemala—among many other sites in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—and the hieroglyphs documenting the competition between them, are testimony that what was the Chorti-speaking area at Spanish contact (1524) was often divided politically but unified by Classic Maya culture (ca. AD 300 to ca. AD 900) and a Cholan or proto-Cholan language, the family to which Chorti pertains (5, pg: 39). “The Chorti are a highland Maya tribe. Approximately 4,000 of them live in the hills of western Cholan Department, Honduras, while a much larger group of 52,000 are in the department of Chiquimula in Guatemala; there are also some Chorti in northeastern El Salvador. The Chorti were first conquered by Spaniards in the 1520s, after having already spent a century under the domination of the Quiche. The Chorti are more closely related to the lowland Maya of the Yucatan and Belize than to the highland Maya of Guatemala. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Chorti population dropped precipitously because of disease, warfare, and relocation into Spanish missions, but by the eighteenth century it had stabilized” (6).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: With acculturation, many indigenous tribes have lost their original ways of life and the cultural practices that are unique to them. In Metz' book, he talks about how many Guatemalans feel about the indigenous Chorti Indians: “when I identified myself as an anthropologist and explained my project, their leader, like many well-educated middle class Ladinos, cited Guatemalan historian Severo Martinez Palaez in proclaiming that “Indian” culture and identity are colonial inventions designed to subordinate poor peasants. Persons adopting an indigenous culture and lifestyle were dupes in their own exploitation, and anthropologists like me were accomplices” (5). With attitudes like this, it is obvious that people aren't going to help maintain or preserve the indigenous ways of life, and so that definitely has an impact/influence on the Chorti Indians. The Chorti Indians have been mostly converted to Catholicism by missionaries (5). Suffered many epidemics due to contact, such as smallpox (5, pg: 42). **See also 1.4 “Brief History” for information about Spanish influence (6).**

1.6 Ecology: During Spanish contact, the Chorti were extremely unlucky because some of the land they inhabited in the Motagua Valley was noted for its prized cocoa, indigo, *achiote* (paprika), vanilla, fine woods, tobacco, gourds, cotton, coconuts, corn, beans, melons, plantains, pineapples, and other fruit (5, pg: 43). The ecosystem in which the Chorti lived pre-contact was one that was rich in natural resources.

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: “30,000 in Guatemala. Population total all countries: 30,010” (4).

2. Economy

(Clip of Chorti Indians: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFvrdI4E1Zg>) (1).

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): Corn is the main staple crop (5). “Maize-and-beans agriculture largely structures their sense of time” (5, pg: 93). Sugarcane is an important crop for the Chorti (5, pg: 94). “Various wild plants and animals are recognized as sources of food and medicine, including dozens of species of herbs and at least four types of mushrooms” (5, pg: 95). “The Chorti practiced a maize and bean agriculture, even though they lost much of their land in the nineteenth century when the Guatemalan government began turning communal lands over to private ownership” (6).

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Beans (5). “Fish fry and freshwater shrimp are collected by diverting streams, and various birds and fowls are hunted with slingshots” (5, pg: 95).

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns: Machetes used by men (5). Mention of historical texts that talk about the Chorti having poison arrows and copper-tipped, fire hardened spears (5, pg: 40). Slingshots (5, pg: 95).

2.4 Food storage: Ceramics are mentioned, but the more modern Chorti Indians trade in the villages, so they have probably acquired more modern food storage containers over time with acculturation (5).

2.5 Sexual division of production: Men plant and harvest the corn, and other crops (5, pg: 94). “Every member [of a family] is productive starting at age six or seven, and work routines are divided by gender. That men farm and women transform the harvest into edible food seems as unquestionable as the sunrise. Gender segregation is such that men and women are embarrassed to do cross-gender tasks and **segregate themselves at public events like religious worship, project meetings and fiestas**” (5, pg: 98). Women are also responsible for all of the housework, such as: weaving, sweeping, washing, tending fowl, hauling water, making crafts and handmade tools, etc (5, pg: 98). Men take on heavier tasks like cutting and carrying materials (5, pg: 98).

2.6 Land tenure/Type of Subsistence Method practiced: “Almost all Ch’orti’ consider themselves subsistence farmers, or “campesinos” and only secondary wage laborers, craftspeople, and merchants (5, pg: 92). Slash and burn agriculture (5, pg: 93).

2.7 Ceramics: Yes, they trade them in the markets in Jocotan (5, pg: 93).

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: “[Chorti] husbands are particularly proud of their wives’ stoicism when giving birth at home without uttering a sound...” (5, pg: 99).

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: “In fact, if a man is particularly industrious, strong, and has much land, he may be polygynous” (5, pg: 100).

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: “Women and their parents desire husbands who are good providers, are not alcoholics, and demonstrate their devotion by giving premarital gifts of clothing” (5, pg: 99-100).

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: “Parent-child relationships are more than just functional, of course. To meet Chorti adults without their children, one might regard them as stoic, closed, and unaffectionate, but this image is reversed when one sees them kiss, cuddle, tease, and share with their children. Many proudly list the names of their children to visitors when asked” (5, pg: 102).

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: “No homosexual men seem to live alone together, but I suspected lesbian arrangements when in my survey I encountered women with different surnames living together without children. Both men and women were uncomfortable discussing lesbianism” (5, pg: 101). The Chorti Indians seem to accept and even embrace homosexuality, even though Metz talks about how homosexual men don’t seem to live together like homosexual women do (5, pg: 101).

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): It seems like some Chorti men are leaving their village to court other women, but I also get the feeling that some people marry within the village as well (5, pg: 101).

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? I get the feeling that women are enjoying sexual freedoms. Maybe not like in the South American indigenous tribes, but Chorti women seem to have quite a bit of power (5).

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?: “kinship tends to be irrelevant beyond first cousins, aunts and uncles” (5, pg: 106).

4.24 Joking relationships: “Sex and body are key sources of Chorti humor, and humor is a much greater part of daily life than most ethnographies of Mayas reveal. Such humor involves pushing the limits of decency with references to bodily waste and puns equating penises with doves, bananas, machetes, and monkeys, of testicles with eggs, of vaginas with toads, monkeys, and mouths” (5, pg: 115).

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: I think the Chorti are a matrilineal/uxorilocal group (5, pg: 100). Author mentions the brides’ parents wanting to pick a good husband to suit “them,” so I feel like the husband may be sticking around with the wife’s family.

4.26 Incest avoidance rules

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?

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): It seems as though with more modern Ch’orti’, marriage is no longer arranged, although it might have been at one point. Metz writes this about prospective Chorti spouses: “Prospective spouses are attractive according to several criteria, but industriousness is key. Women and their parents desire husbands who are good providers, are not alcoholics, and demonstrate their devotion by giving premarital gifts of clothing” (5, pg: 100).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide: Accounts of organized Ch’orti’ war parties during Spanish contact (5, pg: 40).

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: When Metz went to stay with the indigenous Chorti during his research, he was highly avoided: “Suspected as a cannibal of children, I was the object of avoidance and extreme fright by some women and children. One woman was so horrified to encounter me on a remote trail that she froze with eyes bulging and mouth agape, and it was many a small child who ran screaming in terror” (5). The Chorti are afraid of outsiders, and must have some history with cannibalism or some sort of engrained cultural suspicion of 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): Mention of chiefs (5, pg: 43). There is evidence of there being “leaders” within the Chorti, and it one book mentions that “leaders are expected to work the most” (5, pg: 110). “Leaders also take experimental risks” (5, pg: 110). “More recently, in the 1980s, approximately one in four Chorti have fled Guatemala because of political instability there and headed to the United States” (6).

5.4 Post marital residence:

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): “The basic social and work unit is the family. In the 1930s and 1940s, Wisdom and Girard concurred that the extended family or lineage led by elders referred to as “our fathers” and “our mothers” was the foundation of the Chorti society. Family members were ranked by age and gender; children were thoroughly admonished, counseled, and punished; special ritual language was used to initiate and end conversations between lineage members and compadres; and the men arranged themselves single file by age when walking to town, with the women following behind” (5, pg: 97). “It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of children in Chorti households. They are valued as workers as much as enhancing the household’s quality of life, while in the long term they are seen as their parents’ social security” (5, pg: 101).

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: “As my Chorti comprehension improved, so did the complexity of our relationships, including the frequent joking” (5, pg: 31).

5.8 Village and house organization: Long, rectangular palm and thatch hut houses are common among the Chorti (5). **See photos.**

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses): “The home was the locus of pride (at least for men)” (5, pg: 97).

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere: Mention of sleeping on hammocks (5). “Beds consist of handwoven reed mats either placed on the floor or on bed frames of crossed twine” (5, pg: 95). I’m not sure which type of sleeping method is older and which one is newer. There is mention of both in one of my sources.

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

5.12 Trade:

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR:

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

6.2 Stimulants: The Chorti Indians drink *chichia* which is an illegal, and very popular sugarcane beer (5). “Rather than buy medicine in pharmacies, they [the Ch’orti] employed countless herbal remedies and spiritual cures” (5, pg: 93).

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): The Chorti find death humorous (5, pg: 117-118).

6.4 Other rituals: Offering rain to the Earth during growing seasons (5, pg: 126).

6.5 Myths (Creation):

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): “on rare occasion when man sang...” (5, pg: 98). So, some singing exists, or existed at one point but it may not be as common in Chorti culture, or if it was, it wasn’t documented.

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: **See also “2.5 Sexual Division of Production” for information regarding male and female segregation** (5, pg: 98).

6.8 Missionary effect: Catholicism is practiced among the modern-day Chorti Indians, and they are suspicious of outsiders whose religious background they are unsure of (5).

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: If one doesn’t visit kin while they are alive, the kin will visit after death (5, pg: 134). “Apparitions of terrifying animals and monsters also cause disaster, illness (soul loss), and death. *Chijchans* or “great serpents,” cause earth-quakes, erosion, landslides, and flooding” (5, pg: 135).

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.): Pre-contact, the Chori had precious metals and gems (5, pg: 41).

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: In Metz’ book, he discusses how the Chorti he stayed with considered his shorts “improper attire,” which might speak to the modesty in their culture (5).

7.8 Missionary effect: The Chorti wear clothing like any other “modern” person would wear due to the acculturation over time, mostly by missionaries that have come into the area. They are seen in pictures wearing jeans, t-shirts, boots, etc. (5, pg: 125)

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

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):

- Toasted-corn “coffee” mentioned as a type of drink (5).
- Based on what I have read about the Ch’orti’ it seems as though they were an extremely advanced and complex Mayan language group, and after contact with the Spanish their culture and ways of life were completely obliterated. The only remnants of those past ways of life are the monuments that are still left standing, and the accounts that the Spanish recorded during contact with the Maya groups like the Ch’orti’.

Numbered references

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