

Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family:

Name: Tojolabal (Chañabal, Comiteco)

Language: Tojolabal

Language Family: Mayan → Kanjobalan-Chujean → Chujean (1)

1.2 ISO code:

ISO 639-3, TOJ (1)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

Chiapas (16.756932, -93.129235)

Margaritas (19.012328, -98.215379)

Altamirano (16.734299, -92.036222) (1)

1.4 Brief history: The Tojolabal were first mentioned by eighteenth century Spanish chronicler Francisco Ximenez in his book, Historia de la Provincia de San Vicente y Guatemala. He cited Comitán as the capital and that the area was inhabited by the indigenous population of Chaneabal. Within the century, Carlos Basuri, a member of the first expedition into the region sponsored by Tulane University, provided a brief ethnographic, linguistic and physiological description of the Tojolabal. Comitán was again recognized as the economic, political and religious center. Following the Mexican revolution, the majority of Tojolabal were put in nucleated ejido settlements, which forced many to become indentured laborers causing tense relationships with government. Despite the lack of territorial rights to this day and influxes of refugees, the Tojolabal have maintained ethnic identity and integrity (2.)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: Tojolabal is the major means of communication. It is a dialect of the Spanish language, but the Tojolabal people have been influenced by the long-term, increasing contact with the Spanish. This has resulted in wide spread bilingualism. Men are more likely bilingual because of the need to interact in the community and market. Women with good control of Spanish are those that attend school or work for Ladinos.

The Tojolabal have struggled for land controlled with the government of Mexico for at least eight decades. The lack of available, fertile land as relegated many Tojolabal to subsistence living. For example, only 20 percent of households grow enough to last the entire year so villagers must have multiple income strategies including marketing livestock and cutting wood.

The Tojolabal are one of three distinctive Maya-speaking groups occupying the central highlands of Chiapas. The Tzotzil and Tzeltal border the Tojolabal to the northwest and south respectively (2.)

1.6 Ecology: The Tojolabal live in what has been traditionally known as the Lacandon rainforest. The area is prime finca (private ranch) land, and until the mid to late 1930s, the Tojolabal were attached to numerous fincas dispersed throughout prime valley lands. The fincas are generally fertile valley lands while villages are in rocky, less fertile mountainous areas. Because of the recent population increases, the Tojolabal occupy land ranging from a highland temperate zone, which can exceed 10,000 feet in elevation, to a low-lying tropical forest zone. The only major river in the region is the Rio Grande de Comitán, which passes through the southlands (2.)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: The Tojolabal live primarily within three municipal cities. Comitán has the largest urban concentration with a population of more than 84,000 and a density of 62 people per square kilometer. Las Margaritas has a population of 28,000 and a density of 6.6 people per square kilometer and Independencia has 5,000 inhabitants and a density of 4.8 people per square kilometer. Scattered amongst the municipalities are 439 villages, fincas and small land holdings that contain 36,000 Tojolabal as of 1990 with 7,700 monolinguals, down from 12,703 in 1970. An average community is around 200 people with families peaking around ten members (2.)

Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staples: Corn

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Chickens and turkeys

2.3 Weapons: The Tojolabal raise livestock such as cows, horses, donkeys, goats and sheep and don't rely on hunting and gathering food. The Tojolabal do however practice slash and burn agriculture, concentrating on corn, beans, squash and chilies as primary staples.

2.4 Food storage: The Tojolabal do store some food, but long term preservation or foods with preservatives aren't a staple of the diet (2.)

2.5 Sexual division of production: Men working alone or with sons or other close family are the basic unit of production. The men are the main source of wages for families so a significant injury or illness can derail a single family's financial well-being. Women are in charge of all agricultural labor at home, except for plowing, as well as looking after the children (4.)

2.6 Land tenure: The Tojolabal have usufruct rights to plots of land that are communally owned. Individuals do not rent additional lands for cultivation; rather, they are solely dependent on the lands granted to them through the ejido process. Under Mexico's land reform program, the Tojolabal, unlike their neighbors were able to retrain a number of former finca lands as ejidos (communal holdings.) Currently, lands adjacent to most ejidos are either lands belonging to other ejidos or are private ranch lands that have already been reduced to legal size. Therefore current land pressure and the prospect of future shortages are problems that are both real and apparent (2.)

2.7 Ceramics: The Tojolabal potters produce for domestic purposes such as jars to carry water as well as for economic purposes. The neighboring Tzeltal Maya of Chanal won't buy the perfectly adequate water-carrying jars though; rather they buy their vessels from the Tzeltal center at Amatenango. The Tojolabal have specialized firing areas for their pottery and even test pits (3.)

2.8 Specified sharing patterns: One must serve the community through donated labor and goods. Example, one does not offer to help build a house, unless invited to do so. Nor does a Tojolabal woman await delivery of a piece of a relative's slaughtered hog; she arrives at the relative's door, bowl in hand, to request the meat due. One also doesn't expect to repay a loan until requested to do so (2.)

2.9 Food taboos: Sharing food with an enemy would be considered taboo (2.)

2.10 Canoes/watercraft: The Tojolabal live near the Rio Grande de Comitán, so watercrafts and canoes are a popular form of transportation for those down by the river (2.)

Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): Females: 4 feet, 7 inches. Males: 4 feet, 9 inches. The Tojolabal are one of the shortest ethnic groups. They are significantly shorter than people in Mexico City and distinctly shorter than the Cholula, Zapotecs and Mayas of Quintana Roo. By comparison, the average Mexico City male is 5 feet 6 inches, while females are 5 feet, 3 inches (2.)

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): Females: 92 pounds. Males: 103 pounds. The Tojolabal also ranked lighter than all four of the aforementioned groups throughout their lifespans. For example, the average Mexico City male is expected to weight 145 and females, 125 pounds. (2.)

Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): On average, 13 years old (2.)

- 4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): The Tojolabal consider 15 years old to be the beginning of the productive period in people's lives (2.)
- 4.3 Completed family size (m and f): The average family is ten people, including the mother and father. The family number may fluctuate lower than ten because more than 35 percent of children don't make it to age 10 and 20 percent don't make it to age 20. The distribution of men and women is generally slanted more towards males. In Niwan Witz, the community is 53 percent men. In Tajaltik, it is 52.6 percent men and in Yijel K'ul, it is 48.5 percent men (2.)
- 4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): Women are considerable to be in their reproductive period from age 15 to 35. The average woman, due to the lack of contraception and high mortality rates, will give birth to eight children, not including unreported stillbirths. Thusly, the average woman is having a child roughly once every 2.5 years (2.)
- 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): Males and females are first married during the middle of their teenage years. Because life expectancy is so short, maximizing the number of children a family will have is of great importance, though occasional premarital sex is permitted (2.)
- 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: There are marriages that end in divorce amongst the Tojolabal, but the percentage is relatively low because of the difficulty in climbing the socio-economic ladder (2.)
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: Polygamy is rare because of the vast poverty amongst the Tojolabal. At one time, if a man could provide equally for multiple women, the act would not be deemed socially destructive. The number of polygamous marriages is limited by the Tojolabal's integration into society because the government of Mexico has made the practice illegal (2.)
- 4.8 Bride price: Husbands are expected to pay for a bride and usually dependent on their fathers help them make the payment. After marriages sons are expected to repay their fathers by continuing to contribute their labor within the household for several years. Only after this period of service does a son establish his own independent household consisting of his wife and any children they may have had (2.)
- 4.9 Inheritance patterns: Inheritance is passed down from father to son. For example, when starting a family, the son's ability to purchase a home and material goods will depend largely on how much he has inherited upon leaving his father's residence. It is the youngest son though that will inherit what is left of the father's estate upon the father's death, but the amount is usually less than that received by older siblings (2.)
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: There is some favoritism towards older offspring, who inherit a majority of the parent's material wealth (2.)
- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Not determined
- 4.12 Pattern of endogamy: The Tojolabal practice endogamy so it is customary to marry only within the limits of the local communities (2.)
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized? The Tojolabal do not recognize partial paternity nor the idea of other fathers contributing to the birth of an offspring (2.)
- 4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? Women are seen as the caretaker and a traditional maternal figure for child. They are thusly are responsible for the development of offspring throughout childhood (2.)
- 4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process: No (2.)

- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: Not determined
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? There is a relatively lax attitude towards post-partum sex taboo (5.)
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring: While it is not clear the extent of the relationships outside of marriage, there are certainly extramarital affairs (5.)
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? The father will take care of the children though it is largely considered the mother's responsibility to raise offspring through childhood (2.)
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: Roughly 40 percent of females are considered sexually reproductive in a society of 36,000 people. Based on the case studies of specific communities, the gender ratio is skewed in favor of men. 18,720 men/6,912 reproductive women = 2.708 sex ratio.
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades: There is no evidence of couvades in Tojolabal society (2.)
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers: The Tojolabal don't believe in multiple fathers combining for a single child so there is no distinction (2.)
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect? Not determined
- 4.24 Joking relationships? Not determined
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Inheritance is passed on through the father's side of the family (2.)
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules: Marriage is preferred to marry people within the community, but not within the lineage (2.)
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? It depends on the type of marriage. The Tojolabal have several types of marriages. There is a traditional marriage with a series of long marriage petitions accompanied by continuous gift giving. There is dragging off, where the bridegroom forces his bride to follow him as well as elopement and abductions (4.)
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name? Not determined
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community: The Tojolabal prefer endogamous marriages, where people are married to others within the community (2.)
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? There are some arranged marriages by elderly members of the family (2.)
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: When marriage occurs due to abduction there is usually conflict. This occurs most frequently among young couples that are not betrothed either according to the Catholic rite or before the civil registry. There are also some conflicts due to migration into ejidos. Though rare is rare, it is generally through the marriage of a woman from elsewhere into the ejido (2, 4.)

Warfare/homicide

- 4.14 Percent adult males deaths due to warfare: The percentage of males that die to warfare is relatively low. The major cause of death is nutrient poor diets that have lead to many health complications. There are also

stress related deaths brought on by hardships of subsistence living, which is compounded by the Tojolabal overshooting the ideal family size, knowing that many children will die (2.)

4.15 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing/violent death: Land rights debates have led to many violence conflicts between communities as well as out of group. A land dispute between the Jotana and Napite shared blows after a land dispute in 1977 and four years early, the Niwan Witz were on the verge of “a little war” over the annexation of land.

The Tojolabal kill for political reasons, but homicide isn't limited to community members. In the tropical lowlands of San Quintin, three Ladino ranchers attempted to use Tojolabal lands as pasturage for their cattle. When villagers objected, 13 soldiers were sent to quell the disturbance and the Tojolabal killed 11 of them. The situation was resolved after the governor of Chiapas flew to the region to make the peace (2.)

4.16 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies: While the relationship with other ethnic groups such, as the Tzotzil and Tzeltal are amicable, there is tension with Guatemalans, many of whom are refugees. The political volatility because of land disputes, developmental projects and violence has brought a strong military presence to the area. There are also tens of thousands of refugees in the region. Outsiders that impinge on Tojolabal communities by doing things such as colonizing federal lands have further strained relations (2.)

4.17 Cannibalism: No (2.)

Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean village size: Villages are dispersed within municipalities and usually contain a couple hundred members. For instance, Yojel K'ul has 206 residents, Niwan Witz has 241 and Tajaltik has 186 (2.)

5.2 Mobility pattern: There are distinct wet and dry seasons, but neither factor into the mobility of the Tojolabal. Communities like the Niwan Witz and Tajaltik have members that have partially migrated from their natal villages, but are considered as members of the communities because they retain land use rights as long as they continue to use their land. Most people migrating are doing so for economic opportunities elsewhere.

5.3 Political system: The Tojolabal fall under the jurisdiction of the government of Mexico. In general though, because of the stratification of wealth, there is a correlation between power and material possessions. People with more household possessions, animals owned, other business investments and endeavors, types and amounts of foods eaten typically dictate society. As a community, the Tojolabal are relatively egalitarian and lack clearly defined, named and ranked social strata. The Tojolabal also lack a strong centralized political system, which one reason for their legal struggles for land rights. (2.)

5.4 Post-marital residence: Post-marital residence is patrilocal so newly wed family will settle in the husband's home or community. The newly weds will likely live in a house slightly more than a single dwelling near one's father. Some may contain two houses, one serving as a kitchen, with the entire compound fenced (2.)

5.5 Territoriality: Because land is at a premium, there have been conflicts over territory. Two communities, the Jotana and Napite, were in a dispute over a 400-hectare parcel of land. After legal means of obtaining the land failed, the Napite planted corn in the contested area. Villagers from Jotana responded by allowing their cattle to invade the planted fields and by beating up any Napites. This is one of many situations that boiled to the verge of armed confrontation because territorial disputes.

Because of increased population pressure on the fixed ejido lands, many Tojolabal villages have undergone segmentation and formed new village in the sparsely settled tropical forests. Thus, the Tojolabal occupy two different distinct ecological zones: a highland temperate zone and a low-lying tropical forest zone.

5.6 Social interaction divisions: Among the Tojolabal, falsetto is the voice of politeness and deference. Polite conversation carried on with persons of higher status would be in falsetto. Greetings and leave takings will

also be delivered in falsetto. On the other hand, mothers know their children better than they do anyone else and have no requirement for deference or respect in their speech to them. This is contrasted with American mothers that may exaggerate intonation when speaking with children (2.)

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: The Tojolabal have a joking speech called ixta=lo7il, which is compound noun derived from the word ixta or “toy” and lo7il or “talk.”

5.8 Village and house organization: The majority of Tojolabal live in nucleated settlements under the political jurisdiction. There is no specific way in which houses are organized, but the size of the house has a strong correlation with a family’s socio-economic wealth (2.)

5.9 Specialized village structures: There is no specialized housing, but child will sleep in a different house extension than the parents if the parents can afford to build it (2.)

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere: The Tojolabal keep almost no furniture in the houses, so they sleep on the earthen floors. There are seldom latrines or piped water as well (4.)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: Not determined

5.12 Trade: Tojolabal trade is highly localized and centered in Comitán. While cows, pigs, sheep and goats are available for consumption, they are seen as sources of income. The Tojolabal also grow beans, squash, chilies and coffee for income. Many work for Ladinos and will cut lumber, market cattle and sell firewood. The head of households, normally the senior male, serves as the administrator in what is in essence the family enterprise (2.)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies: In most Tojolabal villages, Spanish is only heard when visitors such as government and religious official come from the cities. Some Tojolabal, especially young men, prefer not to be heard speaking Tojolabal in Comitán and there they will speak only Spanish. Their reluctance to Tojolabal reflects Ladino evaluation of Tojolabal as inferior to Spanish. In general, the Tojolabal are relatively egalitarian and don’t have defined social classes, but the ejido commissioner and church president are considered to be relatively high positions (2.)

Ritual/Ceremony/Religion

6.0 Time allocation to RCR: Religion is an important part of the Tojolabal life as they have different types of sorcerers to practice witchcraft and healing. Religion is incorporated into the daily lives of the Tojolabal (4.)

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): The Tojolabal also have certain men that are designated as living ones or “vivos,” who have received the special grace of God. These men use their power for doing good acts or simply to entertain themselves. Local curers are considered vivos and have the gift of curing as well as an animal companion. This includes sorcerers or Pitachik’ who are responsible for performing ceremonies and performing any witchcraft. For example, a sorcerer may test the blood of a person with an ailment to see whether the cause was God or disease. The pitachik is capable of hearing messages that the blood transmits through the meeting pulse. There is also the herbalist or “ajnanum” and the midwife or literally grandmother “me’xep” that have the capacity to heal (4.)

6.2 Stimulants: The use of drugs or stimulants during religious ceremonies is not well documented, but toasts of alcohol beverages are doubled during the events (2.)

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): One of the most important Tojolabal rituals is the balancing of personal equilibrium. Individuals who perform a personal rite of passage with the help of a sorcerer can restore their equilibrium. There are also four pilgrimages that are of prime importance for all Tojolabal, though they are declining in significance over time. Three are performed before the rainy season with the objective of asking the saints to bring rain.

There is a type of right of passage, when young men address a man as b'ankila, which doesn't lower the addressees' status but rather calls attention to another admired attribute among the Tojolabal; identification with the community, which is what All Saint's celebrates. The young man, who is acting for the community, recognizes the gesture for symbolic alignment with the community that the offering represents.

6.4 Other rituals: The Tojolabal have Fiesta of Holy Week. Attendance is mandatory, even for babies. Men construct a canopy of leaves, branches and flowers for shelter at the site. Bonfires are lit and unmarried boys and girls dance nearby to the music of guitar and violins. It is never appropriated for a married person to dance at these parties.

On All Saint's Day, a group of young, unmarried men will collect fruit from every household in the village. The collection ideally occurs in a single day and pile the fruit in the church. The community then gathers at the church to receive a portion, which is distributed by the mayordomos of the church and with the help of the young men. The villagers go to the cemetery to decorate the graves of the deceased.

The Tojolabal have their own religious speech called k'umanel or "speaking," which is sacred and rason or "news," which is profane. (2.)

6.5 Myths: The Tojoabal creation myth starts with volcanic eruptions, which forced some beings into caves. There was then a flood and the beings later emerged as animals with human-like hands. A man was initially created with just animals for companions, but he was so lonely that he cried and his body split in two, which created a man and a woman (6.)

6.6 Cultural material: The Tojolabal have tz'eb'og songs, which like other forms of Tojolabal music involve several people singing together simultaneously. The Tojolabal have formalized singing of verses of Spanish hymns associated with the saying of the rosary and other religious processions. The Tojolabal also use guitars and violins during their Fiesta of Holy Week for entertainment, which is the site for community games involving the unmarried men and women such as speech games. The strong oral tradition occupies a strong place in all ceremonies and is often accompanied by flute, drums and harmonica. (2.)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: Men are the ones that lead and dictate religious ceremonies. Women aren't seen performing major religious roles (2.)

6.8 Missionary effect: Approximately 20 percent of the Tojolabal practice evangelicalism. There are other small percentages of Tojolabal that practice another branch of Christianity. One example of the missionary influence is the Tojolabal's custom morphological, syntactic and semantic characteristics of the Petition for All Saint's Day. The are strong elements of Christianity throughout Tojolabal religion (2.)

6.9 RCR revival: There has been a trend away from religious ceremonies. For instance, fewer and fewer Tojolabal make the four annual pilgrimages (2.)

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: The part of the Tojolabal community believes in a standard Catholic heaven and Hell, but it is not clear the beliefs of the majority of people (2.)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? Not determined

6.12 Is there teknonymy? No (2.)

6.13 Briefly describe religion – The Tojolabal believe the universe is divided into three levels. There is the sky or "Satk'inal," the terrestrial space or "Lumk'inal," which is divided into the sea, hot land and cold, and the underworld or "Kik'inal." Each is inhabited by different beings whose intervention can effects changes in the community and individual harmony. Our Lord God or "K'ajwaltik Dios" and Our Lady Mary or "Nantik Santa Maria" inhabit the sky along with two stars that direct the cycle of life, the Sun or "K'ak'u" and Moon "Ixaw." In the sky, the saints or representatives of God are ordered to protect the villages and ward of the allies of the Lord of the Underworld or "Pukuj/Niwan Winik." The Tojolabal try to maintain an individual

equilibrium between the various forces in the universe. For the most part, the equilibrium reside in a region of the heart or “sk’ujol,” but has many functions that are attributed to the brain is Western culture such as memory, confidence, happiness, judgment and conscience (4.)

Adornment

7.1 Body paint: Not determined

7.2 Piercings: There is well-documented evidence of piercings beyond the ear (7.)

7.3 Haircut: Married women will wear their hair with two braids while single women will wear their hair loose and decorated with ribbons (7.)

7.4 Scarification: Not determined

7.5 Adornment: Women dress traditional with bright colored skirts decorated with lace or ribbons and a blouse adorned with smaller ribbons. They will also cover their heads with a kerchief, beaded breastplates and necklaces. Individuals identify themselves as members of a community by the way they dress and show this even in the small variations in typical female dress (7.)

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Dress is likely more elaborate as a way to attract a mate (4.)

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: While both men and women wear brightly colored clothing, women usually wear more flamboyant attire and more accessories (7.)

7.8 Missionary effect: The Tojolabal wear very westernized clothes including button down shirts. There are many examples of men going to work without footwear though (2.)

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: There is a trend away from expensive traditional clothes because of the tight economic conditions. Men for example will not wear traditional garb because of the cost to make it (7.)

Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system: In kinship terminology, one distinguishes first-born siblings from others among one’s own siblings and one’s own children. In men’s speech, an older brother is jb’ankil or “my older brother” and an older sister is jwatz’ or “my older sister.” Any younger siblings are kijtz’in or “my younger siblings.” Likewise, a man calls his first-born son or daughter sb’ajtanil kunin or “my first born child” and all younger children simply kunin or “my child” (2.)

8.2 Sororate, levirate marriages: Neither system is prevalent amongst the Tojolabal (2.)

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology: The standard kinship typology used is the Omaha system, but the names of kin can change based on context. For instance, under religious circumstances a mother may receive a different name than in a normal social setting. Kinship is also influenced by where newly wed couples eventually reside (2.)

Other interesting cultural features:

- 1) In recent years, Guatemalan refugees trying to escape political turmoil in their own country have settled in the Tojolabal region. The effect has been to exacerbate the Tojolabal need for additional land (2.)
- 2) While the Tojolabal live in the central highlands of Chiapas with the Tzotzil and Tzeltal, they aren’t considered part of the “highland complex” because they are not apart of the complex web of economic interactions centered in San Cristobal (2.)

- 3) The Tojolabal have one of the poorest diets in the region yet have an annual population growth of two percent (2.)
- 4) Mexico as a country has an overall birth rate of 2.6 percent, but the Tojolabal are not growing because of the relatively high death rate (2.)
- 5) Life expectancy is 35 to 50 years old (2.)
- 6) Beyond height and weight, the Tojolabal rate amongst the lowest in fat fold measurements and cross-sectional head circumference (2.)
- 7) The Tojolabal have different speech genres that include human speech, big speech, whistle speech, sacred speech, red speech and blue-green speech (2.)
- 8) The Tojolabal practice back channeling, which is the conversational phenomenon that involves utterances by the hearer within the conversational turn of the speaker (2.)

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