

Ceremonial Centers of the Chachi

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It would seem that archaeologists are forever talking about ceremonial centers, places where people do not reside permanently but where they periodically flock to carry out—you guessed it—"ceremonies." As tabulated in the accompanying box, the notion of the largely vacant ceremonial center has played a persisting role in the annals of New World prehistory. Although few archaeologists would now consider such monumental sites as Tikal

or Chavin de Huantar to be purely ceremonial in nature (the evidence for sizable resident populations is abundant), nonetheless, the ceremonial center concept continues to be an attractive interpretive motif, nudging archaeologists to riddle the prehistoric American landscape with scaled-down versions of Mecca or the Vatican.

During much of 1986 and during summer visits in 1988 and 1989, while carrying out archaeological

Figure 1. Chachi women returning from gardens with plantains, the staple food. Note the use of tumplines. Among the Chachi, plantains are boiled and then pounded into a starchy mash called bala. Introduced by the Europeans, plantains rapidly became a major crop in many parts of the American tropics.



research in the Cayapas and Santiago Basins of coastal Ecuador (Fig. 2), we lived among the Chachi Indians. The Chachi spend most of their day-to-day lives in dispersed, single-house settlements, but also periodically aggregate in otherwise vacant ceremonial centers. In other words, the Chachi furnish a contemporary and observable example of ceremonial centers in action. The purpose of this article is to record our observations of the Chachi settlement system, in which ceremonial centers play a key role, to marshal the available evidence pertinent to the historical development of this system, and to sketch the implications that these findings have for archaeological interpretation, both in the Cayapas-Santiago and elsewhere.

The Chachi: Today and Yesterday

The Chachi (formerly known in the ethnographic literature as the Cayapas) number some 3000 individuals, most of whom inhabit the inland reaches of the Cayapas Basin of Esmeraldas Province, Ecuador. The Cayapas is a formidable river that drains the western slopes of the Andean massif and flows across a relatively narrow coastal plain before emptying into the Pacific Ocean. Rainfall is high, varying from 2000 mm annually near the coast to more than 5000 mm in the Andean foothills. The vegetation is humid tropical forest.

The Chachi are river people, equally at home in the dugout canoe

as on land. Their staple crop is the plantain or cooking banana (Fig. 1), a post-Columbian introduction, along with lesser quantities of manioc and other root crops, seasonally important fruits such as the peach-palm, maize used for preparing a refreshing beverage, as well as fish from the river and game from the forest. The Chachi speak a language of the Barbacoan family (which includes Colorado and Coaiquer). Most men are bilingual in Spanish, and it is in Spanish that our field work was done.

"Settlement pattern" is the phrase archaeologists use to describe the way in which a people distribute themselves across the landscape. The Chachi settlement pattern consists of single houses dispersed along the high banks of the Cayapas and its

Ceremonial Centers: A Sampler from Americanist Literature

References to ceremonial centers abound in the interpretive literature concerning American prehistory. A selection follows.

With respect to Andean South America, Rowe gives a clear, almost definitional, description: "A ceremonial center is a grouping of public buildings housing common facilities, such as shrines, meeting places, markets, and law courts, which is used seasonally or at prescribed intervals by the population of a considerable surrounding area. Between the occasions when a ceremonial center is used it is either closed and empty or houses only a small permanent or caretaker personnel" (1967:296).

Again with an Andean case in mind, Bennett and Bird offer the following, now overthrown prognosis: "Large constructions like those at Chavin de Huantar do not in themselves imply enormous concentrations of population....A religious pilgrimage pattern is implied, in which large numbers congregate during certain ceremonial periods in the year, contribute their labor service, and return to their respective settlements" (1964:101).

While critically and wistfully looking back at interpretations of prehistoric Mayan settlements in the Yucatan and Guatemala, Hammond observes: "Until about twenty years ago, Mayanists were quite happy with this interlinked model of settlement and subsistence—the rural population coming periodically to the basically empty ceremonial centers for festivals, but otherwise living out among their *milpas* cultivating corn, beans, and squashes...." (1982:154).

And in a massive ethnography of a contemporary region in the Chiapas highlands, Vogt notes: "Zinacantan is a classic example of an ancient type of Maya

settlement pattern: a ceremonial center with a sustaining area of outlying hamlets in which the bulk of the population lives" (1969:155).

The concept of the ceremonial center is not restricted to tropical America. It intrudes forcefully into some of the more dramatic remains of prehistoric North America, namely Chaco Canyon in New Mexico and the Hopewell sites of southern Ohio. With regard to the former, Lekson *et al.* speculate: "Could the centers have been created by seasonal gatherings of large numbers of people, who may have converged on Chaco for ceremonial reasons? Once created in that way, they may have become important features of the landscape, serving as visible reminders of past ceremonial events" (1988:106).

Prufer gives a more personal and illuminating account of the Hopewell situation: "While reflecting on all these factors, I was struck by a possible parallel between the Ohio Hopewell sites and the classic ceremonial sites of certain areas in Middle America, where the religious center remained vacant except on ritual occasions and the population lived in scattered hamlets surrounding the center" (1964:94).

Finally, in an aged but still instructive survey of the late prehistory of the eastern United States, Ford and Willey comment: "A few of the mounds and mound groups of this period are of great size indicating possibly that political unification was being effected and that these were the ceremonial centers of large communities. If so, these populations must have been scattered over large areas. Midden material is generally rather scanty on these sites, and there is little indication of any dwellings in their immediate vicinity" (1941:349).

major tributaries. The single-house settlement was well-described early in this century (Barrett 1925) and continues to be the preferred Chachi form, although in recent decades there has been a tendency for the traditionally dispersed households to congregate at missions or government-sponsored schools.

The Chachi house is a simple but elegant piece of architecture. Without walls and with an elevated floor, it is eminently well designed for a warm, humid, and flood-prone environment. The house is a rectangular structure varying widely in floor area from 20 to over 150 square meters, the size depending largely on whether a small nuclear family or a more extended retinue of kin is being housed. As shown in Figure 3, the elevated house floor is divided customarily into a large living and sleeping space and a smaller kitchen with a clay-lined hearth, off of which culinary waste is tossed to the ground. As is also seen in the figure, the clearing or yard surrounding a Chachi house typically is studded with a host of useful and carefully tended plants, especially fruit-bearing trees. The major gardens of plantains are usually found inland within an hour's walk.

The Chachi are not the sole occupants of the Cayapas Basin. They coexist with an equivalently sized Black population descended from people who migrated from Colombia during the past century (West 1957). Relations between the two groups are often strained, the Chachi referring to the Blacks by the denigrative term *juyungo* (a kind of monkey), while the Blacks reciprocate with the simultaneously endearing and condescending appellation *Cayapita* ("little Indian"). The two populations tend to live apart. The Blacks, living in towns, dominate the Santiago Basin and the lower Cayapas up to the mouth of the Onzole (Fig. 2). Above the Onzole, the two populations share the Cayapas Basin upriver to the San Miguel, above which the Chachi are demographically dominant.

The history of the Chachi is best given by their own oral traditions. According to these, the Chachi were formerly an Andean people, living in

Figure 2. The Cayapas and Santiago Basins of Esmeraldas Province, Ecuador. Stars indicate Chachi ceremonial centers while the stippling indicates the area serviced by each center. Dots locate Chachi archaeological sites.

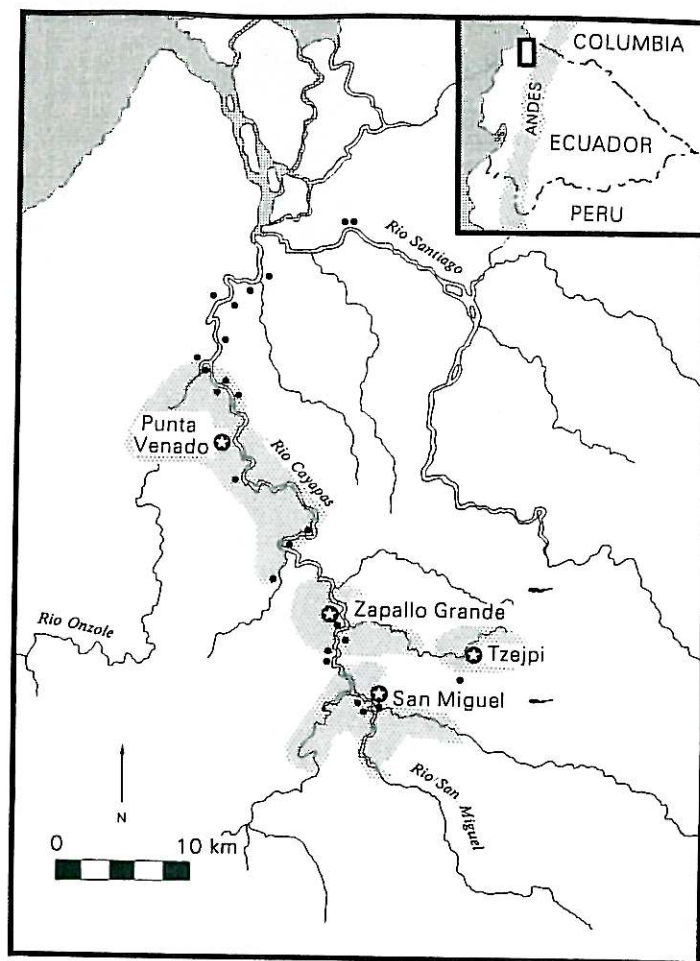
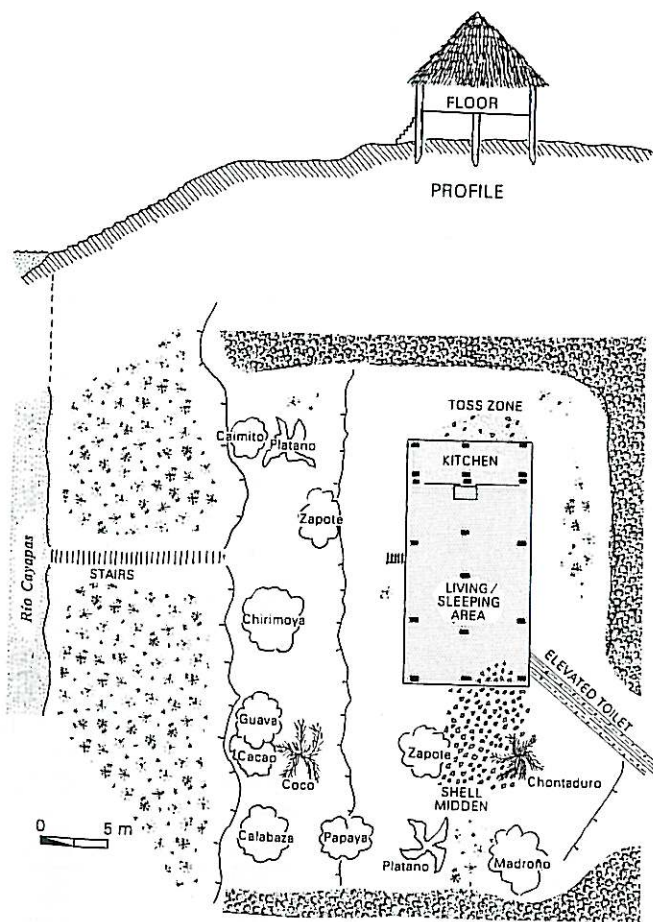


Figure 3. Plan of Chachi house on the upper Cayapas. Location on a high bank flanking the Cayapas, as well as the cleared yard studded with cultivated fruit trees, is typical. The shell midden at one end of the house pertains to an earlier Chachi occupation.



permanent villages near the highland city of Ibarra. Prompted by the sequential assaults of the Inca and Spanish invasions, the Chachi abandoned their highland home and descended the western slopes of the Andes to Pueblo Viejo ("old town"), located far up the Santiago River, where they continued to live in villages and to rely upon maize as a principal crop. It is at Pueblo Viejo that the Chachi first enter European history in the 1597 account of the Mercedarian friar Gaspar de Torres (Monroy 1938:314-364).

Life at Pueblo Viejo was not to continue forever. A second stage of Chachi migration was precipitated

by depredations, especially the stealing of Chachi women, by allegedly cannibalistic *Indios Bravos* ("wild Indians"), who made life increasingly precarious. In response to these attacks, the Chachi, with the crucial assistance of their shamans, descended to the Cayapas Basin, wiped out the settlements of the *Indios Bravos* one by one, and established their own settlements. Some of the *Indios Bravos* are thought to have escaped this campaign of extermination by retreating to the far upper reaches of the Cayapas, where even today the Chachi tell of distant wisps of smoke said to mark the campfires of their lingering foes.

Although the historicity of this oral tradition as recorded by Barrett (1925) and others has been doubted by some recent scholars (e.g., Palop 1986), the Chachi account of their own history receives considerable support from both the ethnohistoric record and from our own recent archaeological investigations in the Cayapas and Santiago Basins. Over 20 Chachi archaeological sites have now been identified in our continuing survey. All of these sites yield a distinctive ceramic ware that can be identified securely to be of Chachi manufacture, and in all cases this distinctive pottery is associated with traces of metal, glass, and



Figure 4. A Chachi girl bedecked in wedding regalia. The jewelry is highly valued and is passed down from mother to daughter.

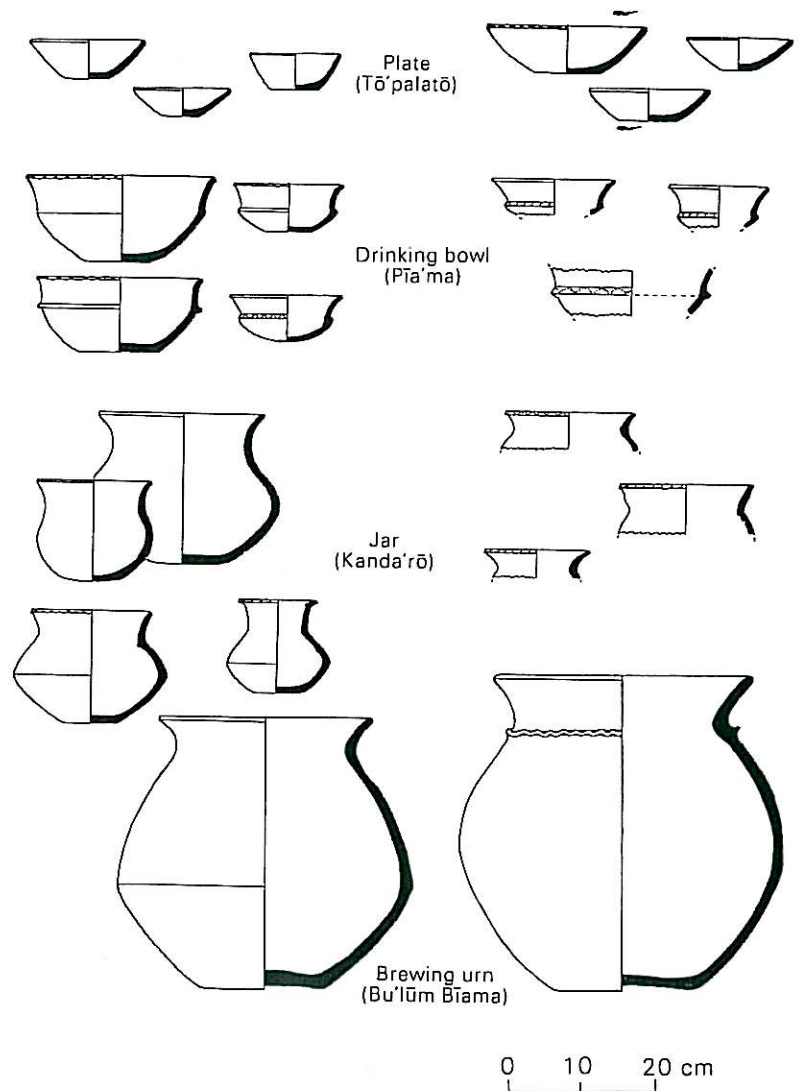


Figure 5. Chachi ceramics: those to the left were collected by Barrett in 1909 and are currently housed in the Museum of the American Indian, New York; those to the right were recovered from Chachi archaeological sites. (Chachi terms in parentheses.)

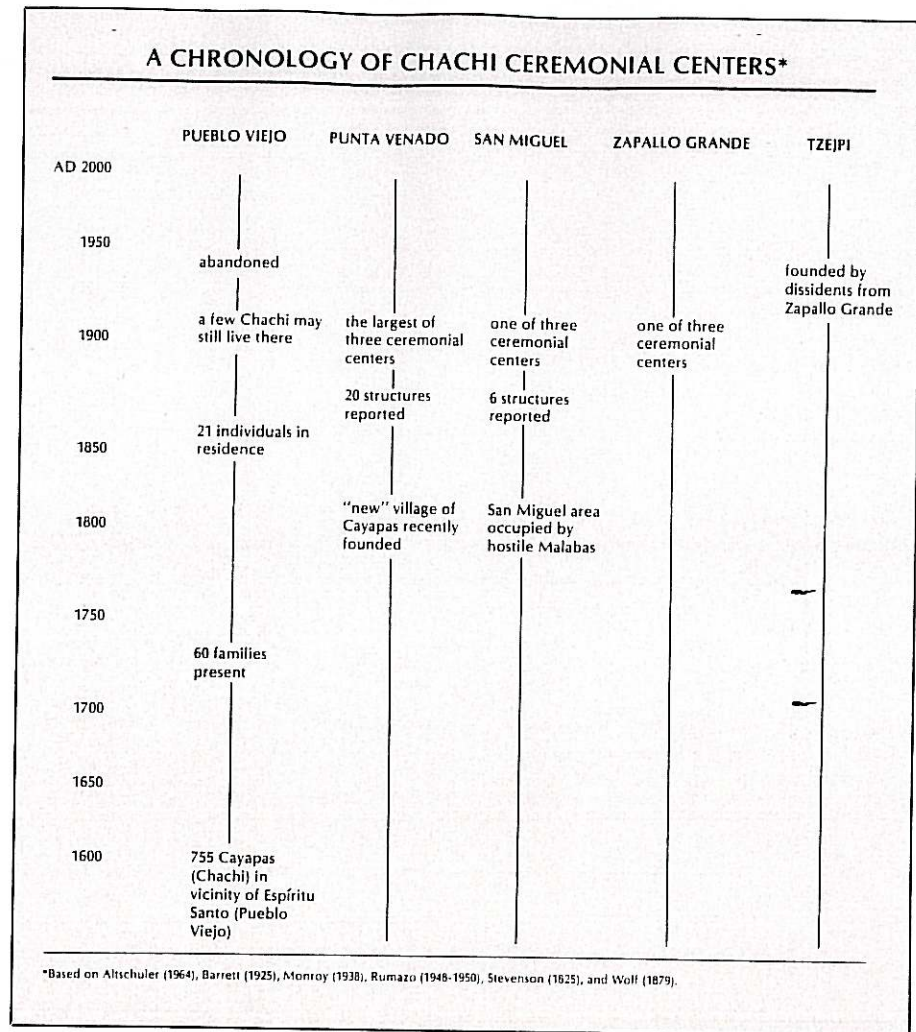
porcelain imports of European derivation, suggesting an age within the last two centuries or so.

Although the Chachi discontinued ceramic manufacture in the 1950s, we are fortunate to have the detailed record of traditional pottery given by Barrett (1925); as seen in Figure 5, our archaeological ceramics conform in detail to the pottery collected by Barrett. Furthermore, these highly salient Chachi ceramics are totally unlike the preceding archaeological materials called Tumbaviro (Tolstoy and DeBoer 1989). It does not require much imagination to identify Tumbaviro with the preceding Indios Bravos of Chachi history. The archaeological signature of the intrusive Chachi occupation is quite uniform: small single-house settlements distributed along the high banks of the Cayapas and its tributaries (Fig. 2).

In their new homeland along the Cayapas, the Chachi abandoned their ancestral highland pattern of permanent villages, shifted to a dispersed settlement pattern in which the single house figured as the standard residence, and shifted from maize to plantain as a principal crop. Now one might ask how it is possible that such a seemingly dispersed and fragmented entity as the Chachi could first confront and defeat the Indios Bravos, and then subsequently maintain their corporate identity in the face of Black territorial expansion, as well as innumerable gold, lumber, banana, and coffee-seeking schemes emanating from the greater capitalist world. In this context, the ceremonial center is of signal importance.

The Ceremonial Center: Today and Yesterday

Today the Cayapas Chachi are divided into four major territorial subdivisions, each having its own ceremonial center. The location of these centers and the extent of their participating territories are indicated in Figure 2; their history, as gleaned from a somewhat sketchy documentary record, is summarized in the box, "A Chronicle of Chachi Ceremonial Centers." Pueblo Viejo, the



traditional Chachi center, had its heyday in the 16th and 17th centuries, then experienced a decline culminating in its final abandonment early in this century. On the Cayapas proper, Punta Venado—today the largest and premier center—was in place by 1809. At that time, the upper reaches of the Cayapas were still controlled by the Malabas (almost certainly the Indios Bravos of Chachi oral tradition). By the late 19th century, however, the Malabas had disappeared from the Cayapas scene, and the three Chachi ceremonial centers of Punta Venado, Zapallo Grande, and San Miguel were fully established and functioning installations. To complete the contemporary geography of Chachi ceremonial centers, we need only add Tzejpi, a center formed by a dissident faction from Zapallo Grande during the late 1930s (Altschuler 1964:7-8).

As the first-founded and largest of the extant ceremonial centers, Punta Venado maintains its premier status. From the air, it appears as an inconspicuous clearing surrounded by jungle (Fig. 6). Even on the ground, during the "off-season"—which includes most of the year—Punta Venado is hardly impressive: a string of liana-choked houses flanking a plaza overgrown with weeds (Fig. 7). During the two main holidays of Christmas and Easter, however, the encroaching vegetation is cleared away, and up to hundreds of Chachi get together for several days. During these periods, a number of Catholic-based ceremonies are carried out, including a procession of saints (represented by wooden icons housed in the church), as well as a passion play on Easter.

In addition to the religious observances, the celebrants engage in feasting (prized shellfish are brought

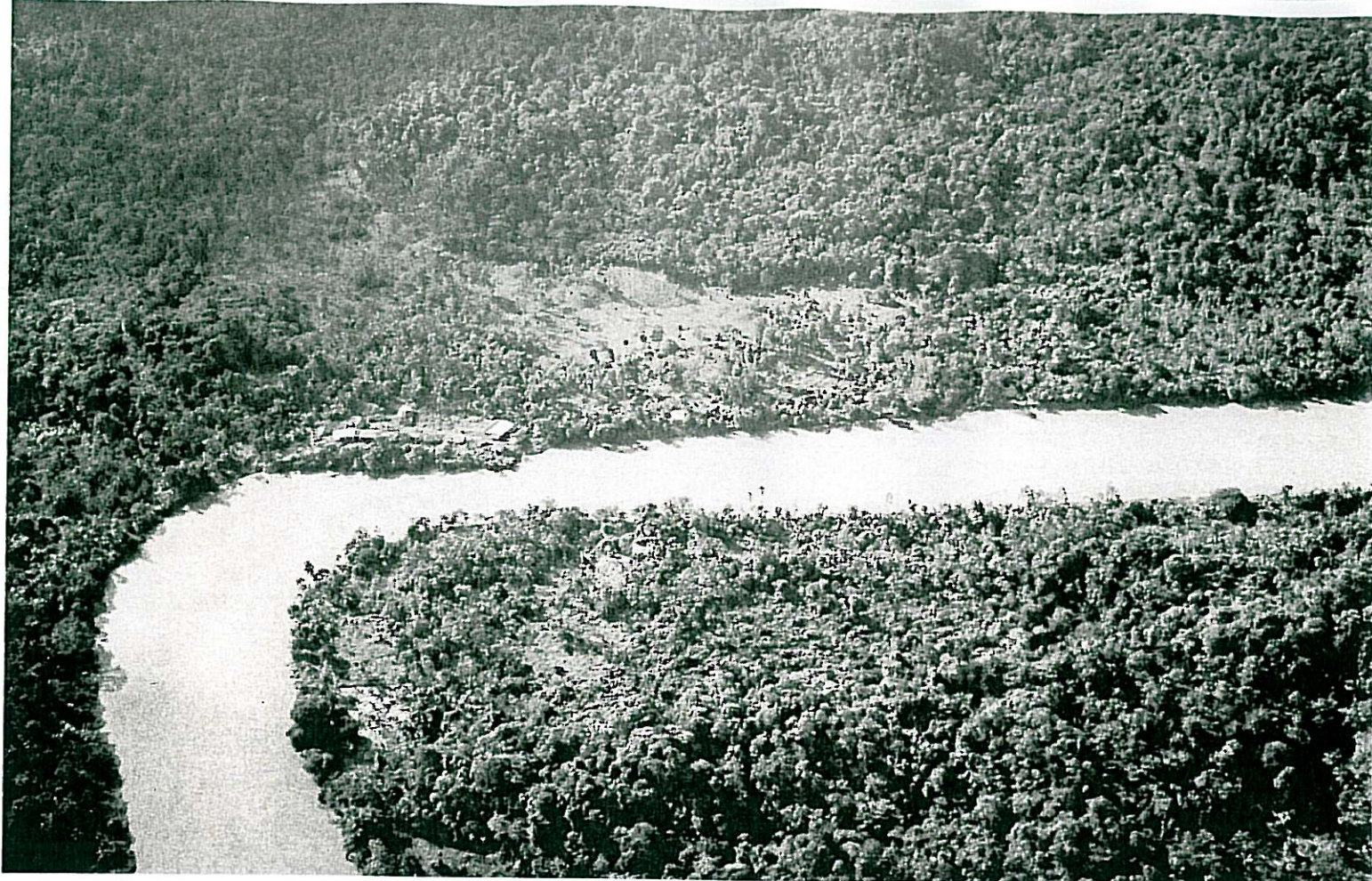


Figure 6. Punta Venado, the major Chachi ceremonial center, from the air. The dense vegetation, mottled by agricultural clearings, is typical of the Cayapas area.

Photo by Stephen Tarjanyi

Figure 7. A vacant Punta Venado. During the Christmas and Easter celebrations, the encroaching vegetation is cleared away.

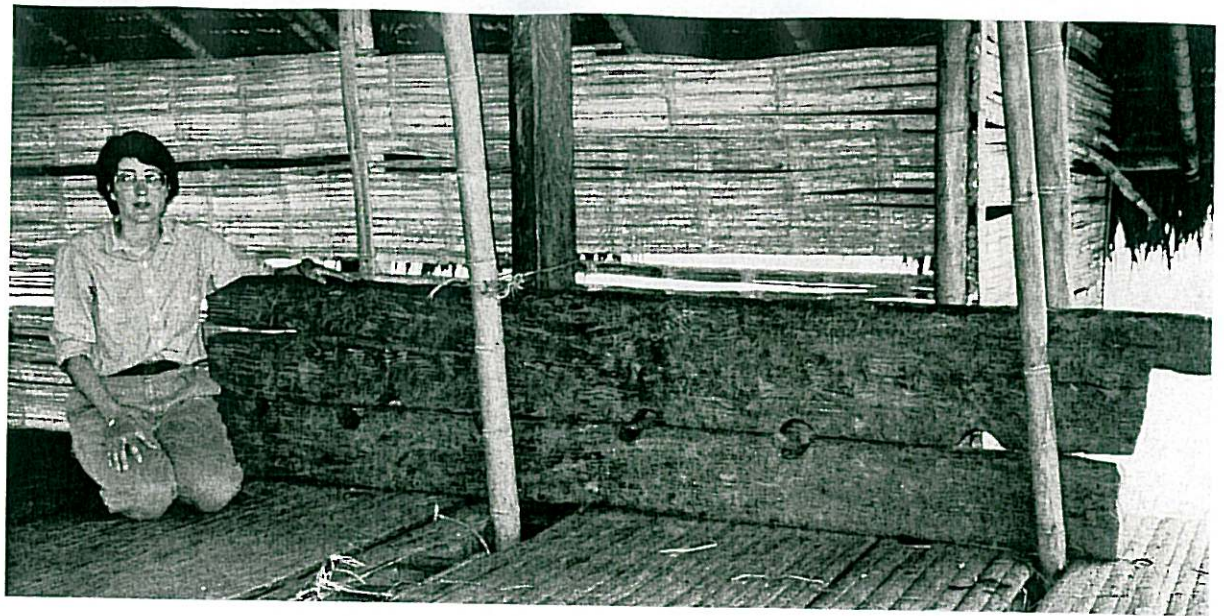


in from the coast), heavy drinking (rum is the preferred beverage), and dancing (*marimba* is the favorite music). These occasions, however, are more than just parties. Confronted by the spectre of a crowd, a government with a hereditary *Gobernador* and his appointed retinue of specialized officials, which includes a police force, is temporarily activated to deal with what can be called "law and order" matters. From his extra-large house, the *Gobernador* reviews and adjudicates

complaints accrued since the last congregation. Most frequently, these complaints deal with accusations of marital infidelity. A forceful physical symbol of these proceedings are the stocks, still in place at Punta Venado and San Miguel (Fig. 8), and only recently discontinued at Zapallo Grande. It is here where spouses accused of infidelity or other abuses, such as wife-beating, are publicly mortified. As the rum takes effect, the stocks are also used to contain unruly drunks.

As archaeologists accustomed to viewing behavior in terms of its material manifestations, we thought it important to prepare reasonably accurate maps of Punta Venado and the other ceremonial centers. On two separate occasions, we were permitted to visit each of these centers in order to prepare site plans and, in addition, to conduct limited excavations in one of them (Punta Venado). Our excavations—two small test pits—revealed a meter-deep midden full of sherds, shellfish, and animal bones, presumably feasting residues. The presence of glass, rusted metal fragments, and imported European wares suggested that we were

Figure 8. The stocks at the San Miguel center. The stocks are used to publicly punish wrongdoers during ceremonial gatherings. The visiting anthropologist is Sara Stinson who is carrying out a long-term study of the growth and development of Chachi children.



dealing with deposits accumulated within the last two centuries, a finding fully in accord with the historical record for Punta Venado. Figure 9 gives the modern ground plan of the center. The Gobernador's house is positioned at the downstream end of the settlement. Guest houses, each identified as to community, form a flattened 'U' that extends upriver from the Gobernador's house. This 'U' flanks a plaza in which the church, with its bells and icons, is centered.

The arrangement of guest houses shown in Figure 9 is not haphazard, but rather mirrors a virtual microcosm of the geography of the Punta Venado section. The houses of the Onzole communities of Pintor are situated at the downstream end of Punta Venado. Next come the houses of Pichiyacu, located but a bend upriver from Punta Venado. Then follow the houses for the farther upstream communities of Santa Maria and Chivatillo. At the upstream extremity of Punta Venado is the guest house for Loma Linda. The latter is an interesting case that still conforms to the geographical logic of Punta Venado's layout. Loma

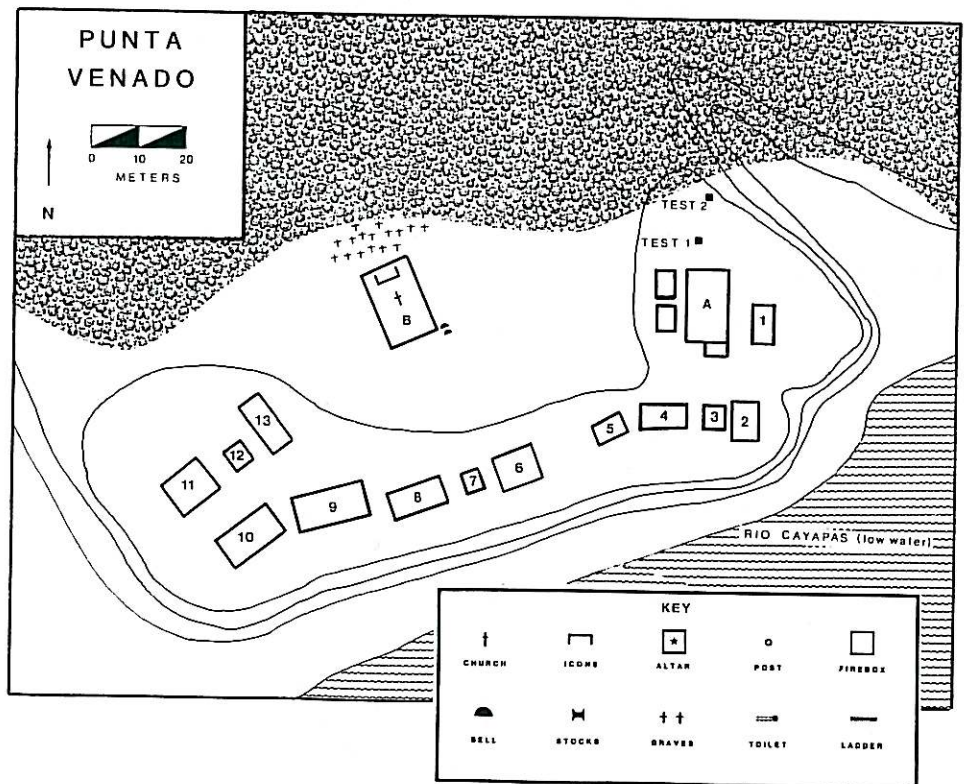


Figure 9. A plan of Punta Venado, the largest Chachi ceremonial center:
 A. the Governor's house (with stocks)
 B. the church (with bells, icons, and associated cemetery)
 1-3. guest houses for Pintor (shell middens and graves beneath floors)
 4-7. guest houses for Pichiyacu (shell middens and graves beneath floors)
 8-9. guest houses for Santa Maria (shell middens and graves beneath floors)
 10. guest house for Loma Linda
 11. guest house for Pichiyacu (built later than houses 4-7)
 12-13. guest houses for Chivatillo (shell middens and graves beneath floors)

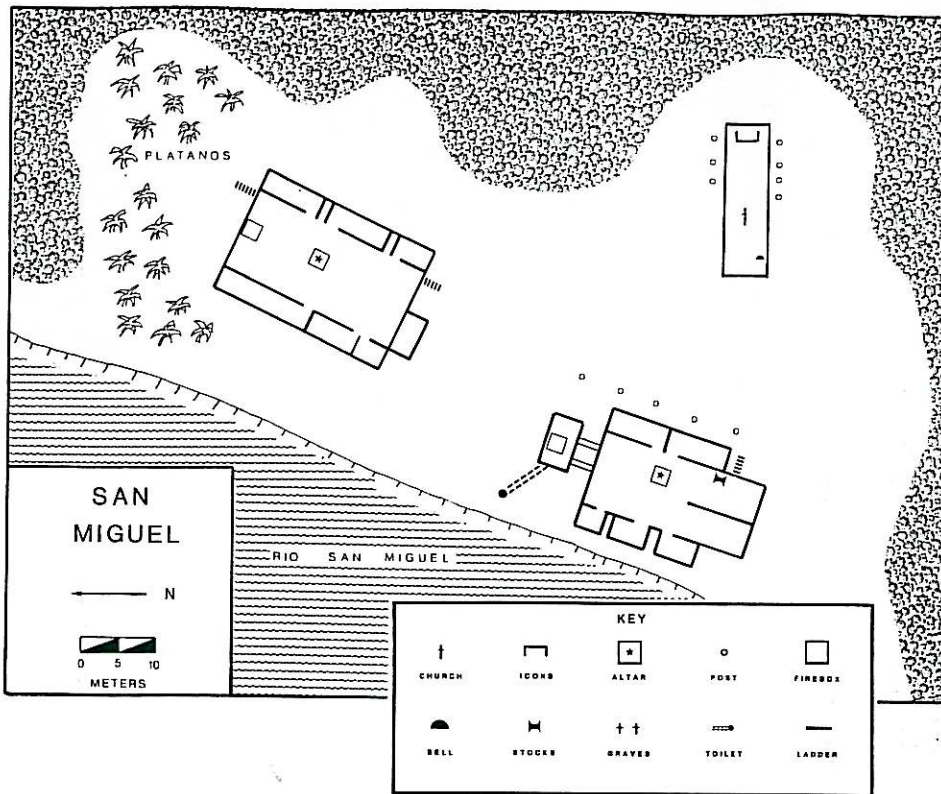


Figure 10. Plan of the San Miguel ceremonial center.

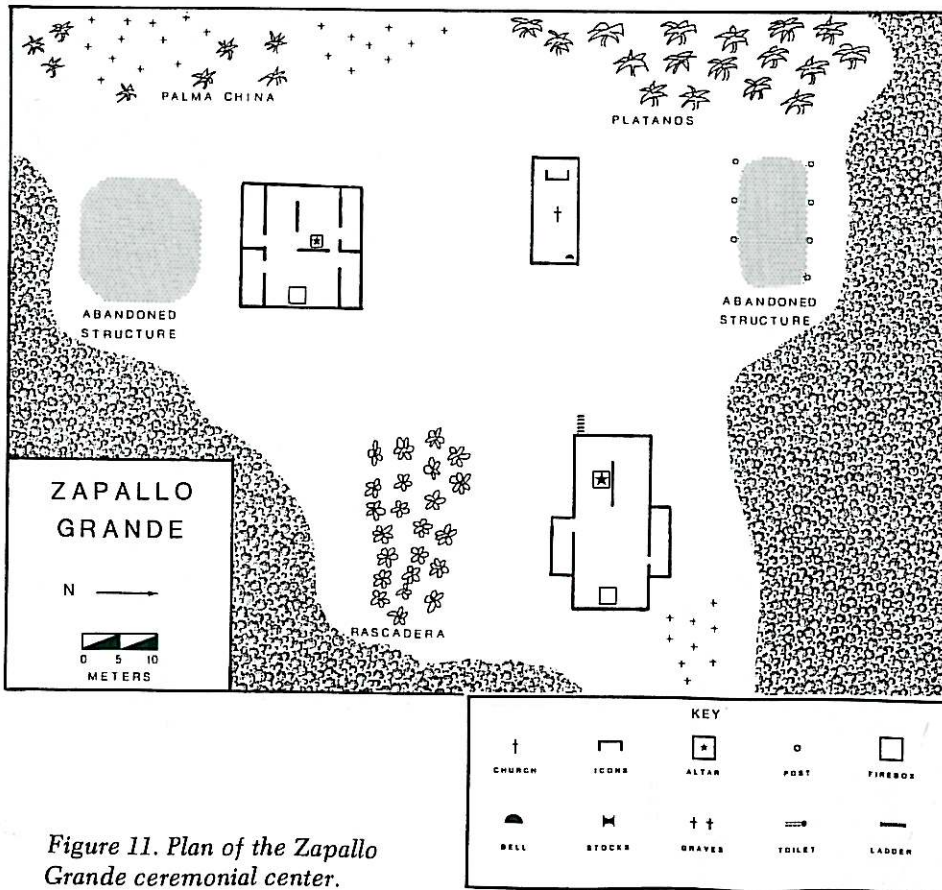


Figure 11. Plan of the Zapallo Grande ceremonial center.

Linda is within the sphere of the San Miguel ceremonial center. Membership in a particular ceremonial section, however, is assigned patrilineally (that is, through the father). Women of the Punta Venado section who have married men from Loma Linda and who reside in that area often return to Punta Venado for the big gatherings of Christmas and Easter.

Among Chachi ceremonial centers, Punta Venado is unique in having a number of separate guest houses, each assigned to a particular area within its territory. In essence, Punta Venado resembles a village, much like the ancestral village of Pueblo Viejo. In contrast, the ceremonial centers of San Miguel, Zapallo Grande, and Tzejpi bear a different aspect. As always, the church is present, but the separate guest houses of Punta Venado are collapsed into one or two extra-large structures with small attached compartments (see Figs. 10-12). Recalling the historical testimony that these three centers were founded after Punta Venado, we find no reason to doubt the Chachi's own account of these differences in terms of a temporal sequence: (1) originally there was Pueblo Viejo, a sedentary village; (2) then Punta Venado, a ceremonial center preserving the old form of a sedentary village; (3) and lastly, San Miguel, Zapallo Grande, and Tzejpi, designed to be ceremonial "hotels" providing short-term accommodations for a dispersed populace.

Until now, we have described the Chachi ceremonial center as a veritable "ghost town" except during the periodic festivities of Christmas and Easter. This description is not quite accurate. The centers are also used for smaller-scale and aperiodic events having to do with rites of passage.

Death and Marriage

The patrilineal rule of section membership is ultimately reinforced by death. Upon death, each Chachi is properly buried in his or her natal ceremonial center. Burial takes place beneath the floor of the appropriate

guest house. Such sub-floor burials, marked by postmortem offerings of food and candles, are still conspicuous at Punta Venado. When such sub-floor cemeteries become full, overflow burials are placed around the church or in a separate cemetery. In the most recently founded center of Tzejpi, however, sub-floor burial was never practiced, interment taking place in a separate cemetery. Among younger members of the Zapallo Grande section, sub-floor burial is perceived to be "unsanitary," and burial in a separate cemetery is increasingly the norm. These separate burial plots are typically marked by a decorative plant locally called *palma china* (Figs. 11-12). To a large extent, these changing mortuary practices at the upriver centers can be attributed to the presence of an active Protestant mission at Zapallo Grande that has urged the Chachi to discontinue sub-floor, in-house burial.

During the summer of 1989, we were permitted to attend a funeral at the San Miguel center. The following comments are abstracted from our field notes, which begin the night before the funeral.

The death wails wafting across the river to our basecamp started about midnight and continued for several hours, mingling with the background chorus of croaking toads and the rushing of the Cayapas. The women led the mourning in a rising and falling falsetto, while semi-sober men sobbed. The efforts of the curing shaman had failed and his patient had died, evidently of the dreaded malaria which takes such a heavy toll among the Chachi. At daybreak, the mourners in a flotilla of canoes—the lead canoe carrying the corpse of the young woman—left for San Miguel, the natal ceremonial center of the deceased, located about an hour's paddling time upriver.

We arrived at San Miguel shortly after the funeral train. About 20 people were present, most of the men inebriated on *aguardiente* (a cane liquor). Three grave-diggers, non-relatives of the deceased who were paid for their services in the same *aguardiente*, were excavating

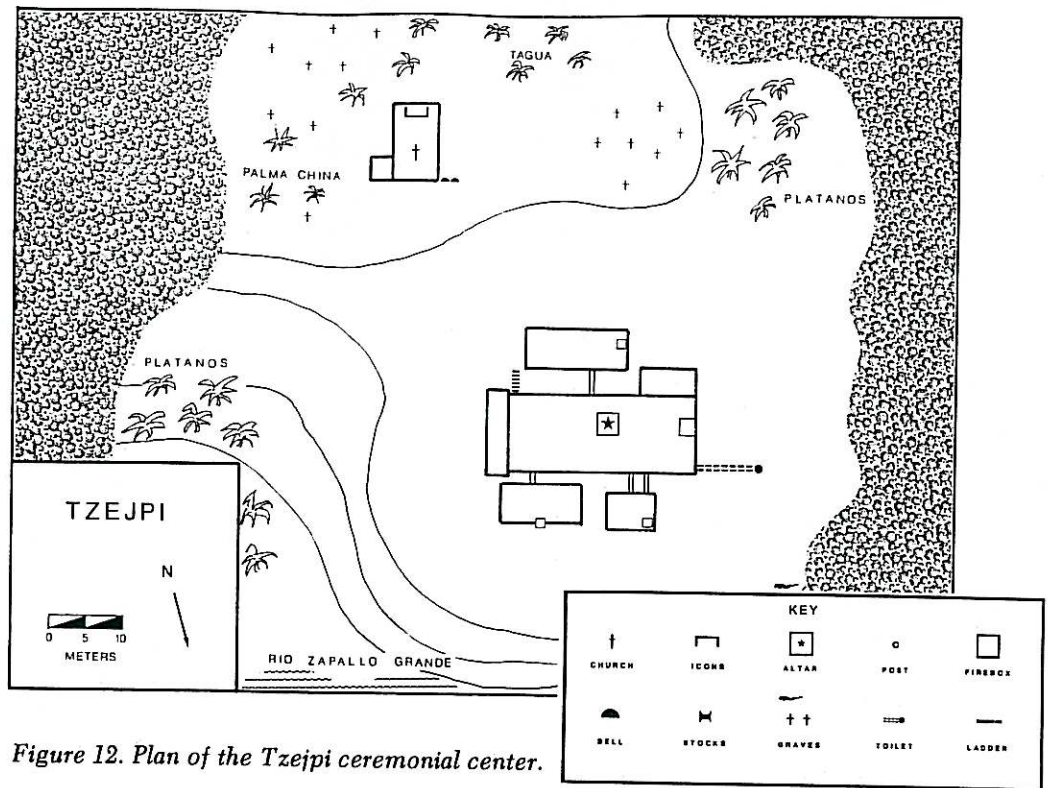


Figure 12. Plan of the Tzejpi ceremonial center.

the grave beneath the elevated house floor (the southernmost structure in Fig. 10). Their excavation, about one meter deep, cut through deposits of shell and the bones of earlier burials. While the grave-diggers dug their hole, the corpse was laid out in a cane casket, her face painted red and her body bedecked in fine clothes. As the grave-diggers

“[The Chachi ceremonial center] is calendar, court, church, and necropolis all wrapped up in one.”

lowered the casket into the pit, the hitherto outwardly tranquil, even indifferent, mourners gathered around the grave, some women resuming the falsetto wailings heard the night before, while close family members recounted the virtues of the deceased. A finely woven mat was placed over the lowered casket as the church bell was rung. Then

the grave was rapidly back-filled and everyone quickly left. As one mourner explained, it is not good to hang around the recently deceased.

Ceremonial centers also host weddings, although this is an option rather than a rule. A couple, in fact, may have been married and living together for years before a “wedding” or *boda* takes place. The wedding ceremony is organized and promoted by the *padrino* and *madrina* (godparents) of either spouse, and it is the godparents who provide the food for the wedding feast. During this ceremony, the couple is separated physically by an internal cane partition noted in our plans of San Miguel and Zapallo Grande (Figs. 10-11). Although we have not observed a “wedding,” we were able to photograph a Chachi girl sporting her wedding dress and jewelry in anticipation of a future *boda* (Fig. 4).

In summary, the Chachi ceremonial center is a multifunctional facility that hosts the calendric fiestas of Christmas and Easter, as well as gatherings occasioned by the less predictable events of death and marriage. It is calendar, court,

church, and necropolis all wrapped up in one.

The Ceremonial Center in Context

With the Chachi case in mind, we can return now to more general considerations of the vacant ceremonial center as a settlement type. Such centers can be viewed as one solution to a common problem, namely the often conflicting claims that subsistence and political demands pose for human populations. In the Cayapas Basin, essential resources—such as arable lands (the “black” soils favored by Chachi farmers), suitable woods for construction and fuel, and fish and game—are scattered along, and inland from, the all-vital river. The Chachi pattern of dispersed households, therefore, represents a sensible adjustment to this landscape.

There are counterforces at work, however. The Chachi exist within a larger, complex, and often competitive geopolitical landscape, in which the very maintenance of their lands depends upon their capacity to occasionally act collectively. In fact, without such capacity it is difficult to imagine what would enable the Chachi to persist as any sort of cohesive social group. In this context, the ceremonial center is the key institution at which the Chachi periodically aggregate. During these aggregations, large or small, participants reassert their identity as Chachi, exchange information concerning both local and more global matters, and expose and attempt to alleviate internal disputes. For the Chachi, such disputes—often the rupturing bane of small-scale societies—are rarely severe precisely because of the dispersed settlement pattern. Any interpersonal or inter-

group tensions mounting during a few days at the ceremonial center are resolved by simply going back home.

The ceremonial center, then, can be seen as a rather clever device for integrating a dispersed population. At the vacant center, church and houses stand sentinel-like, marking “Chachi country” with historically meaningful landmarks at which the Chachi periodically signal their demographic thunder in song, dance, and rum. This message, so appreciated by the Chachi, has not failed to reach their non-Chachi neighbors. As the celebrated Black author Adalberto Ortiz (1943) lamented years ago, *donde entierra juyungo, no entierra cayapa*, or from the Chachi perspective, “where the Chachi are buried, Blacks are not.” As a necropolis, the ceremonial center is a highly visible statement about land, history, and the future of a people.

21

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