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## The Chonos of the Chilean Archipelago

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When the islands off the southern coast of Chile were first being explored some hundreds of years ago, the seamen encountered a number of groups of nomadic canoe people. Those who inhabited the islands for about 300 miles between Chiloe and the Gulf of Penas were called Chonos. Nearly 200 years ago the last remnants of this tribe disappeared, only a few being reported seen later in 1875 (Cooper 1946a:49) and 1886 (Bridges 1948:132). As far as I am aware, they have not been reported since.

Not only did the people themselves disappear, however. The most complete records of their language vanished with the expulsion of the Jesuits from South America in 1767. What little information that has come down to us is insufficient to give anything but the broadest outline of their culture, and it is unclear if even the few words collected were truly Chonos (Cooper 1946a:48). For these reasons it should prove of some value to present information that Father Hanisch recently discovered in regards to their language and that Father Veenstra has collected in regards to people who might prove to be descendents of the Chonos. In this latter case there is a special degree of urgency, as we shall see.

The language issue has always been a crucial one. There has been considerable confusion due to various authors calling the same people by different names (see Cooper 1917:30-34 for an excellent summary). From the scanty cultural evidence available, the Chonos clearly shared many features with the Alacalufs, who lived bordering their territory to the south (Cooper 1946a:50). The question as to whether or not they constituted a distinct ethnic group or were close relations of the Alacalufs remained to be settled on linguistic grounds. Unfortunately, as Cooper (1946a:48) noted, "Not a single word of the Chonos language has come down to us, except, perhaps, the word Chono itself, three names of unidentified birds. . . and a few tribal, personal and geographical names. The three words listed by Fitz-Roy as Chonoan were more likely Alacalufan. Ferrufino's and Estevan's manuscripts in and on the Chonoan language have been lost, perhaps irretrievably."

In the course of research on the Jesuits in Chile, Father Hanisch came across a catechism in the Chonoan language which he published in a book (Hanisch 1972) that likely is not known to anthropologists and which is currently not easily available. For that reason I will present the catechism here with a few additional comments.

In a conversation with Father Hanisch he stated that the catechism was handwritten on two loose pages which were placed in the back of a book called *Breve relacion de las indios de Chile*. He found this book in the National Library of Rome (Mss. Ges. 1507; see Hanisch 1972:236). He said the book was dated 1767, but the few introductory remarks written along with the catechism (Hanisch 1972:237) indicate that the catechism itself dates from an earlier period. That the language is truly that of the Chonos is clear from reference being made to 160 Chonos living on the mission island of Chaulinec. Both Cooper (1917:47) and Harter (n. d.:14) refer to Chaulinec as being a reservation island for the Chonos, though Harter gives an earlier date for when the Chonos were first settled there. Since mention is made of Garcia's diary of his 1766-67 voyage, it seems likely that the introductory remarks were written later than the book, but before the Chonos finally left the reservations (probably in the late 1700's).

The catechism itself was originally used only by the older Chonos. At the time the introductory remarks were written it had fallen into disuse even among them, as by then they all could speak the language of Chiloe (Hanisch 1972:237). Father Hanisch believes the catechism to be complete as it is, and that the reason it was made so brief was because of its limited use among older Chonos and in order that it could be more easily memorized. Unfortunately, there was no translation of the catechism. There are a few Spanish words, and it is possible to make reasonable assumptions as to the meaning of some of the Chonos words. However, one of the questions (number 39) was so illegibly written that Father Hanisch was unable to make out all of it. The catechism that follows is arranged in the form of questions and answers (Hanisch 1972:237-239).

I do not have access at this time to detailed word lists of other languages of the area (Araucanian, Alacalufan and Tehuelchean) to attempt a serious comparative study. However, Cooper (1917:34-36) was able to demonstrate from the statements of people knowledgeable about both Araucanian and Chonoan that their languages were not mutually intelligible. He made a somewhat weaker case that Chonoan was distinct from Tehuelchean (Cooper 1917:36). As for Alacalufan, he came to the conclusion that it was lightly more probable that Chonoan was distinct

- 1.—Luentaumet Dios?
- 2.—Jo padre.
- 3.—Met jo-cautau-Dios?
- 4.—Jo padre.
- 5.—Iglesia taumet Dios?
- 6.—Jo padre.
- 7.—Acha taumet Dios?
- 8.—Jo padre.
- 9.—Ecu lammet Dios?
- 10.—Jo padre.
- 11.—Sam jeyeulam toquieu?
- 12.—Jo padre.
- 13.—Taumet Dios?
- 14.—Dios sap, Dios cot, Dios Espiritu Santo, tas persona, cayca.  
Dios ueñec.
- 15.—Dios sap?
- 16.—Jo padre.
- 17.—Dios cot?
- 18.—Jo padre.
- 19.—Dios Espiritu Santo?
- 20.—Jo padre.
- 21.—Dios tas?
- 22.—Yamchiu, tas persona, cayca Dios ueñec padre.
- 23.—Ti Dios eñjuhau yemamin?
- 24.—Jo padre.
- 25.—Yema zelajasmou?
- 26.—Jo padre.
- 27.—Queni cullin eyuic zeu agic Dios qui?
- 28.—Sam sam cau tau.
- 29.—Queni quiltema eyuic zeu agic Dios qui?
- 30.—Sam sam leng jaguaitau.
- 31.—Ki persona tas queni persona yentau tau?
- 32.—Dios cot.
- 33.—Queutim tecau?
- 34.—Señor Jesuchristo.
- 35.—Señor Jesuchristo cay acau zuquena Dios?
- 36.—Jo padre.
- 37.—Señor Jesuchristo cay acau zuquena yema?
- 38.—Jo padre.
- 39.—Zeu tau g. . . jo Señor Jesuchristo?
- 40.—Jo padre.
- 41.—Queguay tu zeu tau Señor Jesuchristo?
- 42.—Sua ta vla.
- 43.—Sam met jo quipet cay acua quēnau?
- 44.—Jo padre.



from Alacalufan, but made this suggestion with great reserve (Cooper 1917:36-41). In a later work he suggests that the difference may have been merely a dialectical one and felt that there were no grounds for classifying Chonoan as forming a distinct language family (Cooper 1946a: 49).

In the remarks accompanying the catechism, there is a sample of a language labeled as being that of the Calenches and Taijatafes. We know that these are the names Father Garcia gave to canoe people living south of the Gulf of Peñas in the late 1700's (Cooper 1917:31). Father Baeremaeker, who speaks Alacalufan, informed me that this was definitely in the Alacalufan language (cf. also the Alacalufan words in Cooper 1917: 13-22). The sample was a small part of a catechism, this time with a translation, and allows comparison with that found in the Chonos version: Dios chechar, Dios eyol, Dios Espíritu Santo taxu Dios maten cula cay persona (God father, God son, God Holy Spirit one God not more and three persons). In the explanation accompanying this, it is stated that chechar means father, eyol means son, taxu means one, while cula is a word taken from the "general language" (presumably Araucanian) because there was no word in Calenche for the number three. It seems likely that maten means more and cay means and.

This sample should be compared with number 14 and following lines of the Chonos catechism. There is little doubt that sap means father, cot means son, tas means three, ueñec means one and cayca means and (or but). Only the root of this latter word (aside from the Spanish terms) appears to be shared between the two languages. The Spanish words in the catechism are clear. The word jo appears to be translatable as yes. Presumably taumet (in the beginning of the text) means know (or something similar). Number 33 could mean something like "what is he called" or "what is his name". Numbers 35 and 37 presumably relate to questions in regards to Jesus having the nature of God and the nature of man. I will leave it to linguists to try and work out the meanings of the terms and grammatical features. Nonetheless, despite the text not being completely translatable, it does seem to establish Chonoan as being quite distinct from Alacalufan.

There is a further possibility that might be mentioned in this regard. In a book published after Cooper's last work on the Chonos (Cooper 1946a), it was stated that Thomas Bridges met Chonos near Wellington Island probably in 1886 (Bridges 1948:132). Despite their being so far south, it seems quite possible that they were truly Chonos as there were both Alacalufs and Yamanas with Bridges and only one of the Alacalufs

could speak the Chonos language (Bridges 1948:132). Since one of the main reasons for Bridges' trip was to gather linguistic data (Bridges 1948:131), it seems likely that, even if he was unable to gather material directly from the Chonos in the short time they met, he probably would have questioned the Chonos speaking Alacaluf about the language. One should not forget that this is the same Thomas Bridges who wrote the *Yamana-English Dictionary* with 23,000 words (Bridges 1933). The papers of Thomas Bridges have been kept by his descendents, so there could well be a sample of the Chonos language among them which would be of great help in regards to its classification.

There has always been something of a mystery about the disappearance of the Chonos in the late 1700's Cooper (1946a:49) states that the Chonos were living on the mission island of Cailin in 1790, after which only a sole family was reported in 1875. However, reference has already been made above to Bridges' encounter with some Chonos in 1886. Since that time all later observers declared that the region of the Chonos was uninhabited except by a few Whites and Chilotan Indians (Cooper 1946a:49).

Father Veenstra has been working in the Chonos Archipelago on and off for several years, two and a half of which were spent working in a settlement in the Guaitecas Islands. He became interested in the Chonos and has also collected considerable material on the customs of the people currently living in the Guaitecas. He has seen a book in Chiloe in which a letter was published from the Chonos of Cailin Island to the Governor of Chiloe. This was dated either 1793 or 1795 and stated that if they were not treated better they would leave. He saw in another publication that they had left the island in 1796 (Enrich 1891:434).

It might be added here that the Jesuits set up island mission reservations for the Chonos (and later a few Alacalufs) after 1710 (Cooper 1917:46). According to Father Veenstra a major reason for this was that large numbers of Chonos were being taken as slaves. Since the Jesuits were not under the control of the Government of Spain, they were able to administer the reservations themselves and thus protect the Chonos. However, after the Jesuits were expelled in 1767, the reservations were taken over by the Franciscans and came more directly under the control of the central government. Apparently the Chonos became dissatisfied with their treatment and decided to leave.

Of course, by this time the Chonos were conversant in other languages, especially Araucanian, the language of Chiloe (Hanisch 1972:327), and were familiar with the customs of the Chilotes. As Empeiraire



(1963:60) suggests, it is possible that some settled in Chiloe. But, aside from the fact that at least a few returned to the archipelago (where Chonos were encountered in 1875 and 1886), Father Veenstra has gathered evidence that indicates the possibility of a number of them having returned and settled in the Guaitecas Islands.

The Guaitecas seem to have always been an important region for the Chonos. Indeed, the natives of these islands were the first ones referred to as Chonos by the Jesuits in the early 1600's (Cooper 1917:30-31). Delco, a leader of the Chonos about this time, was from the Guaitecas (Cooper 1917:85). Father Veenstra has seen large shell middens there indicating the area has long been utilized by a seafaring people. This evidence is most pronounced on Guaiteca Island itself and nearby Ascension Island. The two form a sheltered bay with exits for small boats to all sides. One can easily cross on foot the narrow stretch of land on Guaiteca Island to enter the Puquitin Channel from the Pacific side or vice-versa. The large shell middens on the southern side of Guaiteca Island facing Ascension Island indicate that this area in particular has been rich in food resources and long a favored settlement site. It was in the Puquitin Channel that Capt. Simpson saw a family of Chonos in 1875 (Cooper 1917:47).

There is a settlement on the northwestern corner of Ascension Island called Repollal. It apparently was not seen by Simpson, but must have existed at that time because a 74 year old man told Father Veenstra that his grandfather found people living there when he first arrived. Most of the people in Repollal know only that their forefathers have always lived there. It seems likely, therefore, that Simpson only traveled into the eastern end of the channel to a point where it narrows and the water becomes quite shallow.

It is the small group of about 80 people in Repollal that Father Veenstra feels may well be the descendents of the Chonos. Culturally and linguistically there is little to distinguish them from the fishermen of Chiloe, and they strongly would resent anyone suggesting that they were related to the Chonos. Nevertheless, Father Veenstra notes that there are a number of things that point to such a relationship.

Two of these have already been referred to, namely that the settlement appears to be in the heart of traditional Chonos country and was also the area where Chonos were met in 1875. Repollal is in fact one of the few settlements of any kind to be found in the Chonos Archipelago. Melinka, the largest settlement in the archipelago and also located on Ascension Island, is said to be more recent. It is currently a port and

trading settlement with a mixed population. This contrasts with the more homogeneous population of Repollal where people have maintained ties through the generations.

The tradition of hunting and boating is still strong in Repollal. Don David, a 74 year old man and one of the central figures of the community, is considered to be one of the best small boat builders in the region. According to Father Veenstra, the people of Repollal are the only ones who have the skill and knowledge to venture in small boats into the dangerous Pacific waters on the western side of the archipelago. Needless to say, they know the waters of the archipelago and the areas for hunting and fishing better than anyone. Their hunting mentality is shown in a number of ways, as, for example, in their furs being the best prepared and, in contrast with the Chilotes, their lack of interest in such settled pursuits as gardening and bee keeping. Yet they are strikingly clean in comparison with Chilotes, a fact that Father Veenstra feels is explainable by their ancestors having come from the mission islands.

Many of the people of Repollal also differ physically from the Chilotes. Some of the men are over six feet in height. The question of the size of the Chonos has long been a problem due to the contradictory reports. Cooper (1917:41-43) once again provides a fine summary in this regard. Although he does not accept a number of the reports of a "gigantic" people (Cooper 1917:41), he does provide sufficient information to enable one to conclude that at least there were tall people (presumably Tefuelches) inhabiting the mainland to the east of the Chonos (Cooper 1917:31, 41, also 1946b:132). These "gigantic" people reportedly used to go at times with the Chonos to Chiloe, (Cooper 1917:41). Even should the Chonos originally have been of moderate height (as, for example, the Alacalufs), an explanation could be given that there was intermarriage among the groups with the result visible today. The people of Repollal are generally lighter skinned than the Chilotes, something also reported for the Chonos (Cooper 1917:42).

Father Veenstra would be the first to admit that there are other explanations for what has been described above and that it by no means has been definitely established that the people of Repollal are descendants of the Chonos. Even if they were, there has been considerable intermarriage with the Chilotes through the years, and there is nothing that can be pointed to as clearly originating from the Chonos. Nonetheless, Father Veenstra feels that the factors mentioned above, when combined with myriad minor details too numerous to mention here, add up to a reasonable case, one that at least deserves to be checked into more thoroughly.



The question as to their relationships to the Chonos may still be capable of being answered, and, if so, would help explain what happened to this vanished tribe. In the parochial archives of Castro, Achao and Calbuco exist books with certificates of baptism and marriage administered by the Jesuits since 1720 (Harter n. d.:15). It might also be possible to locate records kept in the course of the so-called "circular missions", during which various islands were visited by the missionaries. They kept note of the names, deaths and births of all those associated with a particular chapel (Harter n. d.: 19). There should also be records kept by the Franciscans and the Navy authorities when they maintained a base in Puerto Low on Guaiteca Island. Though far less likely, it might even be possible to locate the invaluable records of Estevan and Ferrufino.

Archaeological investigations in the Guaitecas Islands could help to settle a number of questions relating to the material culture and physical features of the Chonos. Burial in caves was common among the Chonos (Cooper 1946a:53), and it might be noted here that Father Veenstra has seen a couple of caverns on the north coast of Guaiteca Island in which bones have been found. As Bird (1946:24) has stated relative to Chiloe, excavation of the middens might yield information which would clarify the relationship between the coastal cultures of southern and northern Chile.

None of this may seem to be of particular urgency. However, according to Father Veenstra, the community of Repollal will likely disband after the death of 74 year old Don David. They have had an increasingly difficult time making a living, various projects initiated by Fathers Veenstra and Baeremaecker notwithstanding. Many women migrate to Chiloe to find work and often end up marrying there. The consequence is a male/female ratio in Repollal that might be as high as 4:1. Four or five families have already left within the last five years. There are currently only 15 houses from what appears to have been a settlement at least four times as large.

A valuable study could be made on current day practises, some of which might conceivably shed light on those of the Chonos, e. g. in regards to traditional camping and hunting places. The former in particular are limited due to terrain, currents and weather patterns and many of the places used today must have been utilized by the Chonos in times past. Many of the practises of the people today, though not being originally Chono, are themselves in the process of disappearing as people migrate, government restrictions are placed on the use of resources and modern equipment is introduced. As for trying to trace the ancestors of the people of Repollal, clearly no time should be lost.



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## Note

After this report had been sent to press, I came across an article on the Chonos which contains a number of points of interest. A short vocabulary is presented which was obtained from a man in 1937 who the author claims to have been a Chono. This language appears to be quite distinct

from both Alacalufan and the Chonoan presented in the catechism. The author argues that the name of Chonos used to denote themselves was Wayteka (i. e. Guaiteca) and that they felt they originated from the Ninualac Canal (shown as being to the south of Isla Leucayec on the author's map, but marked as being south of Isla Teresa on the map of the Instituto Geografico Militar). He states that they would go there to place the bodies of important persons in caves. He also feels that the original area dominated by the Chonos was both further north (encompassing southern Chiloe) and further south (beyond Isla Wellington) than is indicated on most ethnographic maps. See Llares Samitier, "El Grupo Chono o Wayteka y los demás pueblos Fuegopatagonia" in *Runa*, Volume 10 (1960-1965):123-194, Buenos Aires, 1967.