

# "visit me with safety"

The old gods of the Lacandones are still alive, but retreating.

BY RICHARD A. COWAN



Far up the Río Usumacinta, well past the modern city of Villahermosa and the ancient ruins of Palenque in the Mexican state of Chiapas, lies Metzabok, a tiny settlement of Lacandone Mayas. There is a place where the old gods of the Mayas still live, their privacy virtually undisturbed by foreign visitors.

Early in the twentieth century Alfred M. Tozzer, an archeologist from Harvard University, journeyed to the Lacandone area in search of living survivals from the classic Mayan civilization, whose remnants he was excavating. He found few parallels to his work in the structure of Lacandone society or in the buildings they inhabited. These people were probably always *massewal*, or common folk, living in tiny communities of brush huts and organizing their lives solely through family ties to various animal totems. But Tozzer learned that to an amazing degree the Lacandones still followed the same religious rituals and customs once practiced by the priests who climbed the pyramids of the magnificent Mayan cities that were mysteriously deserted more than 1,000 years ago.

True, Kukulcan—the famous feath-

*Pepe, the old man who preserves his tribe's ancient rituals, prepares sacrifices of incense, food, and drink to the gods of the Lacandone Mayans.*

ered serpent—had become just a mythical snake that must symbolically die at every eclipse of the sun. And the Lacandones had reduced the ornateness of the many-tiered Mayan heaven to a land little more complex than their own settlements. Yet, like the classic Mayas of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and Tikal, they still spoke of how the peoples of the world were created of baked clay and of how the gods gave them corn seeds made from the stars of the Milky Way and of how the world would end in darkness when the jaguars of Cisin, the god of the underworld, would get loose and eat the sun and the moon.

Hachacyum, the creator; his wife, Akna; Metzabok, the god of rain; and all the other old gods still lived among the Lacandones, albeit with new or simplified attributes. And it turned out that they were still worshiped with a ceremony that extended backward through Mayan tradition at least to the heyday of the great Mayan cities.

When Tozzer visited the Lacandones, he discovered that each god was honored with food and incense

placed in his own special *incensario*, or god pot. God pots are small clay bowls, modeled on one side of the outer surface into a grotesque face. They are identical to artifacts found at the Cave of the Winds, close to the ruins of Chichén Itzá. According to most archeologists, they form part of a timeless Mayan religious pattern.

Even now the Lacandones of Metzabok worship with god pots very similar to those excavated at the ancient ruins. Each pot is the servant of a distinct god. The Lacandones hope that once the spirit of the pot has accepted an offering the spirit will bear the offering away to the god who is its master. Inside every bowl is the small stone idol of the true god of the god pot. Although the Lacandones remake their god pots every year in a sacred renewal ceremony, these stone medallions supposedly have been passed down from earliest times. They symbolically link the Lacandones of today both to past generations and to their present gods.

In every Lacandone settlement there is one old man who remembers all of his tribe's religious lore. At Metzabok it is Pepe who places incense to burn in the bowls of the god pots and who pours food and drink on the protruding lips of the pots. The heat produced by the burning incense vaporizes the provisions. Their fumes, as well as the smoke of the incense, travel upward to the skies. Thus the spirit of the god pot carries food to its master. The suppliant hopes that the god will be pleased and will visit the settlement, bringing good health and long life. Throughout the ages Maya Indians have shared their bounty with their gods, knowing that only if they make the gods happy can they ensure their own success.

Pepe chants as he feeds the gods. He describes what ritual is being performed and asks for well-being, for freedom from pain. He ends with a recitation of the names of the Lacandones for whom the offering is being made. Feeding the pots is a festival, not a solemn affair. The old man drinks native beer as he chants and feeds the gods. Sometimes his speech becomes slurred, but he retains a constant, slow rhythm. The other men join in his singing, for all Lacandone men eat and drink with their gods. They never stand apart from them:

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BRIAN BRAKE, MAGNUM

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For the Lacandone  
gods this voyage  
up the river  
will be the last.



*Here is my offering of incense.  
Raise it up to Metzabok, our father.  
Restore it to our master.*

*I have burned incense for decades,  
Metzabok, descend to see my gifts.*

*I burn incense for your welfare.  
Do not trample me with fevers.*

*Now I light incense at daybreak.  
Visit me with safety.*

This god-pot chant and those that follow are legacies of Alfred M. Tozzer. Tozzer attended several god-pot ceremonies and wrote of them in his report to the Archaeological Institute of America. There his experiences remained, in a rare volume, only occasionally seen, and then only by scholars.

Last year, while I was doing background research for a film on the Lacandones entitled *Twilight of the Maya*, I chanced upon Tozzer's report. I found a whole series of god-pot chants translated into English from the original Lacandone Mayan. Tozzer reproduced these chants with no frills and with no concessions to modern American poetic taste. Nevertheless, here was a chance to feel for myself a little of the Lacandone spirit.

To me, whether the Lacandones were offering their gods incense, corn gruel,

*Native beer is enjoyed during  
worship, for the Lacandones' rites  
are festivals blessed with humor,  
camaraderie, and a desire to merge  
land, people, and divinities.*

native beer, or tamales, their religious intent seems always the same. They seek a merging of land, people, and gods into one unified moment of magical communion, still tempered with humor and joy. By rendering a few of these chants into contemporary English, I hope I can convey a little of what the Lacandones experience when they call on their gods. Perhaps this chant for feeding *balché*, or native beer, to Metzabok will give you some of their feeling:

*Here is my offering of balché.  
Receive it with pleasure.  
Carry it to Metzabok, our protector.  
We pray that he sees us.*

*I am pouring out balché so you may  
drink.  
I am giving you balché for your  
welfare.*

*I pour you balché.  
May my children continue to enjoy  
life.*

*I pour you balché.  
May my wife continue to enjoy life.*

*I pour you balché.  
May I continue to enjoy life.*

And here is a chant to accompany the feeding of *posol*, or corn gruel, to Metzabok:

*My offering of posol to you, oh father.*

*I am dipping out posol for your lips.  
May you carry it to Metzabok, our  
protector.  
May he come to charm our lives.*

*Eat my offering of posol.  
Take this offering of posol for your  
welfare.*

*Take this offering of posol in behalf  
of my children.  
Take this offering of posol in behalf  
of my wife.  
Take this offering of posol in behalf  
of me, that I may enjoy life.*

Once the gods lived at Palenque, Yaxchilán, Bonampak, and the other Mayan ruins near Metzabok.

Recently large lumber companies have begun to invade the forest, destroying the ancient Lacandone refuges. Now the gods have withdrawn to hidden caves, far, far up the Usumacinta in a sacred place still untouched by invaders. For the Lacandone gods, this voyage up the river will be the last. There are no more holy places to which they can escape.

When a Lacandone undertakes a long journey, he must first appeal to the gods. Here is a traditional chant for a safe trip:

*They are going.  
Guard them, my fathers.  
Do not permit any evil.*

*They are going.  
Do not allow snakes to strike them.  
Do not allow jaguars to hurt them.*

*They are going to Palenque.  
Do not allow sticks to spear them.  
Do not allow fevers to burn them.*

*When they return, they will give you  
offerings.  
They will burn incense.  
They will give you posol to eat.  
They will give you balché to drink.*

*Guard them, my fathers.  
Do not permit any evil. □*

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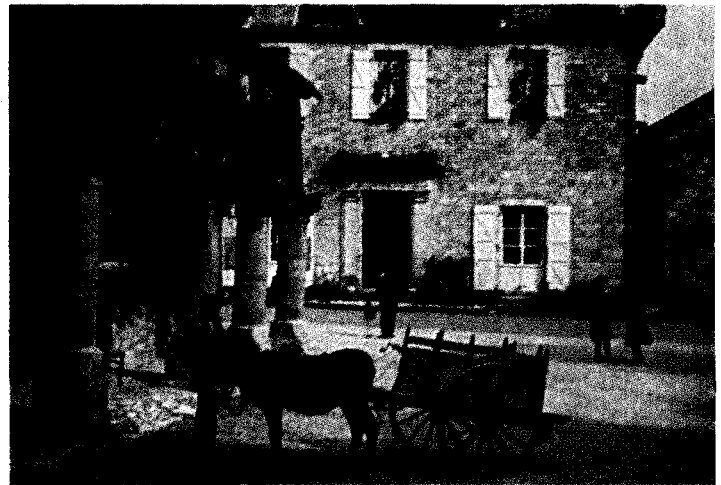
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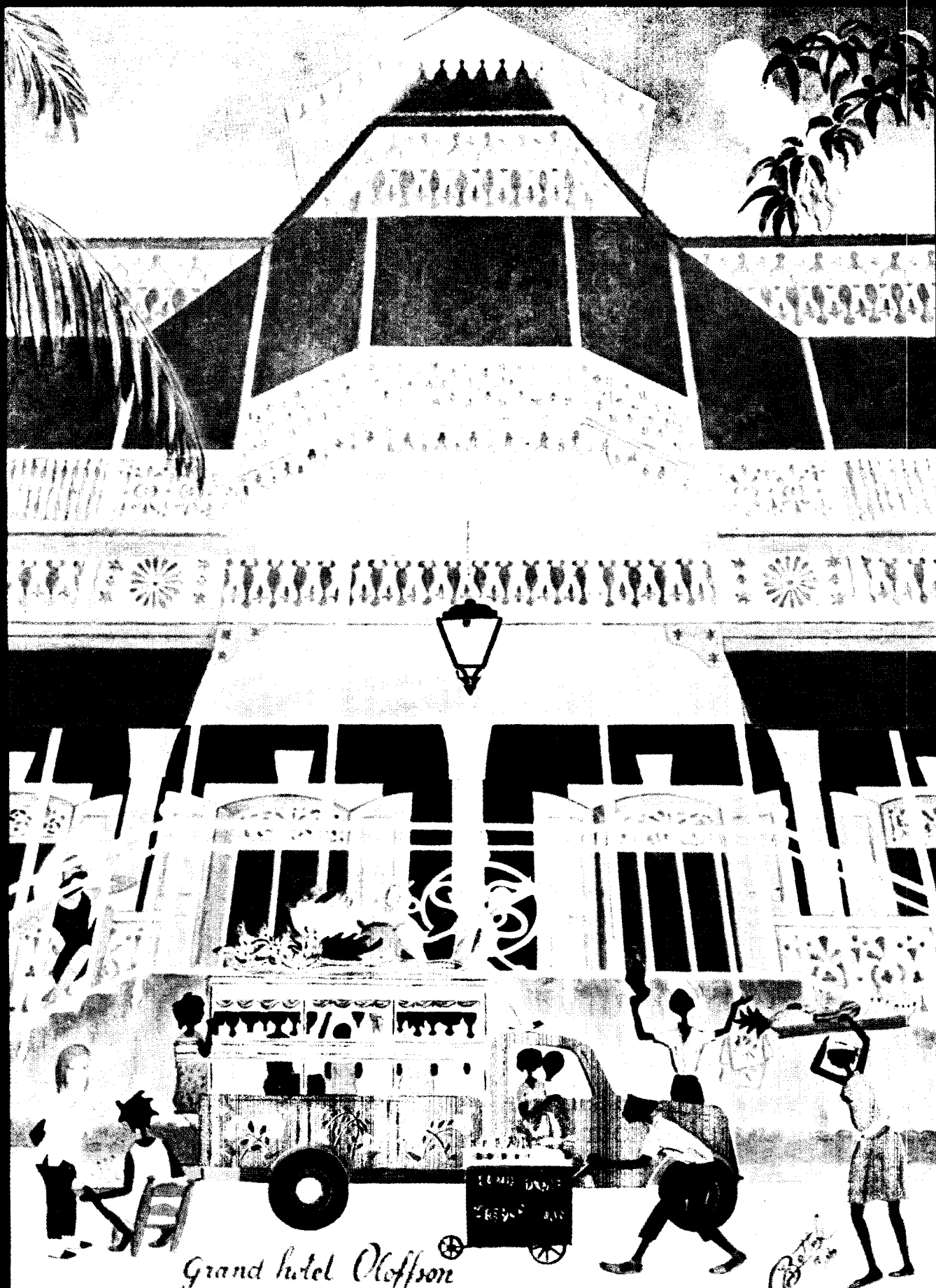
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Grand Hotel Oleffson

# what's so great about the Grand Hotel Oloffson?

BY BETH DAY

Haiti is  
changing,  
and you can  
hear all  
about it at  
the bar of  
one of the  
world's  
most unusual  
hotels.

"Great" hotels mean different things to different people: superior service, architecture, ambience, setting, cuisine. I was curious whether the word really applied to the Grand Hotel Oloffson at Port au Prince, Haiti, the tiny, troubled black republic's first—and for many years only—hotel. Aficionados unblushingly proclaim the little (twenty-two-room) Oloffson as "one of the greatest hotels in the world." A lady author from Westchester County, on the other hand, sniffed that the Oloffson was "overrated, uncomfortable, awful. People go there to see celebrities," she told me, "or because they are masochists at heart and enjoy being insulted by Al Seitz." And *Fielding's Guide* steers guests away from such "primitive bivouacs."

If cloying service, luxurious furnishings, or round-the-clock activities are your bag, by all means pass up the Oloffson. "Great" means something quite different in this intimate, offbeat spot. "It's a private club," one Oloffson regular insisted. "A nonstop house party," another glowed. Set designer Oliver Messel recommended it to his niece (by marriage) Princess Margaret as a perfect getaway spot for an informal holiday. Repeat guests—a list of hearty individualists that includes such theatrical and literary greats as Sir John Gielgud, Truman Capote, James Jones, Ann Bancroft, and Charles Addams—consider the Oloffson "a meeting place for friends."

Despite its impressive title, the Grand Hotel Oloffson is hardly a hotel at all. A rickety, rambling, white-mahogany palace perched on a mountain-side in unfashionable downtown Port au Prince, it is at first glance a spooky, bewildering mass of cupolas, wooden fretwork, and minarets, towering eerily above a grove of mangoes, papayas, and coconut palms, its empty eye of a bell

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*Beth Day's eleventh book, Sexual Life Between Blacks and Whites, will be published this month by World.*

tower glaring forbiddingly at the new arrival. "You expected a witch to open the door to you," wrote novelist Graham Greene, "or a maniac butler. . . . But in the sunlight . . . it seemed fragile and period and pretty and absurd, an illustration from a book of fairy tales."

"You won't like it here!" Al Seitz, a burly, sunburned man in swim trunks, bellowed down from the hotel's open verandah to a taxi-load of fussy-looking newcomers in the drive below. "Why don't you try the El Rancho?" (A second, more relaxed-looking pair of arrivals was allowed upstairs for a rum punch, and, as they passed that test, a room was miraculously found for them.) "We want people who enjoy this kind of place, and people that we enjoy," Seitz says simply. (A passionate hosteler, Seitz is known to have sent one guest packing who didn't enjoy the food, during Haiti's politically dark days in the 1960s when Seitz had only two paying customers at the hotel.)

At first glance Seitz appears more bouncer than hotel owner. "Like it here—or leave," his attitude suggests, and Oloffson regulars go along with this. Perhaps the greatest evidence of devotion occurred when the hotel was completely without water for three days during the height of the season a few years ago; although it was full, not one guest checked out. When a fellow guest was checking out after stoically sharing his suite with nests of honeybees that the Haitian staff, for religious reasons, had refused to remove, Seitz congratulated him: "You passed through without a crisis!"

Sue Seitz, Al's willowy, gracious, blonde wife, who went to Haiti as a technician with the Schweitzer Hospital, has more patience with guests than her husband has and treats each one as if he or she had arrived at her personal invitation. Together they make a balanced pair of hosts—the serene and gracious front of the hand, the raffish and sardonic back of it in one warm clasp.