

**Ethnobotany
of the Chácobo
Indians,
Beni, Bolivia**

Second Edition

Brian M. Boom



Scientific Publications Department
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Bronx, New York 10458-5126 U.S.A.
(718) 817-8721 • FAX (718) 817-8842

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Ethnobotany of the Chácobo Indians, Beni, Bolivia¹

BRIAN M. BOOM

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Abstract

Boom, B. M. (The New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, New York 10458, U.S.A.). Ethnobotany of the Chácobo Indians, Beni, Bolivia. *Adv. Econ. Bot.* **4**: 1-74. Second edition. 1996.—Results are presented for an ethnobotanical study of the Chácobo Indians, a small Panoan group of Amazonian Bolivia. Information about the history and current status of the tribe is given. This is followed by a description of the study area and the methodology employed. A total of 360 species of vascular plants, in at least 221 genera and 79 families, are accounted for based on five months of intensive collecting and interviewing in the Chácobo village of Alto Ivón. Of this total, 305 species, in at least 197 genera and 75 families, are recorded as being utilized by the Chácobo. The use of plants in the Chácobo culture is discussed. Then, the importance of the forest to the Chácobo is considered in light of a one-hectare ethnoecological inventory of the trees at a site near Alto Ivón. It is shown that 82% of the species and 95% of the individual trees in the hectare are utilized.

Resumen

Se presentan los resultados de un estudio etnobotánico de los indígenas Chácobo, un pequeño grupo de la región amazónica de Bolivia. Se entrega información acerca de la situación actual y de la historia de la tribu. A esto sigue una descripción del área de estudio y de la metodología empleada. Un total de 360 especies de plantas vasculares, en por lo menos 221 géneros y 79 familias, se toman en cuenta sobre la base de colecciones intensivas y entrevistas llevadas a cabo en la aldea chácoba en Alto Ivón.

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De este total, 305 especies en por lo menos 197 géneros y 75 familias se registran como útiles para los Chácobo. Se discute el uso de las plantas en su cultura y se considera la importancia de la selva para los Chácobo, según un inventario etnoecológico de los árboles de 1 hectárea en un sitio cercano a Alto Ivón. Se muestra que un 82% de las especies y un 95% de los árboles individuales de la hectárea son utilizados.

Introduction

There is currently a great deal of justified concern over the rapid destruction of Amazonian rainforests. One aspect of this complex problem that is often overlooked is the concomitant destruction of indigenous rainforest peoples. Because of the many factors that combine to acculturate Indian tribes in Amazonia, the people may survive as individuals, but will lose their tribal integrity. Either way, cultural extinction means, among other things, the irreparable loss of an immense wealth of information about plants and knowledge of the ways in which these peoples have successfully interacted with their forest environment for many centuries.

Just as the vegetation is not uniform throughout Amazonia, neither are the native peoples who live there. Naturally, there are many similarities among the tribes, especially those of the same language family, but each one has its own unique way of viewing and utilizing the plant world. For this reason it is critical that ethnobotanists study the plants used by as many different tribes as possible. Future generations of investigators will have a much more limited sample from which to draw.

The Institute of Economic Botany of The New York Botanical Garden is presently conducting a four-year comparative study of Amazonian Indian ethnobotany. The primary focus is a quantification of plant use among each tribe studied. As the first tribe to be studied in this project, the Chácobo Indians of Bolivia were selected because they had never been the subjects of an ethnobotanical investigation, and because they are in the midst of an extremely rapid acculturation phase. Some aspects of culture (e.g., ceremonies, traditional mode of dress, and supernatural beliefs) have already been lost. Other aspects, including their botanical knowledge, are to a greater degree intact and provide an invaluable reservoir of information that in the very near future could be lost as well.

An overview of Amazonian ethnobotany is planned by the present author in conjunction with Dr. William Balée at the completion of the four-year project; the Chácobo data presented herein will be reviewed then in this comparative context. Likewise, a separate paper is planned on the empirical bases of Chácobo ethnomedicine, so reference to the chemical literature is not made herein. What is intended here is a catalogue along the lines produced by Vickers and Plowman (1984) for the Siona/Sequoia; in fact, their format served as a model for much of the present paper.

Bolivia has an extremely rich diversity of indigenous cultures. Thirty distinct groups, representing over eleven language families, were recently listed for the country (Table I). The Aymara and Quechua of the Andes are certainly the best known and most numerous of these groups, but the real diversity is found in the lowland forests and savannas of the eastern two-thirds of the country. With the exception of the Sirionó (Holmberg, 1950), scarcely any of these tribes have received the attention of anthropologists, let alone ethnobotanists. The most substantial body of literature, mostly linguistic in nature, is listed by Oporto (1981) of the Summer Institute of Linguistics; included are references to works on the Araona, Cavineña, Chácobo, Baure, Chipaya, Chiquitano, Ese ejja, Guaraní, Guarayu, Ignaciano, Itonama, Movima, Sirionó, and Tacana. A recent discussion of the "current" situation of the lowland Bolivian Indians is given by Riester (1975).

Table I

Linguistic groups of Bolivia. Listed are the tribes of each group and the estimated population as of 1980. (Source: Summer Institute of Linguistics, n.d.)

ARAWAKAN Baure, 4000 Ignaciano, 4000 Trinitario, 5000	TUPI-GUARANIAN Guaraní (Izocenio, Chiriguano) Guarayu, 5000 Pauserna, 60 Sirionó, 550 Tapiete (Guasurango) [?] Yuquí, 150
CHAPACURAN Iténez (Moré), 150	
MATACO-MACA Mataco (Vejoz), 500	MACRO-MAYAN Chipaya, 750
PANOAN Chácobo, 260 Pacahuara, 9 Yaminahua, 150	YURACAREAN Yuracaré (Yura), 2500
QUECHUAMARAN Aymara [no estimate] Quechua [no estimate]	ZAMUCOAN (SAMUKU) Ayoreo (Ayoré, Morotoco), 1500
TACANAN Araona, 55 Cavineña, 500 Ese Ejja, 1000 Reyesano, 1000 Tacana, 3500	NOT CLASSIFIED Callawalla, 50 Cayubaba, 25 Chiquitano, 20,000 Itonama (Saramo), 110 Leco, 200 Movima, 1000
MOSETENAN Tsimane (Mosetén), 4500	

Ethnobotanical studies from this part of South America that are substantiated with voucher specimens are especially scanty, and few of them have been published. Notable exceptions are the studies carried out on medicinal plants of the Callawalla (Oblitas Poblete, 1969) and on the use of *chamairo* (*Mussatia hyacinthina* (Standley) Sandw., Bignoniaceae) among several lowland tribes, mostly in the Río Beni watershed (Davis, 1983). A report on the ethnobotany of the Chimane is presently being prepared (Davis, pers. comm.). An ethnobotanical study of the Yuquí (a tribe discovered relatively recently in a remote region northwest of Santa Cruz, Bolivia) is now in progress (H. Neal, pers. comm.).

Bolivia's official policy towards the protection of its large indigenous population is not as yet clearly defined. The lowland Indians, such as the Chácobo, are especially ignored. In contrast to neighboring Brazil with its Indian protection service (FUNAI), Bolivia has no such organization. As a consequence, the niche has been filled over the years by various missionary groups. A review of how pervasive the missionary influence has been among Amazonian Indians in Ecuador was presented recently by Vickers (1977); it serves as an example of what has transpired throughout much of Amazonia.

Until recently, missionaries have operated almost *carte blanche* in Bolivia. Now, however, the government has started to restrict the activities of some of them. For example, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an organization that has had a major

impact on the cultures of numerous tribes in Bolivia, was unable to renew its contract with the government several years ago and that group is now phasing out its Bolivian operations. The SIL worked with the Chácobo from 1953 to about 1980. The Swiss Evangelical Mission, based in Riberalta, replaced the SIL in about 1980 in its work with some of the tribes in the Amazonian region of Bolivia, including the Chácobo; this Mission has been in rather constant contact with the Chácobo since then.

In light of the some thirty years of continuous missionary influence, and the concomitant acculturation pressures, the urgency to investigate the ethnobotany of the Chácobo was clear. This monograph purports to be an accounting of the plants known to and used by the Chácobo of Alto Ivón, the principal tribal village, located along the Río Ivón some 70 air miles south of the town of Riberalta. The information was gathered from November 19, 1983 through May 1, 1984, the period of the year in which the Bolivian Amazon is experiencing its rainy season.

The Chácobo

The Chácobo belong to the Panoan language family of Amazonian Indians (Mason, 1950). Of the dozen or so extant Panoan tribes, the Chácobo remain one of the least known (Kensinger, n.d. and pers. comm.). Late in the last century they lived in small groups in northeastern Bolivia, scattered between Lago Rogoaguado and the Río Mamoré. Since then, they were forced northward by more aggressive Tacanan tribes. Their range and numbers were further diminished by the encroaching criollo rubber tappers. It seems that they were spared any serious disease epidemics or being hunted like wild animals as was the fate of some indigenous groups in eastern Bolivia. As early as 1887 there were two groups of Chácobo on the Río Ivón, one comprising six families and the other four (Métraux, 1948). Cardus (1886), in one of the earliest accounts of the tribe, gave a short list of Chácobo words and noted that despite several missionary efforts none of the Chácobo would leave the freedom of wild life in the forest for Christian civilization. He concluded his account by saying that he knew of no instance in which they had harmed anybody, but to him they seemed very serious and arrogant. Nordenskiöld (1923) devoted four chapters to the Chácobo in his book, based principally on his visits to the villages of Cocoya and Mashishoya on the Río Yata. Métraux (1948) summarized what little was known of the Chácobo at the time, most of which seems to have been derived from Nordenskiöld's observations.

After Nordenskiöld, the next ethnographer to visit the Chácobo, Wanda Haenke, did so at a very important time. Until the early 1950s the Chácobo essentially had lived outside the Bolivian cash economy. They were seminomadic hunter/gatherers, swidden agriculturalists, the primary cultigens being sweet manioc, corn, and bananas. They successfully avoided most contact with outsiders by living in isolated areas along small rivers and by moving whenever anyone encroached too closely. Haenke visited the Chácobo along the Río Benicito at a time when religious and government organizations were beginning to take an active interest in the tribe. In 1953 the New Tribes Mission made contact with a small group of Chácobo. Then, in 1954 the Bolivian government became involved directly:

Two months before our arrival [1954], in an effort to start civilizing them [the Chácobo] by getting them used to sedentary habits and a settled life, the Bolivian Government had established an Indian agency, Nuflo de Chaves, located about 15 km from Porto Limones and inhabited by a group numbering 28 individuals. In the area surrounding the agency there were still five villages of savage Chácobo, it was claimed (Haenke, 1958: 105).



BRIAN M. BOOM

Brian M. Boom was born on 24 February 1954 in Memphis, Tennessee. He attended Memphis State University (B.S. in Biology 1977), the University of Tennessee (M.S. in Botany 1979), and the City University of New York (M.Phil., Ph.D. in Biology 1983). During his doctoral studies he held a Herbarium Fellowship at The New York Botanical Garden (1980–1983); his dissertation was a taxonomic revision of the genus *Isertia* (Rubiaceae). Upon graduation he undertook an ethnobotanical postdoctoral assignment in Bolivia as a Research Associate in The New York Botanical Garden's Institute of Economic Botany (1983–1984); it was during this period that his Chácobo ethnobotanical fieldwork was conducted. Since 1984 he has been an Assistant Curator at The New York Botanical Garden where his research is centered on the flora of the Guayana Highland region of northern South America. In 1985 he was awarded The Charles A. Lindbergh/Harry Frank Guggenheim Award in Anthropology to conduct an ethnobotanical study of the Panare, an indigenous group in the Venezuelan Guayana. He was awarded a Fulbright Research Award for 1986–1987 to study the taxonomy of the Theaceae in Guyana. He holds adjunct appointments at the City University of New York, New York University, Yale University, and Columbia University. Since 1991 he has served as Vice President for Botanical Science at The New York Botanical Garden.