

# A JOURNEY UP THE SAMBÚ RIVER TO VISIT THE CHOCÓ INDIANS

Arne Arbin

Edited with an introduction by Donald S. Marshall

and John H. Rowe

## INTRODUCTION

In July of 1935 the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, purchased the major portion of a collection of Chocó artifacts from Mr. Arne Arbin. The balance had previously been acquired by the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York. These specimens were collected earlier in the same year from various groups of the Chocó Indians living along the tributaries of the Sambú River in the Darien area of eastern Panama. At the request of Mr. Donald Scott then Director of the Peabody Museum, Arbin later furnished the account of his observations which is reproduced on the following pages.\*

Relatively little is known of Arbin and his work. Swedish by birth, he is known to have travelled extensively among tribes of the Americas. At the time he prepared the following account he was readying an expedition to the Huichol Indians of the Sierra Madre, Mexico. He had previously mentioned a trip to Ecuador and one to Oklahoma. Arbin apparently travelled to satisfy his own interests, for the bibliographical files at Peabody Museum do not list any publications by him, nor is he listed in the International Directory of Anthropologists (1950 edition). There is little indication that he had any specific background in anthropology, but his notes on specimens indicate that he was a good observer and relatively well educated.

The eighty-five specimens purchased by the Museum are a good sample of the material culture of the Chocó. They are articles made for ordinary use in daily life and ceremonial activity and are not souvenirs for the tourist trade. The ethnographical collection includes a bark beater and a specimen of bark cloth; black palm bows and specialized arrows for fishing and for hunting birds and animals; heavy spears used for hunting pigs and big game, as well as others for fishing; cooking utensils; carved calabashes used as food bowls and for drinking chicha; various magical figures and charms used in curing ceremonies

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\* The manuscript of Arbin's report is on file in the Peabody Museum under the X File number 33-56. The editors have taken the liberty of rewording a few of the most awkward English phrases where a slight change would make the text clearer without altering the sense. For the rest, the author's style has been conscientiously respected. We would like to express our appreciation to Dr. J. O. Brew, Director of the Peabody Museum, for authorizing publication of this manuscript.

and dances; carrying and storage baskets; dolls and other toys for children; and contemporary pottery. For each of these objects the collector furnished information regarding the person from whom it was obtained. There is also a small archaeological collection consisting of some sherds and a celt; site provenience is given for the archaeological specimens.

Some of the objects are noteworthy. Some of the arrows have elaborately designed points of hammered iron, and Arbin states that the iron was secured from specific trade sources in Colombia. The Cuna of Darien, who are neighbors of the Chocó, generally use black palm wood rather than iron for their arrow points. The archaeological specimens are said to have come from the ground and appear to be old. The celt is rather unusual. It is triangular in shape in contrast to the petalloid form more usual in the region. It is also ground smoothly around the blade but the tang is left rough, producing a type which is more characteristic of western Panama than of Darien.

Ethnographic data on the Chocó were scanty in 1933 and are still so. The principal published sources available to Arbin were a book and four articles by Erlend Nordenskiöld, who had visited the Sambú River and other parts of the Chocó territory in 1927, and a report on the Chocó arrow poison, pacurú-neard, by Santesson. These works are listed in the accompanying bibliography, added by the editors. Arbin's manuscript contains no bibliographical references whatever. We have the impression from reading Arbin's report that he knew of at least one of Nordenskiöld's articles, probably the one published in Ymer, and used it as a source for his statements about the divisions and distribution of the Chocó in his second paragraph. His occasional other remarks which parallel Nordenskiöld's are probably the result of independent observation of the same phenomena, however. Most of Arbin's account is obviously based on personal observation and discussion with the Indians. The technical remarks on arrow poison are taken, of course, from Santesson's article.

Like all travellers' accounts of native peoples, Arbin's work must be taken with some reserve. Some of his statements are rather naive and a few, like his statement that the interior Indians "live only by hunting and fishing," are probably mistaken. Marshall has heard the same story from an American gold prospector who has travelled in this area, but Nordenskiöld noted no such change in subsistence in his account of the Sambú River and all other reliable information we have on the natives of Darien indicates that all of them depend on agriculture for subsistence. Possibly Arbin means merely that bananas are not grown in the interior.

Arbin's report is not a major addition to our knowledge of Chocó culture, either in quantity or quality. However, our knowledge of the Chocó is still so fragmentary that the chance to add even a few details to our meager store seems worth taking. The Chocó are a notably friendly group, readily accessible from Panama City and their culture presents many features of considerable theoretical interest. It is very much to be hoped that some properly trained anthropologist will follow the footsteps of Nordenskiöld and Wassén and produce a report which will make the publication of further casual descriptions like Arbin's superfluous.

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## ARBIN'S REPORT

The location of this tribe is the border territory between the Republic of Panama and the Republic of Colombia, in the area close to the coast of the Pacific Ocean and surrounding the river banks along almost all the small rivers running out into the San Miguel Bay and the Pacific Ocean.

This tribe is divided into two families, or branches, the Emperá Chocós and the Nonamá Chocós. The majority of the Emperá Chocó Indians live in Darien, a province of the Republic of Panama. The Nonamá Chocó Indians have their homestead in the northwestern section of Colombia, in the vicinity of Río San Juan. Some Indians belonging to the Nonamá Chocó can be traced as far south as the Bahía del Chocó near Buenaventura in Colombia.

Our expedition started from Panama City the capital of Panama. A countryman of ours secured free transportation for us on a banana boat to the small town of Garachine, situated near the mouth of the Sambú River. Here we obtained passage on a small launch which took us up the Sambú to a small Negro village, Sabalo, located opposite the mouth of the Río Sabalo, a small tributary to the Río Sambú. We hired a cayuco (canoe) from the Negroes and proceeded on our voyage up the main river, taking with us two Panamanian natives. After a hard day's journey we were very fortunate for we fell into the good graces of Fidel Guinora, a tribal medicine-man, who preaches a cult akin to that of Coué. He brews herbs into medical potions and infuses kind spirits into wooden idols and medicine wands, which afterwards serve as a protection and remedy against evil spirits and sickness of all kinds caused by bad demons. These demons are called *animara*. The natives believe that these demons take up their abode in the body of an Indian and bring on various diseases. Most of this medicine-man's curative work seemed to be effected by self-hypnotism, although he prescribed various mixtures of strange herbs for some of his patients.

Fidel Guinora, the medicine-man, was well educated from the experiences of other tribal medicine-men, whom he visited while learning. During this time he was, so to speak, a medicine candidate. During the course of this time he traveled alone, in a canoe, visiting many different rivers and studying many interesting remedies which were taught to him by "fellow-doctors," powerful medicine-men who lived here and there along the rivers in this region of the Central American jungles.

It was before sunset one warm afternoon in the end of March, 1933, that we arrived at the large house of Fidel Guinora. It was placed only a hundred yards from the bank of the river and was between the Río Tigre and the Río Venado, both rivers tributaries of the Río Sambú. The house was very strong and well-built and gave us the feeling that it was of careful workmanship. At first we were surprised to learn that the house was placed on high stilts but later we learned that the Indians built in this way for two reasons: To have the floor high above the insect and reptile covered surface of the earth; the second and most important reason was the river. When the rainy season is at its height the water level of the Río Sambú rises, and at many places an Indian must step from his house right into his canoe before he can reach the forest to go hunting for food.

When entering the house we observed a large wooden bowl containing water. It was standing on the floor and close to the ladder a deeply notched and decorated post which served as means of entrance from the ground. In the water bowl a calabash vessel floated around. Later we learned that the Indians used the bowl to wash the dust and dirt from their feet when entering after they returned from any trip or hunt.

We greeted the Indians cheerfully and they in turn invited us to rest in their house. We gladly accepted their invitation. We entered and inside found the family of Fidel Guinora. This included Guinora his wife his mother-in-law, his brother's daughter, his own two daughters, and his two sons. At the time of our visit there was another guest in Fidel Guinora's home. He was an Indian from the upper Río Sambú, a young, tall, agile fellow about twenty years old. He was very quiet, but very attentive when Guinora told us tales and gossip of the other Indians from near and far. Later we learned that this young Indian was seeking Guinora's consent to marry his oldest daughter as she was of marriageable age (thirteen to fourteen). We watched this young couple closely to see if they showed any emotions toward each other. At last our curiosity was satisfied for when they were left alone the girl crept behind the boy and started to scratch his back. After a while she started to clean his hair of insects. These actions we later learned are signs of great love. We found out that these Indians, like the Japanese do not kiss. The Indians very seldom have more than one wife, but occasionally they take on two or three and they all live together in the same house. When a young Indian marries a girl he goes to live with her family until he builds a house for his wife. If she lives alone before he marries a girl he goes to live with her family until he builds a house for his wife. If she lives alone before he marries her, he moves in, and her house is then his home. If a married man should die his wife immediately cuts off all of her hair. A respectable woman will cut off her hair at least three times.

These Indians, especially in the central and upper part of Río Sambú, are still hunting with bows and arrows. There are only a very few Indians on the lower Río Sambú who have been able to buy shot-guns or rifles. The fish mostly with a kind of thin, long spear made of black palm-wood with a point of iron. This iron they get as trade goods from the Chocó Indians living up in the mountains of Colombia. Their general food consists of rice fish, bananas, and different kinds of fruits as well as pork and the meat of the iguana lizard. The meat of this horrible looking lizard is nearly white and tastes like chicken. It really is the very best kind of meat it is possible to get in this jungle territory of the Isthmus of Panama. There are not many big animals here in this section of Río Sambú, but higher up the river, at the foothills of the Cara Cara Mountains, there are many wild pigs, a few tigers (jaguars) and some tapirs. According to the Indians of the upper Río Sambú only one tapir has been shot in the last fifteen years. The meat of parrots and toucan birds is included in their general food. The Indians of the lower Río Sambú have large banana plantations but the Indians up the river do not cultivate land for the reason that the jungle up there is wilder, making cultivation of banana plantations difficult, so they live only by hunting and fishing.

Chicha mascada (made from ground corn chewed by the virgins of the tribes and considered as a great delicacy, its potent fermentation serving as inspiration for many wild dances which are accompanied by the monotonous chant of the tribes at their tribal festivals, the barbaric character of which is enhanced by the rhythmic beat of the tambura or tom-tom and water are the only drinks of these Indians. Chicha is not drunk at meal-time but is drunk several times a day between meals, being a very delectable beverage. The grinding of corn to make chicha is accompanied by a series of ceremonies especially when making chicha for the more important tribal festivals. The bigger stone used for this purpose is placed in the middle of the house upon two large pieces of balsawood which are painted with zig-zag designs or sometimes carved out to represent the shape of some animal, as snakes or alligators. Always the maidens of the tribe do the work of producing the chicha. On the floor is first placed palm leaves and on top of these leaves two pieces of balsa-wood and upon them the big stone for the grinding. Over the grinding stone sticks of balsa-wood, and palm leaves is built a four posted balsa-wood seaffold or platform seven feet high with one or two shelves or decks. Usually on the first sholf are placed good luck charms in which, the Indians believe, friendly spirits have taken their abode. These charms are usually balsa-wood sticks handsomely carved to represent various objects. On the four posts of the seaffold are painted, in black paint made from herbs of the jungle, designs representing the bad spirits, or animara, the native name for these evil spirits.

The actual making of chicha among the Chocó Indians always first begins with the sprinkling of clean spring water in a circle around the stone and then two young maidens of the tribe start to dance in the very same circle around the grinding stone. They dance in single file, the second girl placing her hands on the shoulders of the first and both dancing in unison in sort of kangaroo jumps, first to the front and then to the left so that they face the stone, and always moving counterclockwise, that is, dancing to the left always, with their knees well bent and close together. They continue the dance in silence for about four or five minutes and then they stop and they both sweep the floor around the stone with palm leaves in their hands before starting the regular grinding. After the grinding the proceed with the same spectacular dance for exactly the same period of time and then after the dance they once again sprinkle spring water around the stone and the final act of the ceremony is to cover the stone with palm leaves. They rest until the next morning when they begin to chew or masticate the corn and spit it in a big calabash vessel and later it is transferred to a large pottery bowl where it remains for several weeks to become a genuine alcoholic beverage.

A calabash vessel full of chicha is very refreshing and stimulating after a fishing or hunting trip. It looks very much like soup, even to the grease that can be seen on the surface. Upon close inspection it can be seen that there is a small insect in the center of each drop of grease floating on the surface. Evidently these insects are placed in the "beer" to give it a more exclusive taste. This may seem peculiar but there are many tribes down in South American who eat caterpillars for dessert and to whom they are a great delicacy.

Many of the Chocó Indians' food dishes have to be fried in oil or some kind of grease. For this purpose they use the nuts from the cusi palm (*Orbignya phalerata*) from which, by means of two stones they press the oil out. This oil they use for the care of their hair and the medicine man uses the oil when he gives massages to any of his patients. He also uses it, mixed with some herbs, as medicine. These herbs are first boiled in this cusi palm oil before they are mixed with the oil for medicinal purposes.

In the jungle territory of the upper Río Sambú the Indians use five or six different kinds of arrows. One of these is the fishing arrow, used for fishing or harpooning, with four, five, or six points. These points are made of black palm-wood. This arrow is called Chahuluhulu, with Spanish pronunciation of all the u's. There are three or four kinds of war arrows some of which are also used for hunting bigger animals. One of these war arrows has a series of points turning backwards in the manner of fish hooks placed one after the other to prevent pulling it out of the flesh. This arrow is called chakeeda. Another war or hunting arrow has the above mentioned barbs only on one side. This arrow is the chakeediaba. Another arrow is the occocha or chaocco, as some Indians call it, which means "poisoned arrow," and is nearly as thin as a match, two or two and a quarter feet in length, with a very sharp poisoned point. This arrow is used for the occo or blowgun used by the Chocó Indians higher up the river. There is still another arrow used for hunting birds which has a rounded, dull point made of hard wood sometimes in the shape of a ball and sometimes in other shapes. The blowgun is called occo and has a length of about nine feet. The Chocó Indians are specially noted for their splendid blowguns, which cannot be duplicated or excelled by any other tribe. The poison used in arrows is the sap of the pacuru-neará tree. This sap is concentrated and elaborated into a deadly poison called bakroniana [sic; should read pakurin - eds.] which seeps through and reaches the heart. It is the first heart poison ever discovered among the American Indians. It is similar to a well known poison by the name of antiarin.

The men rather than the women of these tribes wear the most ornaments. Some of these are heavy silver bracelets. Some necklaces or neck adornments are made of genuine Colombian silver and others are made of beads and the teeth of monkeys, jaguars, and other animals. The most spectacular of these necklaces is one made of live fireflies and is worn at certain tribal festivals held at night. The Chocos of the Docordo River are the only ones who wear nose rings and these are made of pure silver. The holes in the nose for these rings are made when a youngster is two to four years old, in a few instances when he is older. Only the men wear the nose rings. The women never do. Some of the men also wear earrings made of some kind of wood and in many cases these are covered with silver plates or other silver ornaments. Even some of the young boys of about seven or eight years of age wear heavy earrings of wood covered with big silver plates. It is only when they have feasts or festivals that these Indians use all their ornaments.

To count and add the Chocó Indians use a small string upon which they make knots and indicate the sum by help of the fingers on both hands, and if there are more knots than they have fingers they continue to count on the toes. When they reach twenty they put a small stone upon the ground in front of them and proceed to add the stones, each stone representing an amount of twenty. Their almanac or calendar is of the very same procedure. Each day the house father or head of the family makes a knot on a string, making a double knot when the week is gone. The next term is sixty days, indicated by two single knots close together.

The Chocós have two kinds of tom-toms or tamburas. This word tambura was borrowed from the old Spanish language in post-Columbian times. They use their fingers to beat on them. They have still another heavier type of tom-tom carved in wood in the shape of a canoe, and it is the opinion of the writer that the Chocó Indians in the past have been using their old canoes as tom-toms for making signals to other Indians living far away. This latter type of tom-tom is in use among the Chocós of the Docordó River. They use two wooden clubs to beat these with. They use one club for the inner side and one for the outer side of the tom-tom. When there is an earthquake the Indians dance around and beat loudly on the tom-tom. The hid that covers the smaller tambura at one end is sometimes pig-skin and sometimes buck-skin, and even snake-skin has been used for that purpose a few times.

The Chocó Indians are very fond of music. They can sit entranced for several hours listening to music, during which period they are absolutely silent, and if you should talk to them or ask one of them a question he would not listen to you while the music is going on.

These Indians keep themselves clean and their homes very neat. They are in many ways far different than the Negroes of Panama, who don't care much about cleanliness or their homes. The wooden floors of the houses of the Indians are always kept scrubbed by the women, who use a kind of vegetable compound which gives out a pleasant fragrance. They are very hospitable towards the white man, if he in his manner treats them in the right way, but they hate the Negro or the mulatto.

Only the sons of a medicine man can become medicine men. When the novice is about to assume his title, after thorough instruction from the medicine man, the last test his teacher gives him is a nerve test to see if he has strong nerves, an important requisite to become a medicine man. Upon the head of the candidate is placed a crown made of twigs (resembling a bottomless basket) and covered with soot, because the Indians believe that soot is stronger than fire. A poisonous snake is then brought forth and shown to the candidate who is then told that the snake will be placed on his head. The crown keeps the snake from crawling or sliding off. He is forced to sit for several minutes with the snake resting on his head, but he is not informed that the fangs have been removed from the snake so his reaction to this seeming danger is watched closely to determine the manner of medicine man that he will make.

On the night following the test they hold a big feast enlivened with monotonous music and chanting during which they drink chicha all night through. As they dance they carry unique lamps made by using the white, transparent bill of a toucan bird for a lantern and live fireflies in the lantern for light. The native name for the toucan bird is tangara. Each second hour they refill their lamps with a new collection of fireflies so that the light of these lamps shines brightly instead of dimming as the night wears on. At this festival all the male Indians paint their faces and necks with a kind of black color, toning in blue, taken from a herb in the jungle. This herb is called genipa. During such a fiesta the Indians wear all their ornaments, adornments, etc. The candidate wears, in addition to all his other ornaments, a crown made of balsa-wood and painted with symbolic designs. This crown has points all around it shaped like feathers. At the tip of each of these points is placed a beautiful red flower. The crown is painted in a brown red and then covered with a thin layer of soot.

When an Indian is ailing he is placed in a small house, 3 x 3 x 6 feet, made of balsa-wood and built on the floor of the medicine man's home. This small house is also painted all over with designs representing kindly spirits. In this small house is placed a bed made of palm leaves. The medicine man places the patient in the small balsa-wood house at sunset. From sunset until midnight the sufferer is forbidden to talk. During the time from sunset until midnight the medicine man prepares himself for the cure, which means to fight off the animara or evil spirit that, as these Indians believe, has taken abode in the body of the sick man. The medicine man has to drive this evil spirit away and out of the body of the patient. How the medicine man prepares himself for the cure is something that has never been divulged to any white man. The Cuna Cuna Indians of the Atlantic side of the Isthmus have a directly opposite belief. When one of them is ill or suffering any disease, according to one of their best known medicine men, the Cuna Cunas believe that a powerful evil spirit has stolen away the soul of the sick Indian and it is the duty of their medicine man to send out one or two friendly spirits to locate, capture, and carry back the soul to the medicine man, who in turn finishes the cure by transferring the soul back to the body of the patient.

At exactly midnight the Chocó medicine man is ready to start his curative work. First he drinks several calabash vessels full of chicha to get the eerie and hypnotic spirit. In some cases he may be in great need of this synthetic strength to be able to administer the remedy to the patient. After drinking the chicha he starts to dance around the small house singing strange songs, sometimes in a special guttural dialect that the other Indians do not understand a word of. He dances all night long with his medicine stick or wand in his hand. Some medicine men have sticks for special kinds of sicknesses while some have only one for curing every kind of sickness. If his patient does not announce himself cured from his illness by the next morning the medicine man will, during the day, give him some kind of medicine made from roots or herbs secured in the jungle by the wife or daughters of the medicine man.

If the patient is still suffering from his disease at sundown of the second day the medicine man continues his dance another night.

Once a Chocó medicine man had been trying to cure an Indian who was very sick. When the sick man died, he explained to the relatives of the dead man that a powerful evil spirit had killed the man before the medicine man had time to get into action.