Fig. 1. Leaves of the Ak hu'un *tree.*

Lacandon Maya Bark Cloth: *Hu'un*

Jennie Frederick

Introduction

My interest in the Lacandon began about seven years ago when I purchased a bark-cloth (*hu'un*) tunic in Oaxaca, Mexico. There were two folded tunics on the bottom of a shelf with contemporary women's clothing on top, and when I pulled one of those bark-cloth tunics out and unfolded it, the clerk said, "Maya raincoat." I was aware that other Mesoamerican people, including the Aztec and Maya, had worn bark-cloth tunics and other items of bark-cloth clothing. Having just documented the Otomi making *amate* in San Pablito, I immediately saw a new research journey ahead for me.

During the summer of 2000 on a National Endowment for Humanities funded "Maya World" grant, my personal focus became the Lacandon Maya. I had read R. Jon McGee's book *Life, Ritual and Religion Among the Lacandon Maya*, and learned that the Lacandon Maya of Nahá in Chiapas were using bark cloth in their rituals. These ritual implements made of or accessorized with bark cloth included headbands (*chäk hu'un*), adorned rattles (*soot*), God Pots (*läk-il k'uh*), occasionally adorned with headbands, and "filet" offerings. A tunic (*xikul*) made from commercial cloth was still being worn by men in the communities of Nahá and Lacanha, and bark-cloth tunics were still occasionally being produced.

After learning of the death in 1996 of Chan K'in Viejo, the Lacandon elder and spiritual leader in Nahá, I became increasingly concerned about the preservation of their traditions and religious practices, especially those that included the production and use of bark cloth. I found only one photographic reproduction of the Lacandon producing bark cloth, and it was in *Lacandon Dream Symbolism* by Robert D. Bruce, which I had discovered in the library of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute in Palenque. Taken about 1974, the image was of young Chan K'in and K'in—both sons of Chan K'in Viejo—making *hu'un*.

In 2003, I was nominated by Dr. Merna Saliman, president of Maple Woods College, to participate in a Title VI–A Department of Education grant written by the Missouri Community College Association/Missouri Consortium for Global Education. This opportunity allowed me once again to focus on Mesoamerican papermaking traditions, particularly of the Lacandon, and to develop curriculum modules for my Pre-Hispanic Art History and Fiber courses.

Fig. 2. Separating the inner bark from the outer.

Fig. 3. Rolled inner bark of the Ak hu'un *tree ready for transport. Note the machete mark on the log.*

The grant required participants to have a foreign language and project consultant, and so I contacted Dr. McGee and expressed my interest in documenting the Lacandon making *hu'un*. He was most receptive, agreed to be my project consultant, and made arrangements for me to document Lacandon papermaking this past July. During our correspondence, McGee clarified my questions and gave me a "history lesson" regarding the Lacandon. In his book *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, McGee describes the origin of the present day Lacandon:

> ...groups of Yucatec-speaking Lacandon, primarily from the Peten area of western Guatemala, began to trickle into the area and establish communities in the territory formerly inhabited by Chol speakers. Throughout the eighteenth century, these refugees moved westward through the Peten and into Chiapas and it is among these immigrants that we find the ancestors of the modern Lacandon.[1]

The Lacandon residing in Chiapas today consist of two groups. The first is known as the Northern Group and resides primarily in Mensäbäk and Nahá. The community of Lacanha (Lacanha Chan Sayab), near the Maya sites of Bonampak and Yaxchilan, is known as the Southern Group. Another faction of the Northern Group comprises about forty people (who also reside within the community of Lacanha).

After reading *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives*, I was astonished to learn that, in just thirteen years since his last book, McGee used the past tense when referring to their religious practices and ceremonial implements. Furthermore, his research revealed that there are only two or three people left in the Lacandon community of Nahá who are practicing their religious rituals and who make bark cloth, compared to twenty Lacandon men in the 1980s. I felt an even stronger desire to help preserve at least this part of their culture. I contacted the Robert C. Williams American Museum of Papermaking in Atlanta, Georgia, and learned there were no specimens from the Lacandon in the collections. I felt that collecting specimens for the Museum, as well as documenting and collecting *hu'un* specimens to accompany this article would help preserve the art of Lacandon *hu'un*. As McGee noted: "the Lacandon were the last folks who made ritual use of bark cloth in ways that are similar to the blood-letting/paper practices of the ancient Maya."[2]

About three months after McGee arranged for me to document a Lacandon family producing *hu'un*, I, he, Dr. Beth Erhart, and a group of their students travelled to Villahermosa, then Palenque, finally arriving in Lacanha on July 18, 2004.

Making *Hu'un*

Collecting the Bark

On our second day in Lacanha, we hiked into the jungle with three Lacandon to observe the collecting of bark for the *hu'un*; collecting took about three hours. The tree selected to be cut was *ak hu'un*. McGee has identified this tree as masamorro (*Poulsenia armata*), which is in the Moraceae family (Fig. 1). After cutting one tree with a machete, sections were then measured with a piece of vine and marked with cuts. Following marking, the cuts were made deep enough

Hu'un (bark cloth) made in Lacanha, Chiapas, Mexico, by a Lacandon Mayan family. This sample was originally part of a total of 12,500 square inches of bark cloth made from a single Ak hu'un *tree.*

to penetrate to the inner (bast) bark. Individual bark sections were loosened by pounding up and down the sections with stick clubs. The bark was then peeled off with the outer bark still attached. Once separated from the tree, the bark was bent over to begin separating the inner bast fiber from the outer bark (Fig. 2).

From this single tree, twelve pieces of bark were harvested, each piece measuring between five to seven feet long and about ten to twelve inches wide. When harvesting was complete, the pieces were individually rolled up, secured with a piece of vine, and strung together for transportation back to Lacanha (Fig. 3).

Beating the bark

Once back in the village, large banana leaves were placed on the ground to create a mat onto which was placed a long, smooth log (from a tree called *palencano* in Spanish and *tao* in Yucatec Maya); this log served as a base on which to prepare the bark.

The bark beater is called a *bäxä*, made from *wäch*, which McGee thinks is the wild tamarind. "To beat" is translated *bäx-ik*. Several pieces of inner bark were placed perpendicularly across the log, and on the first day, four Lacandon participated in beating (Fig. 4). Beginning at one end, the bark was struck repeatedly across its width (Fig. 5). The bark was rearranged as the beaters slowly moved up the length of the bark. It can take about six hours to beat a piece of *hu'un* large enough to make a tunic. One woman told me that it is important to beat in different directions—diagonally, parallel to the edge, and at a 90° angle. The bark is reduced in thickness rather quickly, from one quarter to one eighth of an inch, and it quickly increases in width as well. A piece that starts out measuring six feet long and ten to twelve inches wide ends up about twenty-four to thirty inches wide and slightly longer. When dry, the completed *hu'un* varies between one sixteenth and one eighth of an inch in thickness.

No water was added during the beating process. When the pieces are finished, they are washed and hung to dry (Fig. 6). When he was a child, the head of this Lacandon household learned the process of making *hu'un* from his father, who was then using the *hu'un* to make ritual headbands. After converting to Evangelical Christianity, the father has since abandoned these practices.

The following day, six members of the family resumed beating, and I asked if other trees are used for making *hu'un*. They said *bitskar* and *hach hu'un* may be used as well. McGee has identified *bitskar* as *Inga* spp. or *Jinicuil*, and *hach hu'un* as *Ficus* sp. or *amate*. When I inquired about different colors, they explained that *bitskar* makes a much whiter *hu'un*. One member of the family showed me two pieces of dyed *hu'un*. One piece had been dyed dark brown with mahogany, while the other with *achiote* using salt and lime as mordants. The Lacandon sometimes use this dyed *hu'un* to dress clay *muñecas*, or figurines, that they sell to tourists.

Xikul (Tunic)

Historically, the Lacandon have worn *xikuls* of cotton. According to McGee, men wearing cotton smocks similar to those worn today are described in eighteenth-century letters, and photos from the late nineteenth century show women wearing *xikuls* woven on a back-strap loom. He added, however, that, "ritual garments were made from bark cloth, perhaps because they did not need to survive long wear."[3] Tunics with red or black dots and some made with what appears to be strips of bark cloth can be seen worn by figures on Pre-Columbian Maya ceramics. These are usually worn when a bloodletting rite or sacrifice is also taking place. Similarly, Lacandon ritual *xikuls* were painted with red spots with symbolic blood made from annatto seeds.

After washing and drying, the beaten *hu'un* was folded over, and the sides were sewn together using hand-spun cotton thread. Two openings were left for arm holes. To make an opening for the neck, the *hu'un* was folded in half lengthwise, and a knife was used to make a five-inch slit along the fold line. When complete, the tunic was proudly modeled by one of the Lacandon for us.

Fig. 4. Lacandon family beating the hu'un.

Fig. 5. Beating the bark across its width.

This marked the end of my stay in Lacanha; the following day I headed to Palenque to meet friends for a journey to San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Nahá. Scholars have stated that the Lacandon group in Nahá are the last Lacandon group to be acculturated. McGee believed that a Lacandon elder was still practicing his rituals in Nahá and was probably still producing bark cloth, possibly for use in his ceremonies. Our arrival in Nahá was incredibly timely. Our guide from Na Bolom (the Lacandon cultural center in San Cristóbal) took us down a path through a corn field to look for the elder McGee had spoken of. At the end of the path, I noticed a hollowed-out log (*chem*) used to ferment the ceremonial beverage *balché* (Fig. 7). Then I realized that the individual we were looking for was in his adjacent God House preparing *xikals* (ceremonial boards) with incense. The God House was just as McGee had described in his books, and we were permitted to observe and document the ceremony. The first ceremony involved taking incense from three *xikal* boards and placing it in two God Pots (Fig. 8). As the incense burned, a prayer was chanted to specific gods in hopes of stopping animals from eating his corn crop. The second ceremony also involved taking incense from three additional boards and placing it in two other God Pots to burn. This ceremony was conducted to ask for rain. The *chäk hu'un* (ceremonial headbands) and a *soot* (ceremonial rattle with *hu'un* streamers) were hanging from the rafters (Figs. 10–11).

Following the ceremonies, we were invited to the house of this Lacandon elder. I was told that only two people in Nahá practice such ceremonies now and both produce bark cloth, using *chäk hu'un* in their ceremonies. It was explained that *hach hu'un* is used for the *chäk hu'un* headbands. This is a different tree than that used in Lacanha for the tunics; McGee mentioned earlier that this could be a regional variation.

I also asked about the *achiote* paint used as a ceremonial color. The elder demonstrated how the paint was used with ground *achiote* seeds mixed with water; this paint is called *k'uxu,* and it is always used to paint the tunics. Applying the paint with his finger, two bark-cloth tunics and a white cloth *xikul* were decorated (see front and back covers). These were replicas of the ceremonial tunics he had worn as a young man. The dots and two donut-shaped double circles placed over the chest were identical to the ceremonial tunic I had seen worn by Chan K'in Viejo in a Boremanse photograph from 1974 in *Mayan Clothing and Weaving through the Ages.* I inquired about the significance of these marks. He explained that the two larger donut-shaped circles represent the sun, and the smaller dots, jaguar spots.

Through the work of McGee and Mayanists such as Linda Schele, as well as through my own observations, the connections and similarities between the Pre-Hispanic and the Lacandon Maya are clearer. In *The Blood of Kings,* Schele points out examples of lintels from La Pasadita in the Peten, Guatemala, and Yaxchilan in Chiapas that have circular motifs on bark cloth representing blood droplets/sacrifice. These often portray figures holding bowls (possibly *incensarios*) filled with bloody bark cloth (Fig. 9). Scholars have also pointed out possible references to corn and rebirth in these designs. Lacandon children's drawings of jaguars from Nahá, collected by Robert D. Bruce and published in *Lacandon Texts and Drawings from Nahá,* also contain solid dots and donut-shaped circles, as well as stripes around their legs close to the paws. Representations of the spotted jaguar are often present in sacrificial scenes depicted on early Mayan ceramics. In addition, the Hero Twins, actors in the famous Mayan creation myth the *Popol Vuh,* are often depicted with spots. One of the twins, Xbalanque, was often portrayed with spotted patches that represented jaguar skin.

According to Virginia Davis, the small dots were called *t'umbar/mehen woris.* She demonstrates through line drawings where, at one time, these red dots were placed on the God Pots, the God House, the *balche* log, the *balche* dipper, spindle whorls,

Fig. 6. Hu'un *drying.*

back-strap loom poles, and arrows and bows.[4] She also states that "the gods are very fond of the red color and the smell of the annatto paint."[5] She further explains that "the association between the red paint and blood is also reflected in the belief that the gods like the smell of human blood and also like the smell of the red paint."[6]

Chäk Hu'un (Headbands)

Chäk hu'un are dyed bark-cloth strips used for ceremonial headbands. Several of these headbands, tinged with red, were hanging in the Lacandon elder's God House (Fig. 10). We were told that the red dye for the headbands is not *achiote*, but rather *cha k'ash*.[7] The elder explained this is always the color used for *chäk hu'un*. These headbands were worn by participants in particular ceremonies and also tied onto God Pots. Stuart and Houston state that "the headband marked the highest nobility in ancient Maya society."[8] Lintel 15 from Yaxchilan (770 CE) depicts a woman with her hair tied with what appears to be blood-stained, bark cloth marked with circles. These strips were also inserted in wounds created during self-sacrifice to catch the blood and were later burned in *incensarios*.

The *hu'un* for *chäk hu'un* was first beaten as described for the *xicul* and cut into strips one-half-inch to one-inch wide and up to 36 inches in length. The strips were then cut by the sponsor of the *Mek?chul* ceremony. Davis illustrates eight variations of bark-cloth strips that were once used to "mark" God Pots. Some ends were square, others pointed, and half of them were cut with zigzag notches on the ends. In further identifying which strip was intended for a particular god or God Pot, small diamond-shaped notches were cut out from the interior of the strips. These negative-space diamond notches range from two to four and were aligned in vertical rows. So, the number of notches and shape of the end determined which God Pot received them.[9] The cutting of these notches is no longer practiced.

During the *Mek?chul* ceremony, the sponsor of the ceremony placed this shaped and dyed *chäk hu'un* around the top of the appropriate God Pots.[10] According to Davis, "one bark-cloth strip is also placed on the *balche* jug, the *balche* dipper, and around the southern end of the *balche* log."[11] Participants in the ceremony were given these headbands to wear, the initiate and the sponsor first. During her observation of a *Mek?chul* ceremony, Davis counted ninety-five bark-cloth bands in use.[12] In addition to their use in the *Mek?chul*, Davis documented the use of *chäk hu'un* in three of nine rituals. These included offerings for a *Witsbir* (payment to the gods for a cure), offerings of bark-cloth bands and corn drink for the pounding of bark cloth during the God Pot Renewal Ceremony, and the *Na?ahplil* offering. She also wrote that "barkcloth strips may be given to the rain gods in certain circumstances."[13]

I asked the Lacandon elder if he had ever burned or witnessed the burning of bark cloth, since this was the preferred method of delivering blood offerings to the

Fig. 7. God House and balché chem, *Najá.*

Fig. 8. God Pot.

gods by the Classic Period Maya. Although he answered no, I am still intrigued by a chant during copal offerings recorded by Davis entitled, "Song for the Copal."

They are going to happen with the small red bark cloth, with the small barkcloth, they are going to happen with the red barkcloth
They are going to happen with the red paint
They are going to happen with the red paint here, with the red barkcloth, I burn the barkcloth for you.[14]

Soot (Ceremonial Rattle)

The use of a ceremonial rattle can be seen consistently throughout Pre-Columbian Maya art (Fig. 12). In *The Art of the Maya Scribe*, there is a travertine vase with an image of a figure (Yax Pas, Sixteenth King of Copan) holding what appears to be a rattle. The caption reads: "the sinister scepter borne in his hand is in the form of an eye with its attached nerve stalk, a symbol of death by sacrifice."[15] In the same book, the carved Kimbell Panel depicts a "sahal" or war leader who presents three prisoners.[16] The figure on the right appears to hold a rattle which may have barkcloth streamers. In Tozzer's *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones*, there is a line drawing from the Codex Tro-Cortesianus of a figure holding a rattle or scepter.[17] There are also several scenes of musicians holding rattles in the murals at Bonampak. Since these scenes depict preparation for ritual and the sentencing of prisoners resulting in sacrificial ceremony, it can be surmised that the rattle was used during war and sacrifice.

An individual is illustrated on a cylindrical Maya vessel in *Painting the Maya Universe*, holding a fan or possibly a rattle.[18] What is interesting about the designs on this object is that it contains a crisscross, linear design that contains red circular dots. Lacandon gourd rattles documented by Tozzer in the early 1900s and Davis in the 1970s contain this same crisscross design that appears to be filled with circular dots as well. Tozzer describes these dots as actual holes. According to Davis, these holes were covered with *achiote* paint and the red paint is for the god of music, K'ayom. I have not found a description of the significance of the use of the holes. Tozzer's drawing of a Lacandon rattle also shows a rather random circular design on the gourd part of the rattle as well.

The only photographs I have seen of a Lacandon holding a rattle were those taken by Tozzer in the early 1900s (reproduced in *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and Lacandones*), and by Boremanse, taken in 1974 and reproduced in *Maya Clothing and Weaving through* the Ages. The Lacandon used the rattle to accompany songs or chants in various ceremonies. Davis observed that the rattle was used when *balche* (ceremonial drink) and tamales were given as an offering.[19] On the same page, she mentions that "a rattle was used at Nahá during a chant that accompanied the offering of rubber figures." She also states that if it was used, "it too is presented on the offering mat and is painted."[20]

Tozzer, in his early descriptions of the rattle, noted that thirteen bark-cloth streamers were attached at the bottom of the rattle. He observed that the bark-cloth strips in the early examples were painted red, but in both photographic reproductions I have seen, the streamers were painted with thin black stripes. The museum at Na Bolom exhibited several rattles. Some were incised with circles and sun motifs. The rattle hanging in the God House also contained the crisscross holes that were painted over, probably originally with *achiote* (Fig. 11). It also contained a large dot, and the bark-cloth streamers were painted with black stripes.

McGee believes the rattle is no longer used, and he has not seen it used since the late 1970s.[21] However, it still seems to hold an important position in the God House

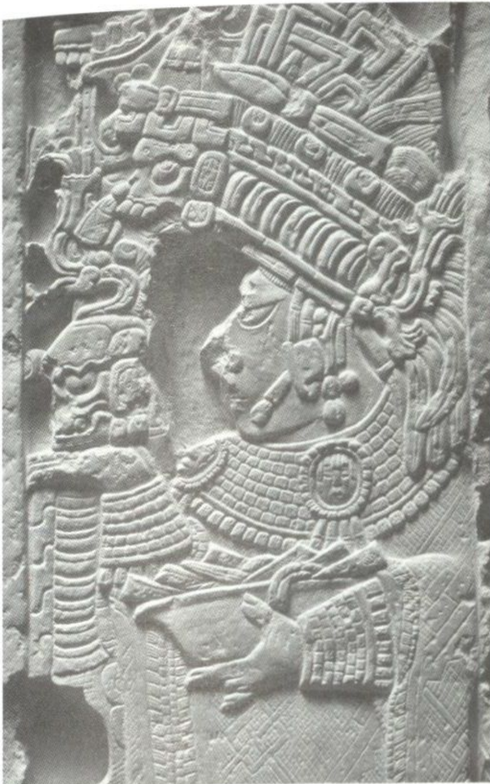

Fig. 9. Detail of Stela 35 at Yaxchilan.

*Fig. 10. Ceremonial bark-cloth headbands (*chäk hu'un*).*

in Nahá. Simple, unpainted rattles with bark-cloth streamers are still produced by the Lacandon for sale to tourists.

What accounts for the connections and similarities I have discussed between iconography of the ancient Maya and the present day Lacandon? As McGee pointed out, the Lacandon in Chiapas were originally Yucatec-Maya primarily from the Peten of Guatemala. The archaeological sites closest to them today were originally built by Chol-speaking Maya. Yaxchilan has been an important pilgrimage site for the Lacandon, and they believed that their gods resided there. It is probable that they assimilated the iconographic symbolism portrayed in the lintels and wall paintings at these sites.

Conclusion

The Lacandon elder was obviously concerned about the fact that he is one of only two men who still practice their rituals in Nahá; both are in their sixties. We were informed that they had twelve gods, as each one was named. It was then added that there are now thirteen, including a god introduced from the United States. The elder said they are told that their gods no longer serve them. While McGee points out that their traditional religious practices are dying, he does not believe that the art of making *hu'un* is dying. However, there seems to be very few people producing *hu'un* now. Almost all of the *hu'un* produced today is meant solely for the tourist market, items that represent merely a vestige of a former practice.

I am reminded of remarks made by Dr. Bret Gustafson, an anthropologist, at a Missouri Community College Association/Missouri Consortium for Global Education Title VI–A conference I attended recently. He said, "Understanding connections is an important part of understanding culture." He also defined culture as "a process of change versus a static collection of beliefs, customs, language, religion and traits," with "changing flows of meanings and practices."[22] I felt a strong sadness as we left the Lacandon elder's house in Nahá and Chiapas. This sadness was mixed with enormous gratitude for the special opportunities I had to record these elements of the Lacandon culture.

Fig. 11. Soot *with bark-cloth streamers.*

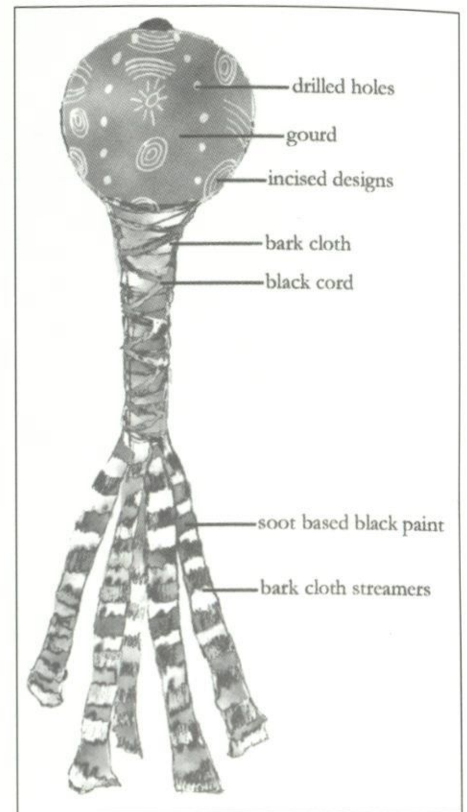

Fig. 12. Ceremonial rattle from Na Bolom, the Lacandon cultural center.

Acknowledgments

The author extends a very special thanks to Dr. R. Jon McGee for his years of work, study, and writings on the Lacandon, and for making the arrangements in Lacanha for this documentation. Thanks also go to Michelle Potts for her help in initial editing of this article, and to Christine Yannitelli and Dennis Manske, my travel companions, who aided us in our sometimes difficult translations while in Nahá.

Notes

1. Jon R. McGee, *Watching Lacandon Maya Lives* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), 7.
2. Personal communication, 2 September 2003, e-mail.
3. Personal communication, 31 August 2004, note.
4. Virginia Dale Davis, "Ritual of the Northern Lacandon Maya" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1978), 172–174.
5. Ibid., 170.
6. Ibid., 177.
7. McGee states that this could actually be *chäk k'ash* or red zapote, as there is often variation in spelling and pronunciation.
8. Quoted in Didier Boremanse, *Hach Winik* (Albany, N.Y.: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1998), 99.
9. Davis, "Ritual of the Northern Lacandon Maya," 180.
10. For detailed descriptions of designs painted on male and female God Pots, their shape, and significance, see R. Jon McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion Among the Lacandon* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publ. Co., 1990), 49–53; Davis, "Ritual of the Northern Lacandon Maya," 72–84.
11. Davis, "Ritual of the Northern Lacandon Maya," 182.
12. Ibid., 330.
13. Ibid., 183.
14. Ibid., 151–152.
15. Michael D. Coe and Justin Kerr, *The Art of the Maya Scribe* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 203.
16. Ibid., 197.
17. Alfred M. Tozzer, *A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandones* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), Figure 20.
18. Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 166.
19. Davis, "Ritual of the Northern Lacandon Maya," 109.
20. Ibid., 175.
21. Personal communication, 2 September 2003, e-mail.
22. Bret Gustafson, Missouri Community College Association/Missouri Consortium for Global Education Title VI–A Conference, Jefferson City, Missouri, August 2003.