



The Black Christ of the Sesincheu village, Chahal, Alta Verapaz

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Introduction

In August 2008, a farmer from the region, called by the locals the Engineer, visited the church in the village of Sesincheu, Municipality of Chahal, department of Alta Verapaz, located in the northern region of the Republic of Guatemala. The engineer, upon realizing that the church only had two images, thought about giving the church of the community of Sesincheu a copy of the Black Christ of Esquipulas. Due to the multiple records of miracles attributed to the image, popular devotion to the Lord of Esquipulas has spread in such a way that it has transcended borders and the number of churches that worship the Black Christ bear witness to the importance that the image has in popular ideology. The cult has spread to different places in Mesoamerica, even reaching cities in the United States where

Guatemalan immigrants live, such as New York and Los Angeles (Esquivel, 2006, 35). The present work follows up on the presence of the cult of the Black Christ of Esquipulas in different municipalities in the Republic of Guatemala. In such a way that this article recounts the origin of the Black Christ from the place where it was purchased until reaching the Sesincheu village, also the religious ceremonies that were carried out upon receiving it at the Engineer's farm, the arrival of the Christ to the parish of Saint Augustine Chahal, the departure after spending 40 days in said parish and the reception of the image upon its arrival at the church of the Sesincheu village, with the participation of the residents of the community.

Geographic description

Chahal is one of the 16 municipalities that make up the department of Alta Verapaz. The capital is located in the Santa Cruz Mountain range, south of the Mayan Mountains and west of the Chahal river, between the Secanté and Telón streams. It has a territorial area of 672 square kilometers and has 2 towns, 1 village, and 20 hamlets. The elevation of the municipality is 240 meters above sea level, with a geographical position of latitude 15° 45' 50" and longitude 89° 33' 29". The municipal jurisdiction is limited to the north with the municipality of Saint Luis (Petén), and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Alta Verapaz); to the east with Livingstone and El Estor (Izabal); to the south with Santa María Cahabón and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Alta Verapaz).

The municipality was created by Government Agreement of September 5, 1903. It is a 4th category municipality and, from then until April 5th, 1983, the head was located in what is currently known as Viejo Chahal or Saint Augustine (Geographical Dictionary 2000, 598). After the date, the municipal seat was moved and founded in Saint Fernando Chahal, which is where it is currently located. The municipal seat is located 145 kilometers away from the city of Cobán and, from the Capital City via Cobán, it is located 367 kilometers north of Guatemala City. Via the Atlantic, through the Northern Transversal Strip, it is located 375 kilometers from the headquarters of the central government.

Demography and Economy

According to the data provided by 11th Population Census and 6th Housing Census corresponding to the year 2002 of the National Institute of Statistics, the total population of the municipality was established at 16,853 inhabitants, which 8,459 were men and 8,394 women. The urban population was 3,894 inhabitants, and the rural population was 12,959 inhabitants. Most of the population is of Q'eqchi' origin and the Q'eqchi' and Spanish languages are spoken.

The population of Chahal depends on a high percentage of agriculture. The daily life of the inhabitants of Chahal revolves around working the land, since it is a strong producer of corn, beans, rice, sugar cane, and chili. It has large areas of virgin

mountain where there are various species of precious woods and quantities of sapodilla from which second-class gum, also known as *Chiquibul*, is extracted. According to data from the Municipal Dictionary of Guatemala (1996, 13), being an eminently agricultural municipality it doesn't have popular crafts. However, when carrying out the field work it was determined that artisanal production of annatto (xayaw, in Q'eqchi' language). Therefore, it constitutes another source of economic income for the residents of Chahal, as well as fishing and artisanal hunting of tepezcuintle (*Lowland paca*), (halaw in the Q'eqchi' language).

The urban area has all the necessary public services to satisfy the needs of its inhabitants, such as: drinking water, electricity, health center, market, post and telegraph office, radio equipment, national and cable television, schools, colleges, institutes, National Civil Police headquarters, parish church, evangelical chapel, shops, grocery stores and others. The road is dirt road, which was in fair condition at the time of the investigation. It has communication with the departmental capital, the capital city and surrounding municipalities. Communication between their hamlets and village is carried out through dirt roads, municipal roads and sidewalks.

Within the hydrography of the place, there are the Chahal, Chiyú or Senimlayú, Gracias a Dios, Samanzana rivers; the Chicoc, Chivitz, Seamay and the Sechum ravine. The Chahal river is the one with the longest channel, the river flows from south

to north, passes north of the municipal seat and heads northeast at the Sesincheu farm and east of the Las Conchas village, which local inhabitants also call Sepemech, with the same meaning. Geographic Dictionary (2000:599).

Head Fair

The titular fair of the municipality of Chahal takes place in August from 24 to 28. The main day of the fair is the 28th, the day on which the bishop and doctor Saint Agustín is commemorated, under whose patronage the town was. The villages also have their respective patron saint festivals. In the Sesincheu village, Santo Domingo is celebrated on August 8th, San Marcos on April 25, and the Lord of Esquipulas on January 15th.

Black Christ of Esquipulas origins

This cult was related to merchant networks and a pre-Hispanic origin, but Carlos Navarrete has disproved that theory (2006: 7-25). As a legend of the emergence of the devotion of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Mr. Francisco Antonio de Fuentes and Guzmán (Gall, 1983: 77), that at his time the author was unknown and that it was owned by an elderly neighbor of Spanish origin of Yzquipulas who had the image of the Christ of Esquipulas in a narrow and very old room, with little worship. As time passed, the house glowed in such a way that the neighboring rooms believed that it had caught fire and when neighbors arrived at the scene, they found her

unharmful. Subsequently, they notified the owner of the prodigy that has occurred in his house, this happened again two more times and, on the third, the light was so bright that the neighbors of the other rooms gathered together and, between horror and veneration, such a prodigy the owner of the hacienda, not daring to have such a relic in the room. With the neighbors, took the image of Esquipulas and placed it in straw hermitage where it worked wonders, until they moved it to the main church where he continued to work miracles.

According to Gadd (Op. Cit), the real origin of the image of the Black Christ of Esquipulas arose around the year 1578 when the Catholic Church prohibited the cult or adoration of indigenous idols, so a small chapel was built. Later, the local inhabitants collected 100 *tostones* (50 ounces of silver) to purchase a sacred image and the ecclesiastical provider, Brother Cristóbal de Morales, commissioned the image from the workshop of the sculpture Quirio Cataño in 1594.

The sculpted Christ, also known as the Holy Black Christ of Esquipulas, is dark brown, his fame quickly spread throughout Central America and Mexico and the miracles attributed to him contributed to awakening the interest of the Spanish and indigenous people. There is evidence of miracles in the 1603 year. Since then, many miracles' cures have been attributed to the Black Christ at different times. The healing power of the miraculous Black Christ was officially recognized in 1737

when Archbishop Fray Pedro Pardo de Figueroa was cured of a contagious disease. The archbishop, as a sign of gratitude and devotion ordered

the construction of the great temple that exists today, which was completed in 1758 and the Christ of Esquipulas was definitively moves there.

The spread of the cult can be seen in the following table:

TABLE 1
CULT OF THE BLACK CHRIST OF ESQUIPULAS IN GUATEMALA
CELEBRATIONS IN JANUARY

Department	Municipality	Communities
Alta Verapaz	San Pedro Carchá	Seconti San Pablo Chiquixil Tzacanihá
	Cobán	Xucanaeb Las Casas Chirrixepc Sacaramix Chibulbut Chirraxquen
	San Juan Chamelco	Chamil Sacajut Campat
Baja Verapaz	Rabinal	Quichej
Chimaltenango	San Martín Jilotepeque	Xesuj
	Chimaltenango	Bola de Oro
Chiquimula	Esquipulas	
El Progreso	Guastatoya (Patron's fair)	
Guatemala	San Raimundo	El Ciprés Las Cruces
	San Pedro Sacatepéquez	
Huaquetenango	San Rafael La Independencia	Caxnajúp Buena Vista
	Santa Ana Huista Cuilco	Yerba Buena
	Nentón (Patron's fair) La Libertad (Patron's fair)	
Petén	Flores (Patron's fair)	
Quetzaltenango	Olintepeque	Chiusuc
	Colombia (Patron's fair)	
	Cantel	La Estancia

	Cabricán	El Cerro
Quiché	Chinique (Patron's fair)	
Retalhuleu	Retalhuleu	Monterey Parcelamiento Caballo Blanco
Sacatepéquez	San Lucas Sacatepéquez Santa Catarina Barahona (Patron's fair)	Las Julias
San Marcos	Río Blanco Nuevo Progreso	Pancho de León Buena Vista
	Esquipulas Palo Gordo (Patron's fair) San José Ojetenam Tejutla	
	El Tumbador	Palma Real El Retiro Fraternidad Alabama Grande San Carlos Miramar La Viña
	Catarina	La Muralla
	Ocos	Pueblo Nuevo
	Tajumulco	Bullaj
	San Pedro Sacatepéquez	Provincia Chiquita
	Malacatán	El Naranjo Nicá Santa Ana Monte Limar
Santa Rosa	Barberena	Fray Bartolomé de las Casas
	Casillas (Patron's fair) Pueblo Nuevo Viñas (Patron's fair) Taxisco (Patron's fair)	
Sololá	Santa Clara La Laguna	
Suchitepéquez	Chicacao	San Pedro Cutzán Nahualate
	San Francisco Zapotitlán (Patron's fair) Cuyotenango Pueblo Nuevo (Patron's fair)	El Chile
Totonicapán	Totonicapán	Chotacaj Chotacaj Paraje de Vásquez Quiacquix

	Santa Lucía La Reforma (8th. Lord of Esquipulas)	
	San Francisco El Alto	Chivarreto Rancho de Teja Tacajalve (8th. Lord of Esquipulas) Chirrenox Xixil Sachmixit (8th. Lord of Esquipulas)
	San Bartolo	Patulup
	Santa María Chiquimula (Patron's fair)	Chuicalá

Source : <http://www.deguate.com/artman/publish/cultura-fiestas-patronales-guatemala/>
 VÁSQUEZ CASTAÑEDA, Dagoberto: Festividades de Guatemala.
 Dirección General de Cultura y Bellas Artes, Guatemala, 1983.

Sesincheu Village

The village of Sesincheu is located in the municipality of Chahal, department of Alta Verapaz and is 18 kilometers away from the municipal seat. The road is dirt road in good condition and is located in a valley surrounded by mountains ranges, mountains, rivers and creeks, the one with the greatest flow being the Chahal River, which course is from south to north, passing north of the municipal seat and heading towards northeast on Sesincheu farm and passes east of the Las Conchas village. Geographic Dictionary (Ibid).

The hamlet has a cemetery and a school. The educational establishment was built 20 years ago, which covers complete primary school and is attended by a teacher from Saint Agustín

Chahal. Currently 33 students in all grades attend the school. It also has a church that was built more than 30 years ago, according to information from neighbors. The construction of the church is made of wood and the land where it is built, according to information from Mr. Santiago Choc Coy, it was part of the communal land. It was approximately an area of 20 tasks and the church was established there. Although they do not have title to the property, to date have had no problems with the church. The neighbors gave it the name *Santo Domingo Catholic Church*. The church has three images of devotion: Saint Dominic, Saint Mark and the Black Christ. As reported by Mr. Santiago, Choc Coy, catechist of the hamlet, the neighbors call the Black Christ, the Lord of Esquipulas. The first image in the place was Saint Dominic, of which there is no reference to how he arrived at the church. However, they do have knowledge of the origin of San

Marcos, since a neighbor, Mr. Luis Rodolfo Barrientos Figueroa, along with his father, Mr. Luis Barrientos, gave it as a gift more than 25 years ago. The most recent is the Black Christ that arrived at the church on January 14th, 2009, which was given as a gift by a local farmer. During the year, only two masses are held, which are officiated by the priest of the Chahal parish, one for Holy Week and the other on January 1st, when the community celebrates the New Year. There is no drinking water in the community and the neighbors get their vital liquid from a stream that comes down from a nearby hill. They do not have electricity but when they need it, they make a handmade installation that is powered by a truck battery and they obtain the energy to carry out religious activities and the traditional dance, which is enlivened by marimba.

The Black Christ of Sesincheu

Since January 14th, 2009, the Catholic Church of Santo Domingo, located in the village of Sesincheu, it has a venerated image of the Black Christ. When asking the donor what motivated him to give the effigy as a gift, he said: *One morning in November 2008, while visiting the village, I saw the church opened and I entered. Seeing that they only had two saints, I thought it would be good if they had a Christ. In my opinion, I thought they needed a Christ. I called the boys (members of the religious group) and asked them why they didn't have a Christ and they explained to me that they didn't have one due to lack of money. I told Santiago that I wanted to give them one.*

Santiago said that he would consult with the other members of the group since they also had to give their opinion to accept it. One cannot come directly with the image and donate it because they have their beliefs and they have to agree to see if they want it. Then, as Santiago told me, they talked, they became very happy and cheerful and they reached the agreement to accept the gift.

Process of purchasing the Black Christ

According to information from the Engineer, he discussed the gift offer with his wife and they set a date to travel to the city of Esquipulas to purchase it. While in Esquipulas they visited the shops located next to the Basilica until they found the Christ that, in their opinion, seemed the best image. The cost of the Christ was Q1,500.00 (Guatemalan quetzales). After the purchase, they went to the basilica to ask a priest for a blessing. They prepared the image and it was transported by pick-up from the city of Esquipulas to the Engineer's residence, located in the departmental capital of Guastatoya, El Progreso.

He stayed here for 15 days, while the Engineer prepared his trip to the Sesincheu property. When the scheduled day of the trip arrives, the image was placed in the pick-up and left Guastatoya, El Progreso, heading to Sesincheu, Chahal, Alta Verapaz. After traveling seven hours, the image arrived at the property and remained there for a week. The Engineer contacted Mr. Santiago and told him that he had the

Christ on the property. An agreement was reached with the members of the religious group on the day and time for the delivery of the image. When the date arrived Mr. Santiago showed up at the property in the company of eight neighbors who traveled in a truck.

The Engineer, in the company of his wife, they presented the Christ to the members of the group and it was received by Mr. Santiago Choc Coy, who said a prayer and recited the Lord's Prayer, prior to receiving it. The rest of the companions burned pom and incense. According to data provided by the Engineer, the day was cloudy with the presence of the phenomenon typical of those lands, known as *chipi-chipi*. However, it was not an impediment to receiving the Christ with great joy and excitement, given the importance of the miraculous image of the Lord of Esquipulas in the Catholic community.

Transfer of the Black Christ to Saint Agustín Chahal

From the Sesincheu farm, the Christ was transferred in a truck and driven to the parish of Saint Agustín, Chahal, on a journey of 18 kilometers. Upon arrival, he was received by the sacristan, in charge of the church. A religious service was held, a prayer was said to welcome the image and it remained for 40 days in said parish. During the time that Christ was in the parish, the Engineer delegated his friend, Mr. Luis Rodolfo Barrientos Figueroa, a resident of Saint Agustín, to carry out the delivery of the Black Christ to the

community of the Santo Domingo of Sesincheu Catholic Church on his behalf.

Transfer of the Black Christ from the parish of Saint Agustín to the Church of the village of Sesincheu

After 40 days, on January 14th, 2009, the Christ was delivered by the sacristan to Mr. Luis Rodolfo Barrientos and the members of the community's religious group, who were accompanied by half of the villagers. Before being removed from the parish, Mr. Santiago said a prayer and the image was taken to the Catholic church of Santo Domingo in Sesincheu. The transfer was made in Mr. Rodolfo's truck, over a 7 kilometers route.

Reception of the Black Christ in the Sesincheu village

Upon arriving at the community, the other half of the inhabitants, together with the priest of the parish, waited for the group leading the Christ and, upon arriving at the village, the priest received it from the hands of Mr. Rodolfo who delivered it in Engineer's name and family. The priest, as reported by Mr. Rodolfo, *thanked the delivery and father sent thanks to the Engineer through me*. A mass was celebrated with the burning of pom, candles and incense, with harp music and the marimba of Saint Agustín Chahal. The welcome party lasted three days, January 15, 16 and 17, and the traditional regional cuisine for these activities were tasted with preparations of pork, creole chicken and *chompipe* (turkey). The inhabitants were

pleased by the presence of the Black Christ, which has only been in existence for two years in the community.

Informant data

Santiago Choc Coy, 44 years old, president of the religious commission, catechist and farmer. He was born in Sesincheu, he was married and has 4 children.

Mateo Cox Tzalan, 38 years old, he was member of the religious committee; he was married, he was catechist and farmer. He was born in Sesincheu, his family, parents and siblings live in Sesincheu. He didn't know to read or write.

Augusto Chub, 29 years old, he was farmer, he was married and he has two children. He was born in the Setania village, Chahal, Alta Verapaz. He knew how to read and write, he was bilingual, he spoke Spanish and his native language is Q'eqchí. He was the interpreter in the field work to conduct the interview about the origin of the black Christ.

Final Comment

In January 2011, the researcher from the Center for Folklore Studies in charge of the Area of Popular Arts and Crafts, visited the Sesincheu village to inquire about the possibility of pilgrimages to the Black Christ of Sesincheu, but according to information from Mr. Santiago Choc Coy,

none has been made yet, probably because of the recentness of the image.

In conclusion, it can be started that:

1. The cult of the Black Christ survives and has spread once again. Although the motivation for its dissemination was for personal reasons of the offeror (called the Engineer in this article) it was widely accepted by the community. Similar to this process was what occurred, as Navarrete records, in Mexico, the United States, Nicaragua and the various municipalities of the country, this shows the survival of the cult and its progressive expansion, as can be seen in the table 1.
2. The religious phenomenon served as an element of strengthening local identity, since the arrival of the image united the community and strengthening traditional activities, such as gastronomy.
3. In addition, it promoted the conservation of important traditions within the community, such as the relevance of religious leaders, to whom the corresponding consultation was made, as well as worship celebrations, with 40 days, in the parish of Saint Agustín Chahal prior to being placed in its final place.

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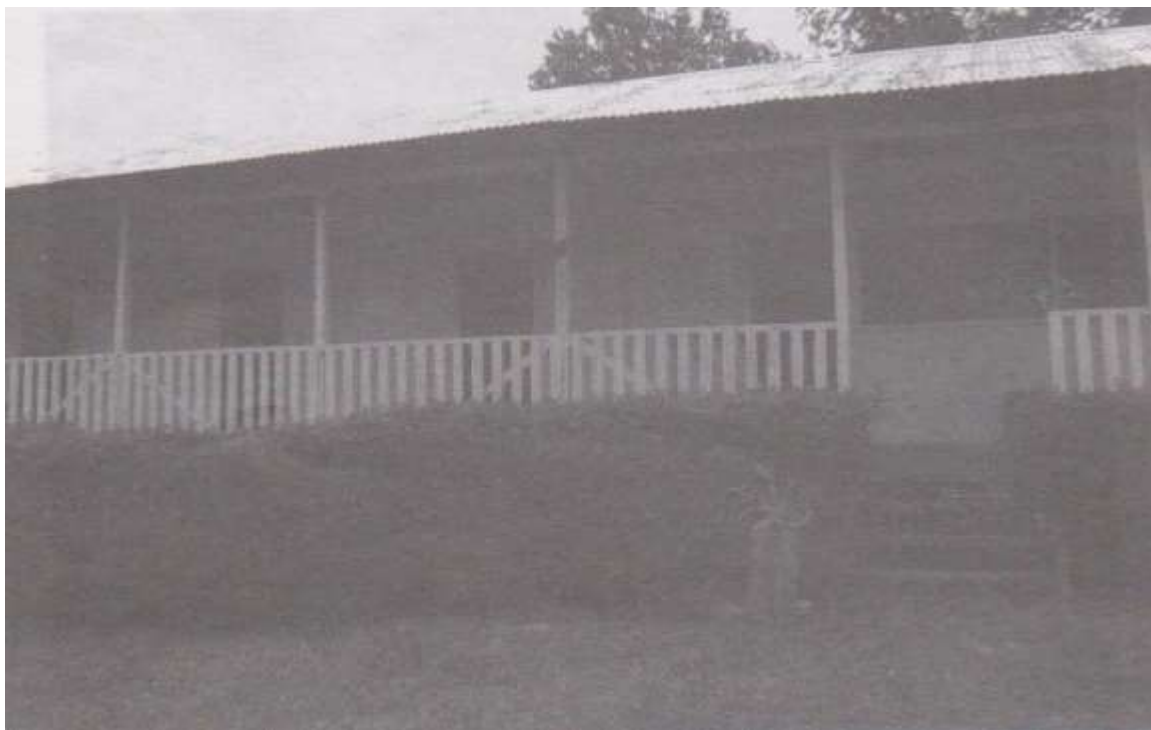
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The Engineer, donor of the image



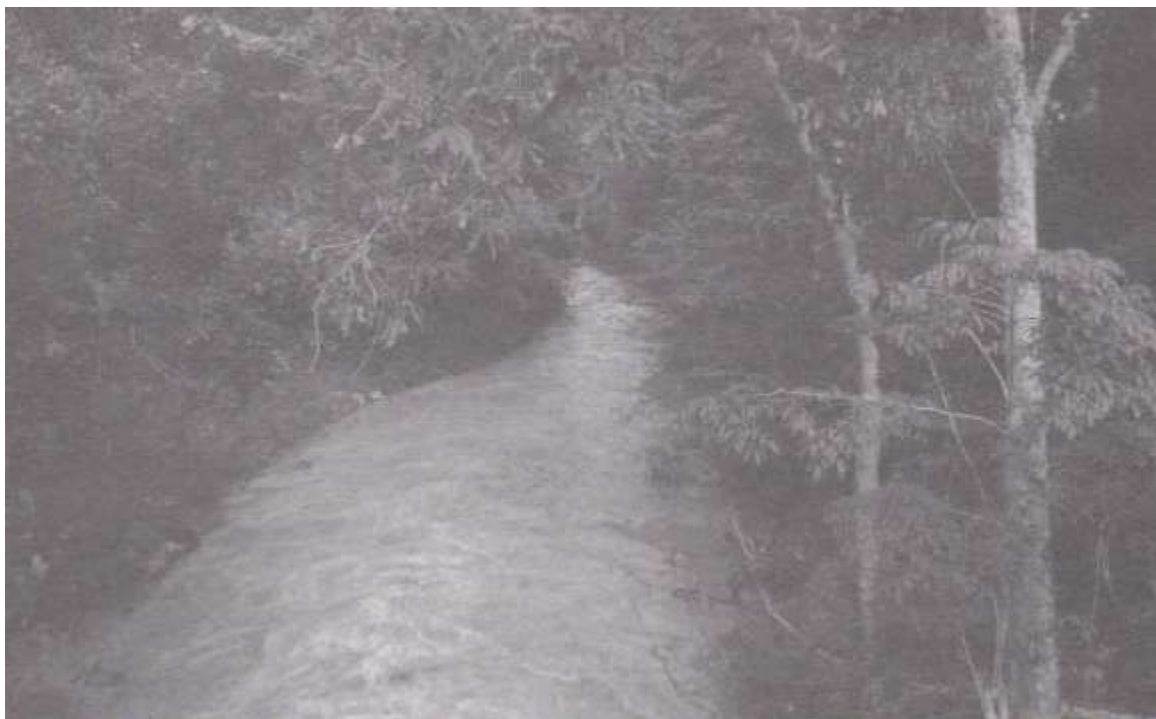
Image of the Black Christ of Esquipulas in Sesincheu.



Engineer's house where the Christ was delivered to the members of the religious group of the Sesincheu church.



Transportation of people on the Northern Transversal Strip.



Río Chahal less than a kilometer from the Sesincheu village.



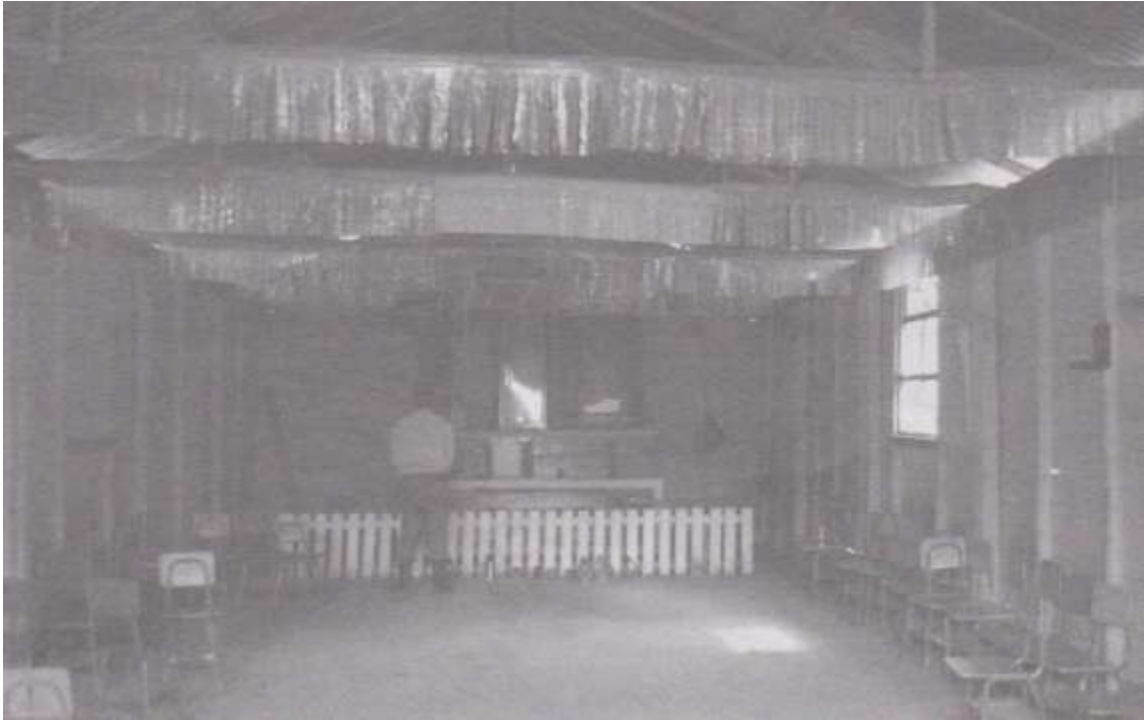
Sesincheu Bridge over the Río Chahal. The interpreter observes the current.



Community dance hall.



Sesincheu Community Church.



This is the Church interior.



Images of the church: *Cristo Negro, San Marcos and Santo Domingo.*



The Informant, Mr. Santiago Choc Coy; the researcher, Aracely Esquivel Vásquez; and the interpreter, Mr. Augusto Chub in the Sesincheu village.



Neighbors watch and listen to the interview in front of the church.



From left to right: Augusto Chub, interpreter, and the informants Santiago Choc Coy and Mateo Cox Tzalan.



Mr. Luis Rodolfo Barrientos, a resident of the community, who presented the Christ to the sacristan and other members of the Sesincheu village.



Deer Dance in one of the streets of the municipality of Chahal, Alta Verapaz.

Pictures: Mario Rodríguez Esquivel