

Notes on Sources

Bernard de Colmont

RICHARD IVAN JOBS AND STEVEN VAN WOLPUTTE



Fig. 1: Bernard de Colmont with the catch of the day, a wild turkey. Photo by Gérard Tacvor, 1935.

Bernard de Colmont, a French amateur ethnologist, went to the borderlands of Mexico-Guatemala to study the Lacandón people in 1934-35 and 1936. Considered a “lost tribe,” the Lacandón were located in the remote mountains of Chiapas and deemed to be the closest living descendants of the ancient Maya.¹ De Colmont’s travels generated extensive media coverage. He related the trip as a consumable narrative that fit within tropes of European exploration of remote places, such as the interior of Africa, the jungles of

¹ On the Lacandón see Joel W. Palka, *Unconquered Lacandon Maya: Ethnohistory and Archaeology of Indigenous Culture Change* (University Press of Florida, 2005); on the West’s interest in and representation of them see Brian Gollnick, *Reinventing the Lacandón: Subaltern Representations in the Rain Forest of Chiapas* (The University of Arizona Press, 2008).

Southeast Asia, and the Arctic or Antarctic. In radio lectures, print media, documentary film, and sound recordings, de Colmont produced implicit imperialist and colonial narratives. Mexico was not nor would be part of the French empire, yet expeditions such as his seeking to produce knowledge of the world through scientific discovery relied upon a Eurocentric understanding of the world that emphasized a racial hierarchy of civilization.

Within the context of celebrity exploration, his trips were indicative of and connected to the ongoing transformation of early ethnological practice typical of France's Museum of Man. In the 1930s, this museum was leading a shift in the field of anthropology away from an emphasis on biological race science to one that focused on the study of language, social order, and ritual as determinative of cultural development; in other words, a shift from physical anthropology to cultural anthropology.² The museum promoted and presented de Colmont's 1936 seventeen-minute, sixteen-millimeter documentary film, "Un Monde se meurt" ("A World is Dying").



Fig. 2: Film Title of "Un Monde se meurt" (dir. Bernard de Colmont, 1936). Used with permission from the GP Archives – Gaumont Collection.

As a historian and anthropologist, we have been collaborating on a short graphic history that uses de Colmont's narratives and images as our primary sources to tell the story graphically in the form of a 1930s adventure serial comic based on the narrative arc de Colmont presented in his film. This expedition has been largely forgotten and, to our knowledge, never studied. It was the materials themselves that inspired us to work on the

² On the Museum of Man and French anthropology see Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (Cornell University Press, 2013); André Delpuech, Christine Laurière, and Carine Peltier-Caroff, eds., *Les Années folles de l'ethnographie: Trocadéro 28-37* (Publications Scientifiques du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, 2017); and Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature* translated by Justin Izzo (University of Chicago Press, 2014).

project in this way. The film footage, photographs, radio lectures, and print media all emphasized storytelling from de Colmont's point of view. Our history, then, is as much about Bernard de Colmont's authorship as it is about the expedition itself. We follow the short comic with an essay that contextualizes and historicizes the tale. We then invite Manuel Bolom Pale, a prize-winning creative writer from Chiapas, to offer an Indigenous perspective on the encounter in the form of a reflective poem written in Tsotsil and translated into English. *In the Land of the Lacandón: A Graphic History of Adventure and Imperialism* is an interdisciplinary microhistory, an experiment in form, in which we consider historical narrative and storytelling for a general audience yet remain grounded in scholarly methods and practice.³

THE INCREDIBLE ADVENTURES OF COUNT DE COLMONT

THE QUEST FOR THE
LOST MAYA



IN WHICH OUR HERO RECOUNTS HOW HE MASTERED
THE DANGERS OF THE MEXICAN JUNGLE AT THE RISK OF
THE LIFE OF HIS COMPANION AND HIS OWN...

BY RICHARD IVAN JOBS, D.PHIL, MA, BSc, ESQ.

&

STEVEN T. VAN WOLPUTTE, D.PHIL, LIC.

WITH MAPS & ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 3: Frontispiece to the new graphic history. Artwork by Steven Van Wolputte.

Our source materials include dozens of photographs and a documentary film, so to retell the tale visually is consistent with the primary sources that de Colmont produced. An adventure comic is particularly apt as in his narrative style, de Colmont's voice and

³ Richard Ivan Jobs and Steven Van Wolputte, *In the Land of the Lacandón: A Graphic History of Adventure and Imperialism* (McGill-Queen's University Press, summer 2025).

framework suit the genre. Likewise, 1930s comics – Francophone and otherwise – traded in exactly this sort of narrative: adventure stories situated in colonial settings.⁴ From our point of view, we package a scholarly investigation in a popular form.⁵ We believe our project will appeal to instructors and students; indeed, the book is designed for use in the classroom.

As documentary narratives, de Colmont's articles, films, lectures, and interviews adopted the literary elements consistent with the "lost race" exploration genre, such as Alain Quartermain, King Kong, and so on. De Colmont's tale, in whatever form he told it, met the expectations of his intended audience, presenting the events as authoritative and natural.⁶ In the opening moments of his film, "A World is Dying," a map of Europe and a Spanish caravel crossing the Atlantic shifts to aerial footage of New York skyscrapers, planes, and cars, with a quick shot of Miss Pittsburgh in a bathing suit, before arriving in Mexico to show Chamula villagers herding sheep, making food, and playing instruments. This is all to emphasize the arc of moving away from the center and toward ever more remote areas, ultimately leading to the Lacandón hidden in the "mysterious" rainforest.



Fig. 4: First Encounter with Kayon from the Lacandón. Photo by Gérard Tacvor, 1935. Used with permission © Illustrated London News/Mary Evans Picture Library.

⁴ On francophone comics of the era see Mark McKinney, *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* (Liverpool University Press, 2011); and Philippe Delisle, *Bande dessinée franco-belge et imaginaire colonial: Des années 1930 aux années 1980* (Editions Karthala, 2016).

⁵ Trevor R. Getz, "Getting Serious about Comic Histories" *American Historical Review* 123:5 (Dec 2018): 1596-1597.

⁶ On lost tribes and lost races see Michael F. Robinson, *The Lost White Tribe: Explorers, Scientists, and the Theory that Changed a Continent* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

De Colmont's narrative arc in print, radio, and film casts his movement away from Europe as a movement away from civilization and modernity. The further from Europe he went, the closer he approached an imagined past. As his means of transport became increasingly rudimentary—from boat to train to car to mule to foot—he became not only spatially remote, but temporally so too. The prolonged emphasis in the film and in his radio lectures on the trek through the jungle emphasizes this. In an interview he said that not only did he experience “a civilization entirely different from ours,” but he also “observed a completely bygone era.”⁷

After the adventurous trek through the rainforest and finding the Lacandón, the film becomes much more ethnographic, depicting the Lacandón hunting for wild turkeys, fishing from dugout canoes, doing chores around the village, and performing rituals. While photography was already well established in the 1930s as part of the colonizing gaze, motion pictures were not, and de Colmont pioneered using film and sound recordings to document “otherness.” Not only was his film contrived within a narrative framework of the discovery of a “remote,” “primitive,” “lost tribe,” but the scenes themselves are obviously staged, curated, and edited. In other words, the Lacandón were the principal actors and de Colmont their director. The voiceover narration strikes a somber, paternalist tone. Still, de Colmont insisted in an interview that the film camera is a “faithful collaborator” and “certainly more objective than us,” and therefore “an absolute necessity” for scientific discovery.



Fig. 5 (left): Listening to de Colmont's recordings. These surviving photographs guided the drawing process. Photographer unknown, 1936.

Fig. 6 (right): Line drawing by Steven Van Wolputte.

We have based the drawings in our graphic history on the film stills and Bernard de Colmont's photographs, which are, in fact, quite respectful of the Indigenous people

⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

they depict. Intentionally, we wanted to evoke the adventure comic style of the 1930s but without reproducing the characteristic racism of the era, and to emphasize critique we have built in visual cues. The graphic history's narration is distilled from de Colmont's three radio lectures, film voiceover, and print media articles. Both the artwork and the text, then, are derived directly from primary sources. This is unusual for a graphic history, where most often the drawings must be produced without documentary evidence and often rely on invented dialogue.

On the one hand, we analyze the film as a text in literary terms (its narrative arc, tone, climax, point of view, characters), and on the other hand its visuality (framing, mise-en-scène, editing, staging, format). We then historicize these dimensions with deep contextualization drawn from secondary research on a variety of subjects: celebrity explorers and adventure literature, cultural imperialism and Indigenous peoples, museums and early ethnography, France and Mexico, comics and race, and so on. We created a scenario using the narrative arc and created the panels using the images, each of which were informed by the historical themes we researched with the intent to present them visually.



Fig 7: De Colmont filming on his first trip to the Lacandón. This photograph by Tacvor served as inspiration for the frontispiece. Photo by Gérard Tacvor, 1935.

Our book has been written for the classroom. It is meant to open a variety of topics for conversation, allowing the instructor several choices of emphasis. It overtly addresses the method of anthropology and history as disciplines, the gaps and silences of historical research, visual and textual representation, and how cultural imperialism and knowledge

production fit with conquest and colonization.⁸ As a graphic microhistory, this short book takes the story of de Colmont's expedition and its promotion to illuminate this moment of late imperialism just prior to the Second World War. We see de Colmont's story as epitomizing the exploration, science, and media of early twentieth century imperialism and how it represented and constructed Indigenous others for the general public.⁹

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⁸ Danna Agmon, "Historical Gaps and Non-existent Sources: The Case of the Chaudrie Court in French India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63:4 (2021): 979-1006; David Todd, *Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁹ Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (University of Minnesota Press: 2014).