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Processing Maya Incense



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Guatemalan Incense

The resin as incense, is an organic substance, liquid, sticky, and has a whitish to yellow color; characteristic of some plants, mostly the gymnosperms plants, that produce this substance to protect themselves from insects. When it gets in contact with air, sometimes it turns hard like a little rock, shiny and amorphous. This also has aromatic oil that emanates a pleasant odor when it's burned.

This sap was collected and burned as incense in México and Central America for many centuries ago with the Ancient Maya, who offered it as gifts to their gods in order to please them.

According with the translation of the Popol Vuh by Adrian Recinos, it was an ancient tradition to burn hearts of animals, if they didn't get any; they made hearts out of copal or pom incense (Goetz and Morley, 1978).

In these days the Sacred Mayan rituals are not the same as they were once, even so, they use the same kind of incense that the Ancient Mayans fabric.

In order to know more about the artisanal elaboration of incense, we traveled to Momostenango "City of Altars" (Fig.1), Totonicapán Guatemala. Our first observation was the confusion between names: we call "**incense**" to all the form of aromatic substance that emanates odor when it burns. As soon as we visited Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán, and Coban markets, the sellers referred to "pom" at the mixture of trementina (sap) and bark. They explained that the sap extracted from Momostenango comes a 100% from pine tree from the Santa Maria village. After following their instructions to get there, after a research, we confirmed the pine trees correspond to *Pinus oocarpa* and *Pinus devoniana* (Fig. 2), and established that the bark used to elaborate the pom balls comes from the same pines or oaks.





Fig. 1. Catholic church in the center of Momostenango, Totonicapán, Guatemala. It is surrounded with the local market which constituted the main activity in the Village. Down. View the Village of Momostenango from the top of a hill. Photo by Jackelinne Nájera. FLAAR Mesoamérica photo Archive.



Fig 2. Pinus oocarpa. At the right: Pinus devoniana collected in the village of Santa Ana, Momostenango, Totonicapán, Guatemala 2008 by Mirtha Cano. Determinated by: Mario Véliz. BIGU Herbarium. USAC Guatemala.

In other regions of Guatemala highlands such as Huehuetenango, Chichicastenango, Quiche and Coban, bark might come from the estoraque tree (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), (*Cupressus* sp), (*Abies guatemalensis*), Pines, etc.

The Popol Vuh mentions that Mayans used several trees as incense, such as palo jiote or Indio desnudo tree; (*Bursera simaruba*) Arbol de Sangre or Arbol de Dragon (*Croton sanguifluus*); rubber (*Castilla elastica*), (*Tagetes lucida*) of the Asteraceae family and other grass. The variety of incense in the offerings was because Quiches liked to offer to their gods incense of different fragrances (Goetz and Morley, 1978).

According with Standley 1950, many trees of the *Bursera* genera (*B. Schlechtendalii*, *B. Steyermarkii*, *B. permollis*, *B. bipinnata*, *B. diversifolia*, *B. graveolens*, *B. excelsa*) produce aromatic resins that people also used as incense.

The “pom” is used in Mayan rituals and incense (yellow grain form) in religious ceremonies, of the Christian Catholic Church.

Currently in Mayan rituals the copal pom incense offering is burned with sugar, pericon, fruits and beverages. These rituals take place in special sites, frequently on top of the mountain called “Cerros” (Fig. 3) or in Mayan archeological places that remain conserved after the conquest, such as Iximché, Zaculeu, Tikal, Mixco Viejo, etc, also some rituals take place in caves according with the Maya cosmology. Some people ask for protection; other ask for their plantations and harvest; for dead relatives; and special favors.

We also realized that in Momostenango village it is used incense to practice white and black witchcraft that they call “trabajos”, accompanied by other substances like minerals, photos, liquor, cigarettes, candles, and plants or animal extracts. It is proper to mention that these practices are totally isolated and different from the Mayan rituals but very common in our villages.

Today in Guatemalan markets we can find many kinds of incense mixed with other resins plus aromatic oils; spices like cinnamon, thyme, rosemary, cannabis, and perfume. It’s sold in different shapes and colors, and it is usually used as aromatherapy, relaxation, decoration, and flavored environments.

Fig 3. Sacred Maya site in Paclom Momostenango, Totonicapán, Guatemala.

When we get there was curious for me to see that being a Sacred Maya place the sanctuary has a crosses, after reaching I found that for some people represents a symbol of Christianity but in the Maya culture it represent the four cardinal points that relation the cosmos and the people.





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The process starts by removing the bark from one side of the trunk, of the tree, and scraping to provoke the production of sap; the bark is collected and the sap is deposited in a container (Fig. 4) then the sap gets boiled for a few hours until it becomes a viscous liquid, meanwhile the bark, its crushed to get mixed with the trementina. Once is warm, balls of different sizes and shapes, are made. These balls are baked for approximately one hour in a homemade oven, commonly used in rural areas (Fig.5).



Fig 4. Up: At the left: Pines and Quercus Forest from Momostenango, Totonicapán. At the right: Secretion of trementina (Sap) from a pine tree. Down at the left: Inside the nylon is a kid protected from the rain. At the right: The sap from the pine tree is gathered in a container.



Fig. 5. Up: The sap is boiled until gets a yellowish liquid form, then is mixed with bark and put them into the oven for a few hours, when they are ready Don Fernando sold them in Momostenango market on Wednesdays and Sundays. Down: Jacqueline and Don Fernando holding incense balls after removed it from the artesian oven in the back.

The same kind of incense has different kinds of wrapper, such “ensarte de chuchito” this is a wrap made from corn husk, or is used “maxan” leaves (*Calathea lutea*) of the Maranthaceae family which are used to wrap tamales, cheese and incense (Fig. 6), always found in local markets in all Guatemala,

The extraction of resin from a pine tree is elaborated mainly in Coban, and Totonicapán, but is also elaborated in less quantity in Huehuetenango, Quiche and San Marcos and Petén as an artesian alternative product.

Don Fernando has collected one barrel of trementina per week to sell in the local market on Sundays and Wednesdays, while the corn crop is growing. The people of Momostenango who lived near to the pine forest, committed to this activity increase their economic resources, even if it means to get in trouble with the local authorities for illegal extraction; just like Don Fernando don't have another option, because the money from the corn harvest is not enough to cover the expenses for feeding his four children and his wife. This situation is common for the Guatemalan people who live in rural areas.



Fig. 6. A. Incense made from pine resin mixed with pine tree bark in different form and shape.



Fig.6 B. Different kinds of incense wrapped in corn husk and maxan leaves.

During our field trip, to Coban, Alta Verapaz, we traveled to Secmuc Champey, which is a famous place in Guatemala for its natural beauty and cultural richness, we were looking for plants used by the Ancient Maya through today. During the route we were surprised to see the transition of one ecosystem to another, in a very short distance; we saw *Heliconia*, ferns and tropical plants growing near to the pine trees.

In some way, the landscape has been transformed over the years with the frequent agricultural activities, but still has remains of the original forest. After a while we arrived in El Portal hotel, we found Cacao trees, achiote, pineapple, manioc, papaya, maize copal pom and many other plants.

In Coban, the extraction of resin from the copal pom tree (*Protium copal*), the preparation of chocolate bars and achiote bars are headed by women, while men performs other tasks.

The difference of copal pom incense from the pom described before, is that copal pom is an oleoresin; the word comes from Aztec Nahuatl *copalli*, it is given the name pom (Maya), Chom (Petén), Pom-té (Queqchí), usually grows in wet forest, chiefly at 350 meters or less in Petén; Alta Verapaz, Izabal, Zacapa, San Marcos. It is a medium-sized or large tree, sometimes 30 meters high, with thick trunk, it has axillary panicles, mostly of 12 cm. Long or shorter, the fruit from 1.5 to 3 cm. Long, glabrous, and short-stipitate at the base. The copal presumably is procured as much as the same way *Bursera simaruba*. They use it also as a varnish and medicine (Standley and Steyermark, 1950).

Coban highlands allowed a long extension of pine and oak forest, a 70% of Guatemalan incense is elaborated from the sap of those trees, other 20% comes from Momostenango Totonicapán and the rest 10% from other regions of the country. Coban also has wet tropical foresting. The lowlands grows many of the Burseraceae family plants and it's used to make incense since the ancient Maya times.

The preparation process of copal pom begins, scraping the trunk of the tree with a knife, then, when the sap comes out, it's collected with a small shaped tool home made paddle, meanwhile the woman puts her own saliva on the fresh sap so it does not get hard, and after that, they wrap the copal pom in maxan leaves, Heliconia leaves or corn husk to sell in the market (Fig. 7). This process is simpler than the described with pine, because of the malleable properties of the copal pom sap.



Fig. 7. Woman collecting copal pom. El protal, Semuc Champey, Cobán Guatemala 2008

We will continue doing field trips to learn more about the manufacturing process of incense from palo jiote (*Bursera simaruba*) (Fig. 8) and other utilized plants from the Ancient Maya trough to-day, and enhance the Guatemalan ethnobotany knowledge.



Fig. 8. Palo jiote (*Bursera* sp.). Cerro Cahui. Petén 2008.

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