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SACRED FOOD AND DRINKS

Biologist : Mirtha Cano

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“The Mayan have always lived in a sacred world, opposed to the profane world. The Mayan seek the subjective, the mystery of things, what cannot be seen but what is the real and the symbolic thing. All their relations with nature, work or sexuality, have a sacred meaning, even the fact to be fed is not a purely organic question or natural, but rather sacred. Therefore, among them, existed food and beverages that were symbolic objects, especially the ones related to their ceremonies (Bernard A., Lozano M, 2004).

According with the Popol Vuh, the book of the Ancient Maya, the purpose of the gods was to create creatures that would able to adore and sustain them. There were several failed attempts to create this kind of creatures. Once they noticed that the creatures were incapable of speaking, or memorizing their names, they were destroyed; and men who survived were transformed into monkeys.

It was until the fourth attempt that the gods: Ahom, Qaholom Tepeuh, Cucumartz and Ixmucané created a man out of corn seeds.

It is written:

“And here their thought came out in clear light. They sought and discovered what was needed for human flesh. It was only a short while before the sun, moon, and stars were to appear above the markers and modelers. Broken Place, Bitter Water Place is the name. The yellow corn, white corn came from there. And these are the names of the animals that brought the food: fox, coyote, parrot and crow. They where coming from over there at Broken Place, they showed the way to the break. And this was when they found the staple food.

“And these were the ingredients for the flesh of the human work, the human design, and the water was for the blood. It became human blood and corn was also used by the Bearer, Begetter” (Tedlock 1985)

These people where able to speak, to hear, to known and to recognize their creators. That was the beginning of the edge of men.

The men were multiplied, they were given their wives for the reproduction and to be propagated, these people depended entirely on Tzacol and Bitol, their creators, but also every tribe had its own idol endowed with supernatural powers.

One of them, Tohil, was the supplier of fire to warm the people, but he required blood sacrifice of victims of foreign tribes or their own tribes, specially their hearts.

The gods drank blood to survive. The blood represented *the source of youth and vitality*. People had to sacrifice themselves tearing up their ears, elbows and other parts of their body until they bleed. Gods also asked the people to bring shoots of herbs, and the blood of deer broods and chicks to sustain them; the blood had to be shed in the mouth of the god Tohil stone.

The offerings also consisted in burning incense, mushrooms, and anis, in altars located in top of the mountains. These activities can still be seen by Mayan descendents in Guatemala Highlands, where they burn copal or copal pom with flowers, corn, tobacco, alcohol et. (Personal observation)

Most of the offerings were for gods but tribes also brought offerings to show respect to the chiefs that fed and support people. There were people who fasted, and others who burned incense, which was offered to ask for divination, expiation and idolatry.

The intention of the religious ceremonies wasn't only ask for their necessities, but also to show respect and love for what was created, including its own existence. Nature and all the things that happened around them had and still has a supernatural meaning closely related with their gods.

It is worth to mention that ever since man was created, until today, it has always expressed a strong interest toward power and dominance to their adversaries and even within the same group in common, therefore within the Mayan hierarchy people used to tribute the great chief and lords. These tributes consisted on metals, feathers, ornaments, precious stones, musical instruments and so, These lords, in order to achieve greatness, glory and power used to sacrifice those who refused to surrender before them, including entire tribes, woman and even children.

These sacrifices came from the battles between tribes, prisoners were taken in front of their gods to be slaughtered during their ceremonies; they decorated prisoners with flowers of the balche tree and painted them with blue, a sacred color (Nájera 2004) but also with cacao pods hanging from the prisoner's body (Chinchilla 2006:17).

During these activities there were included several plants and drinks with psychotropic effects, like hallucinogenic mushrooms (*Psilocibe mexicana*, *Amanita muscaria*,) hallucinogenic plants as peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) wonder flower (*Rivea corimbosa*), Morning glory (*Ipomoea sp*) (Gonzales Torres, 2001) waterlily (*Nymphaea ampla*) (Hellmuth 1987) *Datura sp*, *Tabernanthe sp*, *Anadenanthera sp*, *Duboisia sp*, *virola sp*, etc. (Schultes 2001) which was used to establish communication with the gods and to weaken the will of the victims who would be sacrificed (Tedlock 1985).

According with Schultes (2001) plants that have altered the normal functions of brain and body, have always been considered as “sacred” by peoples in nonindustrial societies. Hallucinogens have been “plants of the gods” per excellence.

Sacred Drinks in Mayan Ceremonies



Photo by Jaime Leonardo. FLAAR photo archive.

In every Mayan ceremony and ritual it has always been included a special drink, the *Balche*, which was the favorite drink of the Ancient Mayans. Used in several ceremonies until today (Tompson 1972:182), it was elaborated using the bark of the balche tree, (*Lonchocarpus longistilus* Pitter) and related species, commonly named as palo gusano, (Petén) yaxmujin, Ixec-subín, subín,

habín (Maya Petén, Lundell) sibicté (AltaVerapáz) saayab, (Standley and Steyermark, 1950, 24.5: 294) with virgin water and honey of stingless bees which were raised by themselves (De Landa, Rivera 2008). According with Alicia Bernard (2003) the balche drink is prepared by boiling the bark of balche tree, to remove the bitter, and then dry it to boil again with virgin water from cenotes or sacred rivers and honey as sweetener. Then it is left to ferment, to produce an intoxicant beverage. Today this drink is still made by the Mayan descendent in Yucatan, but using sugar in place of honey, anis and alcohol (Gabriel 2004).

Tozzer cited by Standley (1959) mentioned that the balche was used in religious ceremonies of the Lacandon Indians in Petén, and it is described as a milky white beverage with a sour odor and disagreeable taste with a little percent of alcohol, but drinking large quantities of it attains drunkenness. The Spanish name is Pitarrilla. Bernard (2003) described it as a pinkish beverage with a sweet taste.

Diego de Landa mentions in his book *"Relation of the things of Yucatán"*, that this beverage was drunk in cups made out of the shell of a fruit. All Indians in general participated with joy in these ceremonies, which were accompanied with dances and sacrifices until drunk. It was also a laxative, and healed them from worms, that they'd get out of their mouths.

With the use of this alcoholic beverage during the collective ceremonies, it was common to ask for protection, thanks and other petitions. They used it to sanctify people, spraying it with a brush of sipilche' over their heads; they also did it over food, crops, animals, or around the kitchen. (Gabriel 2003) This has an etymological explanation: according with Barrera Marín et al (1976:338) the word Balche came from "*baal*" which means to hide, secret or something hidden, "*Che*" means tree. The tree or plant that has narcotic substances or alcoholic properties is named with such meanings. So, the balche was used to sanctify and protect things, activities, animals and persons of hidden evil spirits, unknown phenomenon, etc.

In some ceremonies the balche was the sacred wine but the women also drank Saka, which is a non-alcoholic beverage made of cooked corn (*mixtamal*) the name *Saka* means corn mass. During the ceremonies the saka was offered before the balche. (Gabriel 2003). The Mayan offered saka to their god Chaack before planting corn to protect it from wind, plagues, and herbs; they also asked for the rain to come in order to ensure the optimal growth of their crops, so they could have their daily food. Márquez (2006) reported that these ceremonies are still performed by Mayan descendents in a village of Quintana Roo, Mexico.

The book of the Popol Vuh describes that four animals presented a provision of rich food, including cacao fruits, which is also a sacred drink.

“The good mountain was filled with sweet things, thick with yellow corn, white corn, thick with pataxte and cacao, countless zapotes anonas, jocotes nances, matasanos, sweets the rich foods filling up the citadel named Broken Place, Bitter Water Place. All the edible fruits were there: small staples, great staples, small plants, great plants” (Tedlock 1985)



The sweet pulp of the cacao fruit motivated its consumption by the ancient Mesoamericans. The complex elaboration of the beverage was developed in early time, suggests Chinchilla (2006), he also explains that cacao seeds were used to elaborate different recipes as black tamales or mole, which are still common today. The archaeological evidence, as vestiges of cacao in several vessels inside tombs at Copan, confirms these theories.

It is reported that the Ancient Maya prepared the cacao using vanilla, pepper, pataxte as flavoring, and annatto to turn the beverage red.

Fray Diego De Landa relates that the Indians elaborated a very refreshing, non-alcoholic, drink with roasted and milled maize, water pepper and cacao. An alcoholic beverage was elaborated using the pulp of cacao with fermented water and was usually drunk in common celebrations.

Mayan rituals and ceremonies of Today

The Mayan ceremonies are a key to the Mayan cultural identity; they are a practice of religiosity and spirituality of the Mayans. It's a sacred activity through which men seek to have closer contact and communication with the Supreme Being, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. They are conducted with very specific objectives; to inaugurate or celebrate important dates; to offer a payment as a token for thanks; ask for welfare, health, work and wisdom in difficult moments; to be filled in positive energy; clean negative energy, and so on (**Xkem Báatz, Mayan Priestess**)

It is important to mention, that since the conquest, the structure of the mayan culture has been dismembered in many levels: social, political, agricultural, ideological , etc., but some of that elements that survived in that time, are now integrated into the new social system of our days.

According with (Broda 2002) the rituals are one of the most important expressions of the mesoamerican society and has been transformed since the XVI century adopting part of the catholic rituals like the cult of saints and traditional local festivities.

Oscar Alonzo¹, a Maya from Guatemala commented that “the Mayan culture has degenerated but has survived, hidden behind the Catholic Christianity. In several cases there is a story of a Mayan village where a church was built in a center ceremonial, because that was the strategy that the Spaniard used to convert the people to Christian.

1 Interview with Oscar Alonzo, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2005

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