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# BASKETRY AND MATTING in Mesoamerica



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## Basketry and matting in Mesoamerica

Basketry and matting are activities that go from generation to generation; evolving thanks to the knowledge accumulated through thousands of years. It is believed that baskets and mats were used since the Paleoindian period (15,000 – 9,000 B.C.), used by nomadic groups, because these kind of crafts are easy to transport and are from perishable materials.

The use of mats, but specially baskets, can be seen all over the world. This crafts are elements that can be used in every day activities, for example, storage of food and/or other objects; to carry several things at a time; as decorative; for a religious purpose, etc. In Mesoamerica there are a variety of types of baskets and mats, depending on the cultural group that makes these crafts, because every group has a certain style for making the mats and baskets, and because each group can use several materials for the making of this crafts, some local and others imported from other places.

In Guatemala mats and baskets have a strong demand; they are commercialized in almost all the regional markets and craft shops in the country. It is very common to observe a wide variety of utilitarian and decorative baskets in road shores. They all are elaborated manually and are sold at affordable prices. Mats are also an important craft among the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, because they used it for every day life, and in ancient times it had a strong iconographic importance, as we shall see further on this work, because they were related with the elite power and control.



*Fig 2. Salamá baskets made of dry pine leaves. Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth.*

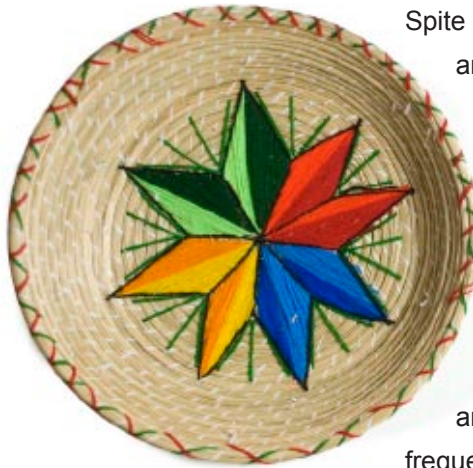


*Fig 1. Fan of zibaque fibers. This kind of fibers are used in basketry and to wrap tamales also. Photo by J. Leonardo.*

### Since Pre-Hispanic to Contemporaneous

In Mesoamerica, during colony and Pre-Hispanic age, basketry had undoubtedly an important role inside daily commercial activities, thanks to its effectiveness, functionality, facility and comfort at transporting things.





Despite the natural fibers are perishable, Perez de Micau (2001) mentions that there are archaeological evidence on manufacturing techniques of basketry, matting, textiles, and other vegetal artifacts, that were conserved in certain special climatic conditions.

The single fragmentary example of basketry from Dzibilchaltun was preserved in the Cenote Xacah. Clay impressions, particularly of matting, occur more often, although imprints of baskets seem to be very rare, possibly occurring only at Kaminaljuyu (Taschek; 1994: 130-131).

Outside the Maya area, fairly adequate collections are known from Tehuacan and the western and northern peripheries of Mesoamerica, where specimens are frequently well preserved in dry sites. In the Cenote Xlacah there was found only one specimen of wicker basketry, which was reported as deteriorated and in very poor condition. It is flat and may be a fragment of a basket, tray, petate, sandal, hat, fan, or other woven article. It is suggested that wicker basketry occurs rarely in Mesoamerica—as other fragments found in the cenote of sacrifice in Chichen Itza (Mefford; 1992; 91)—, except for meager finds in northern Mexico (Taschek; 1994: 131).



Some of the best examples of Maya basketry are shown on the stelae and lintels of the Classic ceremonial center of Yaxchilán. The images of these woven baskets first caught the attention of Maudslay and later were referred to by both Spinden and Morley. Interestingly enough, the shape of the baskets carved on the Stelae differs markedly from those represented on the lintels.

Most of the baskets at Yaxchilán are shown in connection with scenes of self-sacrifice (Robiesek; 1975: 119-120).



Fig 3. Solola's baskets. Photo by J. Leonardo





*Fig 4. Small hats made of palm.*

Another interesting stone-document of pre-Columbian basketry is Stela 9 at Oxkintok. The monument which carries a Maya date equivalent to 849 A.D., is carved with two human figures involved in what appears to be something of an ancient variety of a Mexican hat-dance around a shallow, flared basket filled with small objects probably fruits or copal incense (Robiesek; 1975: 121).

Basketry portrayed on ceramics is even much more common. Several such representative painted bowls have been published from the collection of the University Museum of Pennsylvania. The vase from Nebáj shows a scene, which appears to be social rather than ceremonial: two dignitaries wearing loincloths and elaborate headdresses are engaged in an animated conversation over what appears to be a basketful of *tamales* or some other form of cooked dough. Their attendant stands behind them in a respectful pose. The basket is a shallow one with a flared mouth and a painted rim. The scene continues to the other side of the vase where another noble, similarly clad, appears to sample some sort of food placed in a smaller woven basket (Robiesek; 1975: 121-122).



*Fig 5. Different products made of natural fibers, you can bought some of these at Guatemala Central Market.*

*Photos by Jaime Leonardo.*





Also, in the colonial period, the Spanish chronicler Fray Francisco Ximenez (1967) mentions in his book *Historia Natural del Reino de Guatemala* that “They made plaits with one of these palms, maybe Yarey, then, when gathered and cooked they formed hats.”

Basketry is intimately related with our daily life, it constitutes an alternate source of income in the economy in certain rural communities of Guatemala. Perhaps the basket was the first device created by human ingenuity that may be called a luxury.

In Guatemala the communities that produce baskets and other handcrafts with natural fiber are San Raimundo Guatemala; San Juan Sacatpequez, Guatemala; Parramos and San Martín Jilotepeque, Chimaltenango; Iztapa, Escuintla; Aguacatán, Huehuetenango; Ixtahuatán, Huehuetenango and Santa Clara la Laguna (Sololá); Chilascó Baja Verapáz; Cobán, Alta Verapáz.

Every community has its own form to elaborate their baskets, for example in Chilascó Village their baskets are made of dry leaves of pine, tied with thread. In Santa Clara la Laguna, Solola baskets are made of straw, beautifully decorated with wool of strong and brilliant colors, which are attractive for tourists.

The basket craft is of such importance in Guatemala that in Chajul one of the early dances (Dance of the Baskets, performed once a year) celebrates this craft. Basketry is an ancient handicraft in Guatemala; many pieces were decorated with basketry designs (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 197).

The central market located in zone 1 of Guatemala City offers a variety of baskets of all kind of materials that come from different localities of the country, but mainly from Cobán and Salamá, Baja Verapáz, some of them include materials as duroport to maintain the food’s temperature, in this case it’s used for keeping tortillas warm. The materials are mixed according to the rigid or flexibility that is wished, like sticks, bindweeds, slats, wire, palettes, etc. and they are varnished.



*Fig. 6 Yaxchilan Lintel show a Ruler Jaguar Escudo and his wife in a blood ritual using a basket. Draw in “La Civilización Maya”, Robert Sharer, 1994.*



The Mayas have used basketry work also in manufacturing other utensils and ceremonial objects. Ceramic artifacts and the codices often show dignitaries carried on litters holding fans or wearing belts made of basketry and matting. As far as litters are concerned, they were used extensively not only in the Maya cultural area, but also in most of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. The litter is essentially a portable variety of throne, to which poles are added so that it may be carried from place to place (Robiesek; 1975: 125).

While many of the scenes portrayed in Maya art in which basketry is involved indeed have a complicated story to tell, the basketry objects *per se* do not appear to be directly involved in the deliverance of this coded message but rather seem to be no more than props in these touching but nonetheless theatrical scenes of ancient Maya symbolism (Robiesek; 1975: 129).

### Techniques and uses

Basketry consists on the elaboration of appliances with flexible fibers of natural origin. The employment of these fibers is as ancient as the Egyptian, Greek and Indian civilizations; where they demonstrated the use of linen, ramio, yute, cotton, among others (Remussi; 1956). This craft derives from textile activities; since it is made with similar structures (wrap and weave). These kinds of activities are often a family labor, but especially made by women, therefore they are the principal transmitters of the one-thousand-year-old tradition, and that creates a cultural value in the whole world.



Fig 7. Bamboo basket. Photo by Jaime Leonardo.





According with the first nomadic groups, the need of containers to facilitate the obtaining, transportation and conservation of food was the principal motivation to devise the confection and manufacture of such tools. Nowadays we can see that basketry made with natural fibers is still practiced, spite the industrialization of synthetic fibers that is commercialized at a long scale. The materials used today change according to the cultural practices of craftsmen, the functionality of the elements, and it also depends on the availability of natural resources.

There are several types of baskets depending on its use. The *canastas* boasts a handle, large or small, while the *canastos* has no handle and is always more or less shallow (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 197) (Lemos; 1950: 38). You can also find *canasto panadero*, for bread; *curtillero*, to contain one *cuartilla* of black beans or corn; *cafetero*, used by the women who come to the coffee estates to gather the crop; *colero*, used to sift cooked corn for making dough for tamales, specially used in Rabinal; etc. (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 197-198).

Basketry no only depends on its use, but also on the techniques in which they are built, for example, the manufacture of palm basket consists in placing at the bottom pieces of rods or branches interlaced towards the center to form a base. When the base is woven they fold it up to continue with the sides. The forms and sized of the baskets are variable: with handles, circulars, oval, squared, with covers, etc., sizes also change from miniatures up to big dimensions.



Fig 8. Caña basket. Photo by Jaime Leonardo





## Mats or Petates<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest forms of weaving in Central America was mat making. The importance of mats to the indigenous context is supported by quantities of archaeological evidence. They play an important role on ceremonial occasions and in everyday activities (as walls for huts, as beds, as tables, etc.). They are an almost indispensable household furnishing from the time an Indian is born on a mat till the time he dies and it becomes his shroud (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 182). The name of this artifact comes from the name in nahuatl "Petatl". Mayan codices show scenes where human figures sat on mats, or *pop*, as it is called in most Mayan languages (Robiesek; 1975: 20); some chroniclers indicate that they had board games were mats were used as boards.

Only a few fragments of ancient Maya matting have survived the passage of time and the moist Central American climate. Of the Classic Maya epoch, only a small piece of a disintegrated fiber-mat was found below a plaza floor at the Ruins

<sup>1</sup> Petate: Spanish name for "mat".



*Fig 9. Basketry consists on the elaboration of appliances with flexible fibers of natural origin, and different techniques of manufacture. Photo by Eduardo Sacayon.*





of Uuxactun and Tikal (Robiesek; 1975: 21). While matting itself did not survive, basket, rope, and mat impressions appear frequently on burned adobe fragments dating from the Early Pre-Classic period (1500 – 600 B.C.). It is probable that these marks were not intended to serve any decorative purpose, but that they were imprinted accidentally when the potter put his unfired jars on fiber mats to dry (Robiesek; 1975: 21).

Similar impressions were found on ceramics excavated from Miraflores tombs dating from the Middle and late Pre-Classic times (600 B.C. – 200 A.C.). There is also ample evidence to indicate that palm-fiber and rush-mats were used in many Late Pre-Classic and Early Classic burials. Some of these tombs were first roofed, then totally covered with mats. In other burials matting was used to cover the floors. The richly furnished Esperanza tombs of Kaminaljuyu also contained many impressions of twilled mats, which were probably used to wrap the body and to line the walls and floors. Traces of basketry have also been reported from the same burials (Robiesek; 1975: 21) (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 183).

Besides being applied as a repetitive design of ornamentation on ceramics, these “mat-bands” were also used in both sculptural and pictorial art to indicate that a specific part of the attire or utensil has been made of woven or plaited material. In some cases it appears to be almost certain that the artist indeed intended to depict woven rushes; on others no definite distinction can be made between rushes and other woven materials, such as palm fibers, leather or textile bands (Robiesek; 1975: 136).

Guatemala and El Salvador have several weaving techniques. In areas where rushes and reeds grow profusely, mat making is a major industry. Peculiar to Guatemalan technique is the male weaver’s frequent use of his big toe to manipulate the rushes during the weaving process in order to keep his hands free to weave the mat rapidly. Also characteristic of technique in his country is the fact that a wooden needle is not often used (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 186).

### **The importance of the “Petate” in the Mesoamerican area**

Mats, besides being an integral part of the household furnishings of the Maya Indians, also played an important role in religious ceremonies as well as in mundane festivities. In the temples of the Maya gods, the image of the deities and offerings were placed on rush-mats, and religious paraphernalia were also stored on them. Mats, as ceremonial objects, were also used in the ritual of human sacrifice, as seen on Stela 11 at Piedras Negras where one of the very rare examples of human sacrifice during the Classic period is depicted. The top of the monument is carved with the majestic seated figure of a Maya overlord; the lower part of the Stela is decorated with a small, mat-covered altar upon which the broken figure of a sacrificial victim is stretched (Robiesek; 1975: 22).



*Fig 10. Craftswomen of Chilascó, Baja Verapaz weaving a basket. Photo by Eduardo Sacayón.*

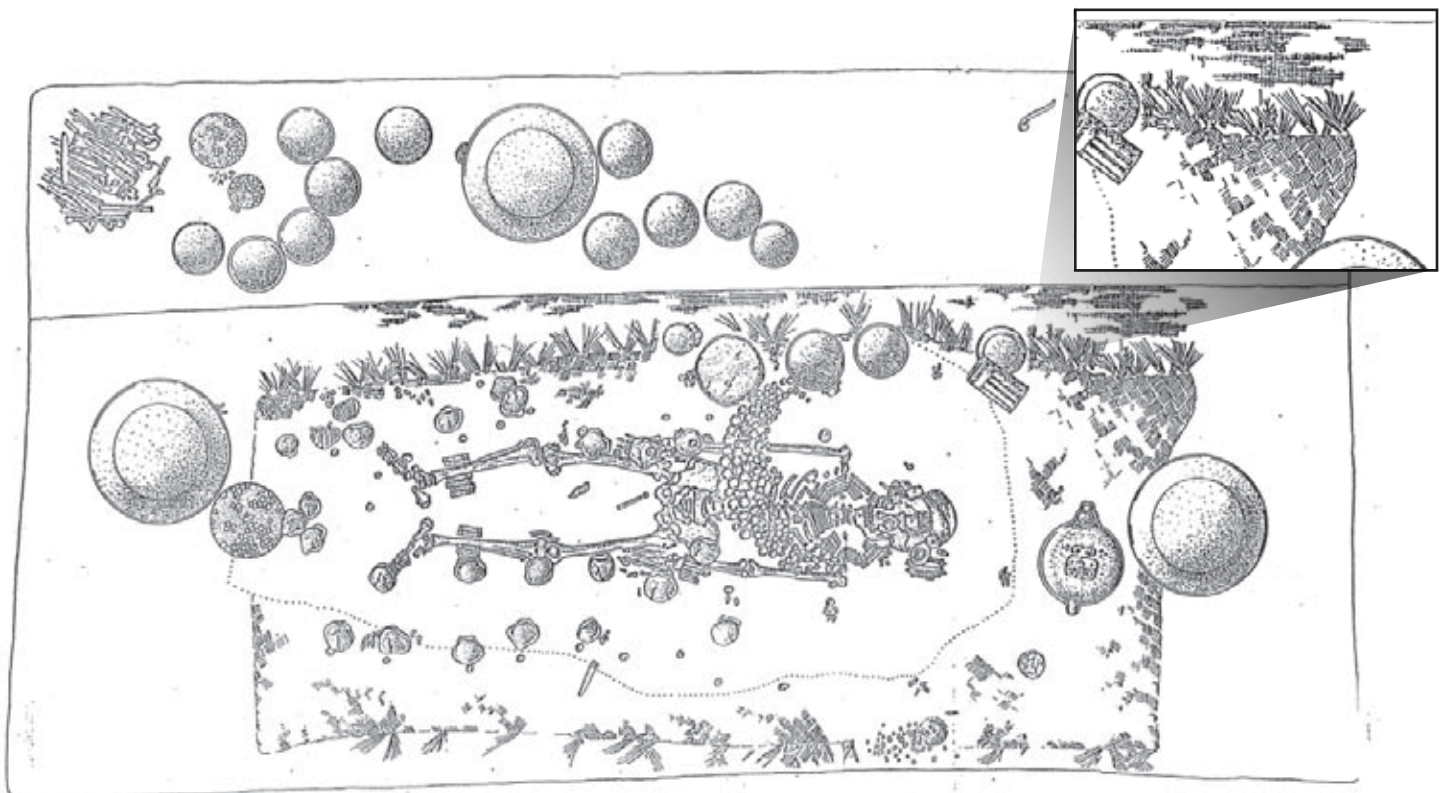




Mats, undoubtedly as a surviving element of their ancient Maya religion, are also used among the population of the Guatemalan Highlands in their catholic religious rituals. The fourteen *cofradías* honor their patron saints just as the Lacandons worship their idols in the Lacandon forest. The shrine at the church of San Cristobal, Alta Verapaz, is also regularly decorated with large, woven mats hung against the wall. Similar custom is observed among the Chorti Mayas, who also cover the seats and thrones of their patron saints with mats, green ones during the rainy season and yellow ones during the dry (Robiesek; 1975: 23-24).

The two most famous representations of the mat on Classic Maya monuments are undoubtedly the hieroglyphic back-panels of Stela J at Copán and Stela H at Quiriguá. Stela J stands alone in the eastern end of the Central Court of Copan and bears no human figures. Its four sides are covered with hieroglyphs carved in low relief. According to its calendar-glyphs, it was probably one of the first monuments erected after Copan's Main Plaza was built in 702 A.D. On the eastern side of the stela, the glyphs are laid out in the very unusual, diagonally crossing pattern to represent the woven mat (Robiesek; 1975: 42).

A similar, but not identical, mat-design hieroglyphic panel decorates Stela H at Copan's sister city, Quirigua. The monument, which may represent one of the many artistic links between the two neighboring centers, was erected about a half a century later than Stela J. While its back is covered by the mat-design glyph-panel, its front is carved with a human figure of heroic size standing on a mask-pedestal (Robiesek; 1975: 42). It can be also said that, the representation of the mat in this monuments can be seen as a symbol of power like Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil –also known as “18 Rabbit”- who was the 13th ruler of Copan, maybe used the mat for that purpose (Martin & Grube; 2008: 203).



*Fig. 11 Of the Classic Maya epoch, only a small pieces of a disintegrated fiber-mat was found below a Tikal burial 196 excavated by Nicholas Hellmuth in 1967.*





Pictorial representations of the mat in the codices are laden heavily with symbolic conjectures. In these contexts, the mat is represented not only as the symbol of overlordship, but probably also as symbol of marriage, house, earth, and in some instances tomb. Extensive references to the mat as a symbol of authority and overlordship are made in Maya scripts written after the Spanish invasion. During the two centuries after the conquest, the Mayas, however, recorded a rich collection of their historical events, myths and legends, many of them no doubt transcribed from older, hence lost hieroglyphic texts (Robiesek; 1975: 47). And in the sociopolitical system of the K'iche', one of the most important lineages where the Kavek; where their leader was the Ahpop -"the one of the mat" (el del petate), symbol of the political power-; he was the leader of the chinamit, and probably he shared his power with the Ahpop Camhá -"the one with a stair way house" of the mat, or counselor- (Hill; 1999: 656) (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 182-183).

At the time of the Spanish invasion, the usage of mats was still very common among the Maya Indians. After the conquest, the Spanish invaders became readily accustomed to the use of mats. As early as 1544, Bishop Las Casas mentions that his Indian hosts at Xicalango had given him "rush mats, handsomely woven in red and black pattern" of their primitive living quarters. Nowadays, mats in the Maya area are usually made of reeds and rushes; however, some special mats are also woven of different types of grass: the *joyatz*-mats of the village of Ixchiguan, or the grass-mats woven from Alpine bunch-grass (*Muhlenbertia*) by the shepherds in the region of Totonicapan, San Francisco el Alto and around Quetzaltenango. Other mats, such as the ones at San Andrés Sajcabaha, are made of palm-leaves, and even of ferns (*petate de helecho*) (Robiesek; 1975: 22).

### Plants found in Guatemala and used for basketry crafts

Based on our observations during field trips along the country, we have identified some of the plants of major use in basketry. The materials in some cases are brought from others localities, such as tul (*Typha*) that is brought from Monterrico, Santa Rosa; Amatitlan or Solola and taken to the place where are elaborated, but in many cases persons who are dedicated to this activity frequently use the available resources inside their localities like pine, palm, bamboo, bindweeds, grass, etc.

And Osborne & Osborne (1965: 186-187) state that ordinary mats in Guatemala are woven from *Cyperus canus* L., and are of excellent quality when they are made in several villages where the plants used for mats grow in the rich soil of swamps or rivers nearby. *Cyperus canus* L., used for weaving mats in El Salvador, is known in Guatemala as *cibaque*, whereas the mat known in the latter country as *petate tule* is woven from *Typha angustifolia* L., *T. latifolia* L., and *T. pentafularis*. Mats are also woven in Guatemala from the leaves of the *palma Chiapaneca* (*Calyptrogyne ghiesbreghtiana* Wendl.)

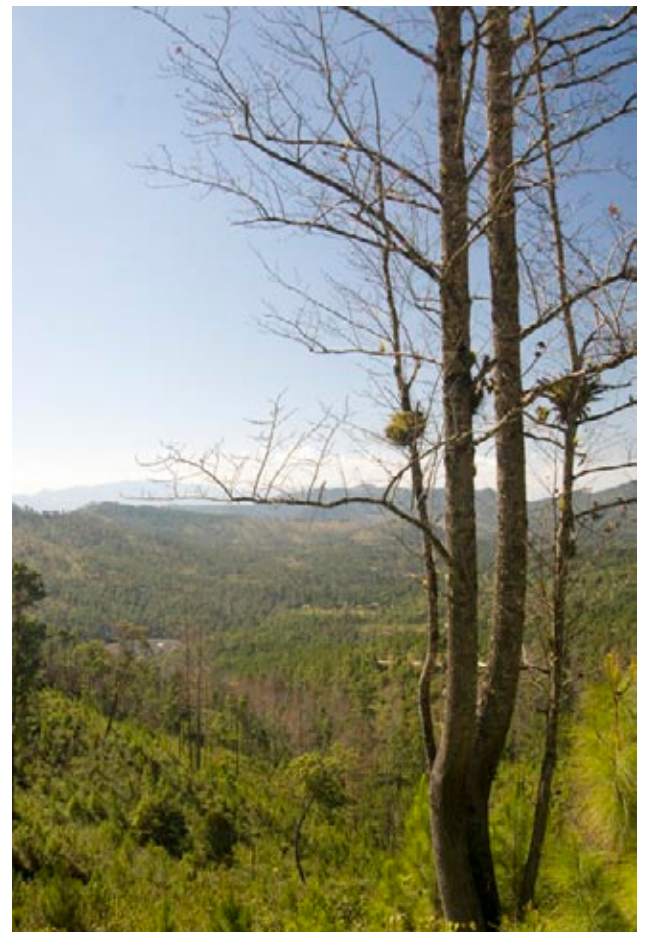


Fig. 12 Chilascó Village, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. Photo by Eduardo Sacayón.





The following chart shows several plants used in the basket industry in Guatemala.

Spanish name	Mayan and other indigenous lenguaje	Common name of the plant used	Botanical name of the Plant used	Family	Purpose	Where basketry are made
<b>Palma o sabal</b>	Rupamq'ab'aj- (Kaqchiquel)	Palm	<i>Acrocomia mexicana</i>	Arecaceae	Petate (bedroll) baskets, toys, dolls, masks, hats.	Retalhulehu, Jalapa, Chiquimula, Santa Rosa, Jutiapa, Alta Verapaz. Santa Cruz del Quiché.
<b>Mimbres</b>		Wicker	<i>Salix fragilis</i>	Salicaceae	Basket, lamps, cradle, furniture	Mixco, San Lucas Sacatepequez
<b>Cibaque</b>	Insay (Q'eqchí)	Cibaque	<i>Typha sp.</i>	Tiphaceae	Basket petates	Pueblo Nuevo Viñas, Barberena, Cuilapa, Sacatepequez y Casillas
<b>Tul</b>		Tule	<i>Typha sp.</i>	Typhaceae	Baskets, Petate	Santa Rosa, Santa Catarina Palopó Sololá, San Marcos, Amatitlán
<b>Bambú</b>	Simb' (Q'eqchí)	Bamboo	<i>Bambu sp</i>	Poaceae	Basket	Sacatepequez
<b>Pino</b>	Chaj (Q'eqchí)	Pine	<i>Pinus sp.</i>	Pinaceae	Basket, bags.	Sacatepequez, Alta Verapaz Sololá.
<b>Pacaya</b>	K'ib'/K'ixk'ib' (Q'eqchí)	Pacaya	<i>Chamaedora sp.</i>	Arecaceae	Basket, petates, bags.	Alta Verapaz
<b>Caña</b>	Aj/Patz'än (caña de milpa) (Kaqchikel)	Cane	<i>Saccharum sp., Arundo sp.</i>	Poaceae Graminaceae	Basket	Sacatepequez
<b>Tallo de trigo</b>	Kaxlan ixin- (Kaqchiquel)	Wheat	<i>Triticum sp.</i>	Poaceae	Baskets, bags	Sacatepequez, Quetzaltenango
<b>Maguey</b>	Wik'e (Q'eqchí)	Aloe	<i>Agave sp</i>	Agavaceae	Baskets, hammockcrucksack	Santa Rosa
<b>Fibra de platanillo</b>		Platanillo	<i>Heliconia sp.</i>	Heliconiaceae	Baskets, Furniture	Retalhuleu
<b>Rafia</b>		Rafia	<i>Raphia sp.</i>	Arecaceae	Baskets, small artesian	





Spanish name	Mayan and other indigenous lenguaje	Common name of the plant used	Botanical name of the Plant used	Family	Purpose	Where basketry are made
<b>Paja</b>	K'im			Poaceae		Cobán, Totonicapán, Tecpán, Huehuetenango
<b>Caña de Carrizo</b>	Kaxlan aj- (Q'eqchí)	Cane	<i>Olyra latifolia</i>	Poaceae	Basket	Guatemala Highlands
<b>Pita de amarre</b>	B'ak'leb' (Q'eqchí)					Totonicapán, Huehuetenango Sololá, Cobán Alta Verapáz.
<b>Sacatón</b>			<i>Muhlenbergia macroura</i>	Poaceae	Basket, Petate	Huehuetenango Totonicapán San Francisco el Alto, Rabinal Baja Verapáz, Cobán Alta Verapáz.
<b>Pajón</b>			<i>Panicum jumentaseus</i>	Poaceae	Baskets and Petate	Quezaltenango
<b>Yute</b>			<i>Corchorus capsularis</i>	Malvaceae	Basket	
<b>Yuca</b>	Izote	Yucca	<i>Yuca elephantipes</i>	Agavaceae	To tie	In every department in Guatemala

## Comments

The basket and mat industry are very important among the several cultural groups that lived and continue living in the Mesoamerican region. These objects have a strong significance in everyday life and in the use for religious purposes.

In Guatemala you can find a variety of baskets, different in form and in the material they are made. This represents the uses that the baskets have, and the cultural diversity that the country has. Mats also vary according to the region, and are really important for the everyday life of the indigenous peoples.

In archaeological terms, there is much to learn about this crafts, because they were also important for the past cultures that lived in the Mesoamerican region. But it is certain that these elements were very important, as they are now for the people in the region.



Fig. 13 Chilascó Village, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala.  
Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth.



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