

# Crafts, Culture and Nature In the Semi-humid Tropical Forest

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Hats in a market in Chilapa, Guerrero.



Palm (*brahea dulcis*) native to Guerrero mountains.



Boxes from Olinalá, Guerrero.

Photos by Fulvio Eccardi

Mexico possesses an exceptional wealth of biodiversity; here we find almost all the planet's ecosystems and nearly 10 percent of

known plant and animal species. This diversity has been enriched with the domestication of species, as a result of the interaction of the ancient Mesamerican peoples with nature. Mesoamerica is one of the few parts of the world where biodiversity, the development of ancient civilization and intensive plant domestication coincided.

## ETHNO-KNOWLEDGE

The Mesoamerican peoples learned about, transformed and built their own surroundings. By direct observation, they identified and classified both plants and animals, the sources of energy and soil; they also identified climatic and geomorpho-

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logical phenomena. They characterized the ecosystems' physical, chemical and biological properties to take advantage of their reproductive potential, and they developed fields of knowledge like astronomy, mathematics, medicine, metal working and the arts. This culture survives to a great degree to this day among Mexico's indigenous groups, who possess considerable knowledge about their surroundings. They are the ones who continue to preserve and increase the variety of cultivated species, inherited from their ancestors, and put a great number of wild plants and animals to different uses.

Artisans' use of bulbs and roots shows their close link to their natural surroundings, which led to sophisticated knowledge from which we still have a lot to learn.



View of Tehuacán, Puebla's semi-humid tropical forest.

#### CRAFT PRODUCTION IN THE SEMI-HUMID TROPICAL FOREST

In warm regions where the rainy season is followed by a dry season several months long, the terrain is naturally covered with low jungles or caduceus forest. This makes production enormously difficult because maximum temperatures make for difficult climatic conditions, and water is scarce during parts of the year. For that reason, a good many of the cultures in these areas established themselves close to cooler, mountain areas or where there is a permanent water supply. Despite



Gourds, known as *jicaros* or *guajes*, from the lower forest, are used to make crafts.



these conditions, this kind of area provides the greatest number of species used in craft production in the country, an indication of the effectiveness of the ethno-knowledge the groups settled there developed.

In 1995, a preliminary inventory of raw materials for craft production listed 308 different species.<sup>1</sup> Semi-humid tropical forests provide 43.5 percent of the total of 134 species, with 43 kinds of wood, 20 different varieties of bark, 18 plants and/or flowers, 13 types of fruit and seeds, 14 bulbs or roots, 12 species of palms, 7 sorts of agave, 4 kinds of rattan or reeds, 1 cactus and two non-identified fibers.

#### WOOD AND BARK

Outstanding among the different woods are those from copal trees, including more than 10 *Burseraceae* species, and the *zompantle*, which contribute another eight *Erythrina* species. Light and soft enough to carve, they are used to make different kitchen utensils, furniture, masks, toys and other craft products. The *Burseraceae aloexilon* is the plant species whose fragrant wood has become famous because of its use in making little lacquered boxes and trunks in Olinalá, in the state of Guerrero.

But not only is the wood useful. Many kinds of bark, such as that of the mahogany tree (*Swietenia macrophylla*), are used to make dyes and the solvents and fixers used in traditional dyeing techniques. *Liberiana* fiber is employed in making different kinds of cording and twine. But, undoubtedly one of the highest achievements of Mexican artisans' ethno-knowledge from time immemorial is the

use of these fibers to make traditional *amate* paper.

#### NATURAL GLUES

Artisans' use of bulbs and roots shows their close link to their natural surroundings, which led to sophisticated knowledge from which we still have a lot to learn. This is the case of the *tzacuhli* (in Náhuatl) or *tatzingue* (in Purépecha), generic names in pre-Hispanic times for the glue extracted from the *Sobralia citrina* orchid bulb still used in Michoacán to make cornstalk paste figures. More than 10 kinds of orchids have these properties

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and most continue to be used in Michoacán, although occasionally this kind of glue is used to make *amate* paper in Puebla's northern mountains.

#### HARD FIBERS FOR HATS AND MATS

Palms and agave fibers are probably the materials used for the longest time in Mesoamerica for weaving. Hats, baskets (*tenates*, *chiquihuites*, etc.), mats, fans and toys in a multiplicity of forms are only a few of the objects made by weaving different palm leaves together, including the *Brahea dulcis* and the *Sabal spp.*

*Ixtle* fiber, used from time immemorial by indigenous peoples to weave clothing like *ayates*, is extracted from agave leaves. Although native to arid and semi-arid areas, some agaves grow in hotter, more humid regions. Two of these, the *zapupe* (*Agave lapinasei*, *A. deweyana*) from the Gulf of Mexico, and sisal (*A. fourcroydes*, *A. angustifolia*, *A. sisalana*) from the Yucatán Peninsula, are utilized extensively in craft production and in the past were important industrial raw materials.

#### LET TRADITIONS FLOURISH

This succinct panorama of the uses that Mexican artisans make of semi-humid tropical forest raw materials shows the urgent need to recover, revalue and disseminate the knowledge that these groups have about their surroundings, the plants and animals which thrive there, as well as the techniques for improving and using both cultivated and wild species.

Respect for these cultures' wisdom and promotion of their sustainable use of resources by offering them new options for commercialization could be the basis for a flourishing cultural tradition as rich as nature itself. **NM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Research by the Mexican Association for Art and Folk Culture, A.C. (Amacup), with support from the National Commission for the Use and Knowledge of Biodiversity.

#### FURTHER READING

- Bravo, Carlos, *Inventario preliminar de especies vegetales y animales de uso artesanal* (Mexico City: Amacup, internal document, 1995).  
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