IBERO-AMERICANA PRAGENSIA – AÑO L – NÚMERO 1 – PP. 21–50
https://doi.org/10.14712/24647063.2025.11

THE LAST MAYA CHUJ POTTERS: HANDMADE POTTERY TRADITION IN NORTHWESTERN HUEHUETENANGO, GUATEMALA

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Abstract
Guatemala is known to the world for the legacy of the Maya culture. Different communities maintain this heritage through their oral traditions, gastronomy, costumes, and other cultural manifestations which are, despite the colonial rupture, still part of their daily life and their worldview. We present the results of the first study on pottery production using native techniques in the Chuj area, municipality of Nentón, department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. It is a tradition preserved in the high mountains of the western part of the country, which uses the technique of coiling. Local women are the main agents of this traditional craft that is gradually being lost. The objective of this research was to identify a link between the communities and their traditions as part of their cultural resistance. It is important to record, analyse, and compare their ancestral knowledge for the future.
Keywords: pottery; traditional techniques; Maya; Chuj; Guatemala.

Resumen
Guatemala es conocida ante el mundo por el legado de la cultura Maya. En la actualidad diferentes comunidades mantienen esta herencia a través de su tradición oral, trajes, manifestaciones culturales, gastronomía, entre otros elementos que son parte de su cosmovisión, a pesar de la ruptura colonial. En este sentido, presentamos en el siguiente artículo los resultados de un primer acercamiento a la producción de cerámica con técnicas originarias en el área Chuj, municipio de Nentón, departamento de Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Una tradición que se conserva en las elevadas montañas de esta parte occidental del país, aplicando la técnica de enrollado, donde las mujeres son las protagonistas y conocedoras de este proceso de manufactura que se va perdiendo con el paso del tiempo. Por tanto, el objetivo de esta investigación es identificar un vínculo de las comunidades y sus tradiciones, parte de la resistencia cultural de estos pueblos. Es importante registrar, analizar y comparar sus conocimientos ancestrales para el futuro.
Palabras clave: cerámica; técnicas tradicionales; mayas; Chuj; Guatemala.[1]

[1] Special thanks to Mrs. Juana Lucas, Mrs. Magdalena Lucas, and Mr. Pedro Lucas for their support in the development of the research, for opening the doors of their home, and for their kind hospitality. We also wish to thank the anthropologist Julio Ildefonso Hernández Ochoa, for his support with the technical process of the recording, through videos and photographs, and the Chaculá Region Archaeological Project, PARCHA. We are also grateful for the support we have received from the Agency for Science and Development APVV-23-0528, and from the Scientific Grant Agency VEGA 1/0804/25, both at the Comenius University in Bratislava.

Introduction

The Chuj are a Mayan group that lives in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, a mountainous and forested part of western Guatemala with a cold climate. The Chuj region is a transition zone between territories: it is in-between the forests of the high mountains of Guatemala to the south and east, the Usumacinta basin to the north, and the Lacandon jungles to the west. The Chuj live mainly in the municipalities of San Mateo Ixtatán, San Sebastián Coatán, and Nentón, although there are small communities in other parts of this region and some Chuj have migrated to Mexico, mainly after the Civil War,[2] because their region is close to the border of Chiapas.

There is evidence of pre-Columbian occupation of this area from the Preclassic to the Postclassic periods, as attested archaeological sites described in the works of the first scholars who visited this region, such as Eduard Seler,[3] and Carlos Navarrete,[4] Franz Termer,[5] and Oliver La Farge.[6] The earliest researchers visited some archaeological sites and Chuj villages the early decades of the 20th century and wrote about local customs and culture. Navarrete's later studies were important in identifying

Figure 1. View towards the mountains in San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala.
Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

[2] Mario TEJADA, *Historia Social del Norte de Huehuetenango*, Ciudad de Guatemala 2002.

[3] Eduard SELER, *Die alten Ansiedlungen von Chaculá im Distrikte Nenton des Departements Huehuetenango der Republik Guatemala*, Berlin 1901.

[4] Carlos NAVARRETE, *Esculturas de Chacula, Huehuetenango, Guatemala*, Ciudad de México 1979.

[5] Franz TERMER, *Etnología y Etnografía de Guatemala*, Ciudad de Guatemala 1957.

[6] Oliver LA FARGE, *La costumbre en Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango en 1932*, Ciudad de Guatemala 1994.

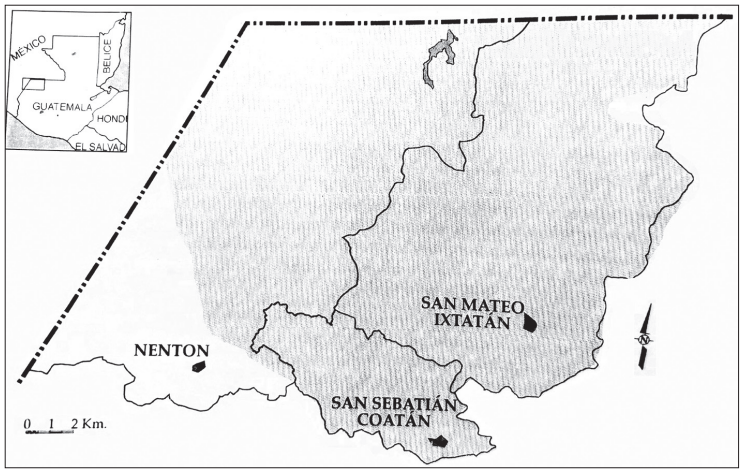

Figure 2. Location map of the municipalities of the Chuj group. Image available at http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-57662006000100004.

the pre-Columbian salt trade route of San Mateo Ixtatán and in highlighting the continuity of its production today.[7] More recently, some further surveys and archaeological investigations of pre-Columbian sites took place in the area.[8] Thanks to these efforts, the Chuj region has been an important source of archaeological, ethnohistorical, and anthropological information.

The conquest of this area by the Spanish took place in early decades of the 16th century. In 1523, Gonzalo de Alvarado, Pedro de Alvarado's brother, was sent to subdue the Mam[9] communities and later the territories inhabited by the Chuj and the Q'anjobal, who were relocated into different communities. The main centre of the Chuj people was (and still is) San Mateo Ixtatán, where the Spaniards built the main Catholic church on top of what used to be a Maya religious centre and put Dominicans in charge of its operation.[10] The present roads that cross San Mateo Ixtatán and continue towards the border of Gracias a Dios with Chiapas, Mexico, and the Cuchumatanes in the other direction, are the same routes that have long been used as a passage through the highlands, linking communities from both sides of the border. We have from 1886 records of disputed territories, when the inhabitants of San

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7 Carlos NAVARRETE, "El origen de la sal en la tradición oral de San Mateo Ixtatán, Guatemala, y la peregrinación de los zapalutas", *Diario de campo, Sal y Salinas: un gusto ancestral* 51, 2008, pp. 143–153.

8 John E. CLARK – Mario TEJADA – Donaldo CASTILLO et al., *Prospección Arqueológica de la Cuenca Superior del Río Grijalva en Huehuetenango Guatemala, Reporte Final de la Temporada de Campo 1999*, Ciudad de Guatemala 2001.
José Luis GARRIDO, *Proyecto Arqueológico de Rescate Caserío Yixquisis, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Informe Final*, Ciudad de Guatemala 2012.

9 TEJADA, *Historia*, p. 93.

10 TEJADA, *Historia*, p. 92.

Figure 3. View of one of the platforms of the archaeological site in San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Figure 4. Main salt source at San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Mateo came to settle in small villages in the area of Nentón, which was attractive due to its proximity to the border with Chiapas.[11] In recent times, the Civil War led to a resettlement of various groups in the area, which is why we find a number of villages populated by Chuj speakers, such as El Aguacate, very close to the border. Currently, this is an area with a mixed population: people came here from different places driven by political and economic conditions. This process of mixing started with the relocation of the indigenous people in the colonial times but, driven by various factors, continues to this day.

Trade has been playing an important role in the economic and social systems of the communities. In recent decades, agriculture is here – like in many highlands around the country – one of the main sources of living, whereby the main local crops are coffee, garlic, broccoli, onions, potatoes, carrots, beans, and maize.[12] Of special significance is also the trade in black salt produced around San Mateo Ixtatán. Each family focuses on a specific agricultural and domestic production, including crafts such as pottery making, which is the main focus of this paper.

Handmade pottery production in Guatemala

Traditions of handmade pottery developed in Guatemala in several regions. After colonisation, their main purpose was to cover the demand for vessels of daily use. As a craft and a trade, the techniques are learned within the nuclear family and pottery is made in the potters' houses. This is thus local production for local needs. In each region, we find local specifics ranging from the use of slightly different raw materials and forms all the way to local trade; this is determined by differences in the economic and cultural dynamics. Termer[13] mentions that pottery production was a subsistence activity. The production of vessels for various functions reflected the needs of the population, which is also why the possibility of selling pottery was important, especially in large cities. Nowadays, two important centres of pottery trade near the current Guatemala City are the municipalities of Chinautla and Mixco, whereby the latter tend to focus on the manufacture of griddles (*comales*).[14]

Since the 1960s, the Centro de Estudios Folklóricos (Centre of Folkloric Studies, CEFOL) of the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala has been documenting various cultural manifestations and crafts around the country. With respect to pottery production, pre-Colombian artifacts stand out: they were modelled and rolled without the use of a potter's wheel. Later pottery, both glazed and painted, was

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[11] Archivo General de Centro América (hereinafter onlyAGCA), Colonia, Caciques e Indios, exp. 2, fol. 10, Indios de Chaculá, Chaquial-Conquntique, Nentón, Huehuetenango, 31 May 1869.

[12] TEJADA, *Historia*, p. 187.

[13] TERMER, *Etnología y Etnografía de Guatemala*, p. 82.

[14] Claudia F. DARY, "Artes y artesanías tradicionales de Mixco", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 63, 1987, pp. 39–52; Charles R. ARROT, "Cerámica actual de Guatemala (Mixco Nuevo)", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 8, 1977, pp. 305–311; Robert S. SMITH, "Cerámica elaborada sin torno. Chinautla, Guatemala", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 8, 1977, pp. 341–346; Arturo TARACENA, "Apuntes sobre la cerámica de la Chinautla Actual", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 7, 1977, pp. 57–71.

Figure 5. Adobe oven in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Figure 6. Majolica pottery from the Convent of Santo Domingo, Antigua Guatemala. Photo: Héctor Paredes, 2005 (Final Report).

influenced by techniques introduced during the colonial period, such as the potter's wheel, kilns, and the use of various elements such as lead for glazing.[15]

Within the context of the history of pottery in the region, one should mention the work of Ruben Reina and Robert Hill.[16] They managed to map pottery production and its centres in Guatemala, describing in detail the production process as well as traditional forms and decorations in each region of the country.

The most common technique of pottery making seems to be coiling. It is widely used in traditional pottery centres in Guatemala, and it is documented that it has been in use already during the pre-Columbian period. In the Chuj region, we had the opportunity to see it. Because of the relatively remoteness of this region from the country's centres, the old tradition is preserved here even five hundred years after contact with the Spaniards and the potters' wheel. Most briefly, a piece of pottery is made by this technique by rolling a piece of pottery clay between the palms until an even clay roll is formed. This is then twisted into a circle according to the intended form of the vessel, another clay piece placed above it and attached to the middle, outer, or inner edge of the previous clay roll depending on whether the vessel wall is supposed extend straight upwards, outwards, or inwards. At first, the vessel looks like it is made of clay ropes spirally stacked on top of each other, but it is then

[15] Aracely ESQUIVEL, "El aporte del área de artes y artesanías populares al conocimiento de la cultura guatemalteca (1967–2016)", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 87, 2017, pp. 44–79; Celso LARA, "Síntesis histórica de las cerámicas populares de Guatemala", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 57, 2002, pp. 202–216; Héctor PAREDES, "La cerámica Colonial del Ex-Convento de Santo Domingo, Antigua Guatemala: Una propuesta tipológica", in: Juan Pedro Laporte y Héctor Escobedo (eds.), *X Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 1996*, 1997, pp. 743–753; Luis LUJÁN, "La Mayólica", in: *Historia General de Guatemala III. Siglo XVIII hasta la Independencia*, Ciudad de Guatemala 1995, pp. 533–540.

[16] Ruben E. REINA – Robert M. HILL, *The Traditional Pottery of Guatemala*, London 1978.

1. San José Petén
2. Flores
3. San Miguel Acatán
4. San Sebastián Huehuetenango
5. Chiantla
6. San Pedro Jocopilas
7. Santa Cruz del Quiché
8. Comitancillo
9. Santa María Chiquimula
10. San Marcos
11. San Cristóbal
12. Totonicapán
13. Quetzaltenango
14. Retalhuleu
15. Sololá
16. Mazatenango
17. Santa Apolonia
18. Chimaltenango
19. Antigua Guatemala
20. Mixco
21. Chinautla
22. San Raimundo
23. Escuintla
24. Rabinal
25. Salamá
26. El Progreso
27. San Agustín Acasaguastlán
28. Lo de Mejía
29. Zacapa
30. San Vicente
31. Jocotán
32. Chiquimula
33. San Luis Jilotepeque
34. Jalapa
35. Casillas
36. Cuilapa
37. Santa María Ixhuatán
38 Guazacapán
39. Santa Rosa
40. Jutiapa
41. Trancas/El Barrial
42. Zapotitlán
43. Cobán
44. San Juan Chamelco
45. Puerto Barrios

Figure 7. Map indicating the pottery centers reported by Reina and Hill. Drawing: Taken from Reina and Hill, 1978.

finger-pressed and smoothed, creating a homogeneous vessel wall. This process requires much skill and practice.

Traditional pottery production also covers the economic aspects, such as sale of the products, their use, and demand for particular vessels, but even the symbolism of some processes and religious vessels such as incense burners. This is deeply rooted in traditions. Maria J. Iglesias and Andrés Ruiz[17] or Celso Lara[18] speak in this context about the existence of pottery centres with 'traditional techniques, that is, processes and techniques learned from generation to generation, which the

[17] Maria Josefa IGLESIAS – Andrés CIUDAD, *Patrones de continuidad en la elaboración cerámica del altiplano oeste de Guatemala*, Madrid 1995.

[18] LARA, "Síntesis", pp. 202–216.

Figure 8. Vessels used in salt processing in San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

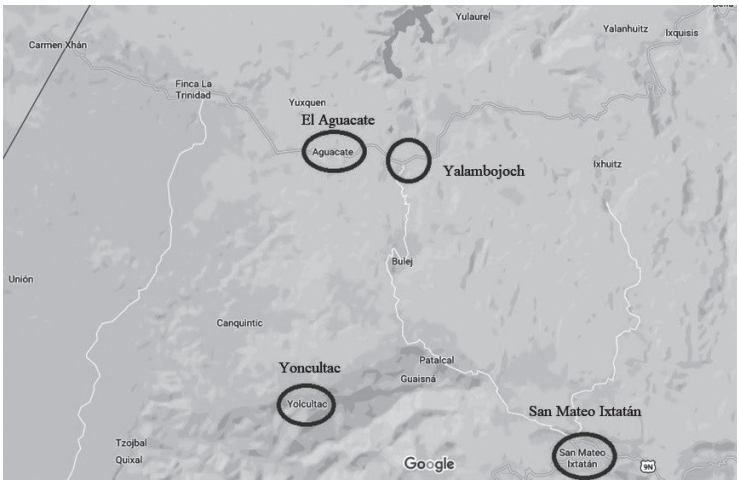

Figure 9. Location of sites visited. Map modified from Google Maps, 2019.

colonisation process did not completely erase'. It is significant to note that this work has always been mainly the domain of women.

As noted above, the production of ceramics responds to demand: it is aimed at a specific market, designed to function in a particular way. For example, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, is well-known for its deposits of black salt, one of the most important natural resources of the region and one that has been

a crucial local trade commodity since ancient times.[19] Our informants mentioned that traditionally, salt production has been linked to pottery production because large jars were needed for the salt-cooking process. San Mateo salt continues to be traded in the region to this day, although its market has shrunk.

Pottery plays a fundamental role in the daily and economic life of the current communities: it is used both for various domestic tasks and in the production of goods, but also sold in the regional markets.

In the following, we describe the main characteristics of ceramic production in four localities: the villages of El Aguacate, Yalambojoch, and Yoncultac, and the municipality of San Mateo Ixtatán, where we had the opportunity to study the actual process of ceramic production and record it step by step, starting with the extraction of the raw materials. In that way, we were able to compare our observations with previously published works. It should be noted that, prior to our study, these specific localities had not been the subject of any research. Our study is therefore intended as a contribution to the ongoing effort to describe and publish records of traditional practices which are in danger of disappearing.

Research methodology

We have made our first visit to the village of El Aguacate in the municipality of Nentón (Huehuetenango, Guatemala) in 2014. This is a place far away from everything, nestled among the mountains, which also means that the locality benefits from favourable security conditions. There, we had the opportunity to record the process of pottery making and firing.[20] It was the beginning of a project aimed at finding also other places in the region where we could study the local pottery culture. A year later, we were able to return and make new observations in the villages of Yalambojoch and Yoncultac, until we finally reached the municipality of San Mateo Ixtatán at the heart of the Chuj region.

This research sparked my personal interest especially when I found how little research on traditional pottery from the western region of Huehuetenango has been done so far. People in this region speak the Chuj language, which belongs to the Q'anjob'alan branch of the Mayan language. Chuj has currently only about 40,000 speakers who also share some other cultural characteristics, including the dominance of women in pottery making.

El Aguacate, Yalambojoch, Yoncultac, and San Mateo Ixtatán form a specific cluster in a part of Huehuetenango department that is rather secluded and isolated in the border mountains. This is what initially also led me to believe that the ancient traditions of pottery making could be preserved there to this day. My interest was also driven by the concern that with the passage of time, this knowledge would be lost without any record. We could thus lose these ancient manufacturing techniques that have been passed down from generation to generation quite irretrievably. It was

[19] NAVARRETE, "El origen", pp. 143–153.

[20] Dora GARCIA – Paola TORRES, "Análisis de materiales cerámicos", in: Ulrich Wölfel y Paola Torres (eds.), *Proyecto Arqueológico de la Región de Chaculá, Reporte de Actividades de Campo de la Temporada 2014*, Ciudad de Guatemala 2014.

clear that this tradition is indeed dying out because it took much effort to find potters who still use the traditional methods and designs. In each of the four villages, we found one informant (all four names are anonymous). In all cases, it was a woman recommended by the community for her art and knowledge. In each place, we had also found a local person who had the support of the community to help us conduct our research. That person was then our point of contact who also helped us with interpreting between Chuj to Spanish (because none of the potters spoke Spanish). We asked all our subjects for their consent with being interviewed, photographed, and recorded on video, and they all gave their consent.

Rather than interview, we observed the study participants and asked them to explain the function of each instrument they used and each step they performed. We have also inquired about technical details such as the amount of clay, temperature, the time of the day when certain things are done, and duration of each part of the process. In this way, we were trying to learn the technique, which turned out to be rather complex. Our participants were 30 to 50 years old, mothers, and even grandmothers, housewives who carry out different household chores and engage also in other activities to support the family economy.

These women were not really our 'informants': rather, they were our teachers in exactly the sense meant by Tim Ingold when he spoke about the meaning of anthropological research. We did not come to explore, we came to learn 'what they can show us of the world'.[21] The main method was thus observation of the participants, that is, my personal presence during all the processes, which was enabled by the participants' openness and trust. The other important tool of this research was video recording by my companion Julio Ildefonso Hernández Ochoa, the anthropologist who documented the entire process from beginning to end. Although this may seem intrusive, after a little while the presence of the camera was almost not felt. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal, which allowed us to obtain data more naturally. We were grateful for this because it allowed us to make the very first documentation of these local practices. In the following, we present below a summary of the main characteristics of the long process of local pottery making, an activity that requires much time and effort from the extraction of raw materials to the final product.

The pottery making process

The raw materials

The process starts with the extraction of clay. According to our informants, the local sites with suitable clay in the nearby mountains have been used for generations. This region is abundant in different types of soils and minerals.[22] The clay is brown, sometimes with a reddish hue. In San Mateo Ixtatán, grey clay is also used, which after firing results in white ceramics.

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[21] Tim INGOLD, *Anthropology: Why it Matters*, Cambridge, 2018.

[22] Miguel Ángel TORRES, *Diagnóstico socioeconómico, potencialidades productivas y propuestas de inversión, Municipio de San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango*, Ciudad de Guatemala 2007.

The clay is soaked and foreign elements removed. Then it is mixed with a mineral temper consisting mainly of calcite (*b'ax* in the Chuj language), a type of rock common in the region that is crushed and finely ground on grinding stones or in a mortar. In San Mateo, potters use as temper grey river sand, which is sifted for refinement. Vessels made with this material are not fireproof. Clay mixed with the temper is kneaded and stored to be used later. It should be noted that each region has its own sources of raw materials so that, for example, in volcanic areas potters use of various types of specific sands and minerals.[23]

Figure 10. Mud sources of Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Figure 11. Scouring sand. Photo: Julio Hernández.

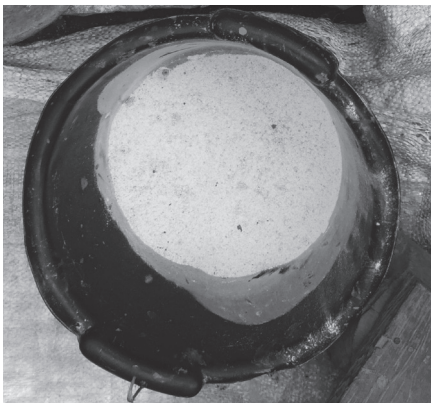

Figure 12. Calcite temper. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 13. Mineral temper used in Rabinal, Baja, Verapaz, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

[23] REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, p. 29; Italo A. MORALES, "Panorama General de la Cerámica Popular del Oriente de Guatemala", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 13, 1980, pp. 61–102; Aracely ESQUIVEL, "Magia en las manos: cerámica en Trapiche de Agua, Salamá", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 83, 2015, pp. 113–148.

Instruments and tools

The potters use a great variety of instruments and containers of different sizes and shapes to keep the clay and the tempers, but also as the base for working on the pottery pieces. It is interesting to note that these bases are sometimes made of broken vessels. It is a form of reuse reported also in Chinautla and other production centres,[24] although nowadays some potters use modern elements such as plastic or metal containers. Although the hands of these women perfectly model each piece, they also use for the smoothing process various tools from natural materials with little or no modification, such as small wooden sticks or smooth river stones, but pieces of cloth are also sometimes used. A common element used by the potters is a thick wooden base (circular, rectangular, or square) of considerable size to accommodate the work.

The instruments and tools, and materials used are typical of each region. For example, in the municipality of Chinautla, potters use chicken feathers to make incisions, spoons from the local gourd (*morro*), and 'piedra de rayo',[25] a traditional name for obsidian, a rock of volcanic origin from the Central Highlands of Guatemala, which has been widely used since the pre-Columbian times. In other places in the eastern part of the country, potters use not only chicken feathers, smooth, round, or oval river stones, and corn cobs, but also elements such as the 'yagual', a ring-shaped object made from the fibres of the stem of the banana plant, which is used as a base on which the vessels are modelled.[26] The use of such readily available local natural resources significantly reduces the production costs.

Figure 14. Tools used in Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

[24] SMITH, "Cerámica elaborada", pp. 341–346; REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, pp. 29–44.
[25] TARACENA, "Apuntes", pp. 57–71; SMITH, "Cerámica elaborada", pp. 341–346.
[26] MORALES, "Panorama", pp. 61–102.

Work on a pottery piece

This process starts with the choice of a base, which takes the form of dish or bowl with a concave shape. Due to modern influences, these bases are nowadays made of metal or plastic, but in the past, the potters would have used old vessels, gourd or wood. Then the potter separates a suitable amount of clay and forms a ball with her hands and with the help of the base, which she been covered with powdered calcite to prevent the clay from sticking. Once the base of the vessel is modelled, the potter makes clay coils, sticking them continuously and successively along the contour of the base until the walls of the vessel are raised. The potter models with piece with her fingers until the desired shape is reached. The most common shape of those we had the chance to observe was a pitcher.

Once the basic modelling is finished, the potter starts to smooth the whole piece using the abovementioned instruments. At this point, the potter also shapes the neck and the lip. For some other shapes, such as plates and bowls, the process is

Figure 15. Process of making a pitcher in San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 16. Rolling process, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 17. Rolling process, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 18. Rolling process, modeling the neck of a pitcher, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 19. Rolling process, modeling of the neck and lip of a pitcher, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 20. Smoothing process of a pitcher, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 21. Smoothing process, using a wooden stick, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 22. Smoothing process of a pitcher, Yalambojoch village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Figure 23. Smoothing process, using a piece of cloth, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 24. Application of handles of a pitcher, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 25. Application of handles of a pitcher, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 26. Decorative applications, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

simpler: the shape is modelled on the base and the details and various finishes are then added using fingers and fine sticks. Finally, in the case of pitchers, the handles are modelled and attached to the finished vessel. This basic process has been observed in most of the traditional pottery centres in Guatemala since the 1960s,[27] which indicates that this is a widely known and widespread tradition.

Further treatment of the vessels and decorations

In all the cases we have observed, the potters did not use any slip, coating, or paint. In San Mateo, they mentioned that sometimes they would apply a colour bath made with other colours of clay. In the vessels observed in this study, decorations were always impressed in the wet clay, that is, before firing. These consisted of incisions made with sticks or their fingernails. The designs were geometric and placed on the upper part of the piece and the lip. Other decorations included representation of certain animals, such as birds. After firing, the pots were subjected to a final seasoning aimed at improvement of their functionality. This is the process the potters call 'curing': it consists of application of a maize gruel coat to the whole vessel. This seals the pores and make the pots more resistant and impermeable, an ancestral secret that has been passed down for generations. In other places, such as Rabinal and Totonicapán in western Guatemala, potters use also other decorative elements and paints, such as indigo with glue to produce bright colours such as red, yellow, and blue.[28]

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[27] REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, pp. 22–24; TARACENA, "Apuntes", pp. 57–71; MORALES, "Panorama", pp. 61–102.

[28] Roberto DIAZ, "Cerámica Coloreada de Rabinal", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 2, 1972, pp. 1–8; Rosa María ÁLVAREZ, "Cerámica de Rabinal", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 5, 1976, pp. 31–46; IGLESIAS – CIUDAD, *Patrones*, p. 228.

Figure 27. Surface finish of a pitcher. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 28. Incised decorative figures, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 29. Making incisions with a toothpick, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 30. Decoration of incisions on the lip of the vessel, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 31. Decorative applications, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 32. Process of 'curing' of vessels with maize atol, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

In Totonicapán, local potters use lead, which gives the local pottery a glazed appearance and a characteristic greenish colour. The use of lead glaze is a technique learned during the colonial period: it was adopted as part of production of majolica ceramics, a tradition that spread in the main cities of Colonial Guatemala.[29] The result is a mixture of several techniques and materials used in pottery making. Other decorative variants are found in Santa Apolonia in the Central Highlands of Guatemala, where the decorative motifs and designs are white on red, whereby the colours are obtained from different types of clay. In Santa María Chiquimula and in Chinautla, in the eastern and central Guatemala, pottery decorations are red on white.[30]

Figure 33. Ceramics from Totonicapán, Guatemala. Photo: Milan Kováč.

It is interesting to note that both in all previous studies and in our observations in this area, the presence of incised geometric designs, curved lines, dots, and triangles is constant. In Rabinal in northern Guatemala, for example, these motifs represent rivers, mountains, and stars.[31] In Chinautla, near Guatemala City, the process of making incisions in pottery is known as *labrado*, but when decorations are painted the process is called *floreado*, because the patterns represent flowers and plants, albeit in a very abstract way.[32] Such decorative elements that refer to various parts of nature are found also in the Chuj pottery. In fact, it seems they are a lasting legacy of the Maya view of the cosmos and its symbolic representation in patterns.[33]

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[29] LUJÁN, "La Mayólica", pp. 533–540.

[30] REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, pp. 70–77; TARACENA, "Apuntes", pp. 57–71.

[31] ÁLVAREZ, "Cerámica", pp. 31–46.

[32] TARACENA, "Apuntes", p. 58.

[33] Dorie REENTS-BUDET, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period*, London 1994.

Figure 34. Triangular incised designs, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 35. Chinautla Polychrome pottery. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Open firing

One of the characteristic features of traditional pottery making is the firing of vessels that is done outside, over open fire, and mainly in the morning hours to avoid the wind. It is important to note that before firing, the vessels must undergo a drying process lasting two to three weeks, depending on the weather. Sometimes, they are placed in the sun or near a bonfire for faster drying.

First, a decent amount of dry wood located and placed so as to form a bed on which the vessels are placed for firing. Then the vessels are covered with more wood but also bark, leaves, or branches, forming a kind of kiln with constant temperature. In the Yoncultac village, we found a variant where the firing was also

Figure 36. Drying process of the pieces in the hearth, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 37. Burning process in San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 38. Burning process of the vessels, covered with wood bark and maize cobs, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 39. Burning process in the village El Aguacate, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Figure 40. Burning process in Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

done on the kitchen fire but even there, the pieces were covered with tree bark. The length of firing varies depending on the temperature reached, but in general it takes 20–25 minutes. Then the fired pieces are then carefully removed with the help of sticks and allowed to cool.

Studies on pottery production in other centres (such as Reina and Hill[34] but also others) describe a very similar firing process. In Salamá, in northern Guatemala, pottery is also made with simple instruments, without the potter's wheel, and the vessels are fired outside using open fire.[35] In other places, for instance Rabinal and Chinautla, potters apparently use also other kinds of natural fuel, such as pine bark or cow dung.[36]

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[34] REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, p. 24.
[35] ESQUIVEL, "Magia", pp. 113–148.
[36] DÍAZ, "Cerámica", pp. 1–8; TARACENA, "Apuntes", p. 59.

Firing always carries the risk of the vessels breaking because of some mistake. For instance, during our stay in El Aguacate we saw that all vessels broke after the firing. Our informant indicated that this happens because there were 'many people watching', which is why potters prefer to fire their vessels alone and in the morning hours. Similar beliefs and preferences in other places were found, such as Cobán and other places in Alta Verapaz.[37]

The shapes

The vessels are always for domestic use: local potters make a great variety of pitchers, pots, and jars, especially for cooking and storing either food or water and other liquids. Some forms of pitchers tend to feature representations of birds (such as ducks or hens). Depending on their intended use, the pitchers can have between one to four handles and their size also varies. For example, in San Mateo, large vessels are made for the processing of salt. Other popular forms include griddles (*comales*) for baking maize tortillas and toasting other foods. *Pichachas*, which are a type of colander, are used for washing the maize after nixtamalization and also for processing other foods. In Yoncultac, we heard potters talking also about making figurines of animals and other more decorative elements. Aside from that, they also make whistles in the shape of a small bird with four holes: these are used to scare away animals from the crops.

In centres such as Chinautla, Mixco, and Salamá, in the northern and central part of Guatemala, there seems to a high demand for pots, pitchers, *comales*, and the like for the preparation of traditional local dishes.[38] For example, potters in Santa Apolonia make a type of large bowl called *apaste*, which is used to cook large amounts of food, which is why it is still produced in most parts of Guatemala.[39] In the east, in Santa Maria Chiquimula, it is known as *tamalera*, which refers to its function of cooking *tamales*. Other dishes are called according to their use, for instance jars (*tinajeras*), which are used to store and carry water.

A special non-domestic pottery product we found in all the places we visited was the incense burner, which is used mainly for ceremonies and to carry fire to the sacred mountains. It has a cup-like shape with a pedestal and it is made with calcite temper to make it fire-resistant. Other kinds of pottery for ceremonial use are reported from Rabinal and Chinautla, where different types of censers and candlesticks are also made. In Cobán and Alta Verapaz, the censers have a smaller base and bands attached to the top for easier manipulation. The incense burners are mostly known as *braseros* (braziers), because of their function of burning resins (*copal*).[40] Of all the forms of pottery we had encountered, this could be one of the most significant because it is still used as part of religious practice by various both Mayan and non-Mayan groups. The burning of offerings in internal spaces is a tradition

[37] REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, pp. 121–127.

[38] ESQUIVEL, "Magia", pp. 113–148; ARROT, "Cerámica" pp. 305–311; REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, p. 29.

[39] REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, pp. 50–64.

[40] ÁLVAREZ, "Cerámica", pp. 31–46; REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, p. 27.

Figure 41. Variety of shapes made in the village Yoncultac, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 42. Forms of vessels, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 43. Large pitchers for domestic work, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

Figure 44. Comal shape for cooking maize tortillas, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 45. Shape of 'pichacha' or strainer. Photo: Private archive of Dora García

Figure 46. Bird-shaped whistle, Yoncultac village, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 47. Incense burner shape, called 'pech' in Chuj language. San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

Figure 48. Making of a censer, San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photo: Julio Hernández.

that clearly goes back to pre-Columbian times.[41] Diego de Landa mentions that the native peoples had 'the custom of entering the temples to pray and burn copal'.[42] Other sources also make reference to this subject[43].

Pottery making as a craft, early records and more recent study

Diego de Landa mentions that 'by trade, the Indians were potters and carpenters'.[44] On the other hand, Pedro Cortez y Larraz mentions that each household was engaged in a different task. Still, it was the women who made the plates, bowls, and jars.[45] These are some of the first records of pottery production during the colonisation process. This specialised craft was the domain of women in certain households. In fact, most of the abovementioned sources report that women are the main protagonists of this craft and trade. In general, women seem to have a closer relationship to pottery because they use pottery dishes to make food for themselves and their families and to process maize. Pottery making was thus a productive activity, a way of meeting the needs of a certain group.[46] This in turn allowed for the development of other specialised activities such as the preparation of food and other resources, such as salt in the case of San Mateo Ixtatán.

The pottery craft thus plays a key role in a chain of economic development. It became the vehicle of survival of knowledge and symbolism related to pottery since

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41 Alejandro PASTRANA, "La obsidiana en Mesoamérica", *Arqueología Mexicana*, *La Producción Artesanal en Mesoamérica* 14/80, 2006, pp. 49–54.

42 Diego de LANDA, ed. Angel Ma. Garibay, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, Mérida 1993, p. 55.

43 Allen CHRISTENSON, *Popol Vuh*, Ciudad de México, 2012; Simón OTZOY C., *Memorial de Sololá: Edición facsimile del manuscrito original*, Ciudad de Guatemala 1999.

44 LANDA, *Relación*, p. 46.

45 Pedro CORTEZ Y LARRAZ, *Descripción Geográfico Moral de la Diócesis de Goathemala* II, Ciudad de Guatemala 1958, pp. 202–204.

46 Linda MANZANILLA, *Unidades Habitacionales Mesoamericanas y sus áreas de actividad*, Ciudad de México 1986.

before the Colonial Period. This permanence was enabled not only by transmission between generations but also by the commercial potential of pottery. Lara[47] included this kind of traditional ceramics among vessels belonging to the pre-Columbian tradition precisely because of characteristics such as those we have presented in the previous section. Studies of the Center of Folklore Studies of Guatemala draw a distinction between traditional ceramics and ceramics that incorporates some of the techniques that started spreading during the Colonial Period, such as the use of glaze, potter's wheel, and specialised kilns.[48]

In general, one can study pottery production in Guatemala as a manifestation of traditional popular culture understood as 'all those manifestations that are developed within the people of a given country, with their characteristics, that express the conception of the world and the life of these social groups'.[49] One could add that such cultural manifestations are transmitted through oral tradition, there is no institutional body regulating them, and they are the result of certain historical events that emerged within a particular socioeconomic context. In the case of contemporary traditional Maya pottery, its development takes place within a context of acculturation, where traditional and novel techniques tend to mix.[50] But in the specific case of the coiling technique, oral tradition enabled a survival of some ancestral knowledge and skills exercised within individual families and specifically by women.

History shows that during the Colonial Period, the most important pottery centres developed close to the main cities, for example in Santiago de los Caballeros (currently La Antigua Guatemala), which was the site of the first formal ceramic workshops.[51] This helps explain why traditions and original local knowledge are better preserved in places farther away from large population centres. The region where we conducted our research is indeed a very distant place, in the mountains accessible through difficult roads, which naturally leads to a level of isolation from foreign influences. For example, it is known from past records that in Chinautla, close to Guatemala City, vessels used to be made by the coiling technique[52] as well, but current production already relies on potter's wheel and moulds. Elsewhere, too, small-scale pottery production has decreased and in some cases practically disappeared, as in the municipality of Mixco, also very close to the capital. This is due to the introduction of new products, such as English and Chinese ceramics, which was introduced during the 19th century.[53] It should also be noted that pottery production centres respond to tourist demand, so their production includes not only items for domestic use but also ornamental objects (vases, religious figures, toys, among others). These centres thus have a much larger market than the small-scale domestic and regional market for ceramics from western Huehuetenango that we present in

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47 LARA, "Síntesis", pp. 202–216.

48 Aracely ESQUIVEL, "El aporte del área de artes y artesanías populares al conocimiento de la cultura guatemalteca (1967–2016)", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 87, 2017, pp. 44–79.

49 LARA, "Síntesis", p. 202.

50 LARA, "Síntesis", pp. 205–207.

51 LUJÁN, "La Mayólica", pp. 533–540.

52 SMITH, "Cerámica elaborada", pp. 341–346; REINA – HILL, *The Traditional*, p. 121.

53 DARY F., "Artes", pp. 39–52.

this work, but as noted above, this is often at the cost of loss of the traditional production methods.

Craft production also needs to be considered from the perspective of division of labour, artisanal specialisation, and the establishment of areas of activity,[54] which implies a certain social order and cooperation between communities. Several factors play an important role: the producers, the means of production, the principles of work organisation, the products, their sale, and the final consumers.[55] The process of making handmade pottery presented here reflects all these factors. Pottery production in the region is in decline due to the introduction of new plastic and metal containers, which are cheaper and more durable. On top of that, the young generation is not very interested in learning this craft: that is largely due to poverty in the region, which pushes locals to search for other means of subsistence. In 2014, a pot, depending on its size, sold for 5 to 20 quetzals (Guatemala's currency), which is equivalent to about 0.60 to 2.40 euros. That is a very low price that hardly expresses the hard work put into making these items and, in current economic situation, it does not stimulate further economic development of this craft.

Figure 49. Current pottery in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

[54] MANZANILLA, *Unidades*, p. 15.

[55] MANZANILLA, Linda, "La producción artesanal en Mesoamérica", *Arqueología Méxicana* 14/80, Ciudad de México 2006, pp. 28–35.

Trade in this locally made pottery is limited to small regional markets; only rarely do potters manage to sell their products a little further away. This is compounded by a shift in customers' preferences, which is, as noted above, influenced by the introduction of utensils from aluminium or other more durable materials. In this context, it should be noted that the places we have investigated are in a different position than the best-known pottery centres of Guatemala, such as Chinautla, Totonicapán, Antigua, or Rabinal.[56] These places have better sales opportunities stemming from tourist demand. On the other hand, this increased demand had also led to manufacture of other decorative, recreational, and religious forms, which are produced in much greater quantity thanks to the use of potter's wheel and other technologies. In effect, therefore, what one sees there is loss of some part of traditional pottery-related knowledge.

Let us now return to the definition of folk art as reflecting the 'conception of the world and life of these social groups'.[57] How much did it change? In this study, We tried to show that the Chuj potters of Huehuetenango perpetuate their conception of the world through their craft. This is expressed, for example, in their be-

Figure 50. Ceramics made in Chiapas, Mexico. Photo: Private archive of Dora García.

liefs surrounding the firing of the pots, where they avoid the presence of many people, or in the continued production of braziers (incense burners), which have spiritual connotations. In San Mateo Ixtatán, local potters have also mentioned that, although pottery production has decreased, many women have a special affection for the clay pots of their ancestors (grandmothers or mothers), keeping them as

[56] ESQUIVEL, "El aporte", pp. 44–79.
[57] LARA, "Síntesis", p. 202.

Figure 51. Girls from Yoncultac village watching their mothers in the process of making pottery. Photo: Julio Hernández.

family heirlooms; similar emotional attachment has also been reported in Chiapas, Mexico.[58]

This is not to say that, in the area we have studied, the pottery craft had survived in a 'pure' form: history necessarily leads to changes. In our case, changes took place due to colonisation and acculturation, which have continued in our recent history through policies that detach the 'classic' Maya culture from the Maya communities of today. Arturo Taracena notes that 'In the political discourse, there is an attempt to make pre-Columbian history a closed utopia around the Mayan origin' allegedly supported by the supposed 'historical vacuum of the 10 and 15 centuries'[59] which enabled a survival of the 'ancient' Maya culture in our recent history. This erroneous concept inadvertently allows the perpetuation of racism in Guatemala, thus jeopardising the continuity of ancestral knowledge of these groups and linguistic communities. They may not disappear, but they change due to constant pressure of

[58] Socorro del PILAR JIMÉNEZ ALVAREZ – Francisca ZALAQUETTE ROCK, "Tecnología alfarera doméstica del Ejido Lacandón, Chiapas", *The Korean Journal of Hispanic Studies* 7/2, 2014, pp. 33–63.

[59] Arturo TARACENA, "La Civilización Maya y sus Herederos. Un Debate Negacionista en la Historiografía Moderna Guatemalteca", *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 27, 2006, pp. 43–55.

the globalised market,[60] which leads to integration of foreign elements or romanticisation of purchase of 'exotic' pieces.

This is a complex issue. In this study, we tried to outline a number of approaches to this subject and highlighted the importance of making this type of anthropological record. The title of our work is clear in that it refers to the 'last' Chuj potters. We have encountered many young women who are losing interest in this work. It is easy for them to get cheap plastic containers, and they want to spend their time doing different things. It is quite possible that we have had the privilege of meeting indeed the last women who have this knowledge that is no longer being transmitted to the next generation.

Conclusions

Work on this study has been a unique experience. Our present intention is to publish the initial results of this research that began some years ago (the field part of the study was conducted in 2014 and 2015) in a region from which there is so far little information on pottery making. We wanted to highlight the survival of an ancient technique, the coiling method, which to the best of our knowledge we were the first to record in these localities. Coiling is a traditional way of making pottery that survived thanks to an orally transmitted tradition among women in the mountains of the western part of Huehuetenango. Their traditional knowledge covers numerous aspects of this craft: the materials, tools, and techniques, but also the traditional shapes and designs unique to this region.

A comparison with other traditional pottery centres shows many similarities. Locally specific are the types of clay that is used, the type of tempers characteristic of each region, pigments, but also some shapes, such as the cup shape of the censer we have recorded and the large pots for the production of salt. In the area we have studied, the shapes respond mainly to local demand for cooking and storage vessels. This has aided the continuity of transmission of the technique for generations. Although in other places, pottery is made to be sold to tourists, in our specific case it is not. This hand-made pottery is truly local and reflects the worldview and culture of this Maya group.

We tried to be guided by the goals of anthropology as defined by Tim Ingold: 'All study calls for observation, but in anthropology we observe not by objectifying others but by paying attention to them, watching what they do and listening to what they say. We study with people, rather than making studies of them.'[61] Although the ideology of racism in Guatemala had led to a devaluation of this type of pottery production, to seeing it as inferior, the complexity of making each pieces is impressive. The process requires unique knowledge about the type of clay and other materials to be used, the way of placing the coils, and fine work with fingers in the smoothing process. The firing is also based on transmitted experience: one needs to finely estimate when the right temperature is reached and when exactly the vessels should

[60] Celso LARA, "Globalización cultural e identidad nacional en la Guatemala contemporánea", *Tradiciones de Guatemala* 62, 2004, pp. 7–10.

[61] INGOLD, "Anthropology".

be taken out of the fire. Such fine manual work imprints a unique character to each piece, each piece embodies both hard work and a long tradition. It is also a way in which the present-day Maya are a valuable source of information: they can help us understand the historical development of their society and culture. Our research could be compared to studies in other localities, because this traditional pottery making technique has been recorded throughout Guatemala but also near the border in Chiapas, Mexico. Further studies of this technique could help identify specific aspects of continuity of the Maya culture and its variability within the different groups that speak different languages.

(Written in English by the author)

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