



THE FOODWAYS OF THE ANCIENT MAYA AND THEIR CURRENT EXPRESSION

Luis Alberto Vargas Guadarrama

Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Ciudad Universitaria, Coyoacán, D.F., 04510; email: vargas.luisalberto@gmail.com

Key words: Maya foodways, Mayan food, Yucatan food resources

This presentation will offer an overview of the history of the Maya people, and will focus on the mineral, botanical and zoological resources which they incorporated into their diet. Some examples of their technology used to store and manage water and process their food will be enhanced, since they are basic biotechnological contributions to humankind. The examples to be highlighted are *chultunes*, the *nixtamalización* process, *pinole* and *atoles agrios*.

The geography of the Mayan area is very complex with contrasting landscapes, surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. It has high mountain ranges and on the Yucatan Peninsula the land is low, its rivers are mostly underground and there is a variety of wild animals that have been exploited as a source of food. This created a situation different from the rest of Mesoamerica. The Maya grew corn, and this was their basic food, but at the same time they had a varied diet obtained from home gardens, walled plots in the forest, used as gardens and pens for wild animals, fishing in the sea and in inland waters, hunting, gathering wild plants, extracting salt, keeping domesticated animals at home, beekeeping and many other resources.

The Maya also had very complex techniques for exploiting their rich environment. In addition to a sophisticated communication system with inland roads, artificial waterways and experience with long-distance navigation by sea, water management included storing rainwater, building irrigation systems, diverting creeks and building raised fields for intensive agriculture. But the most important element that allowed a diverse diet was organized commerce, with exchange routes and marketplaces where food could be sold or exchanged.

The ancient Maya developed a cuisine that we can reconstruct through its plastic representations and descriptions made just after the conquest. Some of their techniques survive today. We know much about the variety of foods that they consumed and we will present an overview.

We will also focus on which foods of the ancient Maya are still available and offer remarkable examples of the current cuisine of Yucatan, transformed after the conquest. This

way we hope that our foreign visitors will appreciate the food that they will encounter while attending this meeting.

Today, we can still taste fruits that have a long history in this land, such as pineapple or papaya, and also have access to preparations that have been inherited from the ancient Maya, for example some dishes made with turkey meat or pumpkin seeds combined with maize preparations. But over the years, Yucatec cuisine has been enriched with items that have been incorporated from abroad. We will talk about *cochinita pibil* and *queso relleno*, true icons that you may experience during your visit.