

Corn: Food, Culture, Power

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Illustration 2. Effigy of Hun Hunahpú with an ear of corn sprouting from his head

Summary

Corn is one of the foods that has changed the history of the world. Since ancient times, nixtamalization of this crop has supplied the most important nutrients of the Mesoamerican diet. From this crop, various religious sects, artistic movements, and culinary globalizations have originated. The following investigation contextualizes the impact of corn with past and present applications within culture, religion, and diet.

Nixtamalization and cultivation

- *Nixtamal*: boil, soak in lime, drain *najayote*, grind
- *Chinampa*: advanced irrigation system comprised of canals and banks; trees provide structures to plant beds and filter water (Illustration 1)
- Hybrids versus indigenous: native corns outcompete hybrid corns in nearly every setting and category, based on relevant use



Illustration 1. Recreation of a chinampa

Art and sculpture

As a product of the traditions of society, art reflects the indispensable values and themes of the moment. Even though experts encounter murals and sketches depicting corn, these illustrations are often damaged. Experts draw upon the statues and figures elaborated from stone to observe key figures and practices associated with corn.

- *Illustration 2* The first ear of corn grew from the head of a martyr god; each blessing in Aztec/Mexica culture has its own sacrifice, in this case, the decapitation of *Hun Hunahpú* in the Underworld
- *Illustration 3* The elaboration of these statues is a synthesis of fertility: that of the corn field and the human womb
- *Illustration 4* The *Piedra del Sol* features two months (*Etzalcualiztli* and *Ochpaniztli*) that mandate human sacrifice to protect crops



Illustration 3. Pre-classical monolith of the child-faced corn deity



Illustration 4. *Piedra del Sol* found in Temple 22 of the Great Temple, Mexico City; Aztec calendar

Mythology and religion

Perhaps the most famous of all Mesoamerican mythologies is *Popol Vuh*, which narrates Creation; man was sculpted out of yellow and white corn. The *chortí*, a Mayan subgroup, venerated the god of the sun and corn, a practice that equates corn to the sun (i.e. the most high god). They practiced ritualized the release of corn spirits to the sky before harvest, to avoid an irreverence against the gods. In Aztec religion, *chicomexóchitl* names “holy corn” as a divine manifestation. Rites of the Aztecs—performed by a priestess—unites the *tenanzintli* (old crop) to the *konzintli* (new crop) to ensure crop fecundity.

The Mesoamerican diet

The *Mexicas* and Mayans reached the climax of their empires, in part, due to the stability of their agricultural systems. Derivatives of corn—like the *tamal*—were imperative to the warrior-countryperson. The addition of readily-available produce satisfied all nutritional requirements. Today, this style of eating has disappeared. The influence of modern foods—like pure sugar, soft drinks, and wheat derivatives—and the high consumption of such foods has affected the region. These products have diminished the role of corn as the base of the Mesoamerican diet. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of obese adults in Mexico increased 25%, which correlates positively to the increase in consumption of food products of low cost, low nutritious content, and high energy density. Chronic undernourishment and excess weight are worsening the health of Mesoamerica.

Conclusion

The rich history and culture associated with corn demonstrates its profundity in Mesoamerica. The *nixtamal* and its applications have altered the face of the continent. With the modernization of diet, the health of Mesoamericans continues transforming while the nutrition steadily worsens. It might be that a reversion to the traditional diet and diversity of foods could solve current health complications; however, the recuperation and application of such practices requires further study.

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