

Corn connects many generations of Maya

May 22 2020, by Marijn Knap



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

That corn was highly important in the Maya culture is something that Genner Llanes Ortiz, himself a Maya from the Mexican province of Yucatan, has always known, right from his childhood. But just how important the role of corn is in the collective memory of his people, is one of the subjects of his research.

Llanes Ortiz's fascination with the role of [corn](#) in Maya culture started around ten years ago. As an anthropologist at the Faculty of Archaeology in Leiden, he noticed how many corn festivals there were in Mexico and that the Maya tradition of praying for the cornfields had grown into mass prayers at these festivals, even when the festivals were held in city centers. He is so fascinated by the topic that it is now the subject of a widescale research project he is working on. By studying the Maya's relationship to corn in the past and the present, he hopes to gain insight into how the Mayas handle their cultural heritage, how they pass on their culture and what it means for them in the present day.

Corn has a rich tradition in the cuisine of Latin America. The number of dishes using corn—even in Mexico alone—is immense. And there is an enormous variety of types of corn—around 60. They all originate from that one plant, teosinte, a Mexican type of grass from which the Maya cultivated corn 8,000 to 14,000 years ago. Biologists have already reconstructed how they turned this weed into an edible plant, but how corn then spread among all the [indigenous peoples](#) in South and North America is still a mystery.

Llanes is fascinated by it, and by the social memories that the Maya people share about the cultivation of corn. For the Maya, corn is more than a food product, it is sacred. According to the Maya creation story, they were actually created from corn: fashioned from cornflour. And corn still plays an important religious and spiritual role in the lives of Maya people.

Archaeologists have mainly concerned themselves with the classical Maya heritage. The history of the native peoples received little attention, partly because so few records were kept. "But the fact that there's no written history doesn't mean that nothing was passed on. That did happen, in the form of drawings, plays and images."

Culture destroyed

Llanes is quick to add that the Maya do have a written history. They used hieroglyphs to record their religious stories, history and astronomy insights in images and in books. However, the books were systematically destroyed by the colonizers during the inquisition. "colonization marginalized the memories of the Maya. Much of their culture was destroyed, and that has had an impact on how their history has been handed down. Things didn't get much better after the colonization period either. But, with my research on corn, I want to delve into the collective memories, which may help to restore these memories."

The classical ancient Maya cities may be deserted ruins, but the Maya people and their culture still exist. There are around six million Maya and they still pass their stories on to one another. Llanes even sees signs of a revival. On [social media](#), a log of young Maya are focusing attention on their identity. "Young Maya people make full use of Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to share their [culture](#) with one another. They are teaching one another to read the ancient hieroglyphs, they construct Maya memes and there's a lot of Maya symbolism in their music lyrics."

Maya hiphop

He picks up his [mobile phone](#) and scrolls, looking for his Maya Spotify list. "Hiphop is really popular among young Maya people because it has similarities with the oral traditions of their ancestors. These modern forms of expression and the dialogue between the old and the young is just as interesting as the ancient stories." He turns up the sound and his office is filled with rap-style Maya texts. He smiles: "They're even singing about corn."

Provided by Leiden University

Citation: Corn connects many generations of Maya (2020, May 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-05-corn-maya.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.