

# Sacred Animals and Exotic Tropical Plants

by Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth

Sharing our knowledge of flora and fauna in Mayan utilitarian use, hieroglyphics, iconography, religion, diet, and mythology is one of the projects of the FLAAR Reports. We hope this introduction to insects in Mayan culture is a topic that is completely new to you.

# The Niij

*Domesticated insects were part of the Mayan civilization*



(GUSTAVO GALLEGOS)

It is so often said that the Maya had few domesticated animals except for the dog and the Muscovy duck. The turkey was domesticated before the time the Spanish arrived. Yet the Maya had several forms of domesticated insects, with the lacquer insects the most obviously domesticated. You can still see the Maya raising *Llaveia axin* today.

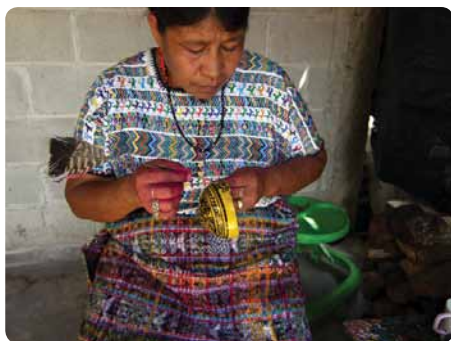
A few months ago I saw my first lacquer insect. I have long known that lacquer in Asia comes from a tree or from the lac insect. But I had no idea there was a lacquer insect in Guatemala. In Mayan languages, this insect is called *niij*.

The lacquer insect is also called *cochinilla* in local Spanish and cochineal in English. The same word, *cochinilla*, is used for the smaller related insect, which is a primary source of red dye (for some lipstick and rouge, among other uses). *Cochinilla* insects are tiny (the size of the head of a pin) and are found on opuntia cactus plants. The environs around La Antigua Guatemala were once a major production zone of this red dye after the Spanish conquest. But today most *cochinilla* insects are bred in Oaxaca, Mexico and in the Canary Islands. ...continued page 70

**In Rabinal we found the niij clinging to jocote trees, living under a 'tent' of white powder-like material.**



(SOFÍA MONZÓN)



The lacquer created from the Niij is used in traditional Mayan handicrafts. (PHOTOS GUSTAVO GALLEGOS)



The lacquer insect is called cochinilla in Spanish and cochineal in English. (PHOTOS GUSTAVO GALLEGOS)




Nicholas Hellmuth with a handful of *Llavea axin* (lacquer insects). (PHOTO GUSTAVO GALLEGOS)

## The Niij cont. from page 68

In Rabinal we found the niij primarily clinging to jocote trees. But biologists indicate that this insect can also live on *Jatropha curcas* trees (physic nut) and various species of acacia.

It was absolutely fascinating to see the insects; most live under a “tent” of white powder-like material. When you harvest the insects, you clean off the white surface layer, and you then see that the insects are a nice light orange color. They do not bite or sting, nor are they otherwise aggressive.

While we were in Rabinal, Gustavo Gallegos produced a video about the insects and preparation of the varnish. Camila Morales wrote a report on the trip, with comments on preparing the insect fat and then applying it to the gourds. Both the video and this report will be available at [www.maya-ethnozoology.org](http://www.maya-ethnozoology.org). 

*Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth is director of FLAAR Reports (Foundation for Latin American Anthropological Research). To view the list of sacred animals visit [www.maya-archaeology.org](http://www.maya-archaeology.org) or contact Dr. Hellmuth at [frontdesk@flaar.org](mailto:frontdesk@flaar.org)*