Flor de Muerto Also for the Living: Marigolds in Maya Diet
by Dr. Nicholas Hellmuth

If you go to any village in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, or El Salvador and ask about how they use marigold flowers, most local people will say these flowers are ONLY for decorating burial sites (and primarily on November 2nd).

If you are a caballero and wish to give flowers to a pretty woman in Central America, if you offer a gorgeous marigold flower, the girl will be extremely irritated. “These are only for Day of the Dead, I do not want to see or touch this flower from you.”

Yet for thousands of years several species of marigold flowers were significant items in the diet of the Maya, and Aztec, and most of the other people of Prehispanic Mesoamerica.

Since Day of the Dead is in early November, now is a good time of year to learn about “the flower of death.” This was really a flower of the daily kitchen; eaten, consumed, and used in many aspects of daily life by the local people (before the arrival of the Spanish).

First part of learning about flowers, fruits, vegetables, or plants in Latin America is that local nomenclature varies from imprecise to contradictory. Every area of Mesoamerica may have a different name for each flower. And even within Guatemala, a single plant may have a different name in each departamento.

If you assume that by using the scientific botanical name you can escape the mishmash of local Spanish you quickly find that scholars change plant names with remarkable frequency. So one group of botanists will call a plant Plantae differentiae and at a nearby university the other botanists call the identical plant Plantae nominias. And other botanists will then tell you that both plant names are merely synonyms of each other and that both plants are really just one species.

But the two plants may look totally different in size, shape and color! (if they are varieties, not really different species). So, be prepared for mumbo jumbo at all levels.

This report is about those marigold flowers that are also called Flor de Muerto (Tagetes patula).

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Part I: Recounting the Story of the IMS Stelae

by Keith Merwin, IMS Webmaster

The Institute of Maya Studies (IMS) was first proposed by Charles Lacombe and founded on September 29, 1971, by a small group including Lacombe, Hal and Alberta Ball, Lewis Dorn, John Harrison, Allan Kaplan, his wife Elayne Marquis, Timothy Sullivan and Albert Weintraub. By November 1971, membership had reached 26 and plans were underway for a museum exhibit, sponsorship of an excavation, lectures and publications.

Initially, the official name of the IMS was “the Institute of Maya Studies of the Museum of Science,” when the members formed a non-profit corporation on April 21, 1972. In one of its early brochures the IMS stated, among its goals, “Maintaining liaison with governments of Mesoamerica, Museums, Universities and organizations with interest in the Precolumbian field.”

From mid-January through February 16 of 1972, the IMS sponsored a photographic exhibit in the lobby of the Miami Museum of Science (Museum). Titled “A Photographic Exhibit of The Maya Area,” it featured 71 photographs dating to the 1950s and forward, taken by Dr. Peter Harrison of Trent University, Ontario, Canada.

Just a short time later, in March 1972, the IMS and the Museum agreed to co-sponsor the Monte Alto Project in Guatemala. The project involved the archaeological find of large stone-carved heads with Olmecoid features, found in Guatemala’s Pacific Coast in the area of La Democracia. A reception announcing the sponsorship was held in Gallery A of the Museum on March 23, 1972.

Albert Weintraub, one of the founding members, served as Master of Ceremonies and Chairman of the Monte Alto Museum Committee. Edwin Shook, director of the Monte Alto Project, was named a Research Associate. The government of Guatemala was represented by Alejandro Maldonado Aguirre, Minister of Education, personally sent by Guatemala’s President Carlos Arana Osorio, and Luis Luján Muñoz, Director of the Museum of Anthropology and History of Guatemala.

Also in March 1972, the first IMS newsletter was published. There it was reported that members had negotiated the loan of a Maya stela from the Guatemalan government to be exhibited at the Museum. At the time, Guatemala was trying to recover a looted stela in the possession of a United States art dealer. Ian Graham had contacted the Guatemalan government after identifying the stela up for sale in California as Machaquila No. 2, which he had discovered and documented in 1962. The Guatemalan government and the Museum had reached an agreement that the stela would be exhibited in Miami upon recovery.

The dealings between the IMS, the Museum and the Government of Guatemala regarding the loan of stone monuments from Maya sites would continue for months to come, culminating in the creation of a Maya Plaza in the Museum that would house such monuments for the duration of the loans.

Nothing would be easy. In the second issue of the IMS newsletter, it was reported that, “Our stela is still in Los Angeles and shipment to the Museum for exhibit will have to await outcome of a court trial to prove ownership by Guatemala. This may take many months, and in the interim, the Guatemalan government has agreed
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Tagetes species, various marigold names, including Flor de Muerto

In USA and elsewhere, the plant is discussed primarily for its diverse uses unrelated to Precolumbian cultures; yet in Latin America, and in particular in Guatemala, Tagetes patula is Flor de Muerto.

The Tagetes patula plant produces a yellow dye for coloring textiles. Many websites mention that natural oil can be produced from this type of marigold, to be included in perfumes.

A thousand years ago several species of Tagetes were used in beverages, to flavor tobacco, and as a colorant: today it is almost exclusively a flower to put on top of the burial place of your beloved deceased relatives. Because this flower has so much potential, we would like to “bring it back from the dead” so to speak, and suggest that the flower should be grown, and harvested, and used productively, for more than just on November 1st and November 2nd.

The stem has a deep fragrance; the flower has a slight fragrance; it is definitely the leaves which have the most delightful fragrance. For the flower and stem you need to crush the plant part between your fingers. The leaves impart an immediate pleasant scent even before you crush them.

Marigolds are known to any gardener around the world. But I bet not many of them know that the origin of this pretty garden plant is Mexico and Central America. And I bet even fewer gardeners realize that just about every part of the marigold can be eaten (but whoa, be careful, you might not like the after effects of some of the chemicals in the leaves).

Far more than being restricted to decorating burials, in Precolumbian times, various marigolds were:

• used as flavoring for cacao,
• used as flavoring for tobacco,
• used as flavoring for incense,
• used as medicine,
• used as insecticide,
• used to produce yellow or related colors to dye cotton or other materials.

Source: Check out all the FLAAR Reports by Nicholas Hellmuth at www.maya-ethnobotany.org. Nicholas has suggested that I mention that there is a newly released book on all the Maya plants which produce dye colorants by weaving specialist, native-born Olga Reiche of Antigua, Guatemala. Google her name for availability.

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to make a substitute stela available to the Museum. Director Charles Lacombe is in Guatemala City to complete arrangements with the government for this stela”. They also learned that another stela already in the United States was also coming to Miami.

In July of 1972, the third newsletter provided more information about the stela Guatemala would be loaning to the Museum of Science and IMS. “Stela 24 is on its way… This priceless national treasure of Guatemala should arrive at the Museum on extended loan by August 1, as announced at the meeting”.

The first stela to arrive in Miami was Stela 3 from Piedras Negras, and it was in pieces. Stela 3 had been cut apart by looters in the late 1950s or early 1960s. In 1964, the Brooklyn Museum purchased eleven of these pieces from a dealer for $3,000.00. They went on display in 1965 and were identified in 1966. The Guatemalan government requested their return, but the Brooklyn Museum did not do so until 1972.

So, on the last day of August 1972, a Brinks armored truck delivered the fragments of Piedras Negras Stela 3, now valued at $120,000, to the Miami Museum.

Gabriel J. Cordovez of the Guatemalan Consulate, the Museum Director and IMS Board members Lewis Dorn and Charles Lacombe, were on hand to supervise the delivery and unloading.

Part II continues in the December IMS Explorer (Issue 12, Volume 43).

Keith will present his program titled “The IMS Stelae” on November 19.
See program announcement on page 7.
Precolumbian Archaeological Boom Underway in Costa Rica

The recent grand opening of the Park and Museum of the Stone Spheres and the extensive recovery and curation work of the Guayabo National Monument are the two most significant events that represent the current boom in archaeological and anthropological research in Costa Rica.

One of the highlights of the administration of President Laura Chinchilla has been her insistence that government agencies must work with each other and cooperate with non-governmental organizations for the benefit of the nation. This collaborative philosophy has certainly benefited the archaeological record of Costa Rica.

In 2014, the Park and Museum of the Stone Spheres in the southern canton of Osa has been deemed a great success in terms of awakening interest in cultural tourism and it is firmly in the running to become one of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites. Also in 2014, archaeologists and restoration experts at the Guayabo National Monument, province of Cartago, are reporting on the considerable progress they have made in unearthing and cleaning up several structures at this important Precolumbian citadel.

The accomplishments made over the last 12 months have resulted in the reconstruction of an area of about 1,925 square meters, which archaeologists believe now looks as it did circa the years 500 to 1350 CE.

The ongoing restoration at Guayabo is a joint effort undertaken by the University of Costa Rica and the National System of Conservation Areas (Spanish acronym: SINAC).

During the excavation, archaeologists dig up more than 60,000 fragments of stone and ceramic materials. In total, the archaeological restoration team at Guayabo rescued and reconstructed a walled stone path about 25 meters long as well as two promontories that were part of a public assembly area. This path, known as Caragra, served one of the main gates of the ancient settlement. SINAC is committed to continue restoration efforts in Guayabo, which will include modern drainage systems to protect the structures and an overhaul of the existing visitor paths so that all structures can be fully appreciated.

The Lamanai Archaeological Project has a New Website and They’re Looking for Friends

Located in the north of Belize, in Orange Walk District, Lamanai was occupied as early as the 16th century BCE. The site became a prominent center in the Preclassic Period, from the 4th century BCE through the 1st century CE. In 625 CE, Stela 9 was erected there in the Yucatek language of the Maya. Lamanai continued to be occupied up to the 17th century CE.

Archaeological excavations at the site began in 1974 under David M. Pendergast of the Royal Ontario Museum, which continued through 1988. Further excavations and restoration work is being conducted as of 2004. A team from the nearby villages of Indian Church and San Carlos help with the excavations.

The current project is co-directed by Dr. Elizabeth Graham (Institute of Archaeology, University College London) and Dr. Scott Simmons (University of North Carolina at Wilmington). Since 2006 research at the site has been directed mostly towards artifact analysis. Major excavations will resume when funding for more artifact processing, analyses and storage is acquired.

Graham currently is focusing her efforts to acquire funds to improve collection and data storage, facilitation of analysis of the Lamanai material culture, and access and exposure to the Lamanai archaeological record by many different publics, which includes researchers, ecotourists, and local adults and children.

Become a Friend of Lamanai and help support their archaeological investigations. The cost of one metal storage box is $20 USD, and they will put your name on it. They are planning their 2015 field season and they’ll be reorganizing the Lamanai artifact collection. 100% of your donation goes toward the purchase of storage and building materials.


Lubaantun Correction:

Editor’s note: On page 6 of the August IMS Explorer (Vol. 42, Issue 8), we featured an article titled “Construction at Lubaantun”, partially penned by our IMS Director of Research, Joaquin J. Rodriguez. I did some research about the site in order to make the article fill a whole page and I came across some beautiful 3-D images and videos of Lubaantun created by TMBA Inc. I picked up some texts, images and a photo caption that noted: “The structures of the city are built from stone blocks that were not set with mortar. The blocks were primarily black slate that was common to the area, instead of limestone.”

Joaquin has since pointed out that he has tested the stone used by the ancient Maya at Lubaantun and that it is not black slate (a metamorphic rock) but a sedimentary grey calcarenite, a sandstone-like rock composed primarily of calcium carbonate grains (therefore a type of limestone). I regret the error.
What is Escuela Caracol?

Escuela Caracol is an intercultural Waldorf school that was founded in 2007 in San Marcos La Laguna, a Kaqchikel community on the shores of Lake Atitlan, Guatemala.

Escuela Caracol, a center for educational renewal, provides the opportunity for indigenous and non-indigenous children alike to live up to their full creative potential, and honors the riches of the long overlooked Maya cultures.

Founded in 2007 by Joshua and Courtney Wilson in response to an overcrowded local school system with an authoritarian character and residual tones of violence, Escuela Caracol is the first and only Waldorf school in Guatemala. Amidst thousands of years of Maya history, children from Kindergarten through Grade 6 are educated with a pedagogy that sprang from the intention of renewal following World War I.

Waldorf education is a natural fit for this community, based on the fundamental principles: freedom, equality and solidarity. The founder of Waldorf education, Rudolf Steiner, was a social visionary, scientist, teacher, architect and much more. He created an education that allowed for the unfolding of an individual’s innate capacities which then formed a free and equitable society representative of the collective consciousness of the whole community. Creative expression, practical work, the natural environment and social harmony are part of each day at Caracol where there is an honest intention to celebrate and honor traditional customs while recognizing ways to integrate and emerge together as a new culture.

The collective voice (‘La Voz’) of Escuela Caracol’s staff, parents and students, are preparing to move forward into the next seven years modeling a center for educational renewal by fully enrolling each class with an equal school-wide proportion of girls to boys, providing teacher training to all teachers, offering professional development opportunities to numerous other Guatemalan educators, and engaging in social-impact initiatives that recognize the needs and challenges of the community as a pulse for regeneration.

Located at the cultural center of the Maya people, “the navel of the world”, Escuela Caracol integrates the richness of Maya cultural traditions that have been marginalized for the past 500 years, enlivening curriculum with traditional Mayan languages, folktales, songs, games, handicrafts and cooking.

A new culture is emerging among the indigenous and the non-indigenous, a humanitarian culture arising from knowledge, understanding, respect an authentic interest in the “other”.

With the attempted border crossings exploding in quantity (in 2011 there were 6,500 minors apprehended at U.S. borders and just 3 years later it is estimated to be 90,000). These children need a reason to stay, they need good education, and they need confirmation that opportunity exists for them.

“Humanity will not recover from their mistakes without a global education.”
– Rigoberta Menchú
Guatemalan Indigenous Leader
and Nobel Peace Prize winner, 1992

In early July 2014, a group of high school students from the Emerson Waldorf School located in Chapel Hill, NC, visited the learning center. A group of 17 students came accompanied by three group leaders and volunteered all week, sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm with the whole community of Escuela Caracol.

School must in itself be a community. Waldorf is a living humanitarian education built on values that honor the evolution of this intercultural community of indigenous Maya, non-indigenous and International students: equality, solidarity and freedom.

A message from Escuela Caracol

Over 70% of our students are indigenous Maya who need the support of sponsors. You can become a sponsor for as little as one dollar a day. Your gift will help us reach our goals to provide renewal, solidarity and stability!

Make donations online at http://escuelacaracol.org, or e-mail info@escuelacaracol.org. The school is a registered 501c3 nonprofit organization.
In March of 1972, the very first IMS newsletter reported that IMS members had negotiated the loan of a Maya stela from the Guatemalan government to “a museum in another country.” This is the story of three stelae from Guatemala that the newly formed Institute of Maya Studies was involved in bringing to the Miami Science Museum. Of the three, two made it to Miami and spent years on exhibit at the now defunct Maya Plaza.

The third involved the legendary Ian Graham and the judicial system of the United States. We explore the history behind Stela 3 from Piedras Negras; Stela 24 from Naranjo; and Stela 2 from Machaquila.

A trip to Guayabo National Monument is a trip back in time. At El Guayabo, walk though thousand-year old streets; observe ancient stone-and-wood homes; examine petroglyphs and stone statues; and explore aqueducts that once carried water from nearby streams to on-site storage pools.


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Recreating an Ancient Beer of Mesoamerica

A couple of years ago, at the Discovery World Science and Technology Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, members brewed a Mayan Maize Ale, as part of their adult education series “Ale Through the Ages: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Brewing.”

The recipe was inspired by how an alcoholic beverage may have tasted in Central America over 1,000 years ago. Archaeological and ethnoarchaeological evidence suggests that Precolumbian cultures of Mesoamerica brewed a fermented alcoholic beverage using corn and cacao as the primary ingredients. Spanish chroniclers described how the Yucatek Maya made a foaming drink from cacao and maize that was very savory and which they used to celebrate their feasts. Discovery World’s ale of the ages was their attempt to recreate how this drink of ancient Mesoamerica may have tasted like.

The bottling was extremely easy and resulted in sixty 12-oz. bottles. The happy brewers noted the corn and cacao ale had a distinct maize flavor with a delicious chocolate body with a hint of serrano pepper on the end.

There are many modern examples of brewing corn beer throughout the Western Hemisphere. Most often it is called chicha, where the traditional method involves the maize being chewed and then spit into a pot or bowl. Natural enzymes in the mouth aid in converting the starch in the corn into fermentable sugars. This mash is then boiled and left to naturally ferment. While the Discovery World brewers did not spit in their Mayan Maize Ale, a small batch of authentic chicha was made following the traditional method.

Source: http://distantmirror.wordpress.com

Final alcohol by volume was estimated to be around 5.5%.