

THE PANTI MAYA MEDICINE TRAIL, AN EXAMPLE OF THE PREPARATIONS OF GOD IN THE PROMISED LAND OF THE AMERICAS

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In the book of Alma in the Book of Mormon, chapter 46, verse 40, it reads,

"And there were some who died with fevers, which at some seasons of the year were very frequent in the land – but not so much so with fevers, because of the excellent qualities of the many plants and roots which God had prepared to remove the cause of diseases, to which men were subject by the nature of the climate – "

What were those plants, and where are they most plentiful and “excellent” in the land? In 1997, I went on a journey to Mesoamerica and the following is a partial account of what I found.

Upon entering the neatly manicured grounds of '*Ix Chel*' Farm near San Ignacio, Cayo, Belize, I was impressed with its tropical beauty and surprised by its unexpected sophistication. Here was the entrance to the Panti Maya Medicine Trail, so named after Don Eligio Panti, Maya healer extraordinaire. Where was the jungle trail, where the healing greenery, and where the biodiversity? Finally, beyond the gift shop sitting next to a refreshment stand was the jungle, a shaman's hut and the famous trail.

Panti died in 1996 at the age of 101. This venerable healer and shaman had devoted his entire life to helping his people with their problems, both physical and spiritual. In 1983, at the age of 86, he accepted a non-Maya apprentice. Rosita Arvigo could see that what Panti did for his people was something that should be preserved by someone, and that someone turned out to be herself, who had been previously trained as a naprapathic physician. She created the Ix Chel Tropical Research Center and Foundation, named after Ix Chel, the Maya moon goddess and guardian of the rain forest, the powerful consort of Chaac, the rain god, according to Maya mythology.

In 1987 in conjunction with a study being made of tropical plants by the National Cancer Institute the *Belize Ethnobotany Project* was formed, which has contributed over 2,000 tropical plants to the NCI for research purposes. In 1993 the government of Belize established the world's first medicinal plant preserve on 6,000 acres of rain forest. It is known as the Terra Nova Medicinal Plant Reserve and is run by the

Belize Association of Traditional Healers of which Dr. Arvigo is a founder.

Appropriately, as we started on the trail, we were shown the giant Ceiba tree, sacred world tree of the Maya, believed to be '*Yax Che*,' or the first tree on earth. The Maya believed that its roots reached through the center of the Universe into the nine levels of the Underworld, its trunk into the thirteen levels of the Upper world, and its branches into Heaven. At its crown sat '*Hunab-Ku*,' the creator, contemplating his world.

The Ceiba is also the national tree of Guatemala and is commonly known as the cotton or kapok tree, which cotton was used for stuffing pillows and mattresses, especially in times past. It has had many other uses for the Maya, both medicinal and practical. The leaves are boiled with sugar into a cough syrup. The traditional dugout canoe of the Maya was carved from its soft trunk, although not able to endure as others made of hardwoods will.

The Breadnut or Ramon tree, '*Chacox*,' provided a staple food for the ancient Maya. The fruits were boiled and eaten like small potatoes, or ground into gruel and sweetened. The cooked, ground nuts could also be combined with corn meal to make a more nutritious tortilla.

Some plants along the trail have endowed modern medicine with new pharmaceuticals, especially the Wild Yam or '*Cocolmeca*,' which provided natural hormonal substances (e.g. diascorea) and chemical clues for steroids, and contraceptive and menopausal medications. It has been chewed by Maya women for ages as a natural birth control substance. Although it is not completely effective, its properties were evidently often helpful.

Another, possibly more effective contraceptive, was made by the Bull Hoof or '*Ki Bix*' plant, steeped into a tea. If the proper quantity is drunk over a certain period of time, it is reported that it can cause permanent infertility, and its properties are presently being studied by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The Red Gumbolimbo tree was one of the most interesting species that we saw on the trail.

Having a very red bark resembling a dark skin, it is referred to by the local people as the "Naked Indian" tree, the Maya name being '*Chacah*.' Locally, a tea made from the somewhat shaggy bark has been successful in combatting both internal and external infections. A chemical analysis of the bark, done in the United States by a noted ethnobotanist, Dr. Janis Alcorn, demonstrated antibiotic activity.

A principle of nature known as the "doctrine of signatures" was explained by our guide. This principle asserts that certain clues in a plant's appearance indicate its medicinal value. As an example, the Gumbolimbo is good for rashes, and its bark is the color of irritated red skin.

The Cockspur tree, or '*Zubin*' in Mayan, has a stinging thorn, which signals that it is useful for another sting of the jungle, snake bite. Maya men known as bushmasters report that they carry some of the bark and root of the Cockspur to be used in case of snake bite. First the bark is chewed and the juice swallowed, then the bark is placed over the bite as a poultice. As the victim heads for more effective treatment, he chews the root and continues to swallow the juice. This first aid purportedly delays the effects of the venom long enough to save a life.

Another signature is displayed by the Cross Vine (*Cruxi*) plant. Don Panti once taught his protege, Rosita Arvigo, "When a leaf crosses a branch it is a sign that the plant is blessed with medicinal powers." Not to be confused with the signal given by the Chicoloro plant which has branches forming a distinctive cross indicating that the action on the human body is both dramatic and potentially toxic, a danger sign. It is a member of the Strychnaceae family which produces the poison strychnine, however, it also has medicinal properties when properly prepared and used. Cousins of this plant provide the poisonous sap that coats the tips of darts for blowguns used by the ancient Maya.

We were shown only about a dozen such trees and plants, however, the FIELD GUIDE, sold in the shop of tinctures and salves at the trailhead, lists thirty-two common tropical plants that provide food, shelter, medicine and tools for the Maya, and useful cosmetics and pharmaceuticals for us, as well, if we will have the wisdom to learn from the ancients.

At the end of the Panti Medicine Trail before leaving the jungle the young guide showed us a full-sized replica of a shaman's hut. The '*H'men*' (Heh-men), which translates to "one who knows," here had a place to grind and mix, to brew and concoct, and a bed of branches to lay his patient upon to apply the herbal baths and medications, as he or a caring relative of the patient slept in a nearby hammock. Incense was burned from the sap of the Copal tree to ward off the "evil eye" or evil spirits, sent to torment the patient by an '*obeha*,' or hechisero, a practitioner of black magic.

As I was leaving, out of a curiosity, I bought some "Jungle Salve" and copal incense, and even some chicle to chew as the natives do, collected from the Sapodilla tree. Years later, I still rely on the salve for insect bites. I purchased not only the FIELD GUIDE, but also a copy of SASTUN, the biography of Don Eligio Panti, written by his friend and apprentice, Rosita Arvigo. I entirely consumed both in the next 24 hours, unable to put them down.

I learned that a '*sastun*' (sas-toon) is a divination tool cherished by the H'men, and the name means "Stone of Light." Through this stone a shaman communes with the spirit world of the Maya to divine things that are hidden, not unlike the Old Testament Hebrew prophets who used the Urim and Thummim, meaning "Lights and Perfection" as seer stones to divine the will of their God (Exodus 28:30). As can be seen, this is another correlation with the Book of Mormon history and the "stones" called "interpreters" in Mosiah 8:13:

"Now Ammon said unto him: I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewithal that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters, and no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he ought not and he should perish. And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer."

and in Mosiah 28:11 & 13-16:

"Therefore he took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, and also the plates of Nephi, and all the things which he had kept and preserved according to the commandments of God, after having translated and caused to be written the records

which were on the plates of gold which had been found by the people of Limhi, which were delivered to him by the hand of Limhi;

And now he translated them by the means of those two stones which were fastened into the two rims of a bow.

Now these things were prepared from the beginning, and were handed down from generation to generation, for the purpose of interpreting languages;

And they have been kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord, that he should discover to every creature who should possess the land the iniquities and abominations of his people;

And whosoever has these things is called seer, after the manner of old times."

Joseph Smith also utilized a seer stone in his translation of the Book of Mormon, as well as the aforementioned Urim and Thummim on a breastplate.

Today, it appears that the ancient Maya religion and healing arts have been mingled with Catholicism, and some of their beliefs are hauntingly strange to this old Mormon gringo from "the States." The old medicine man, Eligio Panti, claimed that he knew an extremely powerful spell that could turn a man into a jaguar by night. Stories of people changing to animals are nearly as old as the human race, but even one who does not share this belief, wonders what the words of the spell might be. However, as has been shown many of their customs and beliefs do also correlate with many things spoken of in the Book of Mormon.

As I journeyed through Central America, I found native Maya still burning incense, lighting candles and making offerings of food, alcohol and perfume to the huge stone heads and images left by their ancient ancestors. I saw smoke rising from a cave on the mountainside above Lake Atitlan from the cornstalk fire of a local shaman giving thanks to or requesting a blessing from the god of the harvest, possibly Ix Chel. I saw a dark room housing supplicants to the usually hidden effigy "Maximon," who is only brought out on certain "holy days." Maximon is a stuffed, fully clothed mannequin with a man's face, who is offered neckties, scarves, money, cigars and alcohol in appeasement so he will bless the little village of Santiago de Atitlan.



Maximon in Santiago de Atitlan, Guatemala

Of all these experiences, the walk through the jungle of Ix Chel Farm on the Panti Maya Medicine Trail made more sense to me and held more hope for the future than anything else I saw on my trip. Hopefully, even though we may not accept much of the belief system of either the ancient or many modern Maya, our generation will be able to help preserve those things of value for future generations that have come from centuries of experience - those nearly forgotten treasures yet to be rediscovered in the prolific rain forest of the Maya world.