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Ritual Relationships with Copal Incense: Reinterpreting 21st Century U.S. Contexts through Indigenous Mesoamerican Ontologies

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Abstract

Copal, an aromatic tree resin, has long been harvested and offered as incense in Indigenous communities of Mesoamerica. In contemporary academic contexts copal and other non-human materials and entities are often conceived of through objectifying ontologies. However, metaphysical frameworks grounded in life forces such as *teotl* (Nahuatl) and *ch'ulel* (various Mayan languages) offer alternative insights to human relationships with other-than-human worlds. Copal can be traced temporally and spatially, across thousands of miles and millennia. Specifically, we can follow copal from Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica across the northern border of Mexico into contemporary rituals in Denver, Colorado where copal continues to burn in Danza ceremonies. Beyond these ritual spaces, copal also moves in neoliberal and new age contexts as a market commodity and is stored in museum collections as a (stolen) 'artifact'. Centering Mesoamerican metaphysics offers a counternarrative to these versions of settler-colonial objectification. Ultimately, precolonial and decolonial kinship practices can inform reinterpretations and reimagining of copal in the processes of museum and market appropriation.

Keywords: Copal, pom, Mesoamerica, Aztec, Mexica, Maya, Museums, Danza, Materiality, Animism, Chichén Itzá

In September 1519, Spanish Conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo recorded an early meeting between Cortés and Caciques of Mexico, he wrote: 'the priests... brought us incense of a sort of resin which they call copal... they began to fumigate us... and they burnt copal and touched the ground with their hands and kissed it' (quoted in Carrasco 2008: 115).

In September 2018, I joined a group of Danzantes gathered on a small patch of grass at the gentrifying edges of Denver. I had seen Grupo Tlaloc many times in Denver, Colorado, at libraries, schools, and cultural events. However, this time I paid careful attention to the steps, though not yet knowing that this ceremony would guide my research years later. I watched as a young dancer held a smoking *popoxcomitl* (clay incense burner), as the ceremony began. She burned the incense—thick, white, pine-scented aromas filling the courtyard. With drums, rattles, singing, and a conch shell trumpet, we honored the seven directions. When we turned to the center of the circle, with copal in hand, the dancer knelt, she pressed her lips to her hand and her hand to the ground.

In March of 2022 I walked to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology on Harvard University's campus. I sat in the brick-walled basement with a curator who trained me to handle museum collections. I was reminded to wear latex gloves, 'not to protect the objects', but to protect *myself* from the toxins applied to these bodies of copal when they were stolen and shipped here over 100 years ago. It is quiet and sterile, no drumbeats or smoke in the air. I reached into wooden trays full of brittle copal called 'artifacts', stored in cardboard boxes and

plastic bags. Instead of rattling on dancing ankles or turning breath to song, large and small shells are propped and padded by foam. I lean in, pull down my N95 mask to inhale, longing for copal's characteristic scent. In here, I don't know which way is east, and apart from the mud on my shoes, no earth is visible under my feet.

In this paper, I weave together various copal-centered accounts—from the Yucatán of Mexico to Colorado and Cambridge—through a lens of animacy and relationality. I rely on a variety of stories and primary sources including the voice of one Denver *danzante*, Carlos Casteñeda and my own first-hand encounters and relationships with the museum collection. Though separated by over 2,000 miles and 500 years, *copaltemaliztli* (the burning of copal) tells a story of ceremonial survivance and cultural resilience.¹ Yet, there is still an uncertain future for copal incense in terms of commercialization within new age spirituality and neoliberalism as well as the containment of copal as artifact within museums. The brutality of colonialism is not merely a feature of the past but part of an ongoing ecological violence, this plays out on the bodies of Indigenous humans as well as other-than-human relations, like copal. Nevertheless, there are possibilities for remembering precolonial practices as a tool for reknitting relations and enacting decolonial or anti-colonial resistance. What Xicana Indígena scholar Susy Zepeda calls 'root work' invites careful and caring reconnection to ancestral knowledge (2020: 225). Kinship beyond the human, or beyond anthropocentrism, may include revival or reimagining of practices from the past. These alternatives to the status quo allow us to better confront present catastrophes and explore possibilities for interdependence. In that spirit, what I hope to contribute is an articulation of copal through Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican metaphysics, namely as an *animate* entity, which then guides critical interpretations of twenty-first century contexts. After exploring the significance of copal in Maya and Aztec ritual relationships, I will turn to Denver *Danzantes* and their contemporary articulation of copal's role in ceremony.² This serves as a comparative tool for examining objectification of copal through the neoliberal market and the Harvard Peabody collections. By taking seriously Mesoamerican cosmovisions, we can rethink ontological categories and reorient our inquiries in Religious Studies, especially as it pertains to ecology and relationality.³ In that spirit, allow me to offer a brief introduction to copal.

The word copal derives from the Nahuatl word *copalli* which became the dominant term in Spanish and then in English for this tree and resin. While copal is a widely used term for the substance, *pom* is the name primarily used in both the *Popol Wuj* and in modern K'iche' Maya (Stacy et al. 2006: 326; Stanzone 2023). *Pom* and *Copalli* are often translated as simply incense but the terms are not necessarily species-specific and often include various modifiers to better

¹ *Copaltemaliztli* is the term for 'the throwing of incense', particularly in a ceremony. See: Sahagún 1997: 71.

² In this article I refer to these prominent Mesoamerican civilizations as Aztec and Maya, though neither group is monolithic and there is a multiplicity of Indigenous peoples and communities beyond these central sites. While many use the term Mexica or Nahuatl, I have opted to use Aztec not only for the familiarity across various disciplines but also honoring the name used by and for the peoples who migrated to Tenochtitlan as written in the *Xiuhpohualli of Tenochtitlan* (also called the Codex Aubin)(fol. 3) Online: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Am2006-Drg-31219.

³ Native American and Indigenous Studies is a particularly instructive space which can offer theories and methods for a strengths-based, dignified centering other-than-human entities like copal and illuminate cosmologies of interrelatedness. Mesoamerican knowledge is often studied outside of the bounds of Indigenous Studies, but this paper is situated between these disciplines looking at religion and ritual as one bridge across time, space, and academic silos. Ecology and relationality function as a pair here only to the degree that kinship and relationality can easily be assumed as exclusively human or human-centric.

describe the function or appearance of the resin.⁴ Aurora Montúfar López, who has done extensive ethnographic and archaeological research on copal with *El Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, lists some of vernacular names of copal: ‘*copal chino, copal santo, palo copal, torote blanco, copal cimarrón, copal amargo o perlate... copal blanco, copal de penca o copalquáhuil*’ (2016: 48).⁵ In what is often unquestioned as neutral and scientific terms, copal is broadly described by botanists as an aromatic resin harvested from living trees from the family Burseraceae with over eighteen genera and hundreds of species across the American continent. These copal trees are spread across tropical and semi-arid landscapes alike, each in their own unique relational networks (CONABIO 2008). In Mexico alone, copal comes from the genera *Bursera* and *Protium* with the prominent *Bursera bipinnata* and *copallifera* growing in the Balsas River basin and *Protium copal* in more tropical climates in the Maya region (Montúfar López 2016: 48). The resin is formed in the outer cells of the tree and works like a scab when the tree bark is cut, oozing out and then drying as a protective patch. When the copal exudes due to insects or other natural (non-human) causes, it is a darker color—black or brown—whereas human harvesting procures a ‘pure’ white or clear tone (Montúfar López 2016: 49). Copal hardens when it encounters oxygen outside of the tree and then can be manipulated and molded with heat and burned as an incense. However, copal has also historically been applied as an adhesive for mosaics and knives and utilized for a wide variety of medicinal remedies: plugging tooth cavities, consumed as tea for stomach ailments, or inhaled for headaches (Case et al. 2003; Gigliarelli et al. 2015: 22391).⁶

⁴ Case et al. (2003: 193) discusses various etymologies and contemporary interpretations of *copal* and *pom*. For *copalli* they cite César Corzo Espinoza’s interpretation: ‘with the help of this path’ or ‘thanks to this path’ (1978). For *pom*, they cite Barrera Marin, Barrera Vázquez, and López Franco who distill two morphemes from the Mayan: ‘po-, a root word meaning “in harmony with the action of fire”, and -om, a suffix which denotes “activity”, literally “that which is to be burnt”’ (1976). More research should be done regarding various Indigenous Mesoamerican languages and the authors’ choices in employing certain terms.

⁵ I use the term copal while acknowledging the depths of words and associated worlds that are lost in this generalization.

⁶ See also Sahagún 2002: Bk 11: 187; Bk 9: 74.



Figure 1: White copal incense in maguey and incense bag among other tribute materials from Codex Mendoza fol. 37r (MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1), courtesy of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

Copal as blood

In Mesoamerican sources, copal is described as blood, food, tears, brains, and hearts (Earle 2001). Here I will focus on blood—in part because of the modern Nahuatl term for copal, *iezzo cuahuatl*, literally the tree's blood—though any of these materials and forms of consumption will ultimately lead to a similar conclusion (Cruz de la Cruz 2021).⁷ For ancient Maya and Aztec, human and animal blood is regularly given as a regenerative offering which ultimately maintains the balance of the cosmos (Carrasco 2008). But beyond humans and animals, trees are

⁷ *Iezzo cuahuatl* is used to speak of copal today in modern variant of Nahuatl in the Huasteca of Veracruz, Mexico and translates to 'sangre de los arboles', or 'blood of trees' (Cruz de la Cruz 2021).

particularly important figures in Mesoamerica. Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, the primordial entities often referred to as ‘gods’, made the earth from the body of Tlaltecútlī—the trees, flowers, and herbs are flesh and hair (Garibay 1965: 91–116). Due to the hard work done by the body of Tlaltecútlī to provide food and water, she requires life energy in return (Maffie 2020: 62). This is what Maffie refers to as Mexica ethics, a form of reciprocity that is *tequitl* (work) that feeds the ‘creator beings’ who are constantly recycling their life forces into the Fifth Age world (ibid.). Also, according to Alfredo López Austin, in one Aztec creation account, four gods sacrifice themselves and transform into four trees, one at each directional corner of the universe (1997). These are trees that act as ‘cosmic antennas’—rooted in the lower worlds and branching into upper realms. Trees, therefore, are a permanent manifestation of creative forces and tree resin is the *blood* of cosmic bodies that manifest as sturdy wood trunks. Inside *copalcuahuitl*, copal trees, energy forces are flowing.

Leonardo López Luján, director of the Proyecto Templo Mayor in Mexico City, has noted that alongside shells, copal is *the most frequent* material in the archeological records of the Post Classic-Period (Lopez Luján et al. 2005: 158). He has described ancient harvesting tools and practices, which often emulate a form of bloodletting rituals practiced by the Aztecs and have largely remained unchanged in the last five decades. When the living tree is sliced the resin visibly bleeds, sometimes in a red tone depending on the species. Both precontact and contemporary *copaleros* capture the resin by tying large maguey spikes to the branches.⁸ While the maguey spine functions as a receptacle for the bleeding trees, these spikes were also used by the Aztecs to pierce their ears and appendages to sprinkle blood offerings onto fires and altars (Sahagún 2017: 79). This is also visually represented in a Mayan glyph, which is drawn as a hand with a row of small circles between the thumb and pointer finger. This glyph is a verb phrase which means scattering or throwing blood or incense.⁹ Historian Inga Clendinnen offers a visceral summary of early colonial depictions of human and tree offerings burning in fires, she writes:

human blood jets vivid and wet, then darkens... human skin, darkened by the sun, also darkens in the fire, and then bubbles and boils like water... [similarly] Copal resin sweats and bubbles and then transforms to a heavy sweet smoke (1991: 246).

Copal does not only act *similarly* as blood but can serve as a direct substitute. In one story in the *Popol Wuj*, a maiden who is to be sacrificed gathers red incense into a bowl as a substitute for her heart. With the help of owl messengers, she tricks the Xibalban Lords (lords of the ‘underworld’) for when they dried the resin over the fire, they found the fragrance delicious as blood, and the maiden escaped (Christenson 2007: 118).¹⁰ As Doris Heyden concludes in her article ‘El árbol en el mito y el símbolo’, trees are ancestors and teachers who have their own

⁸ See also Montúfar López and Red Temática PFNM Aportes desde la etnobiología: Extracción del Copal (*Bursera bipinnata*) en el sur de Morelos, México Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC4CWbuum8o&list=PLNudLF6D4d6zGzHU1eZHykPk1TmZgFCjR&index=1>.

⁹ The full phrase is ‘CHOK-wa CH'A-ji’ (*chokaw ch'aj*) (T33v.710v:130.93:136) 1> tr. v. phr. ‘to scatter drops of liquid’ 2> tr. v. phr. ‘to throw drops of liquid’ (FAMSI n.d.).

¹⁰ Throughout the *Popol Wuj* various terms are translated as incense, including *pom* and *q'ol* as referenced in Christenson’s notes. Ultimately, these various types of trees and resins are related biologically and in their ability to transform as entities of food, blood, sacrifice, offerings, etc.

lives, their own blood, and that copal is part of every precontact ceremony as incense and smoke (1993: 217).



Figure 2: Extraction of copal in Morelos, Mexico (Image courtesy of Red Temática Productos Forestales No Maderables – Etnobiología)

Mesoamerican metaphysics: *teotl* and *ch'ulel*

These varied examples allow us to briefly glimpse how Mesoamericans engaged with copal resin. But what can this teach us about relationality among humans and these materials? The blurring and swirling of copal and blood make sense when we consider what James Maffie calls the ‘heart of Aztec metaphysics’, which is ‘ontological monism’ or a cosmos consisting solely of *teotl* (Maffie 2015: 22). Maffie defines *teotl* as a ‘dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy’ (ibid.). *Teotl* is always flowing, transforming, and becoming and as the foundation of the entire Aztec universe, this philosophy can be described as a ‘process metaphysics’ (2015: 27). This stands in direct conflict with the ‘substance metaphysics’ dominant in western philosophy. *Teotl* defies static *being* in favor of *becoming* and challenges the hierarchical ‘great chain of being’ as a homogenous energy which seeks no particular telos (2015: 23). Hence, substance in motion, the core of existence itself, is *teotl*, and this is the animating force in everything—plants, spirits, animals, gods, humans, and objects.

It is worth mentioning that similar concepts exist in Mayan languages, David Stuart and Stephen Houston point out that ‘k’uh’ refers to sacred essence and ‘chu’lel’ is often translated as ‘vitality’—though it can also refer to dripping life force or a bloodstream (Prager 2018: 562; Stuart 2005: 5789; Maffie 2015: 35). However, these forces, *teotl* and *ch’ulel*, are often translated into Spanish then English as ‘god’, ‘soul’, or ‘divine’, carrying Western Christian theology and significance, which, at a minimum, ignores the richness and distinctiveness of these Indigenous cosmologies, and, at its worst, contributes to epistemicide and enacts ontological

violence.¹¹ These are not benign processes, and, I would argue, contribute to ecological catastrophe and relational ruptures.¹²

By working with these Indigenous words and worlds, such as *teotl* and *ch'ulel*, we fundamentally peel back the layers of naturalized dichotomies of subject-object, human and non-human, culture-nature, sacred-profane, and animate-inanimate (Watts 2013: 3–17). Instead of granting animacy in a case-by-case basis, animacy is the foundation.¹³ We can venture to say then, that blood is not merely a *by-product* of animate beings (such as humans, animals, or trees), but rather, blood, or in this case, resin is itself animate. This is evidenced by precolonial contexts of ritual relationships and ethics. As Maffie acknowledges, reciprocity required in the Mexica cosmos can be offered by other-than-human agents:

Agents may be human, but most are other-than-human: e.g., creator beings, earth, sun, rain, rivers, lakes, mountains, gemstones, animals, plants, gemstones, feathers, agricultural fields, and incense along with spoken words, dancing, singing, music, buildings, statues, and cooking, fishing, hunting, and farming tools. (2020: 66)

And as anthropologist Nurit Bird-David argues, animism as an Indigenous relational epistemology requires confronting the Cartesian ‘I think therefore I am’ with ‘I relate therefore I am’ and ‘I know as I relate’ (Bird-David 1999: 78). Or taking this more general approach to Indigenous religion blended with Mesoamerican ontologies and Maffie’s analysis: the continual becoming of copal is bound up in a swirling interrelated cosmos. Through this lens of relationship in precontact Mesoamerica, how might we interpret twenty-first century encounters with copal, specifically Danza ceremonies and museum collections?

¹¹ It is well beyond the scope of this paper to engage the larger question of who the Mesoamerican deities are. Scholars of Mesoamerica often refer to them as gods and some argue that they can be understood as a pantheon. However, my own suspicion is that they were not fixed ‘persons’ or figures but rather tended to transform and constitute various constellations of powers that became materialized or ‘incarnate’ through human, animal, and natural forms (such as Tlaltecuhli’s body as the earth or Tlaloc as rain). While I use the word ‘entities’ or ‘gods’ here, I want to acknowledge that these terms may not illuminate any aspect of Mesoamerican religion and may in fact obscure any recognizable ontological order. This reflects my own discomfort with the English and Spanish terms.

¹² While I opt for the life force or energy throughout the essay, I avoid replacing *ch'ulel* and *teotl* with English terms which invites writer and reader alike to undergo a disorientation and reeducation that dislodges our impulse for objectification.

¹³ Nahuatl grammar is often taught as differentiating between ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’, and some have noted that pluralization of an ‘object’ may be a form of granting animacy. However, in conversation with Sabina Cruz de la Cruz we also noted that there are a variety of elemental substances that are not pluralized in modern Huasteca Veracruzana Nahuatl. Though, copal does not get pluralized to copalmeh other powerful entities remain unchanged including water (*atl*), beans (*etl*), fire (*titl*), maize (*cintli*), land (*tlalli*), among others (Cruz de la Cruz 2021).



Figure 3: Carlos Casteñeda, maestro of Grupo Tlaloc Danza Azteca in Marble, Colorado June 2022. ©Sabrina Lakin, Threw My Lenz Photography

Denver Danzantes: Casteñeda's Reflections on Copal

In the Greater Southwest of the U.S., Chicana communities relate to copal as a relative. In communal sweat lodges, *limpias* provided by *curanderxs*, and private and public Día de Muertos ceremonial altars, copal is well-known and deeply loved.¹⁴ Specifically I now turn to Danza, where I first encountered copal in ritual relationships. What I am generalizing as Danza is summarized by Marcelo Garzo Montalvo as 'Anahuacan ceremonial dance... a rich tradition of Indigenous and syncretic dance rooted in transnational movements across Mexico, Central America and the United States' (2020: 1). While these phrases attempt to summarize the tradition, Garzo Montalvo and others have shown that Danza is a complicated, diverse, and ever-evolving organism. While Danza in various times and places contains shifting elements, one can count on copal's centrality. To blend Garzo Montalvo's research with my own particular grounded relationships with copal and danza in Denver, Colorado, I spoke with Carlos Casteñeda, the maestro of Grupo Tlaloc Danza Azteca. Casteñeda is an inductee into the César Chávez Leadership Hall of Fame and Grupo Tlaloc has been integral in the Denver community for over thirty years. They began in the early 1980s as an outgrowth of Escuela Tlaltelolco and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) at the Auraria Campus in Denver.¹⁵ As with many religious rituals, Danza includes a blend of protocol and progression, tradition and improvisation. For example, Garzo Montalvo refers to 'pasos' (steps and gestures) of Danza as a

¹⁴ This is well documented in Chicana and Mexican-American poetry, art, ethnographies, videos, etc.; See also Hendrickson 2014.

¹⁵ Online: <http://www.grupotlaloc.org/>; I center this conversation with Maestro Casteñeda as one way in which to illuminate the ongoing enmeshment of copal while noting that Danza is far from monolithic and remains complicated and contested, especially in regard to ongoing dialogues of Indigeneity and Latinidad.

form of ‘inter-dimensional text’ that include ‘the ethic of asking permission’ and as a way of ‘signing a contract’ (2020: 132). These pasos can change shape and different groups tend to employ creative license, however, Garzo Montalvo articulates these variations as part of the larger schema that is ultimately ‘an embodied form of ecology, cosmology, astronomy, geometry, and philosophy’—he sees them, as I do, through a Mesoamerican metaphysics of swirling energies (2020: 134). Therefore, the relationships conveyed here between *danzantes* and copal incense can be understood as integral to a tradition that is passed down (albeit through complicated lineages) and also as a ritual of ‘becoming’ and transforming. The shape-shifting entity of copal seems to easily adjust to our evolving contemporary human spaces.

When I first interviewed Casteñeda, years after our more informal meeting in Colorado, it was immediately obvious that he had a lot to say about copal. Before I could formulate my first question he responded without hesitation, ‘copal itself is, for me anyway, is one of the most important parts of the *danza*’ (Casteñeda 2022). In his grupo, copal is carried primarily by women-identifying *danzantes*.¹⁶ The copal burns in a *popoxcomitl*, a clay censer which represents earth and holds fire, and the women who learn to tend to these entities are called *popocihuatl*, which is a combination of Nahuatl words for smoke and woman. Casteñeda described the importance of the four directions and four elements and the altar as the ‘umbilical cord of the universe’ during ceremonies. This called to mind not only the cosmic trees but also David Carrasco’s articulation of the *axis mundi* in Mesoamerican sacred centers. Garzo Montalvo echoes this spatial orientation writing that ‘those who carry the sacred copal smoke, work for weeks or sometimes months envisioning, studying, and imagining what the central *xictli*, bellybutton altar, could look and feel like’ (2020: 152). The center is a powerful place and I find that copal tends to occupy privileged positions in ceremonies both old and new.



Figure 4: Grupo Tlaloc Danzantes each holding a *popoxcomitl* during a Día de Muertos event (December 2022), ©Angell Pérez, Executive Director of Colorado Circles for Change

¹⁶ Garzo Montalvo mentioned in personal communication that in his grupo they refer to their hand-held censers as *tlemaitl* (Garzo Montalvo 2023). He also writes about the ritual role of the copal carriers in a gender-inclusive manner calling them ‘*lxs sahumadorxs*’, although it is unclear if this is connected to a particular grupo in Northern California and if the role is available to anyone of any gender identity (2020: 152).

Casteñeda did not refer to *teotl* directly but continually spoke of the energy that moves through copal, impacting everyone in the space. He stated: ‘we all face the fire and the smoke and we receive the energy from the copal, it is absorbed into our body and mind... it revitalizes our energy.’ When I asked him about the power of copal, he said it is ‘a gift from Creator’ and that the copal ceremonies in Danza are part of a long oral tradition of *huehuetlahtolli*; he acknowledges that the ‘[copal] tree provides us with medicine which has been used by the Maya, Olmeca, Zapoteca, Chichimeca, all of them have used it for thousands of years’ (Casteñeda 2022). Garzo Montalvo also draws the connection both to the energetic dimension of copal and to the importance of human relationship with plants. Specifically, he writes that he encouraged to become a *danzante* because of ‘the *consejo* (advice) of la Jefa Maria Miranda’ who told him that deeper relationships with ‘the beloved plantitas’ required that we dance (2020: iv). Garzo Montalvo refers to copal as medicine that is sweet, sacred, and cleansing throughout his autoethnographic accounts (2020: 65, 69, 89, 152). Another teacher cited by Garzo Montalvo, Maestro Lara González, connects copal to a ‘spiral energy’, as the smoke is intertwined with sound and ‘spinning’ movements by the *danzantes* (2020: 166).

The ongoing relationship of copal in Danza is not guaranteed given the current context of neoliberalism. Casteñeda revealed to me that he is simultaneously well-aware of the long history of copal use *and* is gravely concerned about the future. Apart from those who work with copal as a relative—harvesting with respect according to specific seasons and ritual protocols—Casteñeda is frustrated about the commodification of copal, which he warns is increasingly a lower quality, mixed with synthetics. In a sense, Casteñeda can reach back thousands of years into the past with significantly more confidence than he can see into the future generations. Regarding neoliberalism and copal commercialization he said:

There’s nothing I can do about it, but I keep a prayer that it will be there for generations to come. Because, like anything else, it can only produce so much and then they try to enhance that production. Then it’s not real. I fear that one day our great-great grandchildren will not have what we have. (Casteñeda 2022)

Montúfar López’s research with *copaleros* who harvest in Mexico substantiates this claim and the weight of market value. *Copaleros* are intimately acquainted with copal resin, as one said to Montúfar López, ‘the copal trees give us their precious blood, their life’ (author’s translation), and yet the market value for harvested *copal blanco* is as much as seven times that of the naturally produced *copal de piedra* (2016: 50–51).¹⁷ Some communities and government agencies in Mexico have begun to explore what sustainability and management means, however, in some cases this means attempting new techniques to make the trees produce more resin (Purata Velarde 2008: 17). The consequences of objectification and commodification are dire. Networks of relationships between copal and the Indigenous *copaleros*, Maya and Nahua communities, ancestors, deities, and ecologies are threatened. Not to mention, that various ceremonial processes such as petitions for rain, blessing the crops, and prayers for healing will be interrupted.

¹⁷ Some of these distinctions existed before the colonial period, the Aztecs demanded refined, white copal from their neighbors. The Codex Mendoza’s *Matrice de Tributo* shows that every eight days the towns of Tepequacuico and Tlachco were to pay a tribute of 400 baskets of white copalli and 8,000 balls of resin (Codex Mendoza, Fol. 37 r.). Online: <https://codicemendoza.inah.gob.mx/>

The demand for copal goes beyond Indigenous, Mexican, and Mexican-American ceremonies like Danza. Since beginning to research this topic in 2020, I have noticed copal's increasing popularity both online and in-person. In some expected places such as boutique stores, farmers markets, and spiritual shops where one can smell sage or palo santo, copal is increasingly available—a new exotic incense sold under a banner of spiritual healing. In fact, a simple online search for copal revealed cheap and easy access to the resin for the average U.S. consumer with varying levels of claims to authenticity or eco-consciousness. I have stumbled upon copal in a variety of unexpected places as well. First, in a Netflix reality TV show called *Too Hot to Handle* (2021), Latina women are led in a 'cleansing' ritual in which they learn to love themselves while the smoke burns in the center of the circle. In this case, copal becomes part of a modern sex and dating project. Copalli is also the name for a brand of rum with the tagline 'the spirit of the rainforest' which is distributed in Europe from Belize.¹⁸ Finally, an advertisement for a 'culinary experience' with 'Mayan Tequila and Copal Ceremony' is part of a four-course dinner priced at \$190 per person.¹⁹ Each of these encounters with copal uniquely highlights particular forms of relating with resin and trees. They also raise questions of appropriation and commodification. Who is permitted to engage with copal and in what contexts? What are the dangers of mass consumption or rearticulation of this resin? Underscoring Casteñeda's concerns, contrasting these market manifestations of copal with Danza rituals allows for particular ontologies to be interrogated. Doing so, I believe, opens a pathway for rearranging our relational ethics in pursuit of decolonial and precolonial kinship.



Figure 5: Examples of copal incense sold (images courtesy of Sarahi, Mango Mantras Etsy Store)

¹⁸ Online: <https://copallirum.com/buy-copalli-rum/>

¹⁹ Online: richardsandoval.com/ddlm22/events/2022/raya-ddlm

Copal Contained in the Harvard Peabody Museum

One such story takes us into the Harvard Peabody Museum, which holds thousands of ancestors (human remains) and over 1.2 million ancestral belongings (artifacts) (Peabody ‘Collections’ 2023). Looking through the lens of Mesoamerican metaphysics, both historic excavation and continued containment of these ‘bodies’ constitutes a blend of settler-colonial and extractive colonial violence—ultimately rupturing relationships through displacement, isolation, and objectification. I’ll focus particularly on objectification of copal as an outcome of American Anthropology’s ontological foundations.²⁰

In what follows, I will explain how archeological extraction ruptured relationships between copal and the many humans and other-than-humans in one particular ecological and ritual network. To begin to map this rupturing, we can look to the brutal catastrophe that was the dredging (a watery excavation) of the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá.²¹ This cenote, one of many, became well-known and frequented in the late nineteenth century following a French-translation publication of Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*. This colonial text revealed the cenote as a ‘receptacle of rich offerings’ and a place of exotic splendor where virgins were sacrificed to the gods (Coggins 1992: 9; Cobos 2001). From gold-seeking Spanish to treasure-hunting travelers, Maya sacred sites were considered ripe for European plunder. The cenote was able to largely keep these secrets and substances safe in the watery underworld until March of 1904 when Edward Herbert Thompson, then-U.S. consul in Merida Yucatan, purchased the Hacienda Chichén Itzá. He famously built an ‘orange peel’ bucket which he lowered from the rim into the cenote to confirm the presence of Maya offerings. The metal claws primarily brought up ‘brown muck’ and vegetation with only minimal fragments of potsherds and textiles during the first phase of experimentation (Coggins 1992: 13). However, a casual reference from a 1905 entry of Leon J. Cole’s field diary revealed that after months of relatively unsuccessful dredging, ‘[Thompson] found two yellow-white balls that, when burned, proved to be incense’ (ibid.). These assured Thompson that what he sought was indeed there for the taking. Up came textiles, gold disk fragments, and human bones. But clearly the overgrowth and fallen trees were impeding a complete excavation and the mechanism they had designed risked damaging the precious goods.

From the beginning of his work in the Yucatán, Thompson was connected to The Peabody Museum. In 1891 Thompson was ‘enlisted’ by then director Fredric W. Putnam, in his ‘grand enterprise... to introduce the American public to the wonders of ancient Maya civilization’ (Coggins 1984: 10). At the turn of the century, Mexico was in the heat of the Porfiriato era with tensions building toward Revolution. Meanwhile, especially from 1905 to 1909 Thompson was busily experimenting. First, Thompson realized that the orange-peel was causing damage to the offerings. He was ripping our roots and trees while the ‘treasure’ slipped back into the depths. Determined, he began to pursue further invasive and destructive excavation attempts. Namely, he spent Peabody money for machinery to lower a raft down onto the water where he and workers

²⁰ It is with respect for Native and non-native scholars, curators, and administrators and from their mentorship that I attempt to critique and encourage this museum towards repatriation. Harvard is attempting a shift from objectification towards ‘ethical stewardship’ due to Native and Indigenous leadership and supportive allies. Nevertheless, repatriation and other forms of pursuing justice can never fully undo the harm caused.

²¹ Though a few dozen gold and greenstone has been returned to Mexico, this remains a contentious collection with thousands of organic materials, bones, baskets, beads, and over 100 fragments of copal bodies. Though there are important legal questions and, in this case some clear legal answers, I want to focus on the ethical questions that are raised when we view the copal within an animate, relational cosmos.

would lower buckets to retrieve the offerings. He assured Putnam of his careful examination of the mud, the cheap use of resources, and the dredging from morning until night (Coggins 1984: 18). Eventually, in 1909, Thompson hired divers and he himself was trained in deep-sea diving as a tactic to remove the desired objects by hand. After years of excavations, thousands of offerings were stolen in luggage and brought to the Peabody Museum. Despite Mexico's 1897 law against looting and selling of artifacts and the eventual post-Revolution court cases against Thompson and his family, nearly the entirety of the original Chichén Itzá collection remains in Cambridge, Massachusetts—over 3,000 materials (Peabody Collections—EMuseum).²²

Ripped away from hundreds of years of tree roots, mud, and rainwater, displaced from *chan ch'en*, the meeting point of 'sky-and-cave', copal was extracted from a resting place and perhaps a ritual process. Halting the dance of life and death, decay and release of *ch'u'lel* is interrupted. From removal in the Yucatán to arrival in Cambridge, the cenote materials are then catalogued, acquisition numbers are scrawled onto their flesh, and they are grouped by type. For over 100 years copal has been isolated, perhaps only once on display alongside their kin for public consumption. Almost certainly, these bodies have been preserved and protected from insects through the application of arsenic.²³ They are carefully placed in official plastic bags and organized on dozens of wooden trays, contained in metal museum cabinets.²⁴ Some of these practices were later condemned by conservators, and Harvard has been highly esteemed for their skillful stewardship. Yet, from Mesoamerican and Indigenous perspectives, the entire project appears absurd. Historic museum treatment of copal illuminates a cosmovision of American Anthropology—despite rejecting a connection to any 'cosmos' and the universalization of the particular 'vision.'

The museum storage spaces were not designed for ceremony, and relationships become awkward with the imposition of isolation and the assumption that every material is mere object. A close read of this collection reveals the hegemony of a hierarchical ontology. In other words, paying attention to the way copal is handled is evidence of a practice of collecting 'curios' and 'crafts'. These models reenforce anthropocentrism and exotify the so-called primitive pre-history. Copal is positioned here not as a relative, not as an animate entity with relations (or possibility of relationships), but rather as an artifact.²⁵ What does this do to copal? Is copal caught between death and life, perhaps dormant in this context? Does *ch'u'lel* swirl between bodies here, or has the relational fracture cut off the flow? These are haunting questions, especially compared to pre-Colonial ritual relationships of Mesoamerica and the survivance of copal in Danza—not to mention the ongoing kinship practices between copal and Indigenous peoples and lands of Mexico and Central America.

²² According to the archives at Tozzer Library and the Peabody Museum (Peabody archives # 47–52), the court case was eventually dismissed, and the Peabody begrudgingly made an exchange with *El Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH, National Institute of Anthropology and History). The objects exchanged from the Peabody were primarily gold and copper materials.

²³ While the use of arsenic may be a regrettable preservation practice of the past, the standard for sterile, orderly museum storage remains and is necessary for responsible caretaking and repatriation to take place. This is the crux of the ontological '*choque*' or clash and the issue of colonial regimes of knowledge, power, being, etc.

²⁴ For critical discussions about academic about repatriation/repatriation, see Colwell 2017; The process of objectification can also be called 'museumification', see Klassen 2017: 337.

²⁵ See Klassen (2017) regarding the irony of museum's claim to secularity; See Bird-David (1999) regarding the totalizing and universalizing position of Western philosophy.



Figure 6: “Life” artwork featuring copal burning alongside marigolds, sun, moon, hummingbirds, mother, and child. Shared with permission from ©2020 Soni López-Chávez; @soni-artist on Instagram.

Decolonial and precolonial futurities

The questions I have posed and the contradictions I have highlighted do not have easy answers. In fact, they require ongoing rearticulation paired with embodied commitment to decolonial and anticolonial approaches. As Natalie Avalos encourages, ‘a decolonial approach makes the mechanisms of colonial power visible’ and ‘Native-centered narratives often provide a more nuanced and tribally specific framework to understand sacred and interdependent relationships with land and spiritual power’ (Avalos 2021: 23, 25). This combination of denaturalizing the settler-colonial structure while prioritizing Indigenous peoples and perspectives is one that can I have attempted. The study of Indigenous religious traditions provides a particularly powerful voice in the pursuit of ethical practices, repatriation, and relationality in the settler-colonial present. I also argue that precolonial traditions ought to be included, not only in the museum conversation but in our engagement with ecology, relationality, and decoloniality. Weaving together stories of copal across time and space can allow us to imagine and enact more beautiful futures.

Ultimately, precolonial metaphysics and relational rituals can support examination, critique, and reimagination of twenty-first century contexts in the U.S. and beyond. In 2023 the Peabody Museum still contains bodies of copal, alerting us to ruptured relationships, both historical and ongoing. The overharvesting of copal and the ‘New Spiritual Marketplace,’ as Brett Hendrickson calls it, threatens the futures of copal resin and ancestral healing practices (2014: 117). Yet, copal cannot be a mere victim in this story. Copal excavated from underneath Mexico City, from the

center of the Aztec world over 500 years ago, still maintained a characteristic fragrance. It would not be a surprise to me if these entities-turned-artifacts awaken again, infused with *teotl* in relationship with Indigenous descendants, bleeding trees, rain-filled skies, and the interconnected cosmos if they were to be returned home.

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