

THE FOLLOWING MATERIAL IS
COPYRIGHTED

AND IT IS SUGGESTED THAT
IT MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED
OR USED FOR PROFIT.

FOR EDUCATIONAL AND
RESEARCH PURPOSES ONLY.

70.36
7675
#5/1976

SAN CARLOS DE GUATEMALA UNIVERSITY
CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLORICOS

GUATEMALAN TRADITIONS

5

Jun. 2005 #0524

Editorial Universitaria
Guatemala, Central America

1976

RABINAL CERAMICS

**Texts and
photographs by:**
Rosa María Álvarez

Introduction

The present work about the Rabinal ceramics has led us to know a town with an important folkloric life, a town of deep traditions, as we could observe in only three visits, where ceramics aren't a strange or isolated feature from the rest of the life of the people of Rabinal. On the contrary, it is a town of farmers and artisans, that has found the way to express themselves aesthetically in the toles and *jícaras* that they use to drink, in the weavings of their huipils (embroidered blouse) and *zutes* (a handkerchief.)

Through archaeology, the ancient importance of this people has been demonstrated, which nowadays leads a very intense life.

The present work has been divided into the following sections:

- a) **Geographical- historical framework:** to locate physically and historically the town:
- b) **Social framework:** with the intention of giving a glance of life in which the ceramics are a constituent part;
- c) **The ceramics:** divided according to the function it performs; and
- d) **Interrogations:** instead of conclusions, we present some interrogations that were brought up during our visit. Our purpose is to communicate our interest in the study of the folklore of this town.

a) Geographic localization

Rabinal is a municipality in the department of Baja Verapaz, in the north of the republic. It has an extension of approximately 504 km² and is adjoined to the north by Uspantán (municipality of El Quiché), to the east by San Miguel Chicaj (municipality of Baja Verapaz), to the south by El Chol, Granados and Salamá (municipalities of Baja Verapaz) and to the west by Cubulco (municipality of Baja Verapaz.)

The municipal seat, Rabinal, is 10 kilometers far from Salamá, the departmental seat. "The benchmark established by the General Directorate of Roads in the park, is 972.64 meters above sea level, latitude 15° 05' 30"; longitude 90° 26' 50."¹

To the south of Rabinal, the *Sierra de las Minas* passes, which takes on different names: *Cumatzá*, *Chixin*, *Tuncaj*, etc.

To the east and north, the mountains are arid and are only covered with vegetation during the rainy season.

The rivers are small: *el Negro*, *el Rabinal* and *el Sajcap*.

There exist the following archeological sites.

Cacyiu or Cajiup: on the top of a hill, three kilometers to the north. It has been explored by Brasseur de Bourbourg, A. V. Kidder, Proskouriakoff and E. M. Shook.

Chipochec: to the west, at 12 kilometers.

Tiquerán: 18 kilometers to the northwestern.

Tuculacán: 22 kilometers to the East.

The municipal seat, Rabinal, has the status of a city and is divided into four neighborhoods. The municipality has 12 towns and 55 hamlets.

Population	Both genders	Men	Women	Literate	Economically active	Indigenous
Department of Baja Verapaz	106,957	54,177	52,780	21,904	30,759	60,349
Municipality of Rabinal	20,393	10,226	10,167	4,060	5,791	16,526
City of Rabinal	4,625	2,273	2,352	1,968	1,251	3,138

Economically active

Informants	Age (approximated)	Origin	Residence	Learning
Name				

¹ *Diccionario Geográfico de Guatemala*. Dirección General de Cartografía, Tipografía Nacional, 1962.

Historical framework

In the *Título de Izquin Nehaib*, the town of Rabinal is mentioned as a taxpayer from the Quiché: "The people of Rabinal (...) entered at midday to pay their tribute of cacao bean, salt and *jícara* from Rabinal."²

The same opinion is expressed by Brasseur de Bourbourg, who also mentions the site of Nim Pocóm, capital of the Pocomam people, located to the northeast of Rabinal.

In the *Título de los indios de Santa Clara La Laguna* is mentioned as a border town: "let us keep then, the boundary of the land of the Quiché, the lands of all of us in front of the Tz'utujil people, in front of the Kaqchikel people, in front of those of Rabinal."³ It is possible that its inhabitants are from Rabinal Achí, who arrived after the Pocomam people and together with the Poqomchi' people formed the eastern part of the Quiché empire. With the conquest of the Verapaz, Las Casas and Angulo gathered in the Valle de Urrán the Tzemaniel, Pocomam, Kekchí, K'iche' and Rabinal Achí towns.

In Urrán, a church and a hundred houses were built and San Pablo Rabinal was founded, approximately 8 km away from the actual town. This first settlement is currently called Chuitinamit (old town) or Nima Tinamit (big town) and has been explored by A. Smith.

The city was moved to the place where it is settled and by decree of November 12, 1825, it was elevated to the category of villa and then to that of city.

Its inhabitants, in proportion of three to one, are indigenous and are dedicated to agriculture. Mainly corn, beans and oranges.

b) Social framework

The city of Rabinal is a pleasant and clean town, with symmetrically traced streets, surrounded by mountains and hills, and covered with a clear sky. Is a classic rural town where everything is motionless and nothing moves... or seems not to move.

In the center, the church, of colonial construction, ample and with fine silverware, shows the antiquity and importance of the town. In front

² "Título Real de don Francisco Izquín Nehaib", in Adrián Recinos, *Crónicas Indígenas*. Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala: 1957, p. 107.

³ "Título de los indios de Santa Clara La Laguna", in Adrián Recinos, *Crónicas Indígenas*, op. cit., Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala: 1957, p. 179.

of the church there is a park full of roses and cypresses and the plaza has a few stalls. And that is all... in the afternoon a *tamborón* (a type of drum) and a *pito* (a one-hand flute) play for a long time in the atrium of the church, until it gets dark, and the electric light starts to turn on to illuminate the park where some people are passing by and chatting.

On Sunday, the town is full of movement. It is the day of the market. From many nearby towns, judging by the *huipiles* (although the use of these in Rabinal has been left due to their cost) buyers and sellers are arriving. The plaza is insufficient for the commerce that takes place.

In the stalls are seen, above all, ceramic objects from Totonicapán and fabrics from Quetzaltenango. Further on, *ponchos* (a handmade blanket) from Momostenango (a municipality in Totonicapán department), ribbons and *cortes* (traditional Mayan women's skirt) for indigenous women.

In the center of the plaza, in the stalls: baskets with beans, corn, a few vegetables, chili and squash, pots with Guatemalan Atolillo (a sweet drink made with rice milk); baskets with red, black and yellow painted *jícaras*, which are used for drinking the Guatemalan Atolillo; baskets with fabric for *huipiles* and *zutes*, woven by the *rabinleras* (women from Rabinal) and also used by the inhabitants of other towns, which is why they have different designs and colors: white, navy blue, black and very dark green. At the end of the plaza are stalls with pots and jugs of slightly red clay.

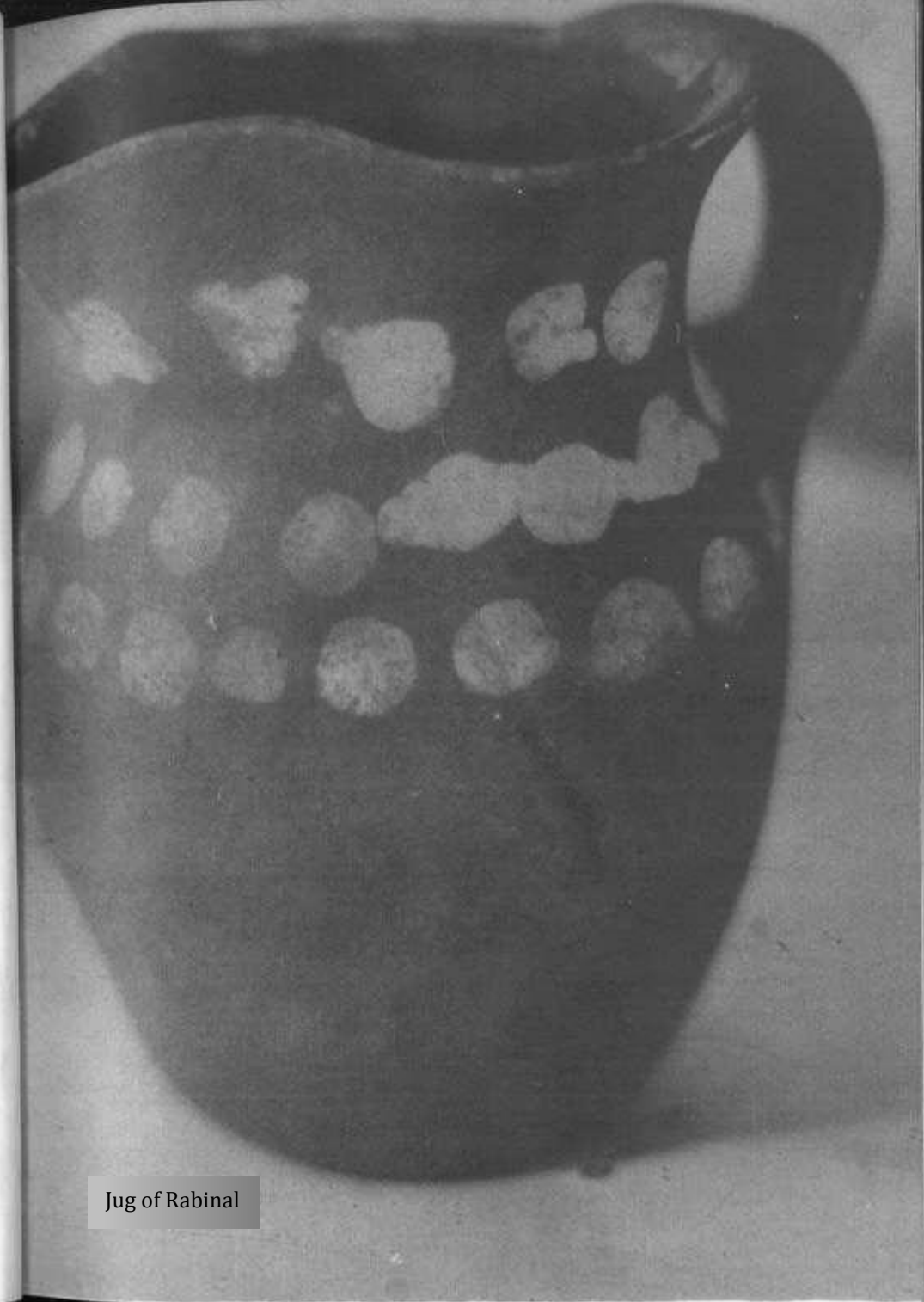
At about 8:30 a.m., couples of men begin to appear at the four points of the square. One of each couple carries a painted staff on whose upper end, hidden by paper flowers, a silver image can be seen. The men pray for a moment at each cardinal point and head towards the church. In total, twelve couples gather, representing the brotherhoods of Rabinal, who will attend Mass in the chancel with the staff in their right hand and a lit candle in the other.

Amidst this framework, which seems rich in popular life to us, we find ceramics as a characteristic expressive feature.

c) Ceramics

1. Daily or household use

The clay is brought from nearby hills and mountains, where the right of extraction is purchased per year. Then it is taken to the house, where it is pulverized (since it comes in colds) and is put to rot.



Jug of Rabinal

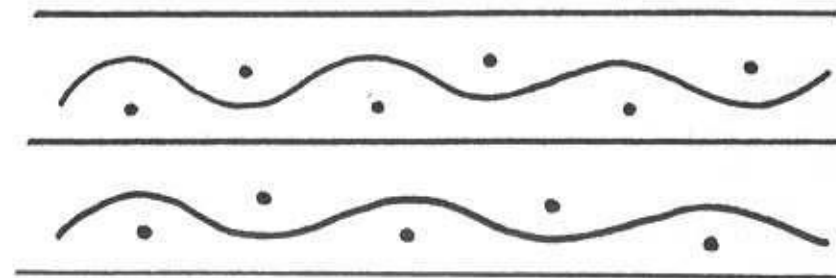


Sale of ceramics in the Rabinal market.

When the clay is to be used, it is kneaded, a proper piece is taken and the part of the walls of a pot is formed. During the first phase, with a bit of clay and making use of a broken pot that serves as a mold, a sort of ring is formed on which rolls of clay are superimposed to gradually increase in height. If the pot is large, the potter stands upright and rotates around the pot. If the pot is small, the potter supports the pot on their knees and while sitting, they rotate the pot between their hands. When this part of the process is finished, the piece is placed out in the sun for dry a little.

At the beginning of the second stage, the potter takes a pot and sitting in the shade, rests the pot on their knees. With an *aro de morro** they trim the edges of the base to even out the shape, then insert their right-hand into the pot while keeping the left-hand on the outside. In this way the base is formed by pushing the clay from the inside, while the left-hand models form the outside. Meanwhile, the pot rotates between the potter's hands until the base becomes slightly rounded.

Some pots have incisions that are made before the second phase. While the pot is drying, the potter with a sharp piece of wood bends down and traces curved and straight lines combined with dots. The following is a finished design, which the potter explained as rivers, mountains and stars:



**Aro de morro*: a pottery tool used for making cuts in the pots during the molding.

During the third phase of this process, the potter, with their wet hands, the potters soften the surface of the piece and then smooth it using piece of wood. Afterwards, the piece is put back to dry, this time with the base up. For the jugs and pitchers, once this part is dry, a roll is made and smoothed, then it is placed in where the neck is and with the hands it is lengthened and smoothed.

Finally, when the pot is dry and smooth to be fired, a thick liquid prepared with red clay and water is poured into it. This is how the reddish color of the finished objects is achieved.

Firing: is carried out in the patio where the pots and vessels are placed on a promontory of broken pieces. The fire is obtained using *muñido* (fertilizer) as fuel. Generally, a week's production is fired.

Objects: pots, pitchers and a kind of bowl called *aguachivera* are made.

Commercialization: the objects are sold in Rabinal plaza, directly by the people who made them.

Division of labor: pottery is made by both men and women regardless of age. However, there are family and even personal specialties: some families only make pots, others only pitchers and jugs; some people make large pots used by the brotherhoods, others only *aguachiveras*.

2. Ceremonial

The raw material is brought from *Capilla del barro* (a chapel located in Rabinal), which is close to the town. It is mixed with water and left to rot for a day. Then it is kneaded, and the different objects are elaborated, which can be:

Censers and candlesticks

They are molded by hand, by removing the excess clay while the object rotates between their hands.

The objects are stored to firing together the week's production.

Firing: it is fired only once in a kind of *poyo** or sink (for washing clothes) that is covered with a shed of tiles. The fire is made with pine bark and dung.

Poyo: stove for heating food, made of stones and bricks attached to a wall, with two parallel bars or rods from which the pot is hung.



Delfina Paz, 10 years old, apprentice potter in her father's pottery workshop.



Shepherds. Ceramics from Rabinal.

After some objects are fired, they are painted with anilines mixed with glue. The used colors are red, yellow and blue with a white background. The anilines are bought in local stores. Other objects aren't painted but are instead simply painted with white lines, a color that is achieved with plaster mixed with glue.

The candlesticks may be a small base to hold the candle, or a tall base decorated with angels or flowers. Another type of candlestick that is known consists of the figure of a horseman or a seated man, who has at his side two bases for candles and that by his attire and masks represents a Moor.

Christmas shepherds

The Nativity figures are not really shepherds. They represent the most varied occupations: generally, carriers, millers, saleswomen, etc. Of these there are two kinds, according to the technique of elaboration:

1. Specifically made by little girls: a bit of clay, already kneaded, is taken and a lump or block is made. A finger is introduced into it and rotating it in the hand, a cone is formed, which will become the body of the shepherd. When there are several bodies, a small ball is placed on their necks.... Next, the shepherd's face and hair are modeled. When all the bodies and their respective heads are finished, they are taken again to place the arms on them. They are then left to dry for a whole day and then fired and painted.
2. Other figures are made in parts, modeling them by hand and with the help of pointed sticks or knives. First, the body is made, then the legs, head and hands. These are modeled and then glued to the body. After they are fired, they are painted with anilines.

Firing: is the same procedure is followed as with the censers and candlesticks

Commercialization: all these objects are sold in the town plaza by the same people who make them. They are often sold wholesale, in Salamá and Cobán, where are bridged through nets by chicken buses on route. In the Cobán market we find them with a five cents surcharge on the price.

The approximate prices, variable in size and decorations, are the following, in cents and quetzals:

Censers:	from 15 to 20;
Candlesticks:	from 5 to 25;
Shepherds:	from 10 to 15;

Division of labor: there is no gender or age division. The children do what they can and learn as they do it. The whole family participates in preparing, kneading, molding, firing and painting.

This pottery is only made by María Luisa Paz Román's family, which consists of herself, her grandson, her daughter-in-law and his four children.

Function: the named objects have, above all, a ceremonial function, especially the censers used to burn *pom*⁴ in the church and the cemetery, as well as the candlesticks made for the Day of the Dead (November 2), which consists of sculptures of the Moor, which are called "festive figures."

Ceremonial aspect: very early on November 1st, the family goes to the cemetery. They bring censers, candlesticks and enough wrapped candles. Once in the cemetery, they pray for a moment in front of each family grave, light the embers for the pom and the candles, and place a censer and one or more candlesticks on each of the graves. The family remains there, talking until late in the evening. Its members eat and try to make sure that the candles don't go out and that the censer doesn't stop burning because the pom is an offering to the dead and the candles are a prayer for the souls, whom they also illuminate.

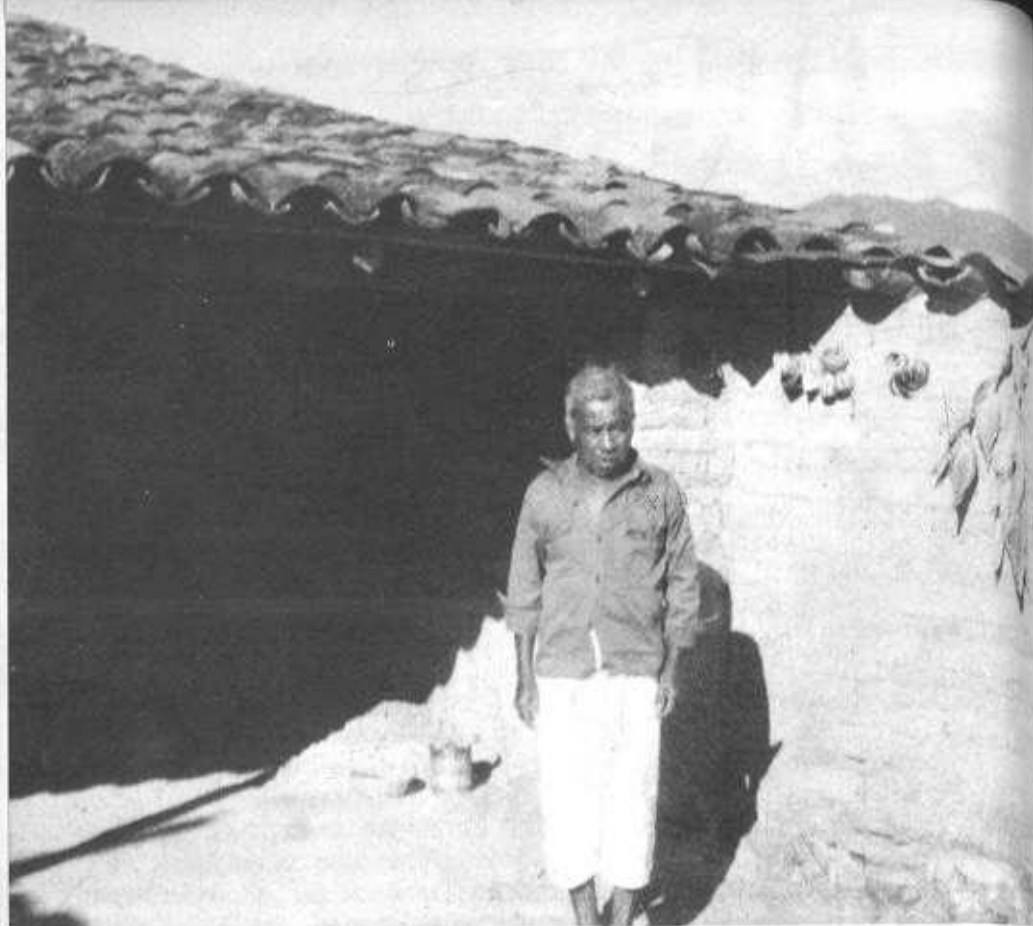
Traditional and non-traditional pottery: coexisting with the two types of pottery described before we found out a third modality that we called, as it functions, decorative pottery. It is made with a potter's wheel, a circumstance that constitutes the first difference with respect to the varieties studied above, all of them pre-Hispanic.

The proper objects of this kind of pottery are the following: vases, flowers, boxes and ashtrays decorated with "neo-prehispanic" motifs, not learned by family tradition, as the previous ones, but by institutionalized teaching. These objects are made for sale in the capital and other parts of the republic, where they are frequently seen.

⁴ Resinous substances, extracted from the pine tree, used as incense during religious ceremonies.



Carmen Chajaj with a Rabinal ceramic pot.



*Don** Tomás Alvarado, potter from Rabinal.

Don: commonly used today for addressing senior people in Guatemala, the English variation is *Mr.*

Within the community this pottery fills a merely economic function but is completely unrelated to their spiritual life. It doesn't affect the development of the other forms, which demonstrates the validity and the deep roots of traditional patterns.

It is worth noting that even in this type of pottery, imposed and foreign to the community, one can appreciate the fine craftsmanship and dedication of the potters of Rabinal.

d) Questions

1. What is the significance of the Moorish figures as candlesticks for November 1st and 2nd?
What beliefs are expressed through the candles and pom carried to the cemetery?
What role do the brotherhoods play in the town?
How does the town view the potters?
What is the importance of Rabinal in relation to the area?
Why are huipiles woven for other towns?
How much and what does the town know about its history?

Economically active

Informants Name	Age (approximated)	Origin	Residence	Learning
Julián Chajaj	45 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	(does not know)
Carmen Chajaj	20 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With her mother
Alejandra Pioz	45 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With her mother
Tomás Alvarado	60 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With his mother
Benedicto Alvarado	37 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With his father
Mercedes	35 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With her parents
Rosa Toj	30 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With her mother-in-law
Alejandro Paz	30 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With his grandparents
Rogelio Paz	14 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With his parents
Delfina	10 years old	Rabinal	Rabinal	With her parents
Ana Celia	12 years old			

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. BRASSEUR DE BOURBOURG, "Un viaje a los Estados de San Salvador y Guatemala", in **Anales de Sociedad de Geografía**, Guatemala, 1925.
2. BREMME DE SANTOS, Ida, **Artesanías de Guatemala**, Mimeographed edition, Guatemala, 1973, pp. 23-24.
3. DEPARTAMENTO PUNTO FOCAL, Dirección General de Estadísticas. *Censos de 1973*.
4. DICCIONARIO GEOGRAFICO DE GUATEMALA, Dirección General de Cartografía, Tipografía Nacional, 1962.
5. DIAZ CASTILLO, Roberto, "Cerámica coloreada de Rabinal", in **Tradiciones de Guatemala** (No. 2), Centro de Estudios Folklóricos, San Carlos de Guatemala University, 1974.
6. JONGH OSBORNE, Lilly de, "La cerámica indígena en Centroamérica", in *América Indígena*, Vol. II, No. 4, octubre, 1943.
7. MARVIN K. & A. MAYER, "Pocomchi", in Languages of Guatemala, Cap. III, *Seminario de Integración Social*, Guatemala, Editorial José de Pineda Ibarra, 1966.
8. RECINOS, Adrián, "Título Real de Don Francisco Izquín Nehaib", in **Crónicas Indígenas de Guatemala**, Guatemala, Editorial Universitaria, 1957.
9. RECINOS, Adrián, "Título de Santa Clara La Laguna" in **Crónicas Indígenas de Guatemala**, Guatemala, Editorial Universitaria, 1957.
10. SMITH, Robert S., "Cerámica sin torno", in **Antropología e Historia de Guatemala**, Vol. 1, No.2, July, 19445, p. 58.