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PRE-HISPANIC ORIGIN CERAMICS IN GUATEMALA

Tradiciones de Guatemala *reproduces in its section called* ***Archive*** *articles on Guatemalan pottery without a wheel, of pre-Hispanic origin, that were published in magazines that are out of print, a circumstance that makes their consultation extremely difficult.*

These articles, by researchers Charles Arrot, Robert S. Smith, and Lily de Jongh Osborne, were published several years ago in ***Antropología e Historia and América Indígena****, from which we have taken them.*

The importance of the texts that we reproduce now lies in that they constitute the first contributions that systematize the study of pottery without a wheel in Guatemala, which is why Tradiciones de Guatemala makes them available to its readers.

THE DIRECTION

THE CERAMICS OF GUATEMALA (MIXCO NUEVO) *

Charles R. Arrot

Not long ago, the village of Mixco could still be classified as an important pottery center. More than a hundred women produced pottery in the style and with the technique of San Raimundo, a town further north in the department. Half of these women were exclusively dedicated to making comales, those large, shallow, round platters that are placed over direct fire to cook tortillas. But it so happens that Mixco is very close to the wide, paved Roosevelt highway, just six miles from the growing and modern capital of the country. The buses come and go from the village to the city with the inevitable effect on the economic life of the population. The exchange of goods no longer has the village as its center, and with this change, even the dress, customs, and ways of thinking have become urban. The result is that of the many women who used to make pots and jars for a living, barely one exists now. When she dies, the craft will disappear because there are no young women who learn it. In the same way, the number of those who make comales has been reduced by almost half, and the decrease will continue. The comal continues to fight a tenacious battle. Because along with black beans, the tortilla continues to be the main food of the indigenous diet, and modernism has yet to invent a satisfactory competitor to the comal. But year after year, European bread types and the baking industry are moving towards Mixco.

However, it is unlikely, due to the abundance of corn and its high nutritional

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* Anthropology and History, Volume XIX, No. 1 (January-June 1967), pp. 65-7

value, that the tortilla will be replaced, at least for many years to come. Hence, it would be a pleasure to be able to say that due to their high quality, the comales of Mixco will continue to be produced for many years to come as well. Because despite their attractive appearance, as is the comal made in Mixco, due to certain structural deficiencies that we will mention later, they are the most vulnerable to competition. As modern substitutes for the comal, we have an inferior but no less durable piece of tin or iron, easily obtainable in the country. So, this phase of the Mixco pottery industry is doomed to decline and disappear.

Observing these potters making comales in Mixco when they are working makes one think that they probably, perhaps unconsciously, know the imminence of such a destiny. Because in contrast to the attitude of the human village where Pokomán is also spoken, that of Chinautla of clay objects, the women of Mixco work with a certain slowness and lethargy that leads to discouragement and lack of appreciation for what they produce. Such an attitude is evident in the way they handle the clay after they have extracted it from the deposits.

This deposit from which the Mixco potters get their clay is about three miles (three-eighths) to the west on the hill beyond the village. It is private property, and they buy the clay for about forty cents per hundred pounds. Sometimes smaller quantities of twelve to fifteen pounds are bought, which the potters carry in baskets on their heads. It is a granular clay that contains iron oxide and a small percentage of sand and mica, and it becomes moderately plastic when wet. When dry it is a dark brown color (Munsell Soil Color Classification 10 YR 4/3); when wet it acquires a yellowish-brown color (10 YR 3/4).

If the clay has been brought to the hut during the rainy season, it is stored inside to protect it. But during the dry season, it is deposited in a convenient place outside, with considerable carelessness because when the wind blows, dust and rubbish settle on top of it. No attempt is made to clean it of all these impurities before using it, which would actually be laborious work. And since most of the Mixco comales are made during the dry season, the clay with which they are made is consequently very impure. As a result, the product is neither strong nor very durable.

Other deficiencies in their work appear when the potter proceeds to make the comal. It is notable that no attempt is made to soak the clay. They simply take a pile of clay, the amount needed for immediate use, add water to it, and immediately place it on the kneading board. And if the clay were

kneaded well here, the deficiency of not having left the clay to soak for a few hours would be remedied. Because the hours of soaking dissolve all the lumps, no matter how hard they are, and by kneading, they also disappear, as the expert potter can feel them and break them up, until a mass with plasticity and resistance is achieved. But in Mixco, neither one nor the other is done. The clay is kneaded a little, only for a few moments. Then a ball is made with the hands, the ball is placed in the center of the mold, and then the shaping of the comal follows.

But a more serious deficiency in the preparation of the clay lies in the fact that these women do not add sand to the clay, which, as already mentioned, contains little sand. With low-fired pottery, which requires resistance, the addition of slightly coarse sand is highly advisable. It is essential in the manufacture of comales, which are made in Mixco in the form of a dry plate more than seventeen inches in diameter and less than (three eighths) of an inch thick. The virtue of sand mixed with the clay mass, up to thirty percent, is common knowledge to experienced potters throughout the world and is also general practice in the large pottery centers of Guatemala. It was difficult to believe, therefore, that these women of Mixco did not know its usefulness. And we realized that they do know it. But, "we are not used to it" was the explanation they offered us. And therefore, they do not add sand. But the explanation did not satisfy us. We began to suspect that at one time, when the town had a good reputation for the quality of its comales, the potters were careful not to reveal their technical knowledge on the subject, and that their successors, facing modernism, have lost pride in their work and sell their product for less, without the desire to make much effort. For this reason, now, a ball of clay of a much inferior paste than it could and should be, is placed in the center of the Mixco molds.

While the Mixco comales are produced in various sizes, from six to seventeen inches, the mold is generally larger, since smaller diameters can be easily made within its concavity. The mold is made of a mixture, a mixture of lime, sand, coarse earth, and water, resulting in a heavy paste that is placed in a round, shallow hole, previously prepared and opened in a convenient spot on the bare ground: the paste is shaped there in the form of a comal and left in a place to dry and harden.

When the work is about to begin, the surface of this mold is lightly sprinkled with sand or dry clay powder so that the wet clay mass does not stick. The ball is then in the center. Kneeling on the ground, with her knees at the edge of the mold, the potter begins by flattening the ball, thus forming a

thick disk. She then proceeds with her right hand in a rotation around the disk and in a clockwise direction, to press the clay with the palm of her hand, in order to thin it and stretch it out, starting from the center outwards. And it is here, in the formation of the comal, that one notes with pleasure the skill of these Mixco potters. They do not hesitate, there is no uncertainty in the maneuver. The action is fast, continuous, and firm. One evolution of the disk, two, three, and the clay has been stretched, in a circle and under manual pressure, to the wavy edge of the mold, in the form of a thin, uniform, and enormous "pancake". Soft and firm hands now smooth the surface, and the right-hand proceeds to lift the edge, and very slowly move the disk in rotation, keeping the outer edge between the fingers, while the right hand also grips the outer edge, but with a small folded piece of wet leather, with the thumb and other fingers as if to even and polish while turning and padding the edge to form a pleasant and circular edge. Thus ends the first stage of making a comal in Mixco.

And it is here at this point, upon observing the work, that one is confronted with a question that arises urgently and which one tries in vain to answer. "How will the potter remove this thin and easily breakable disk from the mold?" She must detach it, because there is only one mold to make the other comales. And leaving the freshly made comal on the mold until it dries would be a waste of time that would affect the production of the whole day, and would make the small industry impossible due to the small number of comales made. Can she lift it? Will she dare? ... and while one is speculating about the dilemma, the woman stands up, bends down, puts her thumbs side by side under the edge of the wet disk, stretches her fingers into the surface, and gently pushes the shiny wheel upwards. She straightens up, and there in her hands is the miraculously intact disk, above her knees, almost touching her bare feet. Without much care, she then slowly takes it to a shaded area or inside her hut and places it on the bare ground, returning to make another comal. But upon depositing the wet disk in the shade, the comal is not finished. Far from it. Because now it has lost much of its gentle concavity, the edge has become somewhat deformed, and the whole assembly is deteriorating. But this is soon remedied. For half an hour, the comal is left there to dry until it acquires a certain hardness and resistance. At the end of this interval, during which the potter has made three or more comales that have also been placed in the shade, she lifts the first one and puts it back on the mold. She wets the surface a little and fixes the shape with the palms of her hands and leaves the edge perfect. Next follows the operation of giving the comal its appearance.

Giving it a "quality appearance" is the name of the process of applying a well-ground talc mixed with water to form a thick cream in which the talc particles are not dissolved but remain in suspension on the "face" of the comal. The purpose of covering the comal in this way is to prevent the tortilla, when being cooked on it, from sticking. The application of this cream is described by them as giving the comal "complexion" or "polish"; while in Quiché or in the Pokomán dialect, the material is called cascaguín or siquigín.

The talc does not adhere to the clay. Consequently, the talc paste must be forced in. This is done with a rounded stone about the size of a hen's egg, which is dipped in the suspended talc and then rubbed over the surface of the comal, one dip for each small area. This requires care and patience. Because in the market, the result of this operation will be subject to scrutiny, because native buyers are quick to point out the parts of the comal that were not adequately covered, or where the layer is so thin that it is falling off. Such defects will be grounds for bargaining or for a complete rejection of the object. The women of San Raymundo are very skilled in giving the final touch to the surface of their comales. The women of Mixco do not do it that way. The indifference with which they view the quality of their work seems evidence of spiritual defeat.

During the course of the day, the women who make comales in Mixco can work intermittently for several hours. She is her own boss and can make six, eight, or a dozen comales, or none. In a week, however, she will produce and have ready for firing thirty to thirty-six large comales about seventeen inches in diameter. These will be dried in the shade and in the sun; already in good condition, according to her experience, to withstand the fire to which they will later be subjected.

Fuel is not very abundant in the vicinity of Mixco. Deforestation and proximity to the city have had their effect. That is why the Mixco potters have to dedicate many hours to searching for it, towards the north and west of the nearby mountain, and patiently gather enough pine firewood, branches, and "chiriviscos".

The firing platform, several inches thick, is three inches long and three or more wide, depending on whether one or two rows of comales are to be fired. They generally prefer to place them at the foot of a small hill or protuberance of land so that on such a slope, they can support the comales against each other, leaving space between them to fill with small twigs. When the row or rows have been properly arranged, embers are

sprinkled from above so that they filter through the intermediate spaces and burn the wood below. When the flame ignites and the fire rises, inconvenient dry thin twigs and vegetable waste are distributed. This waste is not the best for the purpose, as these potters know well, but dry grass that burns easily is now easy to find.

In less than fifteen minutes the fire raises a heat of 1300º Fahrenheit (about 700 Centigrade). This sudden rise in heat causes severe shocks to the clay, no matter how well made a vessel is and whatever the composition of the clay paste. The mixture of coarse sand materially helps the clay withstand such shocks, because the sand grains act by opening pores in the clay that allow an easy escape of the gases generated by the fire. Losses in Mixco are about ten percent, a very high percentage. Most of these losses can be directly attributed to the lack of proper kneading with the mixture of sufficient sand. But "it is not the custom," and "custom" among the majority of natives of Guatemala is more inexorable than the law.

After the fire reaches the required degree of heat, it is maintained as the flames continue fiercely, for about fifteen minutes. Then it is allowed to go out. The duration of the strong heat is forty minutes in total, after which the firewood and waste turn into gray ash and the temperature drops to a point where the comales can be removed. Now they are ready for the market. From what has been described above, it can be concluded that the potters of Mixco do not find much sale for their products. But this is not the case. In normal times, as is well known, all household items have a monetary value and can be sold for their price. The price of a Mixco comal is not as high as that of one (willingly paid) from San Raymundo. But the women in Mixco will continue to receive ten, twelve, and even fifteen cents for their product, which depends on how shrewd they are in bargaining. And for a long time, their comales will continue to travel to the markets of the capital, the nearby villages to the north, and especially to the coastal regions of the southwest.

However, what each of these potters receives weekly, three or three and a half dollars, is very little compared to what other potters from other pottery centers in the country receive, or what those who sell their services in the capital receive. The pottery industry of making comales is, therefore, disappearing from Mixco. Young women are turning their backs on it, and girls no longer want to learn it.