

# Native Chiapas Bees: Recouping an Ancient Mayan Tradition

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Easter week - or Semana Santa as its called in Mexico - is a time of sweet celebration and profound hope throughout the indigenous communities of Chiapas. This year some Zapatistas are working to sweeten the lives of their communities by re-couping the ancient Mayan tradition of cultivating hives of the stingless, native bees of Chiapas.

“This year I am going to put several stingless bee hives into boxes so that we can reproduce the hives - because most of the big trees where they live have been cut down.” explained a middle-aged Chol indigenous bee keeper who is a long time member of the Zapatista movement. As he carefully harvested the bags of Melipona honey from his hives he added, “I’ve always kept the African bees and the stingless kind, but people bother me a lot for the wild kind of honey and the old people want the wax for their candles so they can pray. But I never knew until now that we could use boxes to reproduce the wild bee’s hives; so now I am going to work much harder at saving these little bees we call Chap.”

Known in Chiapas as Ansil Pom (Tzotzil), Chap (Chol), or Melipona (Spanish), these native bees’ have traditionally been highly valued for their honey which has strong medicinal qualities and a powerful sweetness. The wax from their uniquely structured hives is used to make candles which are vital when praying or communicating with family members who have passed on - especially during Day of the Dead ceremonies.

“My father said the entire community used to go the mountains to get honey during Easter weeks to collect honey,” was the wistful comment of one young Tzotzil Mayan beekeeper in the highlands of Chiapas during a recent Zapatista bee keeping workshop in the Zapatista civilian center of Morelia. He continued in a somewhat angry tone. “But now the trees are all cut down so people could make money and our bees are gone. We know a lot about caring for African bees and have almost 80 hives, but I am sad the Anzil Pom is gone and we don’t have the special honey my father talks about. Now that I know a little about Meliponas and have seen this model bee box, I want to get hives for my communities.”

Springtime, specifically Semana Santa, is traditionally the moment to walk in the mountains seeking stingless bee honey in the hollow trunks of huge trees. Families who husband wild bees near their homes harvest honey from the hollow trunks previously collected in the wild. With trees and flowers in riotous bloom everywhere, the hives of these Native American bees are literally dripping with honey during this time of year.

“They’ve cut down our trees and poisoned our land with their chemicals; our native Melipona bees are being exported to Japan to pollinate tomatoes in greenhouses, yet we’ve almost forgotten about these bees,” the Zapatista promoter of ecological agriculture was speaking passionately in heavily Tzotzil accented Spanish to a rapt group of highlands bee keepers in the Zapatista civilian center of Oventic. “Everyone should study this Melipona bee keeping box carefully because it is easy to make and all of us need to learn how to raise and reproduce Meliponas in our communities.”

Ever increasing de-forestation means fewer large trees and thus fewer nesting places for the stingless bees. Also the Africanized European bees compete with native bees both for nesting places and for food sources. Finally, many native bee hives kept in trunks near peoples’ homes have not been well maintained due to Mexican government programs encouraging introduction of high producing commercial bees and a general loss of tradition during the 1970’s and 1980’s. However falling honey prices and the aggressiveness of Africanized bee hives have cooled many Mayan communities to commercial bees.

“My mother always had her bee trunk beside our house,” reminisced one 50 year old Zapatista leader from an important Tzeltal community in the northern zone of Chiapas. “She used the honey for medicine when we had sore throats and to sweeten our tortillas. She called the wax, “black wax”, and she always used the “black wax” for candles so she could pray during Day of the Dead. I want to be part of recouping this tradition because it is very important to us.”