



Ixchel (or Ix Chel) is the 16th-century name of the aged jaguar goddess of midwifery and medicine in the ancient Mayan culture. She corresponds, more or less, to Toci Yoalticiti 'Our Grandmother the Nocturnal Physician', an Aztec earth goddess inhabiting the sweatbath, and also appears to be related to another Aztec goddess invoked at birth, viz. Cihuacoatl. In Taube's revised Schellhas-Zimmermann classification of codical deities, Ixchel corresponds to the goddess O.

Referring to the early 16th-century Mayans, Landa calls Ixchel "the goddess of making children", and also mentions her as the goddess of medicine. In the month of Zip, the feast Ixcil Ixchel was celebrated by the physicians and shamans (hechiceros), and medicine bundles containing little idols of "the goddess of medicine whom they called Ixchel" and also divination stones were brought forward. In the Ritual of the Bacabs, Ixchel is once called 'grandmother'. The goddess's two principal qualities (birthing and healing) suggest, in their combination, an analogy with the aged Aztec goddess of midwifery, Toci Yoalticiti.

Ixchel was already known to the Classical Mayans. As Taube has demonstrated, she corresponds to goddess O of the Dresden Codex, an aged woman with jaguar ears. A crucial piece of evidence in his argument is the so-called 'Birth Vase', a Classic Maya container showing a childbirth presided over by various old women with weaving implements in their headdress, and headed by an old jaguar goddess, the codical goddess O. On another Classic Maya vase, goddess O is shown acting as a physician, further confirming her identity as Ixchel. The combination of Ixchel with several aged midwives on the Birth Vase recalls the Tz'utujil assembly of midwife goddesses called the 'female lords', the most powerful of whom is described as being particularly fearsome.

Websites

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Teachers

- <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/lessons/rally/>
- <http://www.envirolink.org/>

Books by Rosita Arvigo

- Sastun: My Apprenticeship With A Maya Healer (Harper Collins, 1994)
- Rainforest Remdies: 100 Healing Plants of Belize; with Michael Balick (Lotus Press, 1994)
- Rainforest Home Remdies: The Maya Way to Heal Your Body and Replenish Your Soul; with Nadine Epstein (Harper Collins, 2001)



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Rosita Arvigo - Ethnobotanist Healing with Plants of the Belize Rainforest

In 1985 Rosita Arvigo moved from Chicago to Belize to farm and open a small clinic. Fortunately, she heard about and finally met an elderly Mayan shaman (a person known for special powers of healing). Don Elijio Panti then 87 years old and one of the last Maya shamans of Belize, agreed to share his knowledge of over 500 plants and their uses with Rosita. For ten years she learned all about the plants and their uses in Don Elijio special garden, the rainforest of Belize.

When Rosita Arvigo and her husband, Greg Shropshire arrived in Belize in 1981 they planned to homestead 30 acres of jungle they bought on the banks of the Macal

River. But then Rosita she began to hear about an amazing old man who could cure any kind of illness using plants. Her encounter with Don Elijio Panti changed her life.

As a young girl growing up in Chicago, Rosita loved plants. She helped her grandfather plant what was called a Victory Garden. During World War II, to ensure there was enough food President Franklin Roosevelt asked people to plant their own gardens. Four year old Rosita was fascinated to watch tiny buds emerge from seeds. Later in the 1960's she lived in Mexico and there was introduced to the special healing properties of plants. She studied herbal medicine. So when she arrived in Belize she knew about plants and could appreciate the unique knowledge possessed by Don Elijio. His knowledge was special, believed by him and other Mayan Indians to be a sacred trust, passed down from teacher to student over the millennia. "For every ailment or difficulty on the earth, the spirits have provided a cure-you just have to find it," Don Elijio Panti told Rosita when they met. Rosita realized all his knowledge would die with him and she was determined to learn and save this special knowledge that only Don Elijio knew.

Arvigo spent a year trying to convince him to take her on as his apprentice. When he finally agreed to be her teacher Don Elijio insisted that the knowledge stay in Belize with the Mayan people. Rosita promised to stay in Belize and continue his work. She has turned her land, now called Ix Chel Farms, in honor of the Mayan Goddess of Healing, into a learning lab for rainforest plants. In 1993 she helped create a 6,000 acre plant preserve in the rainforest called Terre Nova. It is here she transplants plants that were going to be destroyed by clearing and building so they can grow and reproduce. She harvests the plants and makes medicine from them. Her medicine company Rainforest Remedies produces nine different formulas based on Don Elijio's knowledge and her extensive research and are used for back pain, stomachache, colds and flu. Half of the proceeds go to the Belize Traditional Healers Foundation, which Arvigo established to help local healers. Arvigo also brings healers from other parts of Belize to Ix Chel to record their knowledge of plants. In the summer she runs a rainforest camp to teach young people about the healing plants. Arvigo also works with the New York Botanical Garden to preserve this special knowledge. Rosita Arvigo is continuing work with knowledge learned over hundreds if not thousands of years about the special uses of plants in the Belize Rainforest.



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Maya of Belize

Belize, an English-speaking country, was called British Honduras from 1862 until 1973, but for three millennia to this day it's been home to Mayan indians. The first documented humans to settle in Belize arrived about 11,000 years ago. About 2000 BC the Olmec Civilization emerged in Mesoamerica - an area now encompassing Mexico, and Central America. The Maya civilization emerged from the Olmec around 1200 bc. The culture was based on farming and trade and had a rich ceremonial and cultural life. Some of the well known cities of the Maya were Tikal, Chichen Itza, Palenque and Teotihuacan. Gonzalo Guerrero, a shipwreck survivor was the first known Spaniard to arrive in the Mayan region. His arrival in 1511 was closely followed in 1519 by that of Hernan Cortes who defeated the Aztec civilization to the north of the Maya. The Maya fiercely resisted the Spanish and still to this day the Maya of the highlands continue to resist outside attempts to rule. It is in these tight knit Mayan communities that the ancient knowledge has been preserved.

Belize Rainforest

Belize has some of the most extensive tracts of primeval rainforest in Central America. These forests are inhabited by puma, jaguar, ocelot, gray fox, black howler monkey, Central American spider monkey, tapir, peccary, red brocket and white-tailed deer, agouti, paca, Mexican porcupine, scarlet macaw, jabiru stork, toucan, ocellated turkey, harpey eagle. New species are being discovered every year.



Ethnobotany

Ethnobotany is the study of the plant knowledge of a particular culture documenting the use native plants for food, shelter, medicine, clothing and ceremonies.

Ethnobotanists

Ethnobotanists are usually botanists and/or biologists with additional training in: archeology, chemistry, ecology, anthropology, linguistics, history, pharmacology, sociology, religion and mythology. Not only do they study the plants they also work with shamans within the native cultures, understanding that culture's concepts of disease.

Biodiversity

The biodiversity of the rain forest is so immense that scientists have only studied about 1% of the millions of species of life. We have idea what we are loosing when the rainforest is cut down, or what impact those species might have on human life. We are losing more than 137 species of plants and animals every single day because of rainforest deforestation.

- * More fish species are in a single pond in Brazil than in all of Europe.
- * 25-acres of rainforest in Borneo has more than 700 species of trees - a number equal to the total tree diversity of North America.
- * A single rainforest reserve in Peru is home to more species of birds than are found in the entire United States.
- * There are more species of fish in the Amazon than in the entire Atlantic Ocean.



Rainforest Facts

- * More than half of the world's estimated 10 million species of plants, animals and insects live in rainforests
- * Rainforests once covered 14% of the earth's land surface; now they are only 6% of the land surface. Experts fear they will be gone in less than 40 years.
- * In the next 25 years more than half of all species of plants, animals and microorganisms will vanish as the rain forests are cut down.
- * 137 plant, animal and insect species disappear every single day or 50,000 species a year due to rainforest deforestation.
- * 1½ acres are cut down every second
- * More than a quarter of all our medicines come from rainforest plants but only 1% of all plants have been tested.
- * The Amazon Rainforest in Brazil is called the "Lungs of our Planet" because it produces more than 20% of the world's oxygen from recycling carbon dioxide. One-fifth of the world's fresh water is in the Amazon Basin.

Rainforest Plants

Fruits: More than 3,000 known in the Rainforest. The native peoples eat more than 2,000. We eat 200 including avocados, coconuts, figs, oranges, lemons, grapefruit, bananas, guavas, pineapples, mangos and tomatoes; vegetables: corn, potatoes, rice, winter squash and yams; spices: black pepper, cayenne, chocolate, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, sugar cane, tumeric, coffee and vanilla and nuts including Brazil nuts and cashews.



Plants that Saved Lives

For most of human history plants not only provided food but also medicine. Modern medicine is built on this long history.

Cinchona tree (Cinchona officinalis)

When Europeans came to the Americas they noticed that natives used the bark of the cinchona tree to treat fevers. Later scientists discovered that the plant contained quinine which was used to fighting malaria.