

**Maya House Thatch and Wall  
Materials in traditional Maya  
style of thousands of years**

Construction Materials for native Maya Houses of Alta Verapaz:  
Besides Guano and Corozo, what plants were used for Roof Thatch  
and what were Walls built of (Guarumo, Tanil, Bajareque)?

This is the English edition of the SIAG presentation:

**Construcción y mobiliario de casas tradicionales mayas  
en el momento de Conquista**

*37 SIMPOSIO DE INVESTIGACIONES ARQUEOLÓGICAS EN GUATEMALA*

*JULIO DE 2024*

*EL PRIMER CONTACTO ENTRE LOS  
PUEBLOS ORIGINARIOS DE GUATEMALA Y LOS ESPAÑOLES*

# The best description of a Maya house is not by Diego de Landa, but by Nicolas de Valenzuela.

The Spanish conquerors of the Cholti-Lacandon Maya provide details about the inside and outside of the Maya houses in the village of Nuestra Senora de los Dolores, also known as Sac Balam.

I did ethnohistorical research in the Archivo General de Centroamérica (Guatemala City), three blocks from where I lived in the 1970's. Based on the results of that research I was awarded a grant to fly to the Archivo General de Indias, in Sevilla, Spain. There I found the handwritten 1690's book by Nicolas de Valenzuela. German scholars found another edition in Germany and published that.

During recent decades, while driving through Alta Verapaz, especially on the back roads, I was surprised to find everything that was mentioned for the Cholti-Maya of the 1690's in the Q'eqchi' Maya areas of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. These field trips were to study flora, fauna, and bio-diverse ecosystems, but when we saw the Maya houses we stopped to photograph them.

The presentation for SIAG 2024 was to study what the Spanish first saw and first discussed, and to show that these traditional houses still existed 10 years ago in the Q'eqchi' Maya area of Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. Sac Balam is in Chiapas, Mexico. The Spaniards exterminated the Cholti-Lacandon. Once this area was abandoned due to the conquest, Maya people escaping the Spanish conquest in Yucatan and Campeche migrated to Chiapas and were named "Lacandon". These Yucatec-speaking Lacandon houses are very different than the Cholti-speaking Lacandon of Sac Balam.

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Spanish descriptions of the roofs of the 100 Cholti Lacandon houses in Sac Balam (Dolores) in the 1690's: "The roofs are of much straw..." So no mention that the roofs were of palms!

The Spanish also said that the sides and rear of the houses were built up of stakes covered with clay. This is bajareque architecture!

The bed platforms were not hammocks but rather wood held up by posts driven into the ground.

Also describes the "huts in the milpas".

We now find all these 17<sup>th</sup> century Maya house aspects in remote parts of Alta Verapaz. Let's start by looking at the huts in the milpas.



Troje, Aldea Pinares, Cahabon





A troje is a granary to store maize. The farmer can only carry a certain amount of the harvested maize on the several kilometer hike back to his house. So the rest of the harvest is stored in a troje out in the milpa.

If the farmer needs to spend several days in the milpa, he will sleep in the troje.





# Troje, Tal Purulha, Tucuru, Alta Verapaz.

The troje I show here is several years old and has lost part of its thatch roof.





This is heliconia that is used to thatch roofs of Maya houses in the hills near Cahabon, Alta Verapaz. We photographed this heliconia near a Q'eqchi' Maya house that used it as roof thatch.

Heliconia is a relative of banana, but bananas are not native to Mesoamerica. Several species of heliconia are native to Guatemala, especially in Alta Verapaz and Izabal.

Heliconia thatch is not mentioned by Spanish historians and is not pictured in books, articles, or theses on Maya house architecture.





# Heliconia roof thatch, Tzalamtun

We found the Maya houses with heliconia thatch while driving from Senahu to Cahabon, Alta Verapaz. From the unpaved road you could see houses far away that had roofs not of palm thatch.

We hiked to each house with our Q'eqchi' Maya-speaking staff and were able to get permission to photograph each house inside out.





# Heliconia roof thatch, Tzalamtun





Heliconia roof  
thatch, Alta  
Verapaz,  
Guatemala.





Inside a Maya house with heliconia leaves as thatch.

If you count how many leaves are in each row you can estimate that the entire house roof will need over 1,000 heliconia leaves.





Maya style bed for thousands of years. Corner posts are driven into the ground. Hammocks were not widely used a thousand years ago.





In remote areas of Alta Verapaz you can find houses and furniture that use the style of over a thousand years ago.

The wall of this Q'eqchi' Maya house is wattle-and-daub.





# A wider native Maya bed





Heliconia plants near the houses.





Another Q'eqchi'  
Maya house with  
heliconia leaves as  
thatch.









Another Q'eqchi'  
Maya house with  
heliconia leaves  
as thatch.





Another  
Q'eqchi'  
Maya  
house with  
heliconia  
leaves as  
thatch.





Heliconia thatch, Comunidad Santa Rosa Chivitec, Cahabon.

99% of books, articles, and theses on Maya house architecture do not show a Maya house with a heliconia thatch roof.

Since heliconia grows only in certain wet ecosystems, you do not get heliconia roofs in Peten or most other Maya areas. Diego de Landa and other authors do not mention heliconia roofs because they explored other areas of Mesoamerica (where guano and corozo were used, or grass).





Heliconia roof, Aldea Pinares, Cahabon





Inside a Maya house, looking up at the heliconia leaves used as thatch.

There are about 84 leaves in this small area.





Tzalamtun,  
heliconia  
thatch roof.





Heliconia thatch roof. Door is at one corner of the house. There are no windows.

The walls of this house are tanil. The door is from other plants.





Heliconia thatch.





Chivite, Cahabon, Alta Verapaz, palm thatch.





Polochic  
area, palm  
thatch.





Bajareque wall, San Jose Par  
Ochoch, Baja Verapaz. Palm thatch.





## Bajareque, San Jose Par Ochoch, Baja Verapaz

Nicolas de Valenzuela comments that the Cholti-Lacandon houses of the 1690's were of this same material as you see here.





Purulha, wattle and daub, bajareque wall. Palm thatch.





Bajareque. Six of the cross pieces of wood have rotted and fallen off in past years. Only the top two are still in place.





Wattle and daub walls and guano palm thatched roof.





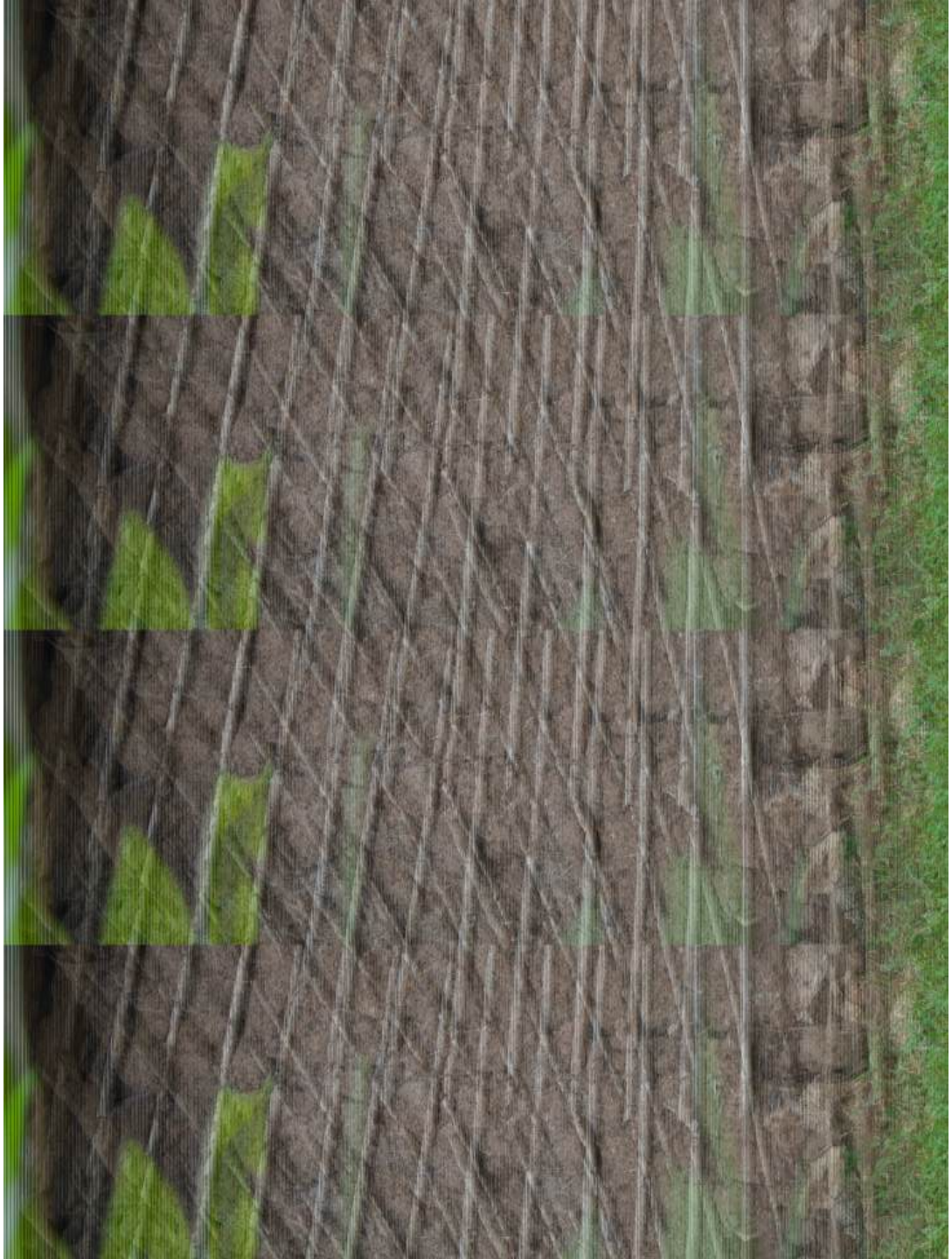
# Tucuru a La Tinta

Wattle and daub wall. Only one area is covered with clay over the horizontal wood.





Wattle-and-Daub,  
Lanquin village





# Guarumo, Senahu a Chipemech

Wall of guarumo,  
*Cecropia peltata*.





Palm thatch.

Wall is tañil.





# Chimulac, Cahabon, Alta Verapaz

Wall of tañil.





*Phragmites australis*, tañil, Turucu La Tinta





Teleman, Alta Verapaz, *Phragmites australis*, tañil.





La Tinta, Alta Verapaz, *Phragmites australis*, tañil walls, palm thatch roof.





The houses of Cholti Lacandon town of Sac Balam, in the 1690's, were roofed with grass, aak.





Here is the ak grass





Polochic, Aak

Inside a Q'eqchi house with a  
roof of grass, aak.





Polochic, Aak





Polochic, Aak





Tecpan

Maya  
Highlands,  
grass roof.

Grass roofs  
are known  
and  
documented  
for the  
Highlands.





Grass thatch.





Chamisun,  
Alta Verapaz

Grass thatch.





# Tucuru

Grass thatch  
for Q'eqchi'  
Maya house.





Cahabon  
Panzos

Grass thatch.





Roof thatch of ak grass





Closeup of roof  
thatch of ak grass





Corozo palm, Q'eqchi'  
Maya house thatch.





Panzos, Cahabon, roof thatch of corozo palm.





Corozo, Panzos to Telemán, Río Polochic, Alta Verapaz, palm thatch.





# Corozo palm thatch, Panzos to Teleman, Polochic









Corozo,  
Petexbatun  
area





Corozo,  
Petexbatun  
area





Corozo, Petexbatun area, on roof and growing behind the house





## *Carludovica palmata*, junco, kala



This plant looks like a palm, has a species name *palmata* but is not related to any palm whatsoever.

Convergent evolution resulted in this plant looking like a palm.





Inside a Q'eqchi' Maya house, looking up at the roof, of *Carludovica palmata*, junco, kala.





Qeqchi' house, before Canguacha, with thatch of Junco, *Carludovica palmata*, which is not a palm.









Most Maya houses nowadays have roofs of tin sheets and walls of concrete blocks or sawn wood. None of that is native.

It would be helpful for a student to do a MS thesis or PhD dissertation on heliconia roofs, grass roofs, and roof thatch of kala (junco) because in coming years none of these houses will continue to exist. Same with walls of guarumo, tanil and bajareque. Our photos are from 10 years ago, and many of these authentic Maya houses no longer exist.

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