

2. Cultural aspects of meliponiculture

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SOUZA Bruno A, LOPES Maria Teresa R¹, PEREIRA Fábila M

Bee Research Center, Embrapa Mid-North. 5650 Duque de Caxias ave, Buenos Aires, P.O. Box 01, Zip code: 64006-220. Teresina, Piauí, Brazil.

* Corresponding author: Bruno de Almeida Souza Email: basouza@gmail.com

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Abstract

Some ancient cultures from Central and South American had close contact with stingless bees. Their representation in decorations, drawings and sculptures is common in various indigenous groups, as part of its cosmology and relationship to the world. This group of social insects also represents an important source of food resources and income (honey, wax, resin, larvae and pollen). The use of these bees and their products as sources of food and income and in the cultural and religious expression are reviewed in this chapter, mainly regarding the Brazilian culture.

Key words:

Culture; indigenous groups; stingless bees; food source; income source; religious expression

Introduction

Insects are almost culturally ubiquitous, a considerable number of superstitions and symbolic adaptations relying on humans (Hogue, 1987). Their representation in decorations, drawings and sculptures is common in various indigenous groups (Rodrigues, 2005).

Some cultures from Central and South American had close contact with stingless bees (Apidae: Meliponini). This group of social insects represented an important source of resources (honey, wax, resin, larvae and pollen), and also formed part of its cosmology and relationship with the world (Rosso et al., 2001).

In the Americas, especially before the discovery and conquest of this continent, the keeping of these bees was an important part of religious customs, food habits and trade of many native peoples (Zamora and Alvarez, 2004). Keeping colonies of several bees was common in parts of Latin America, highlighting the

species *Melipona beecheii* in Mexico, and *Tetragonisca angustula*, *M. scutellaris* and *M. compressipes* in Brazil.

Despite the presence of several indigenous groups in Mexico when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the XVI century, the Maya were those with the longest tradition stingless bee keeping. This activity was an integral part of social and religious life of this people, as well a vital part in the local economy due to the trade of honey for therapeutic and domestic purposes, as a sweetener and in the preparation of fermented beverages, in addition to waxes and resins (Cortopassi-Laurino et al., 2006).

In Brazil, a country with more than 227 indigenous ethnic groups, the Kayapó were the ones that stood out in such activity. Even today they are still considered the greatest experts in traditional keeping of stingless bees. Considering the diversity of indigenous people and the various ecosystems where they inhabit, it is likely that a lot of indigenous

knowledge regarding the classification, biology, ecology and management of bees are still to be discovered (Villas-Bôas, 2008).

2.1 Uses of the stingless bees in the Americas

Since ancient times, insects have been used directly or indirectly with various purposes such as in human medicine in different cultures world wide (entomotherapy). There is the record of the use of insect larvae by the Maya for therapeutic purposes. These larvae feed on dead tissues where bacteria that can cause gangrene thrives (Zimmer, 1993 apud Costa-Neto, 2002).

Also, the products of bees have great importance in folk and modern medicine as a potential source of drugs. An example of this application was registered in 1989 by Calderon Espina and refers to the notable antiseptic effect of topical application of honey in obstetric surgery. Propolis has been reported to present several pharmacological properties such as anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimicrobial, antiviral and antineoplastic (Kujungiev et al., 1999; Menezes, 2005; Lustosa et al., 2008). Besides medical applications, bees and their products are still nowadays intensively used by indigenous groups from Central and South America with different purposes (Sommeijer, 1999).

The rediscovery and record of these potential uses, including zootherapeutic, as well as the development of research with these traditional populations - ethnosciences - represent an important contribution to debates on biodiversity, providing new opportunities for cultural and economic valuation of animals previously considered 'useless' (Costa-Neto, 2002; Ballester, 2006).

2.2 Food and appliance

In the history of humanity, honey was one of the first sources of sugar, especially in periods prior to the introduction of sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*, Poaceae) and European honey bee (*A. mellifera*).

In Brazil until the XIX century, honey from stingless bees was used as food by indigenous and settlers, and its wax for making candles by the Jesuits. There are also reports on the knowledge of the Kayapó related to the high quality nectar supplied by some flowers. These flowers were visited by stingless bees, and provided honey harvest with good consistency and flavor (Hollanda, 1946; Cortopassi-Laurino, 2002).

Even today, in many countries from Latin America as in other countries, the stingless bee honey is

frequently consumed, often more as a medicine than as sweetener or food (Cortopassi-Laurino et al., 2006).

Consumption of stingless bees by human was also observed by Ballester (2006) among the Brazilian indigenous Kaiabi. The larvae of these bees are used in the daily diet of the tribe. Its consumption is usually done in places where the colonies are explored and the surplus taken to the tribe for later consumption.

According to Kerr (1987), there are records of the use of cerumen (a mixture of wax and resin) of these bees by South American natives for waterproofing baskets for the carriage of liquids. Similar applications to the wax produced by *A. mellifera* and cerumen by *Frieseomelitta doederleini* were found by Sampaio et al. (2009) between the indigenous Pankararé, from the State of Bahia, Brazil. The cerumen produced by this stingless bee is also used in the making of musical instruments as glue for fixing parts, as caulk mass to seal vessels and cans, bottles and plastic boxes, for polishing wood, for strengthen and lubricate ropes used in bows and candles for lighting.

2.3 Cultural and religious expressions

The cultural importance of stingless bee species has been recorded over time by traditional communities. The Maya, for instance, reported in their Codex through ideographs their knowledge about the "xunan-kab" *M. beecheii* (Cortopassi-Laurino et al., 2006). The information contained in one of these codices, the Codex Madrid (formerly Codex Tro-Cortesian) deposited in the Museum of America in Madrid, describes the close relationship between these people and the stingless bees on religious issues and in their cosmology. Specific ornaments were also specially developed, reproducing sacred bees and God-bee (Cappas e Sousa, 1995). See Sotelo Santos and Alvarez Asomoza, this book.

According to Vail (2006), researchers have found that some codical almanacs in the Maya Codices functioned as real-time instruments to document important astronomical events; others were used to schedule rituals as part of the 52-year calendar that guided civic and religious life in Mesoamerica. Regarding the bees, the Mayan rituals were "fertility rites". This is the major concern in the Maya world, since there is no food without fertility (González, 2009).

Among the Maya and Nahua the custom of their ancestors to add the honey of *M. beecheii* in drinks

offered to their gods during religious ceremonies is still maintained, besides its use as medicine in mixtures (Zamora and Cappa e Sousa, 2000).

In Brazil, the use of honey, wax, cerumen, propolis, geopropolis, pollen and the own bees in larval and others stages of development by the Guarani-m'byá tribe is done with various purposes, like feeding, preparing potions for the use in traditional medicine, spiritual and contemplative activities, as well as for handcrafts (Rodrigues, 2005). Ballester (2006) reports that the honey of *Tetragonisca angustula* and *Melipona oblitescens* is used for medicinal purposes by Kaiabi in Brazil. This tribe also recognizes the honey produced by *Lestrimelitta* as hazardous to health, and that the species *M. oblitescens* has unhygienic habits being observed on jaguar feces. An approach to the use of honey from stingless bees for medicinal purposes is presented in Molan (1999), Obiols (2004), Cooper (2005) and Jull et al. (2009).

For the State of Bahia, Costa-Neto (2002) recorded the applications of stingless bee products in traditional medicine. However, this statement still requires scientific validation.

2.4 Source of income

Throughout the history, honey has been used as a commodity and tax in Yucatán. Historical references suggest that the techniques of beekeeping are still very similar to those used in prehistoric times, except for minor changes (Weaver and Weaver, 1980).

In Costa Rica, the honey and cerumen were products sold by the indigenous to pay taxes to the settlers, and the cerumen, known as Campeche, was exported to Spain. The inhabitants of the Nicoya peninsula were responsible for keeping and preserving the stingless bees. Its honey production had fueled the national market until the early XX century (Ramírez and Ortíz, 1995 apud Zamora and Alvarez, 2004).

In Paria Grande, located in the Venezuelan State of Amazonas, the Asociación Civil Red de Manejo Sostenible de Abejas de Amazonas has supported, through technical assistance, financial and logistics, the development of stingless bee beekeeping in its state. Likewise, the "Asociación Cooperativa de Meliponicultores Warime" has developed activities with stingless bee beekeepers, supporting the making of handcrafted products with the cerumen produced by these bees (Pérez and Salas, 2008) (Figure 1). See also the wax secretion of *Melipona scutellaris* worker (Figure 2), which is mixed with resins to form cerumen.



Photographer: Bruno A Souza

Figure 1. Handcraft of Asociación Cooperativa de Meliponicultores Warime, Paria Grande, Venezuela, (a,b) using stingless bees cerumen and natural fibers by Mr. Alfonso Pérez, from Professor Patricia Vit office.



Photographer: Bruno A Souza

Figure 2. Secretion of wax by *Melipona scutellaris* worker, Camaçari, Bahia, Brazil

2.5 Songs and Poems

The stingless bees are also important constituents of ethnobiology of Brazilian indigenous people. The Kayapó, for instance, have named and classified about 34 species of bees, in which nine were considered managed or semi-domesticated (Cortopassi-Laurino et al., 2006). Similarly, the Kaiabi tribe studied by Ballester (2006) recognizes a total of 27 ethnospecies of stingless bees. They know about its preference for environment with greater diversity of plants and animals, the plant species preferred by bees for nest building and gathering food, besides the differences between their defense strategies and the amount, density, color and taste of produced honey.

Much of this information and common names used to identify bees still persists in Brazilian popular culture, like jataí, urucú, tiúba, mombuca, irapuá, tataira, jandaíra, guarupu and manduri (Kerr et al., 1996).

Texts of the song "Mel" (which means honey in English) by Caetano Veloso and Waly Salomão, and

poetry of Francisco Romano, are transcribed below. In these texts are listed some of these common names of stingless bees, which may refer to the following species: *Leurotrigona muelleri* "lambe-olhos", *Scaptotrigona depilis* "torce cabelos", *Lestrimellita limao* "vamo-nos embora", *Frieseomelitta varia* "moça-branca" and *Oxytrigona tataira* "tataira", among others.

"Mel"

(Caetano Veloso / Waly Salomão)

“(…) *É meio-dia, é meia-noite, é toda hora
Lambe olhos, torce cabelos, feiticeira vamo-nos
embora
É meio-dia, é meia-noite, faz zumzum na testa
Na janela, na fresta da telha
Pela escada, pela porta, pela estrada toda a fora
Anima de vida o seio da floresta
O amor empresta a praia deserta zumba na orelha,
concha do mar
Ó abelha, boca de mel, carmin, carnuda, vermelha
(…)*”.

Poem written by Francisco Romano (1840-1891)

Source: Nogueira-Neto (1997)

“*Quando chove as abelhas
Começam a trabalhar:
Moça branca e a pimenta,
Mandaçaia e mangangá;
Canudo, Mané-de-Abreu,
Tubiba e irapuá*

*Ronca a tataira,
Faz boca o limão,
Zoa o sanharão,
Trabalha a jandaira,
Busca flor a cupira
Faz mel o enxú,
Zoa o capuchú,
Vai a fonte a jataí,
Campeia o enxú,
Faz mel a uruçú.*”

In the next texts, the song "Minha Fulô" by Luiz Gonzaga and Dantas, and "Morena Tropicana" by Alceu Valença are also cited some common names of Brazilian stingless bees, possibly: *Melipona mandaçaia* "mandassaia", *Oxytrigona tataira* "tataira", *Trigona spinipes* "sanharó", and *Melipona scutellaris* "uruçú". Additionally, in "Minha Fulô" information is provided on plants known by the author, and that are visited by these bees to produce quality honey "Faz mel que admira", possibly: *Tabebuia* sp. "pau d'arco", *Aspidosperma* sp. "pau pereiro", *Senna* sp. "canafístula" and *Cleome* sp. "mussambê".

"Minha Fulô"

(Luiz Gonzaga / Dantas)

“(…) *As fulô do meu sertão são bonitas são
cheirosas,
O pau d'arco e o pau pereiro faz inveja a qualquer
rosa
Canafista e mussambê eu nem sei qual mais formosa.
É por isso que as abelha mandassaia, tataira,
sanharó e uruçú
Faz o mel que admira (…)*”

"Morena tropicana"

(Alceu Valença)

“(…) *Da manga rosa quero gosto e o sumo
Melão maduro sapoti joá
Jaboticaba seu olhar noturno
Beijo travoso de umbú cajá
Pele macia, é carne de cajú
Saliva doce, doce mel, mel de uruçú (…)*”.

There is also the trend of using these common names for designate the honey produced by stingless bees, like “*Melipona* honey”, “*Trigona* Honey”, “*jataí* honey” and “*uruçú* honey”, as a way of identifying the entomological origin of product.

However, with the colonization process in the Americas, the introduction of the European honey bee and crops like sugar cane led to a detachment of the man from your cultural environment, promoting the discontinuity in the transmission of traditional knowledge, including those relating to stingless bees.

Currently the *Congreso Mesoamericano sobre Abejas Nativas* has a session in its program reserved to reports and studies on the cultural aspects of beekeeping in Mesoamerican communities.

In 1799, Vicente Coelho de Seabra made one of the first records of the Brazilian stingless bees. In that time was already observed the tendency to give greater value to what was exotic to our reality. About these bees and their products the author states that: “(...) Brazil is so fertile in these useful insects, however their people do not take care of their keeping. The hives are unknown there: and when necessity obliges them, they make use of colonies, sparsely build by bees, where nature offers them comfortable place. The wax is very abundant in some of them, but first wants to buy an expensive price the European and African products, than to cultivate that nature so freely gives. (...) Its honey is superior to some from Portugal”.

Currently this activity has gone through a rediscovery, leading to high demand of information for the keeping of these bees and their products. Thus, training in stingless bee beekeeping has increased, as well as the study of the biology of these insects, the development of rational boxes and handling techniques, besides the study of characterization of their products, especially of their honey. This generation of scientific knowledge, associated with knowledge of rural populations, has contributed to the conservation of these bees, to the knowledge and the valuation of its products and services supplied to nature.

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