



THE CULTURAL MEANING OF FIRE IN JUNCANÁ

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In memory of Dante Arturo Rodríguez Trejo, a pioneer of fire ecology in Mexico and a beloved friend. What we promised now burns in fulfillment.

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Presentation

Conflicts over the use of fire in ancestral territories of Indigenous Peoples have been widely documented around the world, particularly when these territories overlap with or border national parks.

Since 1872, when Yellowstone, the world's first national park, was established, burning in protected areas began to be restricted due to the belief that fire was inherently harmful to ecosystems and wildlife conservation.

However, over the past two decades, there has been a global rethinking of fire control policies. In many places, the elimination of regular burning has proven to be a greater threat to the ecological integrity of conservation areas, as these are landscapes that have long been shaped by fire. The suppression of burning and the resulting accumulation of vegetation has, in many cases, led to much more destructive and widespread wildfires.

For this reason, countries such as Australia, Guinea, Mali, and Senegal have started to pay greater attention to understanding, rather than questioning, the cultural fire regimes, valuing and recovering Indigenous knowledge about fire management. This renewed appreciation and integration of cultural practices into official fire management policies has been driven in part by a growing understanding of the value of cultural burning in maintaining low fuel loads in mixed forest and savanna environments. For example, it is now well known that in Australia, Aboriginal people burn to keep savanna vegetation low, thereby preventing large, destructive wildfires. Since fire is an integral component of savanna environments, the main question for fire managers in Australia is not how to prevent the use of fire, but how to use it in a controlled manner to promote a fine-grained mosaic of burned and unburned savanna. This mosaic helps prevent large wildfires, enrich biodiversity, and promote landscape heterogeneity. For this kind of participatory management approach, fire managers in Australia rely on a growing body of ethnographic literature, which suggests that cultural fire management was crucial in the past for maintaining low fuel loads and controlling the "distribution, diversity, and relative abundance of plant and animal resources".

As a result, there is now a global proposal to reintroduce cultural burning practices as a permanent tool for land and ecosystem management. In some cases, this is already being done with relative success, even in countries like the United States and Canada, where strict anti-fire policies once prevailed in wilderness areas. Some Latin American countries, such as Bolivia, Venezuela, and Guyana, have also begun to take important steps in this direction.

The key difference between Latin America and countries like Australia is that, in the latter, very few Indigenous people still live on their ancestral lands. Most were displaced or relocated during colonization, and few remain with the knowledge necessary to help

reproduce culturally adapted fire regimes for local landscapes. As a result, it has largely been environmental managers who have taken on the task of revitalizing this cultural knowledge, working hand in hand with the few elders who still hold it.

In contrast, in Latin America, many Indigenous Peoples continue to live on their ancestral lands, and therefore, the knowledge necessary for fire management adapted to local ecosystems is still alive. This knowledge must be recognized not only to help strengthen Indigenous territorial rights, but also to prevent fire from getting out of control and causing negative impacts on nature.

Within this context, Mexico has positioned itself, both in Latin America and internationally, as one of the countries that has most advanced scientific research in fire ecology since the 1980s. This has helped build a solid foundation for understanding the role of fire in ecosystems. Thanks to this progress, fire ecology has become one of the fundamental pillars of fire management in the country, with important contributions to the development of public policy on fire use. Among these are the General Law on Sustainable Forest Development and, notably, the Mexican Official Standard NOM-015-SEMARNAT/AGRICULTURA-2023, which establishes detailed technical and legal conditions for the use of fire in agricultural and forestry activities.

From the National Fire Management Office of CONAFOR, CONANP, and various academic centers, prescribed and experimental burns have been promoted to better understand ecological fire regimes, control invasive species, promote the regeneration of native species, and restore ecosystems historically adapted to fire. These efforts have produced manuals, technical guides, and collaborative networks that have strengthened technical and scientific knowledge around fire management.

However, despite these institutional advances, the incorporation of cultural fire knowledge from Indigenous communities has received little attention. Ancestral knowledge and community-based practices related to fire continue to be marginalized, despite their deep territorial roots. This is due in part to a long history of criminalizing the use of fire, which has left lasting impacts on pyrobiocultural territories—where fire is not only a tool, but also a symbol, an ancestral practice, and a means of connecting with the environment.

Just as the importance of ecological fire regimes has been recognized, so too should the value of cultural fire regimes, which reflect how each community has its own ways of using, regulating, and understanding fire, closely tied to historical memory, nature, and territory. Ignoring these systems generates tension and mistrust. In contrast, recognizing and integrating them into institutional strategies opens the door to building a fire management approach that is more just, legitimate, and intercultural.

A concrete expression of this recognition is El Colectivo Los Sin Fuego, a collective made up of civil society organizations, communities, academics, and individuals across Latin America who defend the use of fire as a means to protect the rights of rural territories and Indigenous peoples. Through intercultural dialogue, Los Sin Fuego seek to influence public policies and decision-making processes at local, national, and global levels, highlighting

the cultural dimensions of fire among diverse Indigenous peoples. These communities contribute their experiences, knowledge, and respectful fire practices as key elements for understanding fire's importance in sustaining life. The authors of this document are members of this collective.

The book Cultural Meaning of Fire in Juncaná is grounded in this conviction. It recognizes that Mexico is a country of immense biocultural wealth, and that Chiapas is a pioneer in fire management. This book aims to reclaim the cultural, symbolic, and territorial value of fire, demonstrating why its recognition is not only an act of historical justice but also an urgent necessity for designing fire management strategies that are more sensitive, context-specific, and sustainable, anchored in dialogue among science, policy, and Indigenous wisdom. Its content shows how deeply fire is rooted in the lives of communities in the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal, and how much local knowledge can contribute to appropriate fire management in the region.

This book is the result of the collective effort of participants in the “Project on Cultural Knowledge of the Use and Management of Fire in the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal, Chiapas, 2022–2026,” carried out in close collaboration with local communities and El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR). We thank everyone who has contributed to its production and hope its content serves as an inspiration to all those working in favour of an intercultural approach to fire management in Chiapas and beyond.

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Foreword

Throughout human history, there has never been a single year on this planet without a fire. What does that mean? That every year of humanity's existence, a battle has been lost, a failure? No. It simply means that fire is an integral and fundamental part of the world and of life itself, a dynamic component of nature and of the various ecosystems in which it appears. Fires, beyond their increase and devastation due to changing atmospheric conditions, land use, and economic dynamics, also contribute to ecosystems because they are natural events. Their recurrence and presence have taught valuable lessons to the peoples who have ancestrally inhabited these territories, allowing them to learn to live harmoniously with fire.

From this, we identify two key points: first, the existence of territories where fire is part of life-there—territories that have always been inhabited by peoples with centuries- or millennia-old cultures. We call these pyro-bio-cultural territories. Second, the peoples of these territories possess the wisdom of knowing-how-to-live-there—a culturally rooted way of coexisting with the nature they inhabit, including the presence of fire. These communities, who have not abandoned their ancestral wisdom, advocate for a respectful relationship with fire, teaching us that fire should never be seen, or worse, treated, as an enemy to be subdued or extinguished.

There are pyro-bio-cultural territories all around the world, inhabited by Indigenous peoples. Their ancestors have left a legacy of knowledge and care for fire, teaching that it should neither be ignored nor mistreated, but approached with respect. We depend on it.

What does it mean to respect fire? To treat it with humility, to learn from it, to know it, and to recognize its powerful vitality. A common understanding is that fire is a sacred being. But then, why do some sectors of society no longer see it this way, or have even forgotten this truth? It stems from a dominating mindset that desacralizes life and buries what is sacred. Delving into these matters reflects an intention to focus on what we call cultural dimensions, which invite us to recognize the legacies of life and values that give meaning to our actions. In this case, they remind us that fire has its own vital essence, which gives it its unique characteristics and qualities. Something we must approach with humility and strive to understand.

This provides the foundation for us to take on a major challenge: to reflect on and move beyond the way we have related to fire in recent decades, whether through social norms, laws, productivity-driven and capitalist economic logics, or even environmentalist, academic, or conservationist frameworks. These approaches have often shown little respect, for fire, for the land, for nature, or for the territories themselves. That is why we propose the need to take a step toward what we call: intercultural fire management.

Through the dialogues that shaped the work leading to this text, the community of Juncaná has generously shared with us a profoundly valuable legacy, one we deeply appreciate, respect, and from which we have much to learn. It is their knowledge of fire: how to manage it, how to understand it, and how to relate to it with affectionate respect. After listening to them, each of us is left with a question: how do we relate to fire, and what meaning does it hold in our individual lives, in our families, and as a society? The people of Juncaná have no doubt: they recognize fire as a being that listens and speaks, protector, messenger, and counselor; a source of joy and unity.

We all carry a historical and cultural responsibility to act with meaning, to cultivate the depth of our relationships and to nurture the sense of purpose in all things. This requires that we pause to contemplate, to truly listen to the words of those who carry wisdom, and to learn. We must act with intention, not out of obligation or unconscious routine. It calls for connection and awareness. It calls for doing with love, and for love.

The people of Juncaná show us their strong commitment to working collectively and in an organized way, strengthening community assemblies and contributing through active participation. But we must ask ourselves: is that our conviction as well—to work collectively and with organization? Or are we instead acting as mere bosses or errand-runners, lacking the ability for dialogue and driven by the mindset of those groups who claim power and seek to keep others in submission? To work collectively requires humility, willingness, and a positive attitude, qualities our ancestors and our communities have long taught us.



Raised hands, united voices: This is how Juncaná decides in assembly.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2025.

This text is a sharing of the cultural knowledge of the families of Juncaná, that is, their deeply rooted convictions in the memories and lives of their campesino and laborer ancestors, from Tseltal and Poptí cultures, within the ancestral Chuj territory. These convictions are as much rational as they are spiritual and religious, as much familial as communal; as hopeful for a future of life and dignity as they are practical for meeting the demands of harsh, everyday life.

Born from experiences and inherited legacies, as well as from opening themselves to what the heart of sacred corn, the heart of the mountains and water springs, and the heart of the sacred little fire express, this knowledge sustains their rebellions and resistances, refusing to leave to others the responsibility for the territory of which they are both caretakers and beneficiaries, the land where their grandmothers and grandfathers planted fields of large Juncaná corn. The people of this community, through their words, their work, and their stance, envision a future that, although difficult to achieve, is desirable and possible, a future of respect, love, care, working the land, traditions, and hospitality.

The current conditions of our planet, the climate crisis, the globalization of a harmful mindset focused on consumption and monetary gain, and the already affected state of our forests and lands, make the desirable future difficult to achieve. Yet these conditions also point to the path of what must be touched and transformed, calling on us to cultivate awareness, determination, and a strong conviction of what is ours in the face of what is foreign and dominating. In this way, we can assume our responsibilities in order to restore and reinstate, seeking to add rather than subtract or restrict.

We wish that this little fire, kindled and guarded by the beautiful heart of the people of Juncaná, never goes out, that it lights the paths ahead, clarifies the decisions that must be made, and warms our hearts to prepare us to work collectively and in an organized way for life, with intercultural fire management, and in harmony with all life. Life that is always community, life that surpasses us but also calls us and asks us to nourish it with our own lives.

Fernando Limón Aguirre

Comitán de Domínguez, Chiapas, April 10, 2025.

Introduction

Cultural knowledges give meaning to the presence and relevance of fire management in Juncaná, a municipality in La Trinitaria and part of Region XV Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. The people of Juncaná are characterized by their humility, solidarity, and determination in defending their ideals and their community (Ramos, 2023).

In Juncaná, the thoughts and voices of the people govern decision-making. The cultural knowledges of fire, deeply rooted among its inhabitants, have been passed down from generation to generation and continuously contextualized, constituting not only knowledges and dialogues around fire but also a form of community organization that responds to the symbiotic relationship between the residents and their territory.

In this context, fire is not limited to being a production tool; it is an essential element of their territoriality and way of life, both inside the home and in the fields, in agriculture, cooking fires, and rituals.

The name Juncaná, which in Maya Tseltal can be interpreted as "a star" (referring to a Maya calendar date), reflects the deep connection of its inhabitants with the land. The milpas, which form part of the landscape and family livelihood, are prepared through the judicious use of fire, a tangible manifestation of respect for nature.

In recent decades, these cultural knowledges have faced serious threats such as climate change, which has altered crop cycles by prolonging droughts and modifying cultural fire regimes. Furthermore, government policies have attempted to restrict the cultural use of fire without considering the ancestral knowledges and ecological processes that support it.

In Juncaná, the experience and practices of fire use serve as a means to preserve and transmit knowledges and are also a key component of cultural resistance to contemporary challenges. The inhabitants of Juncaná have developed an organized system of fire management based on collective experience, historical memory, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledges.



Where the past still stands: traces that dialogue with the present.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2025.

This approach is not arbitrary but responds to a coherent management structure that maintains the balance between nature and community life.

Recognizing the cultural and ecological importance of these knowledges is fundamental for formulating fire management strategies that respect local knowledges and ways of life, while also contributing to the sustainability of ecosystems and the well-being of the community.

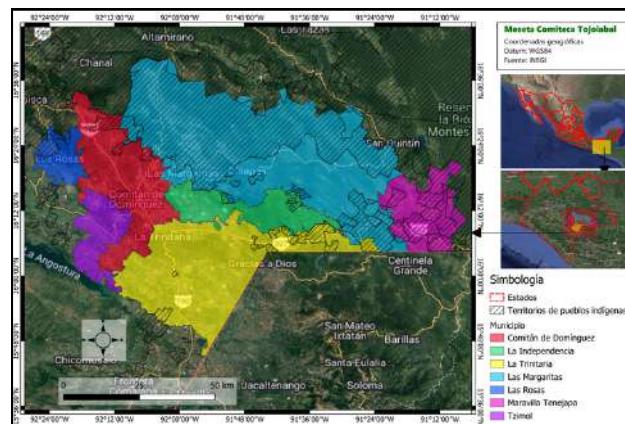
The inhabitants of Juncaná distinguish between controlled use of fire, such as agricultural burns, and wildfires. Men and women know that the burns that should be carried out are done with caution and technique, have a purpose and objective, and must be supervised at all times by the participants or landowners.

Wildfires, on the other hand, locally known as “quemazones”, are seen as a dangerous threat with negative consequences in Juncaná. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights the importance of fire in the cultural practices of community organization for its management. As is commonly said: “the burn helps”, while “the big wildfire doesn’t”.

This document aims to provide resources to understand the presence and meaning of fire in Juncaná, exposing some practices that, coming from the past, are part of the present. It seeks to emphasize that the knowledges supporting these fire management practices are part of a broader constellation encompassing community and territorial life. Beyond their historical continuity, it is essential to understand why fire remains present in Juncaná and what role it plays in daily life. Its persistence responds to concrete needs of the community, both in terms of agricultural production and social and spiritual cohesion. The goal is to value the necessity of fire use and the importance of preserving these knowledges to promote territorial conservation while maintaining the community’s ways of life.



Sunset over a traditional milpa, where maize, beans, and zucchini are grown.
© Iokiñe Rodríguez, 2024.



Location of the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal.
© Shrey Rakholia, 2025.

This document is part of the project “Cultural Knowledges of Fire Use and Management in the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal”, which aims to analyze the cultural knowledges related to lived experiences with fire among the peoples and cultures present in communities across the municipalities of Comitán, Las Margaritas, La Independencia, La Trinitaria, Tzimol, Maravilla Tenejapa, and Villa Las Rosas. Based on this, a fire management proposal is currently being developed, one that integrates epistemic and cultural diversity, as well as the socioeconomic needs of the inhabitants.

Throughout this text, Juncaná will be presented as a territory where fire is not only a practical element but also a symbol of the deep connection between the community and its environment. Furthermore, this document will explore how this territory has served as a space of resistance and transformation, with fire playing a fundamental role in these processes.

The understanding of fire as a cultural pillar among the people of Juncaná will include its symbolism and its role within the community, highlighting the importance of this “numinous being”. Finally, a collective and dialogical reflection will be offered, pointing to the need to integrate intercultural fire management strategies that respect both the knowledges of different ethnolinguistic groups and their relationship with the territory, as well as the contemporary challenges in a context of climate crisis.



Natural transition where the forest and the milpa meet.

© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.



Walking through places of interest with the inhabitants of Juncaná.

© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

The information supporting this document is based on research using participatory methodologies and the active involvement of local authorities and the inhabitants of Juncaná. Through interviews, focus groups, life stories, social mapping, and walks through the territory, as well as participation in festive activities and meetings at various times, experiences and knowledge about the use of fire have been gathered from 2022 to the present, allowing the symbolic and subjective dimensions of this practice to be made visible.

Juncaná: A Pyrobiocultural Territory

Fire, in the construction of territoriality, is considered a life-giving articulator. In this sense, it must be understood as a historical and cultural element that acquires its meaning from the elements with which it is intertwined: territory, people, and biological and cultural diversity. Therefore, it is necessary to turn our attention to what concretely happens between the peoples and their pyrobiocultural territories. To achieve this, it is essential to understand, through the voices of the inhabitants themselves, how they have acquired, shaped, transmitted, and implemented the various cultural knowledges, particularly those linked to fire, in their practices.

A pyrobiocultural territory is a living, culturized space in which the interaction and influence of fire on its ecosystem are recognized, as well as its impact on the social and cultural practices of the communities that inhabit it, shaping their way of life. In this type of territory, not only ecological components such as biodiversity are considered, but also the cultural, social, and economic aspects of the local communities. The term pyrobiocultural emphasizes how the use and management of fire, whether in agriculture, rituals, or cultural practices, impact and shape both the natural environment and the social and cultural life of the people who inhabit it.

Juncaná is a clear example of a pyrobiocultural territory, shaped throughout its history by the social dynamics and cultural practices of its population. It is surrounded by pine-oak forests and is near the Montebello Lakes National Park. Climatic variability directly influences agriculture and the management of natural resources: the dry season, from December to February, is followed by heavy rains in April and May. However, the inhabitants have noticed changes in the seasons, such as delayed rainfall, which affects land preparation and harvest times.



Participatory research in Juncaná
©Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2023.



Cultural burning for agricultural purposes.
© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

Fire that rekindles the dialogue of Juncaná's memory.
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The heart of the forest, where the water is born.
© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

The forest is a space of great value, as it houses a spring that supplies water to the community. For the inhabitants, this territory is not only a source of resources but also a place of healing. Don Manuel, a community member, expresses: "When one is sick or sad, going to the mountain gives strength, that strength is oxygen".



Mural depicting life on the old Juncaná hacienda and the struggles for freedom of the Juncaná people.

© Arely Mundo Gopar, Seucy Maldonado, Nery Muñoz López.



Monument to Colombian General José María Melo.

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Remnants of the old "Casona" of the hacienda.

© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2022.

Most of the inhabitants of Juncaná were born in the region, although some have roots in San Antonio Huixta, Guatemala. While Spanish is the predominant language, past generations spoke Poptí' and Tseltal, reflecting the cognitive and linguistic richness of the area and the convergence of cultural heritages that remain vibrant and strong. Migration has been a constant since the 1950s, with destinations including Comitán, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the State of Mexico, Coahuila, and even the United States, all in search of better opportunities.

Over time, Juncaná has witnessed significant historical moments, such as the death of José María Melo, a Colombian general who, after fighting alongside the liberator Simón Bolívar, joined the ranks of Benito Juárez. It has also been a site of land struggles, especially when the hacienda changed hands several times until it was acquired in 1904 by Abelardo Cristiani and Rebeca Romero. Although the inhabitants were unable to access the land during President Cárdenas's Agrarian Reform, they managed to consolidate ownership of their limited territory in 1945, allowing them to preserve their cultural practices.

The presence of fire in Juncaná has been central since its origins as a hacienda, owned by various proprietors, from the Gandulfo family to the Cristiani family. During this period, the so-called "peones baldíos" (landless laborers) depended on the land and fire as essential tools for agricultural work and daily life. With the consolidation of the territory in 1945, 29 inhabitants acquired ownership and continued their cultural practices, including fire management. Other families of the laborers, after the dissolution of large haciendas and the agrarian reform process, founded the Unión Juárez ejido.

Fire is an intrinsic element of their collective cultural knowledges. Through maps and narratives, key points where the use of fire is essential have been identified: in the milpa, for agricultural burns; in the pasture, for grass burning; in hunting, where fires are lit at cave entrances to produce smoke and force animals out; and intradomestically, in the hearths. Additionally, fire is used in festivals and religious celebrations as a symbol of purification, and for ritual purposes, such as lighting small candles in caves to ward off evil spirits. It is also used for burning trash and for protection against snakes. Finally, fire was employed in construction, especially for producing lime.

Despite conflicts arising from a negative perception of its use by some governmental institutions, mainly at the state level, fire has remained a symbol of resistance and cohesion. Through walks guided by the inhabitants themselves, it has been possible to understand where each activity takes place and the role of fire in Juncaná as a pirobiocultural territory. These explorations have helped identify spaces for activities such as milpa cultivation, firewood extraction, wooded areas, and zones more prone to fires. They have also recognized paths, trails leading to plots, sites of natural and historical interest, places of memory and offerings, and water springs.

This precision represents a strength that the community acknowledges in their conversations, showcasing their deep knowledge of the territory in contrast to external actors who lack this understanding. Moreover, the stories intertwine with the community's history, enriching the comprehension of fire in their daily life. The following sections detail the key aspects of pirobioculturality in Juncaná.



The cross: symbol, offering, and protection.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2023.



Creation of social cartography to locate areas of biocultural value.
© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.



Paths of knowledge: walks and journeys through the Juncaná territory.
© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza. 2023.

Fire as a Link to the Past

In Juncaná, archaeological remains of ancient Maya settlements have been found, such as stelae and constructions on hills like El Campanario and Juncaná. These remnants not only evidence the Maya presence in the region but also highlight the importance of fire in their cultural, agricultural, and ritual practices. During the 17th century, a friar documented the existence of a ruling lineage led by the legendary Balun Canan, who governed this large area (now a cross-border region between Mexico and Guatemala). Historical and archaeological records indicate that fire was an essential tool both in religious ceremonies and in the delimitation of territories.

Other ritual elements reinforce this connection to the pre-Hispanic era. According to Professor Baltasar, the meanings of Juncaná ("a star") and Balun Canan ("nine stars") are not only etymological but are deeply linked to the cosmos, where fire functioned as a means of spiritual communication.

Over time, the ritualization of fire has undergone transformations, greatly influenced by religious practices and cultural syncretism. However, a language and dialogue with fire persist, one that rarely manifests publicly and is mostly preserved within the intimate space of the home, where the family gathers around it.



Metate and 'Bach' stone on Juncaná hill.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2025.



19th-century sugar mill structure, built on the slopes of the ancient archaeological site of Juncaná, dated around 500 A.D.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2025.



Mural "Identidad Historica de Juncana".
© Arely Mundo Gopar, Seucy Maldonado, Nery Muñoz López.



Mural "Feria del Elote".
© Nery Muñoz López y Jonathan Alexis López Ferreyra.

A clear example of this relationship can be seen in the Elote (Corn) Festival, where women prepare a wide variety of dishes that highlight local flavors and traditions.



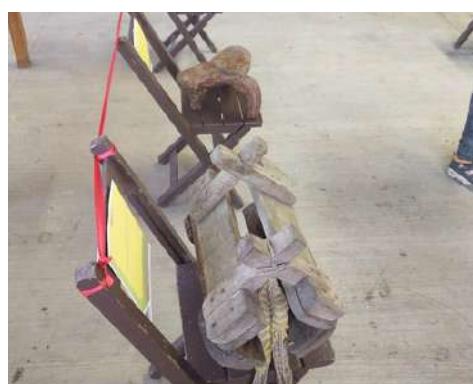
Don Mario Vázquez Alfaro, participant in the Golden Ear of Corn contest.

© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2024.



Greased Pole contest.

© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2024.



Exhibition of farming tools and traditional household items.

© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2023.



Dance representing the milpa and communal work.

© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2023.

In this context, fire acts as a vehicle for preserving ancestral recipes, passing down through generations the culinary skills that characterize the community. The meticulous organization of utensils and the careful selection of firewood for cooking reflect wisdom acquired over the years.

Every year, during the Elote Festival, a contest is held to win the coveted “Golden Ear of Corn” prize. This competition evaluates characteristics of the ear of corn, such as the base, the center, and the tip, among other aspects. Additionally, other contests take place, including the greased pole climb, the blackened comal, and the best tortilla. Amid all this lively activity, children participate in a dance related to the milpa. Central to this performance are corn plants and traditional farming tools. There are also exhibitions of photography and agricultural implements.

Fire in Juncaná holds a deep spiritual meaning. The elder women, especially the grandmothers, play a key role in transmitting this symbolism. During the preparation of corn atol, for example, before serving it, they offer a portion to the fire and the earth as a gesture of gratitude. This ritual act symbolizes the connection between humans and nature, reflecting the ancestral view that fire is not just a tool but a sacred being to whom homage is paid.

The following section explores the cultural significance of fire in Juncaná, delving into its management, attributes, and how different community members relate to it.

Cultural Meaning of Fire in Juncaná

The meaning and attributes of fire vary according to age and gender. Men, women, elders, and youth establish different bonds with fire, relating to it in distinct ways. Their way of perceiving, feeling, and connecting with it is shaped by the need to obtain a direct or indirect benefit, or even by the intention to engage in a dialogue. In the home, fire must always be present: "in the morning, at noon, at night, every day of the year".

Who is the fire and what does it represent?

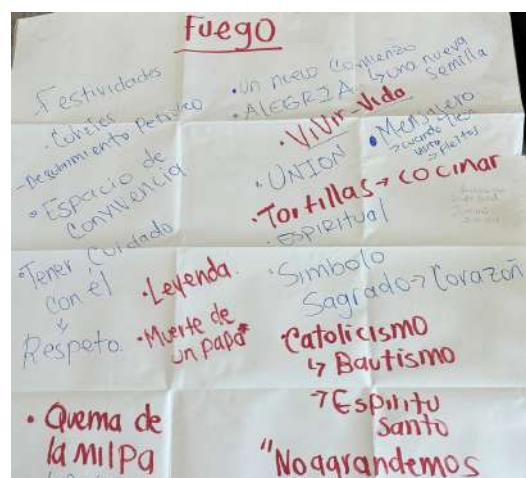
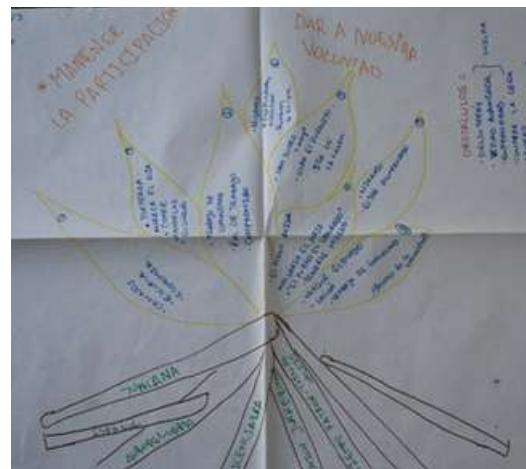
Fire has its own identity and is considered a member of the household, participating in daily tasks. From the moment it is lit, it brings life to the home, marking the start of a new day and the beginning of the family's activities. The fire in the stove is not the same as the one in the hearth; the latter has presence, personality, and character.

Essential in the home, in the fields, and in social life, fire is more than a simple functional element, it is a cultural and ecological engine deeply connected to community life. It not only warms, cooks, lights, and accompanies.

One of the locals expresses it simply but powerfully:

"If you want to eat, you make your little fire; fire is the happiest thing. Where do you make your little tortillas?"

In this context, fire becomes a space for gathering and work, as well as a symbol of distinction. Fire transcends its basic role; it is seen as a being with its own identity, a wise grandfather who not only warms and lights but also listens, speaks, and guides. For some, fire is a protector; for others, an advisor and bearer of omens. No matter how it is perceived, fire is present in everyone's life.



The little fire of life: Narrating experiences and knowledges around fire.

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During a nighttime gathering around the fire, participants shared their thoughts and reflections. Their voices revealed a deep knowledge and connection with this symbolic fire:

- “Fire is a new beginning”. (Juan Carlos, 2023)
- “Fire has been considered a numinous being, a living entity, the grandfather of respect and danger”. (Baltasar, 2023)
- “Fire is a flame, a light that illuminates natural life”. (Don Manuel, Juncaná, 2023)
- “Fire is part of us, part of the universe. We live thanks to fire; all the energy we have is fire. Since we are in this life, we must fight for and love fire”. (Don Baltasar, Juncaná, 2023)

In Juncaná, despite the advances of modernity, fire remains fundamental to community life: “It’s around the stove that conversation flows best”, they tell us, because the fire listens and speaks:

- “Because the fire is listening, the fire talks, scolds, warns, says you will have visitors, the fire gets angry, it announces calamity; it’s always speaking in the present, meaning fire doesn’t talk about the past but about what is coming”. (Don Baltasar, Juncaná, 2023)

Regarded as a sacred being, fire—as well as water—is an element that must be respected; one cannot play with them because they are sacred. Spiritually, fire is the flame of the community. It is also a metaphor for peace in times of conflict: “Let’s not enlarge the fire,” people say, because a problem can start as a small flame but if uncontrolled, it can destroy all harmony.

- “The flame of the heart... This needs to be discussed a lot, about what fire is, because it has five dimensions: the spiritual, the individual, the partial, the communal, and the sustaining. From these come all people’s ideas”. (Manuel, Juncaná, 2023)

Uses, meanings, and virtues of fire

In Juncaná, fire is deeply intertwined with conversations, revelations, prayers, and healing. Its presence marks key moments in daily life.

Fire in the kitchen: Women have a special relationship with the fire in the hearths. Their interaction with it reflects knowledge of the secrets that the fire has revealed to help in cooking. For example, if the food burns, there is a secret: to speak to the fire to try to save it. The first thing to do is to blow on the pot with the apron or blouse and say to the fire: “I went to the plaza and didn’t take care of you”.



Doña Esperanza next to a modern fogón.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2024.

When the food needs to cook faster, they say:

“Boil, boil, boil, Dorita (golden one), I want you for today, not for tomorrow”.

The fire as a messenger: At the hearth, fire gives signals, warnings, omens, and even scoldings. “The fire wants to speak a word, a message”. That’s why its presence is essential during community gatherings. Fire is “like joy and unity”. This is how sacred fire is in Juncaná, like life itself, an ally of existence and a pillar of the community.

These messages are interpreted through different characteristics of the fire in the hearth:

- **Color:** The normal color of fire is orange. A green or yellow flame indicates anger; if it turns blue, it foretells a visitor; a red flame symbolizes danger. In that case, women offer masa (corn dough) to the fire so it can “eat” and keep everyone safe. It can also be soothed by sprinkling a bit of water on it.
- **Sound:** A prolonged wail followed by small thunder-like noises is considered a scolding from the fire, whereas if it sounds like a dog's panting, it may be a sign that visitors are coming.
- **Shape:** The shape of the flame reflects the state of the family. When there is peace in the family, the flame is steady; this is known as the flame of life. If the logs produce “offshoots” of fire in the main flame, it is said to be angry, and that is why it scolds. Another sign of anger is when the fire breaks down the logs and a soft wailing sound can be heard.
- **Cooking:** If the first tortilla of the day flips on the griddle and breaks in two, it is interpreted as the imminent arrival of a visitor.



Light and Wisdom: Fire as a Messenger.
© Iokiñe Rodriguez, 2024.

“The fire goes ahead, announcing sad omens with sparks and sounds”. When this happens, a dialogue begins between the women and the fire, as they are the ones who best converse with it in the home. This dialogue can be tender, but there are also times when the women scold the fire in return. After this, they rearrange the logs in the hearth, adjusting the fire's intensity to prevent harmful messages from coming true.

Fire as witness and mediator: Fire is called upon to witness important events. One example is the request for engagement between a young man and woman. In Juncaná, in earlier times, the suitor would undergo a ritual that symbolized burning, using spicy chili consumed in a sauce. The purpose of the chili was to ignite the suitor's passion, to make him suffer, to inflame him, to make him sweat from the heat, and ultimately to bring him to tears. In this way, the chili stood in for the fire. Before taking the bride, the suitor had to "pay" by being "burned" and enduring this torture; however, for the family, this act was seen as refreshing.

When a family opposed a marriage, the groom's relatives would bring a gift to "extinguish the fire" of anger and restore peace. During celebrations, once the food and dancing began, it was said that "the fire has gone out", meaning that there was no more resentment in their hearts, and without the flame that had burned them, the union was sealed.

Fire in healing: Fire is also regarded as a healing element:

- **Burns:** The "fire is sucked out" to extract the heat from the affected skin. Only someone with the gift of healing can perform this. Some people place a cloth over the burn, then blow on it and suck the area. During the process, the fire is spoken to lovingly, telling it that it is good to heal the person, that it is caring, and the skin is told: "Little skin, we love you; you have to recover".
- **Evil eye:** Older people tend to have more body heat, more "flame" or fire, and are therefore considered more capable of curing the evil eye.
- **Fever:** To reduce a fever, feet are soaked in water mixed with ashes.
- **Stomach ache:** A burned toast with mint (yerbabuena) is consumed to relieve discomfort.



Church of the Most Holy Immaculate Virgin of the Conception: The flame of the candles is a way of drawing near to the sacred.

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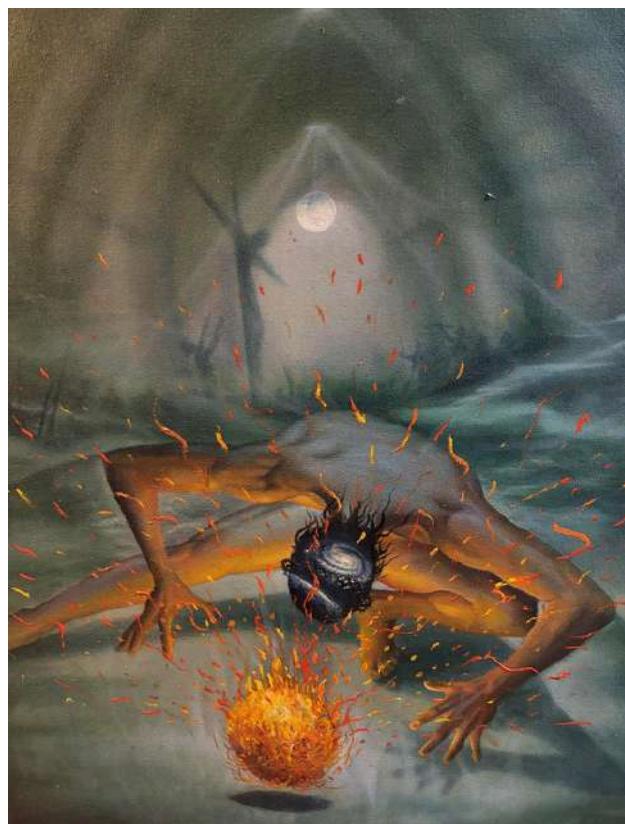
Fire as a guide on the journey: When a loved one sets out on a journey, the mother or grandmother "cleanses" them with a candle and keeps the flame burning until their return. During wakes, the fire must not be extinguished until the nine-day mourning period is completed, as it is believed to be the soul's final refuge on its passage to the afterlife.

Some residents of Juncaná recall that, in the great cultures of the past, the fire in the hearth was never allowed to go out, because they understood that fire is the essence of life. If it went out, it symbolized death.

The sacredness of fire: In Juncaná, candles were lit in caves to ward off evil spirits and to pray for people's well-being, revealing the fire's connection to the divine and its role as a protector. Today, fire symbolizes energy, light, and life, as reflected in the small candles lit in the Catholic temple. Additionally, a procession is held that stops at various points in the community before reaching the church, mirroring the eternal dance of the stars around the sun.

Magical beings and fire: The term Cachoj may be a local or regional variation of the word K'akchoj, which refers to balls of fire or intense light seen in the hills at night. These sightings are viewed by the people of Juncaná as a mysterious phenomenon, often associated with the belief that they indicate the presence of buried gold or money in the area where they appear.

However, these lights also inspire fear among the population, as it is believed that those who see them may suffer memory loss and disorientation. It is said that people become hypnotized by these lights and, upon regaining consciousness, find themselves in locations different from where they originally were. This phenomenon, widely reported by witnesses, reinforces the perception of mystery and the supernatural connected to fire.



Between Fire and the Cosmos.
© Juan Chawuk

The following section focuses on the differentiated use of fire between men and women, highlighting the role of gender in its cultural management.

Logic of the differentiated use of fire between women and men

The logic of fire use in Juncaná between women and men is defined by the context in which it is employed. From there, different, though complementary, roles are assumed in the well-being of the family. Women “possess great intelligence in using fire”, as demonstrated by their experience and wisdom in relating to one of the most important elements in daily life.

The women of Juncaná maintain a close and familiar relationship with fire, being responsible for managing it within the domestic sphere. In their hands, fire becomes not only the centerpiece of the hearth but also of festivities, such as in the example of the Corn Fair mentioned earlier.

It is clear that the role of women is influenced by cultural and gender norms that limit their participation in certain activities. Although girls accompany boys in the burnings at a young age, they do not continue with this practice into adulthood. Therefore, they have specialized in the management of fire within the home and in ceremonies, in the secrets and sacredness of fire, in the hearths, and in the dialogues they maintain with it from early morning until nightfall.

In the spiritual realm, older women, especially grandmothers, play a crucial role in transmitting this symbolism. For example, during the preparation of corn atol, before serving it to those present, the grandmothers offer a portion to the fire and the earth as a gesture of gratitude. This ritual act not only symbolizes the connection between the human and the natural but also reveals the ancestral view that fire is not just a resource for cooking but a sacred being to whom homage is paid.

In the agricultural field, women's participation in the crop burnings is limited, as this activity is mostly assigned to men, reflecting the gender norms governing the community. Fire in Juncaná, then, is shaped as a potential space for social change. While women specialize in the intra-domestic and ceremonial use of fire, their involvement in fieldwork is indispensable. Nevertheless, their participation in agricultural burnings is limited, highlighting a deep division of roles based on gender.



Doña María Luisa Ramírez Vázquez showing the drawing of the process of opening the guardarraya during a burn.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2023.

The role of men is sometimes not directly reflected in the intra-domestic use of fire or in festivities, such as in the preparation of atol, where they may not be involved directly. However, they are responsible for cutting the firewood, arranging the logs, and ensuring that their assigned role is fulfilled according to the list and instructions given by the assembly, where they are also tasked with lighting the fire. Primarily, they focus on the practices of using fire in the fields.

Both men and women understand the importance of establishing a friendly relationship with fire: "Each person has to find their fire and tend to it". Naturally, there are shared spaces and uses of fire between both genders. For example, in case of an emergency when the wife is ill, the man must take care of the domestic fire.

Although the management of fire in Juncaná is deeply marked by gender roles, its presence in daily life transcends these divisions and becomes a unifying element. Beyond its differentiated use between men and women, fire is the heart of the home, a symbol of warmth, gathering, and cultural continuity. To better understand its importance in family and community dynamics, it is necessary to delve into the space where it takes center stage: the fogón.



The male role in community fire.
© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

Fogones: Fire as the center of the home

In Juncaná, the fogón remains the center of the home and a place for gathering and reflection. Beyond its practical function, it is a meeting point where conversations take place, decisions are made, and knowledge is passed down. Its presence has shaped the rhythm of daily life for generations.

As Don Baltasar recalls:

"The children competed for the spots closest to the hearth, where the fire comforts and brings everyone together".

Lighting the hearth is an act full of meaning. Before lighting it, the hearth area is cleaned:

"[...] before lighting it, the floor of the hearth must be cleaned with a damp cloth; then, a cross is made, which can be done with a piece of charcoal, a corn cob, or just with a finger. Some elder women do it in the air".



Fogón, a space of warmth, words, and memory.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2025.

This practice represents protection and respect. Although the use of eco-friendly stoves has increased, the “secret” of lighting the fire remains alive.

Some people associate it with ancient beliefs about protection against negative energies or connection with the spiritual. In fact, there are parallels with pre-Hispanic rituals, such as the lighting of the new fire in Aztec tradition. This suggests that rather than an isolated custom, it is a practice deeply rooted in local history and culture.

The fogón, besides being the center of the home, is just one of the many expressions of the relationship that the community of Juncaná maintains with fire. Its use extends beyond the domestic and ceremonial spheres, also encompassing essential productive activities. In particular, fire plays a fundamental role in agriculture, where agricultural burnings are part of ancestral knowledge that adapts to present-day challenges.



Warmth of the Fogón in the Celebrations of the Corn Fair.

© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2024.

Use of fire in agricultural burnings within the “milpa” production system

Agricultural burnings in Juncaná are fundamental for preparing the land, reflecting a deep knowledge of fire with its cultural and ecological dimensions, passed down through generations and adapted to climate changes and the modernization of agriculture. These practices aim to maintain balance with nature. However, despite their benefits, controversies have arisen, especially due to regulations that do not consider the diversity of cultural meanings and forms related to fire, nor the variety of pyrobiocultural territories.

In the fields, fire is mainly used in agricultural burnings to prepare the soil, renew pasture, hunt animals hiding in burrows, and, in the past, for producing lime used in construction.

Lime production required firing stones in ovens through long nights. A resident of Juncaná proudly recalls how his family was a pioneer in selling lime in the community. Since childhood, he accompanied his father, collecting stones and feeding the fire. This process, which lasted for days, depended on fire not only to sustain the firing but also as a constant companion, keeping them focused and awake, much like in agricultural burnings.

In agriculture, some of the advantages and disadvantages mentioned were:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Organic fertilization with ash is considered a fertilizer that promotes greater growth and yield of corn.	Soil degradation due to the heat of the burning, which depletes soil fertility (when used frequently).
Pest control: pests are eliminated and the health of the crop is maintained.	Dryness in the soil when it doesn't rain.
It stimulates the regrowth of spiny plants, a species of important firewood.	It can cause wildfires if not done properly.
It facilitates agricultural work in land preparation because it reduces the amount of residue in the soil.	Smoke causes discomfort.
It is a low-cost tool.	
The use of agrochemicals is eliminated.	

Figure 1. Advantages and disadvantages of agricultural burnings in Juncaná.

Within Juncaná, there is a regulation for carrying out agricultural burnings, which is established through agreements made in the ejidal assembly. Some of the main agreements include: notifying the municipal agent before conducting a burn, never burning alone and always doing it in the company of others, carrying out the burn in the morning when there is no sun, avoiding burning on very windy days, conducting the corresponding patrol, and above all, being very careful when starting the burn to prevent escapes. In case a wildfire is caused, the responsible person must pay a fine or repair the damages.

Additionally, there are specific dates to carry out different actions throughout the year, ranging from land preparation to *tapisca* (Figure 2).

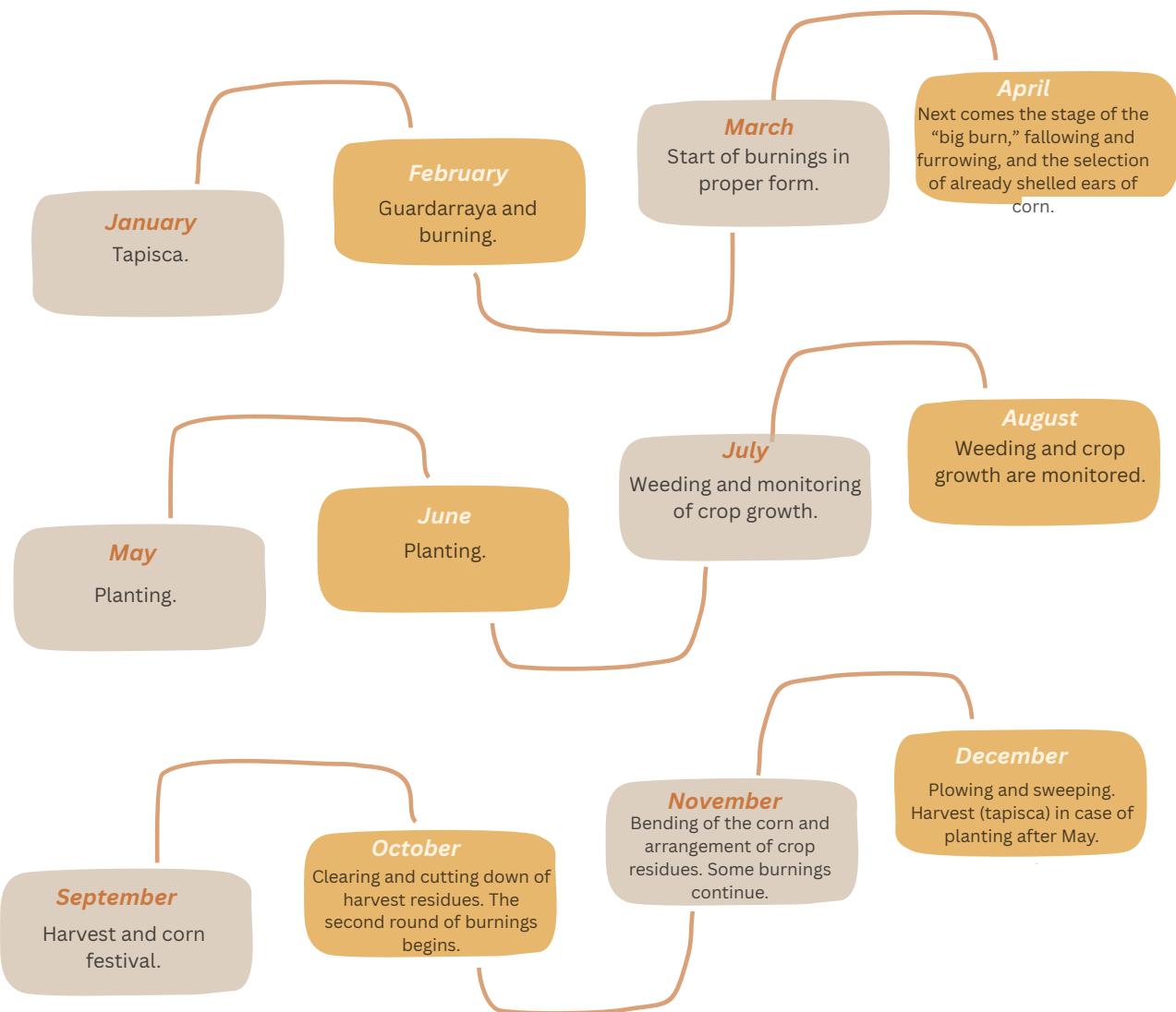


Figure 2. Calendar of burnings in Juncaná

The dates have had to be adjusted due to increasingly noticeable climate changes. These changes affect not only land preparation but also cultural activities, such as the corn festival. Previously, this festival was held in January, coinciding with the maize harvest. However, due to climate shifts and their impact on production, the date has been moved, and it is now celebrated in September.



Don Rodrigo, whose role with the branch is to ensure that the fire does not escape from the plot.

© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.



Participants making the firebreak before starting the agricultural burning.

© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.



Agricultural burning process: “spreading the fire”.

© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

Reflections on the Wisdom of Cultural Fire Management: Perspectives from Juncaná



Night of dialogue on experiences in fire management.

© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

After presenting the lived experience of the population of Juncaná, showcasing their knowledge and connection with fire, three sections are presented below. Based on the ethnography of Juncaná, these sections contain general reflections on territoriality related to fire. The intention is to situate the observed practices within the framework of cultural fire management, proposing possible directions for the understanding and integration of pyrobiocultural territories in Mexico as part of an intercultural fire management strategy.



Talk about the cultural use of fire in the past and present.

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Cultural fire management

Participatory observation of burning practices and their relationship with fire, both inside and outside the homes in Juncaná, has made it possible to document how the community collectively organizes and plans its management. Each member plays a specific role within this process, demonstrating a fluid and precise organization. This structure results from a deep knowledge of the territory and trust in cultural practices passed down from generation to generation.

Cultural fire management originates within communities to reclaim knowledge and historical memories, granting legitimacy to community organization based on the understanding of the relationship between humanity and fire in the territory. In this space, people recognize each other and the fire, giving it a fundamental role in their daily lives.



Activity: fire lived, fire felt.

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Legitimizing cultural fire management means recognizing and validating the practices of communities without confronting them with external values, granting autonomy and territorial authority to their inhabitants to make decisions about fire management in a way that aligns with their values, nature, and ways of life. This approach fosters a shared sense of responsibility toward building, inhabiting, and caring for the world.

The strategic components of cultural fire management are fundamental to achieving the goals of understanding the knowledge and cultural practices linked to fire. Our approach is sustainable, grounded in the roots of the historical memory of the peoples to reduce the risk of wildfires without abandoning the use of fire. This involves adopting culturally appropriate and environmentally responsible approaches. Additionally, *cultural conservation* plays a key role in preserving the cultural knowledge of fire, promoting its transmission across generations and ensuring its revitalization.

Challenges in cultural fire management

This section analyzes the main challenges of cultural fire management based on observations made in Juncaná. The points presented here should not be seen as an exclusive reflection of the community, but rather as broader issues that may apply to different contexts within the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal.

The climate crisis has had a significant impact on agricultural production practices and fire management in Juncaná and other areas of the region. Additionally, the loss of knowledge about fire-related practices has increased the risk of accidental wildfires, while institutional distrust of traditional knowledge and cultural fire management has hindered community adaptation to new realities. As noted, “modern science has replaced some ancestral practices, but these remain vital for the community”.

Cultural fire use goes far beyond being a simple ancestral technique; it constitutes a deep bond between communities and their environment. These practices reflect knowledge accumulated over generations and are fundamental to the sustainable development of pyrobiocultural territories. Maintaining a balance between ecosystem services and the socioeconomic benefits derived from fire use is essential for productive systems.

It is crucial to preserve and revitalize this knowledge, as it is at risk of disappearing, which could have serious consequences for community livelihoods. In this context, the planning, implementation, and monitoring of Cultural Fire Management Protocols (CFMP) should be key components in pyrobiocultural territories. These plans must be scalable and adaptable, adopting a participatory approach that integrates cultural realities, the agroecological benefits of fire, and respect for nature.

Moreover, the revitalization of these practices must face emerging challenges such as the climate crisis, ensuring food sovereignty and socio-environmental and epistemic justice. Cultural fire management must be inclusive and respectful, considering differences in gender, ethnicity, and social groups (indigenous peoples, mestizos, Afro-Mexicans, etc.), promoting integration that reflects the diverse ways communities relate to fire.

As reiterated throughout this document, fire in Juncaná is not only a tool for work but also a manifestation of collective identity, an element that connects the spiritual, the everyday, and the cultural.

Juncaná faces various challenges that put the continuity of these practices at risk. Among the main obstacles are:

Lack of institutional support: Many institutions do not recognize the importance of cultural fire management and do not provide the necessary backing for its preservation or for strengthening the community in this area.

Regulatory restrictions: Environmental regulations can limit the community's ability to carry out cultural burns, making it difficult to transmit and conserve this knowledge.

Resource scarcity: The lack of financial, human, and technical support hinders the implementation of these practices and community training about their importance.

Climate crisis: The intensification of drought periods interferes with the cultural use of fire, delaying land preparation and affecting food sovereignty. Additionally, burning at the wrong time increases the risk of wildfires.

Lack of coordination and communication: The absence of effective collaboration between government institutions complicates the implementation of fire management strategies based on cultural knowledge, because on one hand some institutions promote NOM-015 for fire use, while other state institutions criminalize the use of fire.

Despite these challenges, the community of Juncaná maintains a strong connection to its territory and a deep knowledge of cultural fire management. As a community member expresses: "Fire means union, and you can see it because we are gathered here, happy with the conversation, and it is because of fire". This vision reflects how fire is more than a tool; it is a bond that strengthens social cohesion.

Juncaná also faces problems such as water scarcity during the dry season, when the gravity-fed distribution system fails, and inequality in access to support for community projects compared to other ejidos. Older adults, in particular, face economic difficulties due to their dependence on laborers for burning and maintaining their plots. Still, the community adapts to new realities while defending its cultural practices.



Tour through different historical sites that are part of Juncaná's heritage.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2024.



Walking towards the plot of land.
© Viviana Ramírez Loaiza, 2023.

Vision on collaborative fire management

As has been emphasized throughout this document, the cultural management of fire represents a tradition that connects the community with its territory and history. Social participation is a fundamental strategy to strengthen and legitimize the right to voice and vote in decision-making regarding intercultural fire management. From this perspective, social programs must guarantee the participation of owners and holders of forest, agricultural, and livestock lands in designing participatory methodologies that leverage the cultural and local resources and knowledge available in the territories.

To strengthen intercultural fire management, several key strategies are proposed:

- **Participatory regulation:** Develop regulations on the cultural use of fire through consultation processes in community assemblies, ensuring the effective inclusion of the voice and vote of the inhabitants. This allows regulations to be contextualized and relevant to the specific realities, needs, and practices of each community.
- **Community burn calendar:** Design a calendar based on local conditions and cultural knowledge, considering territorial factors such as vegetation, climate, topography, and community organization.
- **Cultural knowledge in burns:** Implement burns with the accompaniment of experts and fire corridors from each community or institution to ensure the success of the burns.
- **Community projects for knowledge preservation:** Include women, men, elders, youth, and children in the transmission and strengthening of historical memory, with the goal of preserving cultural knowledge for new generations. This work continues through expressions such as art and music, which have already served as valuable means to keep the tradition alive.
- **Publications in native language:** Develop outreach materials about the cultural use of fire in local languages, ensuring their accessibility.
- **Incorporation into legislation:** Recognize cultural fire management in national and state regulations by adapting public policies to promote sustainable practices based on key articles, such as the first part of Article 2 of the Political Constitution, which affirms that the Mexican nation has a pluricultural composition, and that the existence and the right to free



Flower of the Dead: a Juncaná song that revives memory and ignites the heart.
©Alba de la Cruz Vázquez Ortega, 2024.

Self-determination of Indigenous peoples and the General Law of Sustainable Forest Development, which defines the concept of fire management and recognizes its role in ecosystems, in addition to NOM-015.

- **Bridging the gap between government authorities and academics:** Promote collaboration between government institutions (municipal, state, and federal) and scientific bodies to integrate technical knowledge with cultural practices that are part of the territory. An example of this effort were the two workshops organized last year by ECOSUR and CONANP in the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal: the First Workshop on Intercultural Fire Management and the First Community Meeting on Cultural Fire Management. These events involved various local communities as well as national and international institutions, fostering a dialogue that recognized and valued the knowledge and experiences in fire management alongside technical and scientific approaches.



Workshop on intercultural fire management in the protected natural areas of the Southern Border Region, Isthmus, and Southern Pacific.

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Dissemination, communication, and intercultural education are fundamental to promoting fire management that respects and values cultural knowledge, with its particularities in local contexts. Information must be accessible and adapted to the cultural and linguistic realities of the communities. Through intercultural communication strategies, an open and respectful dialogue among different actors can be fostered, facilitating collaborative fire management. Likewise, intercultural education, integrated into educational programs, will strengthen cultural identity and ensure the transmission of this knowledge to new generations.



Don Tiburcio Morales, from San Felipe Jatape, Montes Azules, uses the CONAFOR drip torch.
© Laura Patricia Ponce Calderón, 2024.

For cultural fire management to be effective, its legitimization within municipal and state regulations is essential. Recognizing it as a cornerstone in national strategies will strengthen community participation, align public policies with local realities, and promote sustainable practices that preserve both culture and the environment. In this way, cultural fire management will not only ensure ecological sustainability but also contribute to preserving identity and social cohesion in communities like Juncaná, through community strategies, sociocultural approaches, knowledge transmission, as well as communication, the formation of management committees, and capacity building harmonized with the environment from an intercultural perspective.



First community meeting on cultural fire management in
the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal.
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These reflections, based on observations made in Juncaná and other communities in the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal, aim to enrich the foundations for how communities can collaboratively face the challenges of fire management, without intending to establish a single model for all cultures or contexts.

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This book is an invitation to understand our relationship with fire, recognizing it not as an enemy, but as a sacred and vital being for ecosystems and for the cultures that have learned to live with it. By sharing the wisdom of their cultural fire management, the community of Juncaná, municipality of La Trinitaria, Chiapas, Mexico, exemplifies what a pyrobicultural territory is and provides us with guidelines to treat fire carefully and in harmony with life.