

Tzeltal Maya Explanations for the Actions of Medicinal Plants: A Preliminary Study

Waldstein, Anna (Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia)

Ethnobotanists argue that indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants can facilitate the development of new pharmaceuticals. However, little is known about how indigenous peoples perceive the actions of such plants. In 1997, I initiated research on Tzeltal Maya ethnobotanical and ethnomedical concepts that define their perceptions of medicinal plant actions. Through interviews with eleven individuals from Tenejapa, Chiapas, Mexico, I found that the Tzeltal use their five senses to select appropriate medicinal plants, and determine when plant-based medicines are properly prepared. Preparation methods are determined by cultural notions of medicinal plant action, and notions of how plant-based medicines travel through the body.