



Amate in the Twenty-First Century: Between Mountains and Dollars

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A vibrant mural on San Pablito's main street in Puebla, featuring a striking origami plane folded from a dollar bill at its center. BELOW: An amatero working in her family workshop. Each container holds strips of fiber, meticulously organized by color. All photos courtesy of the author.



Born into a family devoted to pre-Hispanic arts in Puebla, Mexico, I had been familiar with amate—Mexican bark paper—since an early age; however, my knowledge about its history was limited. It wasn't until I became involved in paper research as a biologist that I learned amate had persisted through the centuries in the complex, remote terrain of the Eastern Sierra Madre, where Indigenous Nahua and Otomí peoples of the region found refuge from political conflicts before and after colonization. To my surprise and concern, today I have witnessed amate resisting extinction in its only homeplace, the Otomí village of San Pablito, Puebla. Here, it faces signature problems of the twenty-first century, including migration and loss of biodiversity. With only a few dozen families still engaged in amate production, one can only wonder about the current state of this ancient craft and what the future holds for it.

One hundred years ago, the Otomí economy relied on the trade of both agricultural and manufactured products, including packages of shoe-size amate sheets called *huarachitos* (sandals). In this market, women were the protagonists, processing the fibers, transforming them into sheets, and selling them in the weekly local market, while men focused on bark extraction. Customers devoted the paper to the making of *nzahki* (cut-out figures) employed by *brujos* (shamans) in their rituals to represent good and evil spirits. However, the general perception of this practice was that of a spiritual nature apart from the dominant religion, forcing *amateros*—traditional amate papermakers—to remain in the shadows.

Since the 1950s and '60s, both women and men have been involved in the entire process of making amate. After the mass production of amate in the 1970s, driven by the contact between Mexican bark paper and Nahua painters from Guerrero, *amateros*



A panoramic view of the San Pablito landscape from an amate workshop, where sheets of bark paper dry under the sun.

transitioned from shamans to full-time artisans, while amate acquired new value in the national and international art market. Nevertheless, the growth in this industry could not offset the decline of the regional market for sugarcane and coffee caused by the changing trade policies, resulting in deep economic instability. Consequently, young men began migrating to the United States in the late 1970s and early '80s, first to Texas and later to North Carolina, altering the economy of San Pablito and inherently, the fate of amate and its production.

When I first traveled to San Pablito in 2022, I was eager to witness the transformation of this *pueblito* (small village) of northern

Puebla. What I found was a lively main street where small shops offered “American Pizza” or “Super Burgers,” juxtaposed near a mural that spoke volumes about the community’s complex relationship with migration, economic survival, and sustaining the amate tradition. In this milieu, one can hear the *amateros* beating fiber for amate, accompanied by conversations in Otomí, which they refer to as *dialecto*, interspersed with Spanish.

In San Pablito, amate flourishes in the hands of around 50 families, a number steadily declining due to the migration of men, women, and even children, as well as the passing of elder family members who held detailed knowledge of the tradition.



Juan S., who returned after three years of feeling *dentro de una jaula de oro* (inside a cage of gold), remarked: “*Un día nada más los amateros nos vamos a quedar en San Pablito* (One day only us, the *amateros*, will remain in San Pablito).”¹

But for the ones who choose to remain as *amateros*, the making of traditional, flat sheets alone is not enough. Instead, they have been compelled to innovate their creations and designs, producing a wide array of handcrafted objects such as bookmarks, lamps, notebooks, and frames. These artworks incorporate techniques such as webbing, cutting, and elements of other Mexican traditional arts, like embroidery from Tenango, Hidalgo, and *chaquira*



San Pablito's central plaza, vibrant nzahki (spirits) adorn the surroundings. These figures are the subject of cut-out amate sheets, often used as decorations and exclusively used by shamans for ceremonial rituals.

(beadwork) from the Wixárika (Huichol) of Western Mexico. While amate traditionally had a more limited color palette in the past, typically in shades like black or white, artisans now use anilines to dye the fibers, producing vibrant, colorful patterns.

With fluctuations in commercial rhythms, the biological aspects of amate have also changed. The fig and mulberry tree species traditionally used were quickly depleted due to increased demand 50 years ago in the region, prompting the incorporation of *jonote colorado* (*Trema micrantha*), a tree abundantly found in coffee plantations, despite its fibers requiring longer cooking times and the addition of lime or baking soda. Within years, *jonote colorado* became scarce, leading *amateros* to source bark from *jonoteros*—bark harvesters—in Veracruz. While *jonoteros* previously sold their products in local markets, they are now just a phone call away from amate papermakers in Puebla. Access to the fiber market has increasingly depended on having the right contacts or sufficient resources to procure the material, leading smaller papermaking families to shift to reselling, exploring other crafts, or seeking employment in the construction and transportation industries.

The lack of access to *jonote colorado* fibers has also incentivized experimentation with a wider botanical diversity. In general, most newly adopted species are abundant in secondary forests and have a rapid growth rate, allowing harvest all throughout the year.² Nevertheless, these fibers are more difficult to work with, whether in cooking or beating, and the resulting paper is considered weaker or less suitable for handcrafted objects. Today, *jonote*



Frames made from amate de tulle. As the fibers of tulle are stronger and more rigid, these qualities allow amateros to incorporate knots and ties in several layers.



Production of amate bookmarks. The colorful cut-out figures are made of dyed amate de mora, while the white background and webbing patterns are made of bleached and unbleached jonote colorado (*Trema micrantha*).

colorado comprises about 80 percent of amate production, followed by tulle (*Typha domingensis*), an aquatic herb commonly found along the road to Pachuca, Hidalgo. Tulle was incorporated into amate papermaking about two decades ago. Only those with access to sufficient, yet highly priced *mora* (*Morus celtidifolia*) fibers use them for amate, especially to make cut-out figures for decorations and rituals. Although around seven additional tree species are known locally to be useful for making Mexican bark paper, botanical knowledge required to identify these trees has been passed down to *jonoteros*, limiting the ability of *amateros* to obtain these fibers independently.

The current state of amate is complex, and its future in San Pablito is uncertain. Its long-term survival hinges on regional economic and environmental stability. Local cooperative strategies that take plant biology into account are crucial to ensuring that all *amateros* have access to fibers. Some families are now working together to cultivate *jonote colorado* and *mora* trees on their lands, but large fields are needed to meet the demand. Additionally, creating more economic opportunities is crucial to prevent migration and encourage younger generations to keep the tradition alive.

As paper enthusiasts, we appreciate the legacy of amate. But to ensure the survival of this tradition, we must raise awareness and push stakeholders and communities at all levels, from local to national, to recognize the cultural, biological, and economic value of amate. Ultimately, preserving amate represents not only the survival of Otomí traditions in San Pablito but also the continuation of a cultural legacy that traces back to our Mesoamerican ancestors, whose essence resonates in every sheet of amate, one beat at a time.

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NOTES

1. Juan S., Interview by the author, September 13, 2023, San Pablito, Puebla, Mexico. Juan's family is one of the most creative and successful families of amateros that remain in San Pablito. He and his brothers migrated to the United States several years ago, while some men later returned to reunite with their families.
2. C.M. Peters, J. Rosenthal, T. Urbina, "Otomí bark paper in Mexico: Commercialization of a pre-hispanic technology," *Economic Botany* 41, no. 3 (1987): 423–432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02859061>.