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RUBBER

By ALFRED MÉTRAUX

The discovery of rubber is undoubtedly one of the greatest Indian contributions to modern civilization. It was used in South America long before the Conquest. One of the first to mention this substance was Oviedo y Valdés (1851-55, 1: 165), who gives us an involved and quite inaccurate description of the fabrication of rubber balls by the *Taino* Indians of Haiti.

Throughout tropical South America the principal use for rubber was to make balls for the famous games in which the ball was butted with the head or shoulders. Consequently, the list of tribes said to use the rubber ball, prepared by Nordenskiöld (1918) from the literature, may well serve as a basis for mapping the distribution of the use of rubber. In his list are included the *Taino*, the *Otomac*, the Indians of the region of Mainas, the *Cavina* of the Beni River, the *Huari* of the Guaporé River, the *Paressí*, the *Chiquito*, the *Chané*, the *Chiriguano*, and the *Auetö* Indians of the Xingú River. To these should be added the *Apinayé*, the *Mojo*, and the *Guaraní-Itatin* of northern Paraguay.

According to F. X. Eder (1791), the *Mojo* made their balls by coating a round clay core with liquid rubber. When it had hardened, the clay was dissolved by dipping the sphere in water and was removed through a hole. After this the ball was inflated with air, wrapped with a strip of rubber, and smeared with several coatings of liquid rubber. The finished ball weighed about 25 pounds.

A similar procedure is described by Nimuendajú (1939, pp. 62-63) among the *Apinayé*, where the making of rubber balls was a ceremonial operation that took place at the end of the boys' initiation rites. Latex of the mangabeira tree (*Hancornia speciosa*), which was tapped with a stone knife, was smeared on the novices' body and limbs in strips about three fingers' wide. As soon as the liquid had dried, a second and third coating followed. A core, 4 cm. in diameter, shaped out of hard clay from termite nests, was wrapped with the rubber bands by rolling the strips off the boys' bodies. As soon as the ball had attained a certain thickness, the core was knocked into pieces and was removed through a small slit cut into the rubber rind. The

hollow sphere was further strengthened by additional rubber strips, which covered the slit and finally yielded a very elastic ball.

Several tribes of the upper Amazon Basin (*Omagua*, *Maina*, *Cari-puna*, and *Cacharary*) made rubber syringes, which were provided with a bone mouthpiece to blow parica (*Piptadenia* sp.) into the nostrils, but which were used most often to administer powerful clysters prepared with the same intoxicant. These syringes were made on clay molds. Nordenskiöld (1918, p. 85) surmises that the Indians may have got the idea of making syringes when they observed that they could spout the water with which they dissolved the clay core of their balls.

Otherwise little use was made of rubber. The Indians of the Caiarí-Uaupés and Orinoco Rivers smeared rubber on the ends of the heavy wooden mallets with which they beat their huge slit drums. Rubber also entered into the construction of the famous *Catuquina* telegraph drums. Many Indians of the middle Guaporé (*Amniapa*, *Mequens*, and others) wore rubber bands under their knees or around their ankles. Rubber also was used for making torches or for starting fires when the wood was wet.

During the Colonial Period the rubber industry on the Amazon was in the hands of the *Omagua*, who taught the Portuguese of Pará the methods of its preparation (Martius, 1867, p. 440). They manufactured for sale rubber bottles, bands, and waterproof pieces of bark cloth.

Through Indian influence rubber articles became very popular in the Spanish colonies long before the substance was known in Europe. In the 18th century, the Spaniards used rubber containers, ponchos, and shoes.

The development of the gigantic rubber boom of the 19th century could hardly have taken place without the work of the wild and acculturated Indians of the Amazon Basin. The trees were discovered and tapped by Indians, and the basic techniques used by the Whites had been learned from them. Unfortunately, the dependence of the Whites on the Indians led only to their ruthless exploitation and virtual destruction.

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