Nahua-Otomi Indians and Amate

For centuries, the Mesoamerican cultures of Latin America have been making their own paper. Both the Maya and Aztec cultures recorded their early histories on Amate. There is also archeological evidence that it was used in decoration of their shrines, burial places, sculptures, and other art forms. The paper was extensively produced and used for communication purposes, tribal records, and rituals.

When the Conquistadors from Spain conquered the region, the practice of using Amate among Mesoamerican cultures was banned. Its production was stopped and replaced by European paper. The only exception was the Otomi Indian village located in the mountainous and somewhat geographically isolated Mexican state of Puebla. The Otomi people continued to make their own paper (Amate) and create beautiful works of art—bark paintings illustrating the flora and fauna native to their region. Traditionally, the paintings included colorful flowers, birds, and other animals such as deer or rabbits. Artists developed new styles that eventually included illustrations of their villages and also religious scenes.

The Amate created by the Otomi people was said to have magical properties. The Otomi craftsmen began to sell the paper throughout the region and in Mexico City. Painters and craftsmen from the Nahua tribe around Mexico City revived the craft and began to produce new works of art, which was then promoted by the Mexican government. Through this promotion, Amate became very popular in Mexico and around the world as a traditional Mexican indigenous handicraft.
The paper itself is still made in the traditional way. The men strip or peel the bark from wild fig, nettle or mulberry trees. Each tree has its own color and tone that ranges from dark brown to a silvery white. The bark is washed and boiled in a large pot for hours with ashes or lime until it becomes soft. Next, the softened “pulp” is rinsed and laid onto a wooden board to form a grid pattern. The women beat the pulp with a stone or wooden block to blend or fuse the pulp fibers together. The blended fibers form a paste like substance that when dried becomes paper. The blended sheet of fiber is then laid out in the sun to dry. Once dry it is cut into smaller sheets of paper.
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Directions: Use the information from the reading to answer the questions below.

1. Which two early Mesoamerican cultures began the practice of recording their histories with Amate?

2. In what region of the world did the practice of Amate develop? (Circle the correct answer)
   North America  Central America  South America

3. Describe how early Mesoamerican cultures used Amate:

4. Why did the practice of Amate production cease except for the Otomi people?

5. Describe the steps in creating Amate:
Nahua-Otomí Indians and Amate KEY

1. Which two early Mesoamerican cultures began the practice of recording their histories with Amate? Aztec and Maya

2. In what region of the world did the practice of Amate develop? (Circle the correct answer)
   - North America
   - Central America
   - South America

3. Describe how early Mesoamerican cultures used Amate: to record their tribal history, rituals, communication purposes, decorations for shrines, burial places, sculptures and other art forms.

4. Why did the practice of Amate production cease except for the Otomi people? Spanish Conquistadors conquered the region and banned use and production of the paper. Used European paper instead. The Otomi people were in a mountainous and somewhat isolated region of Mexico (Puebla). They continued the practice for many years and eventually began to sell the paper commercially.

5. Describe the steps in creating Amate:
   - men strip or peel bark
   - boil bark until it becomes soft pulp
   - strips of pulp are laid into a grid pattern on a wooden surface
   - women use a stone or wooden block to beat the strips until it forms a paste like substance
   - the sheets of paste are dried in the sun and become paper
   - the sheets are cut into smaller sheets to be used as paper