

## The Gourd – *Lagenaria Siceraria*

### Most Important Plant in All of Human History

The hard-shell gourd (*lagenaria siceraria*) , cousin of the soft-shell squash, is the most important and most special plant in all of our human history. Here is why:

1. For 90% of our known human history, it was gourds – almost only gourds – for almost everything. (For 200,000 years of our pre-fabrication time.)
2. Gourds are the lightest of the earliest natural containers: lighter than sea shells, animal horns, or broken pieces of bamboo.
3. The gourd was used for more different things than anything else:
  - a. Food, when green, before drying out to a hard, hallow shell.
  - b. An enlargement of the hand for holding water, berries, seeds, anything.
  - c. A carrying container for transporting water, food, stones, anything.
  - d. Storage bin, to hold leaves, a bee hive, seeds, vine rope, everything.
  - e. A scoop for picking up stuff: water, animal blood, mud, anything.
  - f. Bowls and cups, for holding and serving meals and drinks.
  - g. Clothing: for hats (like I have from Africa, Asia and Pacific islands) and penis protection (as I have from Papua, N.G.) right up to modern times.
  - h. Flotation, by holding it in water (like I saw in Argungu, northern Nigeria), tying them on the body, or bunching many together for rafts.
  - i. Wheels for wheelbarrows and wagons (as I saw in north coastal Peru).
  - j. Music:
    - 1) Maracas, with rattling seeds, and later stones, dried corn, or rice inside.
    - 2) Drums, with or without an animal skin stretched over an opening.
    - 3) Horns and flutes.
    - 4) Lutes, banjos, koras, sitars, and other stringed instruments.
    - 5) Marimbas or xylophones, with gourds placed under wood or bamboo keys.
    - 6) Kalimbas, or thumb pianos.

- 7) Shakeres, with seeds, beads, or whatever strung around outside.
- 8) Guiros, tubes with lines cut in for scraping with a stick or something.
- 9) Later, little pigeon whistles, attached to birds to sound in flight.

And so many others . . . .

- k. Artistic creations: sketches, fetishes, dolls, masks, adornments.
  - l. Religious uses: holding magic potions, imaging gods or spirits, representing the earth, fertility, blessings, good future, health, luck, etc.
  - m. Smoking, with a trough added for burning something for inhaling smoke.
  - n. Brain surgery: Ancient folks in Peru used pieces of gourd to replace broken pieces of cranium, brain encasement.
4. The most manipulated plant by man:
- a. First by selective breeding or seed selection for desired results:
    - 1) To grow them bigger and bigger, and recently, smaller and smaller.
    - 2) To get a lot of different desirable shapes: spheres, clubs, dippers, funnels, gourds with waists, ducks and geese, etc.
  - b. Second by intervention during growth, for example:
    - 1) Clipping vines or male flowers for female flower gourd growth.
    - 2) Resting them stem up for a flat bottom.
    - 3) Hanging them for a straight handle.
    - 4) Moving, tying, or bagging them for selected shaping.
    - 5) Putting a mold around them to impose the post-growth shape.
    - 6) Scratching the surface to leave permanent scar patterns.
    - 7) Fueling them with chemicals to change color or texture.
  - c. Third by alterations imposed after growth, for example:
    - 1) Scraping off the outer skin before drying to avoid blotching.
    - 2) Cleaning off the blotched or mottled dried outer skin, or leaving it.
    - 3) Coloring gourd with clay, berry juice, tea, dye, stain, ink, anything.
    - 4) Cutting an opening for desired container, resonator, or whatever.
    - 5) Carving patterns on the surfaces with a cutting tool.
    - 6) Fine scratching for delicate lines on surfaces – scrimshaw.
    - 7) Depressing on edges of designs to make them out-standing.
    - 8) Adding things, like stones inside for rattles, a wood handle, leaf cover, carved wood stopper, implanted gems, sticks and strings or a

stretched animal skin for music, potions for magic or religious effect, or anything anyone can imagine.

- 9) Repairing, like sewing up a crack (or more recently using glue), putting in a patch, recoloring after fading, etc.
5. The hard-shell gourd is the plant with the most different shapes, natural and manipulated.
6. The plant with the greatest size variability: Smallest can be smaller than a cubic centimeter, the largest greater than many hundreds of cubic centimeters, holding up to 30 liters, maybe 9 or 10 gallons. That existing size disparity is many thousands to a tiny one.
7. It was the mother of more musical instruments than any other plant.
8. It was likely the first of all shaker musical instruments, a simple found gourd with rattling seeds inside. Maracas used in bands around the world are often still made from natural gourds, from vines or from calabash trees.
9. I believe it was the resonator or amplifier for the first stringed musical instrument – a hunter’s bow with gourd attached to enlarge sound – then, the mother of all stringed instruments. (The violin and bass still retain a modified flattened bottle gourd shape.)
10. A water-holding gourd was the first refrigerator: Evaporation of seepage out through the semi-porous shell cooled the gourd and water inside.
11. The first telephone in form of two gourd cups with a drawn string between for carrying the sound waves from one to the other, around 800 A.D., Peru.
12. The gourd was surely one of early man’s best friends, for its food, containers, symbols, music, enlargement of the hand, clothing, and intimate relations to eating and survival.
13. For these reasons, many anthropologists, and I, myself, believe it to be the first domesticated crop of our ancient ancestors.
14. It is the most hand-carried crop dispersed everywhere by walking, migrating early humans, and also by water travel.
15. If there had been no gourds helping our ancestors in so many different ways, I declare: most of us would not be here now.

16. Finally, the gourd just might be the most preferred home of the most birds worldwide. Those that I put out in the United States were always occupied, most of the time by birds. (Some by bees and others by lizards.)

Surely, to know gourds is to love them. Our ancient ancestors loved them, and even worshipped them. They were best plant friends and travel companions.

Personally, I have appreciated and loved gourds my whole adult lifetime. I have been collecting them for 45 years, from all around the world. I love the connection they help me feel with the many different cultures of our Earth and with the many, many generations past.

By Raymond Konan, Orlando, Florida, U.S.A., 2 December 2017 ©