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Eating in Fear: Hunger Narratives in a K'iche' Mayan Community in Guatemala

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Introduction

Throughout Guatemala's history, violence has served as both cause and consequence of food insecurity and famine. One such violent event was armed conflict that occurred during a thirty-six-year period (1960–1996), which left generations traumatized because malnutrition from famine and war compromised childhood growth and prenatal development.^[1] Between Guatemalan citizens and indigenous communities, over 200,000 people were affected by Guatemala's internal armed conflict, and the majority of the victims in Guatemala were Mayan people.^{[2][3][4][5]} As other researchers have documented, the Mayan population suffered severely across psychological, social, and physical parameters, and their cumulative harm remains in current times.^{[6][7][8][9]} During the armed conflict, human rights violations were committed against ethnic Mayan, indigenous people, and Ladino peasants, who together make up the rural poor. These events resulted in permanent damage to the nutrition profiles of the Mayan people, resulting in a form of oppression to this indigenous population.

In my own personal and professional experience, fear and hunger were the everyday experiences of my life in Guatemala, which is still marred by experiences of violence, racism, and social and economic inequality as a legacy of the armed conflict. As the son of a Kaqchikel-K'iche' Mayan, my first concern in this ethnographic report takes up how hunger and food issues were experienced by a K'iche' Mayan community during the Guatemalan armed conflict in an area that experienced indirect violence. My second concern is how these experiences are represented, documented, and analyzed by scholars because there is an absence of ethnographic research that privileges the hunger and lived experiences, narratives, and memories of indigenous women populations under warfare.^[10] My own positionality as a Mayan insider and an academic outsider informs the following ethnography, which focuses on two victims' hunger narratives of the K'iche' Mayan women during war.^[11]

Hunger is defined to be a condition in which a person, for a sustained period of time, is unable to eat sufficient food to meet basic nutritional needs.^{[12][13]} During the armed conflict, Mayan people in rural areas suffered from an irregular supply of water, unsafe water, irregular access to health resources, economic instability, declines in food production, and lack of healthcare. In this sense, the perception of hunger during war was contextualized by collective suffering with multiple causes for hunger. Hunger was not just a lack of foodstuffs but a deliberate act of warfare against Mayans under

armed conflict, whereby sadness and silence became materialized in the distressing memories of how people could (not) access food under armed conflict.

My ethnography takes place in a small community of the Department of Totonicapán, Guatemala (Figure 1). K'iche' Mayan knowledge, in Totonicapán (called Chwi meq'ina in K'iche' Mayan language), has been absent in contemporary political representation with regards to Mayan apprehension towards food access. This is why it was important for me to speak in the K'iche' Mayan language to qualitatively explore violence, hunger, and health issues during the armed conflict. Some of my informants were more than fifty years old (that is, they were born before the armed conflict), which made them key interlocutors to discuss experiences of hunger before, during, and after war.

Guatemala Western Highlands

[14]

Figure 1. Research Area, Department of Tonicapán.

Memories

The K'iche' Mayan narratives provide heartbreaking testimonies, memories, and experiences, showing violence at the personal, quotidian level. [15] These narratives have been stored in the memory of the local K'iche' Mayan people over time. Lost stares, silence, and delays in responding were recurring patterns in the interviews. The Mayan narratives I hear in a local community of Totonicapán are composed of pluralistic experiences about the armed conflict.

The walking trails in the mountains of this community lead to lonely and distant houses. One such house on the top of the mountain was the place where I find Anita. [16] Our first encounter took place inside Anita's house, a key place of kitchen memories, where she prepared food for her family. Anita made *atol* (native hot beverage) that she shared with me and also served a food called *Sub'* and *lej* (tamalitos and tortillas, corn based food, in K'iche' Mayan language).

Figure 2. *Tortillas* (corn-based food) and *atole* (hot beverage), Anita's daily food. Typically, The Mayan diet is based on corn, vegetables, and seeds.

Anita always sat on a stool next to the stove. Anita first began to speak to me in Spanish by saying:

*Regresaste, ¿quieres hablar acerca
de las experiencias [conflicto
armado]? – Anita*

*You came back, do you want to talk
about the experiences [armed
conflict]? – Anita*

Anita is referring to the experiences during armed conflict. Anita shares with me that her family only ate chili (chile), *tortillas* (corn-based food), and wild herbs every day, which is a diet of low nutrient density. These food items are poor in nutritional value with regards to nutritious food, filling up only around forty percent of daily dietary recommendations.^[17] Anita said, again in Spanish:

*No había nada para comer, era peligroso ir a
los cultivos. Fue complicado comprar comida
porque los mercados locales no estaban
permitidos en la comunidad. Caminar a la
siguiente comunidad por comida era un
riesgo. A veces, caminaba largas distancias
para tomar el autobús en otra comunidad
para comprar maíz en el centro; esto aumentó
el costo de acceso a los alimentos. – Anita*

*There was nothing to eat, it was dangerous to
go to the land crops to harvest. It was
complicated to buy food because local markets
were not allowed in the community. Walking to
the next community for food was a risk.
Sometimes, I walked long distances to take the
bus in other community to buy corn downtown;
this increased the cost to access food. – Anita*

Personally, all these descriptions give me historical perspective about the hard times that Mayan people suffered; these were my people. Then, Anita began to speak in K'iche' language. The transition from Spanish to K'iche' Mayan signaled to me that the information that she wanted to share was more confidential and personal.

Je le na xujwa ta chik, ya' xuya' susto. Chaqe na xraj ta chik qawa, qaxab'ij chiqib' ya no qaya' pena kujel b'ik rumal qakil le ripch'ich' kesutinik pa qayacha qib'. Wene kujkitirnej b'ix kujchaya'. – Anita

We didn't eat again, we were afraid. So, we did not want to eat, we were afraid, we could not do anything. It was dangerous to go out of the house [to the land crop] because we saw the airplanes around us. They [guerilla-military groups] followed us. – Anita

For Anita, the combination of food insecurity and the physical fear of military armament manifested in sadness and pain. Indeed, Anita showed expressions of fear in her eyes and a wavering voice.

Esto sucedió cuando el miedo y la tristeza comenzaron en la comunidad. Los hombres comenzaron a patrullar, algunos hombres que no querían hacerlo, fueron asesinados. Las ausencias de los hombres en los hogares, los hombres fueron llevados por los militares, fueron a las montañas con los grupos militares e hicieron todo lo que los militares dijeron. – Anita

This happened when fear and sadness started in the community. The men began to patrol, some men that didn't want to do it, they were killed. The men's absences in homes, the men were taken by the military, they went to the mountains with the military groups and they did everything that the military said. – Anita

The men were the main source to produce food for the family. The men's absence contextualizes that men didn't work in the planting and harvesting season, denying the means of food production for Anita's family. During the armed conflict, men were recruited by military groups, civil patrols, to train them in combat skills without their consent.

<p><i>Le winaq xekelb'ik che patrullera b'a xetata'</i> <i>taj la' como ch'aqwi' kab'ij, chiya' taq ri</i> <i>achijab' ke'esax b'ik, ke'ek'am b'i chi</i> <i>b'ana' chixb'ison jeri', porque k'o winaq</i> <i>k'o eleq'omab' je ri' eq je', kib'an kichoch.</i> <i>– Anita</i></p>	<p><i>The people [men] got out the patrols, but,</i> <i>after that, people did not understand, they did</i> <i>not hear they (guerilla-military groups)</i> <i>kidnapped the men, they took them, it was sad</i> <i>for them [men of the community], we were</i> <i>sad. – Anita</i></p>
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The men also suffered the consequences of warfare because the main actor to cultivate and protect the harvest land was not able to tend to the land and produce food in the context of war. As a result, families lost their means of food production and the head of their household, which subsequently broke the community's social cohesion.

I tried to get more information about why people associate men with land resources and agricultural labor. Claudia, another K'iche' Mayan woman, confirms that the absence of males in the house denied access to food because women needed men to work in the land to harvest food.

<p><i>Ri ojer na k'o ta como na k'o ta qarajil como</i> <i>la era' como kamasaxik, kamasaxik qeb'a</i> <i>are' nupapá xub'an patrullero, k'o ta qarajil.</i> <i>– Claudia</i></p>	<p><i>In olden times, we did not have anything, we</i> <i>did not eat anything because they [the</i> <i>military-guerilla groups] killed people, they</i> <i>killed people. Therefore, my dad became a</i> <i>patrolman. We did not have money. – Claudia</i></p>
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*nada k'o ta chi'qaja' k'o ta chik nada, como
are' winaq ekamiselab' ek'o chaq'ij,
ke'ujb'isonik porque taq q'ayes qatijo xu ri'.
– Claudia*

*We did not have water, we did not have other
home resources, because they were killers
[guerilla-military groups], they came here in
the community in the day; we were sad because
we only ate wild plants. – Claudia*

The sadness these women experienced while eating under fear is an expression of distress.^[18] This distress exacerbates the social inequities already felt in oppressed groups. Since cultural, social, and political context shape the emotional experiences within and outside of the individual, oppression in the form of food deprivation impacts the social capital of the population.^{[19][20]}

The memories of trying to access food during war are themselves painful and people may try to avoid them. But memories may recur. Since these memories were coded in the body during times of trauma, one can relive anger and distress when eating certain foods. The memories mediate the fear that results from life-threatening experiences on multiple time scales: during the time of conflict as well as the present-day reliving of these past experiences. In this sense, it seems that the memories inflict a kind of *double violence*—then and now—in the social fabric of K'iche' Mayan people.

Final Thought

Mayan communities in Guatemala have acutely experienced health inequalities as a result of armed conflict, particularly with regard to malnutrition, food insecurity, and its lasting effects. For many who are affected by armed conflict, prolonged exposure to the adverse effects of economic, political, military, and cultural harm prevent individuals, groups, and societies from reaching their full potential. Many local villagers in the small K'iche' Mayan community accumulate stress as they continue to face food deprivation today. While the past will always be a powerful memory for these K'iche' Mayan women, their memories, narratives, and words remain. Voicing these kinds of cultural and historical events with their own voice gives historical value to the informants.

The preceding discussion fulfills a personal commitment to discuss these narratives in an academic journal. But it also epitomizes a moral commitment to the K'iche' Mayan women whose narratives live on as part of this document. Their voices,

memories, and narratives are not just data; they are deep experiences with hunger and food issues under warfare. The legacy is not only in their wasting bodies; it is also in the social and communal fabric of these K'iche' Mayan women, their identities, their food practices, their experiences, their words, and their memories.

Biography

Miguel Cuj grew up in a family of Mayan descent in Guatemala city. He has a Nutrition degree from San Carlos University, which was supported by the Maya Educational Foundation scholarship program in Guatemala. Miguel was a fellow in the Tobacco Control Fellowship program of the Cardiovascular Surgery Unit of Guatemala (UNICAR). He has worked in several projects in rural Guatemala with the Mayan population. Also, Miguel has a Master of Arts in Latin American Studies and a certificate in Global Health at Vanderbilt University.

Currently, he is a PhD student in Anthropology at Vanderbilt University. Miguel has an interest in food, health, and cultural issues in rural Guatemala. He has focused on nutrition, health, and structural violence issues in older rural populations of Guatemala in the aftermath of armed conflict. Also, he has engaged in the interaction between biomedicine and social factors. His research interests are food anthropology, the language of food, K'iche' Mayan foodways, cultural models, and bio-communicability in health.

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10. A large part of anthropology studies focuses on the political violence surrounding the armed conflict in Guatemala. Another part of the scientific community focuses on government mechanisms of repression to Mayan population (see: Carmack 1992; Falla 2007; Schirmer 2010; Oglesby and Nelson 2017; GMS 2009). However, there is an absence of ethnographic research with regards to hunger narratives under warfare in rural K'iche' Mayan communities of Guatemala. The majority of anthropological research in Guatemala—as well as, that by aid institutions, and international or local NGOs—have focused their efforts on “Red Zones” in K'iche' Maya lands (communities that were razed by the confrontation between guerrillas and militaries during the armed conflict between 1960 and 1996; see: Carmack, 1992). This is opposed to “Yellow Zones” (communities that experienced selective violence), or “Green Zones” (communities that experienced indirect violence). Thus, the description of “Green Zones” has been absent in regards to the memories and experiences of indigenous peoples under warfare. One such Green Zone is Totonicapán (Chwi Meq'ina is its K'ich'e Mayan name). [↵](#)
11. Ethical practices are vital in this kind of study with regards to population in conflict zones. To engage in the community, I participated as a part of a

multidisciplinary team in a local non-governmental organization (NGO). The protocol of the research was determined exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB #170404), as the study was found to pose minimal risk to participants under 45 CFR 46.101 (b) category (2). I was also supported by two native, local K'iche' Mayan speakers in the transcription and translation processes. I obtained oral consent and permission from participants to record their narratives confidentially; and, ultimately, to uphold all information in an ethical manner, as keeping identifiers confidential is fundamental to protecting the integrity of their testimonies. [↵](#)

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16. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, the names of informants have been redacted. The author uses pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and information with regards to the research subjects. [↵](#)

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