“Las niñas hacen tortillas, los niños siembran milpa”¹

An Exploration of Corn, Cosmology, and Gender in a Highland Maya Town

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¹ “Girls make tortillas, boys plant milpa” (Ana Fieldnotes Feb. 14, 2014)
Abstract

The Maya of today are faced with change on many levels, cultural, religious, economic, and a marked decline in traditional subsistence agriculture. Gender and agriculture are tightly linked in Maya cosmology, and in this paper I explore how this link is manifested in the contemporary context of the highland Maya town San Antonio Palopó. In this way, I explore the relationship between a Maya community and maize, utilizing ethnographic field research and linguistic analysis. I found that corn is definitively female, a concept compatible with the traditional Maya notions of gender complementarity. Though there is a clear decline in both maize centered cultivation and oral tradition, it continues to be a crucial aspect of life. Its life cycle mirrors the human life cycle, and the two are intertwined, connected in the continual process of life renewal.

Introduction

On one of my final visits with my friend Don Pedro at his onion terrace, we sat on a stone, discussing (as we had many a time), ixim, maize. He looked out over a bed of onions and flowers, years of sun and wind worked deep into the wrinkles on his face, and thoughtfully explained that corn and people “tiene la misma espíritu”, they have the same spirit (Fieldnotes Feb. 28, 2014). He pointed to a corn plant, pointed to himself, pointed to me, and repeated: we all have the same spirit. This simple statement encompasses what I came to learn about the relationship between the Kaqchikel inhabitants of San Antonio Palopó, and the maize that is sown, harvested, dried, consumed, and sown again, year after year.

Despite the fact that the onions make up the most significant cash crop in San Antonio, one does not have to look far to see traces of corn production. In late February and early March when I conducted my fieldwork, dry golden stalks dotted the steep hillsides, yellow and white kernels could be seen glinting in the sun spread to dry, and net bags filled with husks were hung on many a rooftop. Morning, noon, or night, I
heard the familiar *pat pat pat* of tortillas deftly being clapped into shape for every meal 
as I ambled through the uneven streets. For a town that does not produce much corn for 
market, it is incredibly abundant. During my time in San António, I sought to explore 
the relationship of a Maya pueblo and its corn, and to gain an understanding of what 
this relationship means. I focused primarily on maize as a means to understand gender, 
and ultimately began to use Kaqchikel understandings of gender to understand the 
importance of maize. Cynthia Robin writes, referring to ethnohistorical study of the 
Classic Maya, that “examining the gender relations of agricultural work over time...
gives a view of how the Maya dealt with changing contexts” (2006:420). I used the 
relationships between gender and agriculture to explore the significance of maize in 
daily life and worldview, in a contemporary Kaqchikel town inundated with change.

**Historical Precedence of Maize**

Since the Classic Maya era, agriculture (centered on maize especially) has been 
the basis of the Maya way of life. Not only practically, in terms of food and economy, but 
also more fundamentally, in terms of culture, religion, and identity. The Classic Maya 
“shared an agricultural mentality” that informed their entire worldview (Carrasco 
2014:121). For the Classic Maya, “the world is in a continual process of sowing, and 
dawning (sprouting)” (Carrasco 2014: 123). In the seminal K’iche religious text, the 
*Popol Vuh*, humans were created from the corn that continues to sustain the Maya 
people today (Tedlock 1996). Agricultural practices of the Classic Maya continue, as has 
the fundamental link to the agriculturally based, cyclical view of life (Robin 2006:410). 
With a foundation in the literature concerning the Classic Maya, I was able to make 
important connections and interpretations of contemporary practices. Maize and
agriculture are an integral part of contemporary Maya life, just as they were for the Classic Maya. The human life cycle is intertwined with the maize life cycle, and many aspects of identity can be explored through maize. In this paper I primarily explore gender, but there are numerous fascinating connections and findings to be made about contemporary Mayan identity using maize as a basis for understanding.

*San António Palopó and the Decline of Agriculture*

I conducted the research providing the material for this paper in the highland Kaqchikel town of San Antonio Palopó, on the shore of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. Historically, it was a primarily agricultural town, but the economy is shifting. According to the literature, this is a common trend among many Maya communities. As Suzanne Gaskins writes there has been a significant shift to wage labor (2003:249). However, despite the decline, San Antonio continues to produce crops of all kinds, especially onions and maize.

As I quickly learned from conversations with farmers, agriculture is becoming a difficult way to sustain oneself or a family. Two years ago on the same anthropology program, Gwen Jenkins conducted a more ecologically focused assessment of San Antonio agriculture. Her findings confirmed what I was told; prices of production are high, and most farmers need the income several jobs in addition to what their crops can earn (Jenkins 2012). One farmer, Raymundo, explained to me that he would lose money by selling corn, and for that reason it is better not to sell, and to keep it eat (Fieldnotes Feb. 17, 2014). This sentiment was echoed by many others. The market for corn is simply not good for producers, yet nearly every farmer I spoke with continues to grow it. However, fewer and fewer people are able to rely on farming as their primary livelihood. Despite declining the declining economic viability, “Mesoamericans cling to this form of agriculture...
Carmack, Gasco, and Gossen 2007:350). At the end of her research, Jenkins was left wondering: “What this deterioration of their central worldview concept will mean for the Maya people is something only the future holds” (Jenkins 2012:17). Two years later, this is where my research begins. I investigated Mayan identity centered on corn and gender, and how this is responding in the face of a rapidly changing context. In this paper, I demonstrate that maize continues to be a fundamental aspect of Maya life, practically and symbolically.

**Methods**

The entirety of the fieldwork for this paper was conducted between February 12, 2014 and March 5, 2014 in San Antonio Palopó. The nature of my topic, maize, is relevant to virtually every community member. From the kernels that are planted, to the cobs that are shucked, to the tortillas that are prepared and consumed, maize is a part of daily life for men and women of all ages. For that reason, I attempted to talk to a wide variety of individuals. I spoke with both men and women, of ages 18 to upwards of 80. People of different generations, genders, and socioeconomic classes had slightly different relationships with corn, but important relationships nonetheless. I employed participant observation, observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews to inform my research, as well as linguistic analysis.

Corn in and of itself was not a particularly sensitive topic, so many of my conversations were carried out in public places such as streets, the market, and in fields and terraces near and within San Antonio. I also developed closer relationships with a few individuals, such as my host mother and her oldest daughter, and spoke with each of...
them in their homes. I met with other individuals in my home or theirs. For much of my information from farmers, I had informal conversations when I came upon a farmer working in an onion terrace or walking to or from their milpa. I developed a friendship with one older farm, 70 year old Don Pedro, and visited him regularly at his terrace to talk.

I primarily conducted my fieldwork alone, walking up the steps to the terraces above the town, or meandering a little ways out of town. However, I experienced some limitations as an outsider female. As a lone woman I sometimes drew unwanted attention, which slightly limited the extent to which I felt comfortable to explore. This did not prevent me from meeting several farmers who were more than willing to talk to me and who treated me with respect. Another challenge was of course the language barrier. For my project in particular, some of the information I was hopeful to learn was only known by the elder generation, many of whom had a poorer command of Spanish. Spanish is also my second language, so sometimes communication was difficult or muddled. Additionally, although I successfully learned many pertinent Kaqchikel words, I was nowhere near conversational, and information had to be gathered through an imperfect filter. Finally, much of the information I was seeking, such as significados (oral narratives to explain natural phenomenona or teach lessons) is generally passed within families, from mother to daughter, or grandfather to grandson. In the short span of my fieldwork, I was only able to cultivate the kind of relationship that allowed me to learn that information with a small number of individuals.

Despite the limitations and short time of my research, living with a family gave me connections I would not have had otherwise, and allowed to experience and participate in many of the daily aspects of corn production and consumption, and
conduct a more well-rounded ethnography. I sought to answer: 1) What is the significance of maize in a contemporary Mayan community, and how is this manifested, particularly in terms of gender? 2) What are the gendered aspects of maize cultivation and production, and how do these inform daily life and gender roles?

**Linguistic Analysis**

I began my foray into the Maya world of corn by learning Kaqchikel terms associated with corn production. There is precedence for the importance of linguistic analysis in anthropology, and researchers such as Brian Stross have used linguistic comparison among Maya languages and the *Popol Vuh* to make important connections and uncover pertinent metaphors, analogies, and meanings. I quickly learned that connections that were not at first evident became clearer when I had the right language. Stross asserts that “one interpretative element of which there can be little disagreement is that the life cycle of maize is encoded in various places in [the *Popol Vuh*]” (2007:415). Similarly, I found that the life cycle of humans is encoded in the language concerning maize.

*Ixim*: The word for corn in all Maya languages is the same: *ixim*. This alone is evidence of its universal importance to the Maya. In an analysis of Classic Maya corn deities, Karen Bassie-Sweet notes that *ix* a prefix for female or woman, is often represented by a portrait glyph of a goddess with “long flowing hair, which is how the Maya metaphorically refer to corn silk” and with with a corn bud over her ear (2000:7-8). It seems more than coincidence that the word for woman in Kaqchikel is *ixoq*, and that both woman and corn share the female prefix. Corn is nurturing and life-giving, like a woman. There is a different name for each part of the plant, and for each stage of the
life cycle. It begins and ends with ixim, the kernel, in a cycle that has continued, and will continue, for years to come. The most pertinent stages of the corn life cycle I found are as follows: ija’tz (seed, this stage is also simply referred to as ixim), awex (just sown seed), awan (the stalk before any ears grow), öch’ (small ears of corn), äj (full grown ears of corn), and jäl (dried cobs, mazorca in Spanish). The most relevant will be examined in depth.

Awex: The first stage of corn, immediately after it is sown, is called awex. In the Popol Vuh when humans were created, the creators asked “How should the sowing be, and the dawning?” (Tedlock 1996:65). The agricultural metaphor for the beginning of life lies in the language. Tedlock writes that the word for sowing is awax in K’iche, which is nearly like awex (1996:225). Sowing and dawning are nearly always paired, and Tedlock writes that the relation between them is similar to that of a Möbius strip, one is continually becoming the other (1996:225). A corn seed becomes awex the moment it is in the ground, thus the farmer is symbolically creating life, just as the world and humans were initially sown.

Jäl: This translates to mazorca in Spanish, or corn cobs, dried and taken from the plant. In the chapter “The Flowering of the Dead” in War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town, Carlsen and Prechtel explore the Tz’utujil concept of Jaloj-k’exoj. This is the “conceptualization of observed processes and patterns in the natural environment, particularly of agricultural production” (Carlsen and Prechtel 2011:49). They explain the etymology of the term, which proved to be related to Kaqchikel as well. Jaloj comes from jal, or “change from the outside, at the ‘husk’” indicating that it is closely related to jäl, the Kaqchikel term for dried cobs (Carlsen and Prechtel 2011:50).

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2 For a complete glossary of corn terms and related terms see Appendix I
K’ex “occurs at the ‘seed’ and refers to generational change” and together this term embodies the cyclical nature of life and death (Carlsen and Prechtel 2011:50). I did not encounter a concept or term precisely like Jaloj-k’exojoj in my fieldwork, but the cyclical nature of the maize life cycle, and how closely it relates to the human life cycle, is clearly evident. As my friend Don Pedro put it, corn is just born like a person, “cuando nace el nene, pues, es igual” indicating a corn stalk (Fieldnotes Feb. 20, 2014). The human life cycle, and the cyclical nature of all creation, is replicated every time a farmer tills the earth and plants maize seeds.

K’u’x: This term came to my attention very late in my fieldwork, so I was unable to explore it thoroughly. However, it seems to be quite significant. My host mother explained it to me as the center of ixim, “aparte de la cáscara...cuando nace” (Juana, Fieldnotes Mar. 6, 2014). This was the term that arose when Carleton Professor Jerome Levi asked what the tiosil, the co-essence, or spirit, of corn is called (Fieldnotes Mar. 5, 2014). It seems to be both the literal core of a corn cob, as well as the spirit of the corn. It also seems plausible that k’u’x is related to the Tz’utujil k’ex, the seed, center, point from which life begins again. The essence of corn is the essence of life.4

**Corn as Woman**

*Historical Precedence*

Among the Classic Maya, there are important gender associations with maize which serve as a foundation for contemporary analysis. There has been considerable

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3 Spanish for “separate from the husk... when it is born”

4 K’u’x also seems likely to be related to the term Suk’u’xi, the name of the young woman whose blood became the first red kernels of corn (see story 3 in Appendix II). However I have not included the term Su’ku’xi for analysis because I was unable to find confirmation, and in the final written version of that significado was given, the young woman was not named.
scholarship regarding the gender of the Classic Maize Deity, with some degree of contention. Robin writes that the Maize god has a “male upper body... and a female lower body” and is thus problematic (2006:413). Taube identifies two male versions of the Classic Maize Deity, the Tonsured and Foliated, and writes that the Tonsured “at times has a decidedly feminine caste, which parallels the female, life-giving quality of maize” though argues that both are male (1983:10). Lastly, Bassie-Sweet writes that the male Maize Deity must have a female counterpart, “in light of the male/female principle and the female nature of the corn ear” (2000:6). Gender was an important category for the Classic Maya, and it is unsurprising that corn today should also be viewed in gendered terms.

*Wife and Mother*

Biologically, a corn plant has both male and female parts that allow for fertilization and the production of ears. Bassie-Sweet writes that some contemporary Maya view corn as embodying both male and female characteristics, with “the stalk and leaves of the corn plant as male and the ear of the corn and its seed as female” (2000:3). However, in my fieldwork in San Antonio, I found corn to be unequivocally female. In fact, several individuals explained to me very matter-of-factly that all plants that gave fruit were female, because otherwise they could not give fruit (Juana Fieldnotes Feb. 24, 2014). Everyone I spoke to about corn gender, farmer or otherwise, spoke about the female nature of corn as if it should be self-evident. As Don Pedro told me, “man doesn’t give seed...milpa is woman” (Fieldnotes Feb. 27, 2014). When I asked one woman to explain why corn was a woman, she said it was simply because they have hair like a woman (Patricia Fieldnotes Feb. 21, 2014). The Kaqchikel word *smar’rue’* is used to describe hair both on a person’s head and on an ear of corn.
I initially understood the fact that men are almost exclusively carrying out planting and tending of crops until after the harvest, when women’s work begins, in terms of practical gendered divisions of labor. However, when I learned that corn is understood to be a female, it seemed completely logical that a male farmer, and a female plant, are both required to yield offspring (the ears of corn). One farmer, indicating towards the road that led to his milpa told me “alli esta mi mujer” (Samuel, Interview Feb. 17, 2014). This analogy was deepened when Samuel continued, and told me that he calls the small ears of corn ne, Kaqchikel for newborn. Several other individuals confirmed this. Don Pedro explained that after the harvest, “la mamá se queda” pointing to a corn stalk left without the cobs, her children (Fieldnotes Feb. 20, 2014). A corn stalk after the harvest is a mother who has given birth.

Another farmer, Pablo, on the subject of plant gender, told me that “el ixim es nuestra madre...siempre con ella vive nosotros” (Interview Feb. 25, 2014). Once again, corn is perceived as woman, but as mother. Bassie-Sweet observes that among many Maya peoples, “corn seed is frequently referred to as ‘our mother corn’” just as Pablo did (2000:3). In both of these conceptions of corn, wife and mother, she is a sustainer, provider of life, and embodies the human life cycle.

**Traditions and Significados**

Oral narratives can prove to be powerful indicators of which concepts, ideas, morals, and physical things are valued in a community. Exploring myth has begun to be recognized as a valid, and vital, aspect of fieldwork. As J. Levi writes: “because history,
at least to some extent, is preserved in myth, so too can it be uncovered” (Levi 1988:616). In the literature regarding the Maya and maize, oral narrative has been recognized as an important source of knowledge. I came across two scholars who had worked with Guatemalan Maya who found maize to be a central component of traditional cuentos, stories intended to teach lessons and values (Huff 2006:86; Keys 1999:97). Not long into my fieldwork, I was informed by a young man, José, that the word cuento is inappropriate because these are not stories, but rather explanations of why things are the way they are, and suggested the term significados (Fieldnotes Feb. 17, 2014). José was kind enough to ask his grandfather about San Antonio significados, and write them down for me. The familial connection between grandfather and grandson yielded narratives that I, as an outsider, struggled to uncover.7

Lessons Learned and Gender

One of the primary narratives regarding corn has implicit messages about the dangers of wastefulness and gender roles and maize. I was told two slightly different versions of the narrative with the two-headed bird Q’o’ch.8 In both versions of the story, the women were not using the corn as they should, people were not being careful, and it ran out. This story not only serves to explain why there are three colors of corn, but carries an important message about how to use this valuable resource. As one man told me, there is no word in Kaqchikel for inorganic waste, basura (Valencio, Fieldnotes Feb. 21, 2014). Every part of corn had a use, right down to the cob. Additionally, it is very clear that it is the male role to plant and harvest, and the woman’s role should have been to make proper use of the crop.

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7 For the narratives in full, and other narratives and beliefs I learned, see Appendices II and III.
8 See appendixes II, El regreso del maíz al mundo

Persmark 11
One of the significados from Juana carries a simpler message, but yet again teaches a lesson. A young woman making nixtamal⁹ in her new home is frustrated when it simply does not grow the way it should.¹⁰ She continues to check the pot, and the corn never cooks. This story is along the lines of the adage ‘a watched pot never boils’. A young woman I befriended invited me into her home to teach me to make nixtamal. While a chick named Santos scurried underfoot, she explained that to make good nixtamal it is very important to leave the pot covered so it cooks correctly (Melany Fieldnotes Feb. 26, 2014). A brief story revealed both the importance of patience, and gave practical instruction for the making of a daily food staple nixtamal, the first step in making tortillas. These narratives reveal the fundamental importance of corn. Keys found that cuentos, as he called them, were used to educate children, and often include gendered aspects of relationships with the physical environment (1999:91). This was evident in most of the significados I came across.

The most ubiquitous significado was about what it means when some kernels in yellow maize are red. Virtually every individual who I asked in San Antonio told me that when kernels are red, someone has been stealing your harvest. The story varies in specifics, but the most consistent aspect was that the red is blood. As Pablo told me “my father has told me... there is a secret” which is that the blood comes from the hands of those who are stealing the crop (Interview Feb. 25, 2014). In the version written for me by José, the first time the corn turned red, it was from the blood of a young corn maiden that dripped as she was walking through a field.¹¹

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⁹ nixtamal is the Spanish word for the corn prepared to be ground for tortilla masa, made of kernels soaked and cooked in water with lime
¹⁰ See Appendix III, Nixtamal
¹¹ See Appendix II, La leyenda de maíz colorado

Persmark 12
Each of these corn-based significados not only reveals the prime importance of corn for the Kaqchikel of San Antonio, but also a gendered nature in the transmission of narratives. Pablo was taught by his father, my host mother learned from her mother, and José learned from his grandfather. It appears that the narratives are passed male to male, and female to female. This is consistent with the literature, as mentioned above, and Keys’ findings about the gendered educational aspects of cuentos.

*Changing Ways and Decline of Oral Tradition*

The day Melany taught me how to make nixtamal, we sat in her small, dark kitchen watching her youngest daughter chase the chickens around as beans bubbled on the woodstove. I asked her if she knew the story about the woman whose nixtamal never grew, and she said she had never heard it. She was excited about it, and when I told her another of the significados I had learned, she earnestly asked me to repeat them so she could remember. She told me sadly that her grandmother had died before passing on any historias to her mother, so she simply did not know them (Fieldnotes Feb. 26, 2014). This seemed to be the case for many people in the younger generation. José, 18 years old, told me young people simply do not know, and many do not care, about the old ways. He only began learning the significados from his grandfather after I showed an interest in learning about ixim in his town, and said “of course it’s important” to learn them, but it is getting harder (Interview Feb. 24, 2014). Many people with knowledge of these stories and explanations are still alive, and I hope that at least some continue to be passed down. As the rest of my fieldwork proved, however, corn is inextricably linked to the Maya people, and it seems unlikely that its significance will diminish, even if some of the old narratives are not told in the same way.
Gender Roles and Corn

From Milpa to Tortilla

As my host family and I sat around the small kitchen table one evening, eating beans and tortillas hot from the stove, I asked if my host sister’s nephew, age four, would learn how to make tortillas. This simple question kept them laughing for several minutes, and they told me that of course he would not, he was a boy (Ana Fieldnotes Feb. 14, 2014). Carey writes that gendered divisions of labor are clear from birth, and in my fieldwork I found this to be true (2008:130). Though there are exceptions to the rule, the traditional gender roles, (women working inside the home and men outside) were still clearly evident (Gaskins 2003:255). Every morning I would see a trickle of men and a few boys heading off out of town towards their milpas, machetes and azadones casually slung over shoulders.12 Most of the male farmers still dressed in the traditional wool skirt and woven shirt, marking them as men of milpa.13 Just as significados were traditionally passed from man to boy or from woman to girl, gendered labor divisions are too.

Samuel told me he learned to farm from his father, and he too was teaching his 12 year old son how to work the land (Interview Feb. 17, 2014). This pattern was mirrored within the house, the female domain. My host sister Ana had a baby girl, almost a year and half old, and already she would watch her mother, aunt, and grandmother wide eyed as they patted out tortillas, and demand some masa to make her own small, lumpy ones. My host mother, Juana, learned how to make tortillas and nixtamal when she was 8, watching and learning from her mother (Fieldnotes Feb. 23, 2014). Most women told

12 an azadón is a kind of hoe used for tilling
13 I observed that the majority of older, male farmers still wore traje. This would prove to be an interesting fact to investigate further. Don Pedro told me: “there are people who are disdainful of the typical clothing” (Fieldnotes Feb. 26, 2014)
me they learned to make tortillas between the ages of 8 and 12. However, based on time spent in various San Antonio kitchens, I noticed that young girls are exposed to the female chores from early childhood, swaddled and wrapped on a mother's back while she makes tortillas for dinner, or tagging along to the molino to grind nixtamal into masa. Consciously or unconsciously, on a daily basis children are socialized into gender roles.

I came to view tortillas as a metaphor for femininity. I would jokingly ask young women if they were experts at making tortillas, unlike myself, and they would earnestly tell me that they were not, but their mothers were. Female maturity and tortilla-making prowess coincided. As I slowly learned how to form tortillas, my host family and strangers alike commented that soon I would be eligible to marry a Mayan, once my tortilla-making skills were sufficient. Being able to make tortillas to provide for your family is both an expectation of a woman, and a point of pride. One woman I interviewed spoke disdainfully of those who do not make their own, “they are lazy” she said dismissively (Rosa Interview Feb. 18, 2014). It seemed that a woman who did not make her own tortillas was viewed as a less adequate wife or mother.

*Socioeconomic Status*

Gender roles wavered the most in situations of socioeconomic hardship. Carey writes that the social restrictions in gender roles is greater for men, and “social pressure often prevented mayan men from even dabbling on domestic chores, women often enjoyed greater flexibility in transgressing gender norms” (2008:116). I found this to be the case. No man would ever make tortillas (my host sister was emphatic on this point) but women would occasionally work in the fields, especially in times of need (Ana Fieldnotes Feb. 14, 2014). Patricia told me that in San Antonio, no women worked in
fields, but in rural areas they might (Interview Feb. 17, 2014). This was not entirely true. My friend Melany, 25 years old, quite poor, and with four young daughters, told me that she and her daughters go work in the *milpa* sometimes. They cannot afford to hire a worker and do not have enough male family members to complete the necessary tasks (Fieldnotes Feb. 26, 2014). She did specify that she would only work in a field if her household work was completed; in times of need gender roles may be less rigid, but a woman’s work is still completed first.

*Seed Selection*

Besides simply preparing tortillas to eat, women are involved in other areas of corn production. Women are responsible from removing kernels from dried ears of corn, and selecting seeds for the next year. One morning I sat on the floor of Patricia’s house, helping her remove kernels until I got a blister on my thumb. While we were working, she explained to me that women choose and save the seeds to be planted next year, looking for the largest ones (Fieldnotes Mar. 2, 2014). After speaking with Pablo, he introduced me to his wife who told me she always chose the seeds, and was responsible for laying out kernels to dry in the sun (Fieldnotes Feb. 25, 2014). The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) produced an article comparing the story in the *Popol Vuh* in which Ixquic pulls corn silk and it fills her net with corn, to the way in which women today are responsible for genetic selection of maize, arguing that the *Popol Vuh* story represents genetic manipulation (2002:5). Despite the fact that men are primarily responsible for planting and harvesting, women traditionally selected and maintained the maize, and based on my fieldwork, primarily continue to do so today.

During my stay in San Antonio, I met one man who had studied the *Popol Vuh* extensively, Valencio. This was atypical for San Antonio. He too told me the story of the
trial of the young woman, mother of the hero twins, to fill the empty net when there was only one ear on one stalk. She pulled the corn silk, which became an abundance of cobs. In Valencio’s version, he added an interesting spin: “since she was a woman, she couldn’t carry it alone” (Fieldnotes Feb. 21, 2014). Men generally carry the harvest back from the milpa, and once it reaches the home it becomes part of the women’s domain. However, the two roles are both vital, and one could not exist without the other.

**Gender Duality and Complementarity**

The gendered division of labor evident today with corn production has its roots in ancient Maya times. Bassie-Sweet writes that the Maya conceptualized the world in complementary pairs, such as the male/female pairing (2000:2). She notes that in contemporary times, “the complementary nature of a married couple is perhaps best demonstrated by corn production” as I have illuminated above (2000:2). My findings in San Antonio revealed that plants have gender, which evinces the fact that gender is still a category used to understand the world.14 In the *Popol Vuh*, gender complementarity is evident throughout. The first creators of humans (and maize) were called mother-father; both genders are required for completeness (Tedlock 1996:146). Males were created, but were not fully alive until women were created too: “with their women there they really came alive” (Tedlock 1996: 148). This notion is present in contemporary Kaqchikel culture, and fully embodied in the cycle of maize production.

**Conclusion**

Despite diminishing agriculture, increasingly rapid change, and a decline in oral tradition, corn remains a central part of life in San Antonio. It embodies personhood

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14 See Appendix III, Why *Huisquil* is a woman
and the cyclical nature of life in a way that no other food substance does. As Don Pedro told me, “es algo triste si no hay maíz”\textsuperscript{15} (Fieldnotes Feb. 15, 2014). When I asked him to explain, he was not able to put his feelings into words. My findings indicate that even in the face of change, the Mayan connection to \textit{ixim} is profound. The roots of corn in Maya culture are centuries deep. A young woman told me “\textit{sin tortilla no puedes vivir}”\textsuperscript{16} (Ángela Feb. 18, 2014). Maize was the foundation of virtually every meal in San Antonio, but it meant so much more than physical nourishment. People simply could not conceptualize a life without corn. It is a deeply nurturing, feminine presence, inextricably woven together with the human life cycle. Both male and female roles are necessary to ensure the full cycle of corn, from kernel to tortilla and back to \textit{milpa}, and corn remains a useful tool for understanding gender, and vice versa. Ears of corn are born from a mother, just like people. Neither man nor maize could exist without the other; they are mutually sustaining. My fieldwork made it clear that perhaps fewer individuals will continue to farm, symbolically re-creating the earth as they sow \textit{ixim}, but the cycle, both symbolically and literally, will continue.

\textsuperscript{15} Spanish for “It’s a sad thing if there’s no corn” \\
\textsuperscript{16} Spanish for “without tortillas, you can’t live”
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Valencio
Appendix I: Glossary of Relevant Kaqchikel Terms

- **ixim**: corn, maize
- **awex**: corn immediately after it is sown
- **awan**: young corn plant (no ears)
- **watz’ik**: corn flower, tip of the stalk
- **öch’**: young ear of corn
- **äj**: mature ear of corn
- **pats’an**: corn stalk
- **ija’tz**: seed (for all plants, also corn, though corn seeds are generally referred to as *ixim*)
- **jäl**: mazorca, dried cobs
- **smar’رع**: hair (human and maize)
- **si’paj**: a gift, what one farmer told me he called his harvest
- **k’em**: corn masa, dough
- **t’zo’l**: nixtamal, corn cooked in lime and water, ready to be ground
- **wánime**: heart
- **k’u’x**: spirit
- **skil wäj**: food
- **wäj**: tortilla
- **na’ tik’**: to plant

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17 The corn plant without ears is called *awan*. It is the core of the plant, the mother that remains when the ears are harvested. Don Pedro, my farmer friend, told me that *wánime* means heart. The similarity between the root of *wánime* and *awan* is striking. With a Kaqchikel dictionary I was able to confirm that *wánime* means heart, but I have been unable to verify a connection between these in the literature.

Persmark 22
Appendix II: Significados

These are the significados written down by José, as told to him by his grandfather. The Spanish is in his words as written, with minor spelling corrections. The English translations were completed to the best of my ability, attempting to keep meaning as intact as possible.

1. La leyenda del pueblo maya
Según cuentan los mayas hace muchísimos años, pero muchísimos años. La leyenda cuenta que la gente vivieron desagradablemente porque no había nada para alimentarse.

El origen del pueblo maya cuentan cuando las mujeres daban luz a un bebé lo dejaban de crecer seis meses y luego lo cocinaban para comer, triste y desagradablemente vivió el hombre y la mujer en este mundo.

Pasaron los días, años así sucedió: pero desde entonces Dios mandó lo que no había antes mandó lo necesario para el ser viviente en este mundo maíz, frijol, trigo, etc.

Desde ese año entonces hubo paz, tranquilidad, amor entre la gente, se dejó vivir a los inocentes criaturas.

A Dios gracias el hombre empezó a sembrar los primeros granos de maíz pasando los días el labrador cortó la cosecha que lo sembró en donde la milpa sacó tres mazorcas grandes y gordos en donde salió una mazorca de color amarillo, blanco, y negros desde ese entonces existía los tres colores, de maíz siendo así el hombre cosechaba y la mujer cocinaba pero una cosa rara entre las mujeres no cuidaban bien lo que el hombre cosechaba.

Un día el hombre cosechó mucha mazorca. En un día de verano estaba la mujer escogiendo la mazorca buena y lo apartaba de los podridos bueno. Sería eso si lo hubiera apartado para comer o dar a los animales domesticos.

Pero no fue así lo que relatan los abuelos de mi pueblo. La mujer no pensó en ella misma antes de inventar una locura hubiera pensado en ella su sencillez, humildad y respeto entre ella misma pero la pobre mazorca podrida fue tirada en un río que pasaba en el pueblo y se iba alrededor de una montaña.

Pasando los días meses y años. La mujer no se estaba dando cuenta que la cosecha de maíz que cosechaba el labrador se había desapareciendo poco a poquito y así sucesivamente desapareció el maíz.

Así lo relatan los abuelos de mi pueblo.
The legend of the Maya pueblo

This is how it was told by the Maya many years and years ago. The legend tells that the people lived disagreeably because there was nothing to eat. The origin of the Maya people tells that women would give birth to a baby and let it grow for six months and later they would cook it to eat, sadly and disagreeably lived the man and the woman in this world.

Days passed, and so did the years: but since then God sent what he had not sent before, all that was necessary for a human being in this world, corn, beans, wheat, etc. From that year on, there was peace, tranquility, and love between the people, and the innocent creatures were left to live.

Thanks to God, man began planting the first grains of corn, passing the days laboring, cutting the harvest that he planted, and from the milpa took three large and fat corn cobs, from which came one of yellow, one of white, and one of black, ever since then there have existed the three colors of corn. And so, the man harvested and the woman cooked, but a strange thing among the women was that they did not care well for what the man harvested.

One day the man harvested a large quantity of corn cobs. One day in the summer, the woman was choosing good cobs and separated them from the rotten ones. It would have been good if she had separated them to eat or to give to domestic animals.

But it was not like that, as the grandfathers of my pueblo tell it. The woman did not think of that before inventing a madness, she should have thought with simplicity, humility and respect for the corn. But the poor cobs that the woman had separated. The poor rotten cobs were thrown in a river that passed by the town and went around a mountain. Days and months and years passed. The woman did not realize that the harvest of corn that the laborer had harvested was disappearing bit by bit. In that way, slowly the corn disappeared. That is how the grandfathers of my pueblo tell it.

Note: the narrative that follows is more or less a continuation of the preceding one.

2. El regreso del maíz al mundo

Según relatan que el regreso del maíz un grupo de alimentos vegetales estaban intercediendo por el pueblo destrozada sin la llegada del maíz.

Arrepentida estaba la pobre mujer al pensar de lo que hizo fue algo imperdonable.

18 The spanish here was quite unclear and I have translated to the best of my ability. I was also told this story orally, so have adapted this line so it makes sense with what I was told.
Pero Dios no es malo para castigar la gente. Dios escuchó la intersección de los alimentos. Entonces mandó nuevamente el sagrado Maíz ixim pero no tan fácilmente mandó por una montaña un brillante grano de maíz blanco. Un ave venía volando encima de la montaña y aterrizó para comer algo bajo y vió algo que brillaba en el monte debajo de los árboles de la montaña, y el ave Q’och de dos cabezas rápidamente caminó a ella y lo comió, nuevamente empezó volando y encima de un pueblo hizo sus necesidades el maíz iba entre ella bajando de la tierra rápidamente iba un campesino viendo algo brillante que bajaba de la tierra.

El campesino sonriendo se acercó a ella y lo cogió lo limpió y vió que era un grano de maíz.

Contento brincaba de alegría exaltaba dando gracias a Dios el campesino de luego lo sembró el grano de maíz. Pasando los días la milpa salió se secó y dió tres mazorcas grandes y gordas pero había una mazorca de color amarillo blanco y negro desde ese entonces existía los colores de maíz.

Así llegó nuevamente el maíz en la tierra.

Esta simple explicación de leyenda solo sabían la gente anterior. Lo que relata esta leyenda es la verdad y nada más que la verdad.

The return of corn to the world
According to how it’s told, a group of food vegetables were intercessing on behalf of the people, destroyed without the arrival of corn.

The poor woman was thinking that she had done something unpardonable. But God is not bad and punishes the people. God heard the intercession of the food. So he sent once again the sacred Corn ixim but not so easily, he sent upon the mountain a brilliant kernel of white corn. A bird came flying over the mountain and landed to eat something below, and saw something shining in the wilderness below the trees of the mountain, and the bird Q’och with two heads quickly walked towards it and ate it, once again beginning to fly above the town he did his necessary (defecated) and the corn within fell quickly to the earth and a farmer saw something bright that was falling towards the earth.

The farmer, smiling, neared it and took it and cleaned it and saw that it was a kernel of corn.

Contentedly he jumped for joy, giving God thanks and exaltations, the farmer later planted the kernel of corn. Days passed and the milpa came forth and dried and gave three dried ears large and fat, but there was one the color yellow, one white, and one black and since then the colors of corn have existed.

And thus arrived, once again, the corn to the earth.

This simple explanation of the legend was only known by the people before. The one who told this story told the truth and nothing more than the truth.
Note: My farmer friend Don Pedro told me a nearly identical version of this story, except it did not include the detail of women cooking babies, and Don Pedro put it very bluntly: “cuando hizo popó salió la semilla” (Fieldnotes feb 27th).

3. La leyenda de maíz colorado

Note: In one version of this story the woman’s name was written as Su’ku’xi, but the final one I was given by Jose was unnamed.

Es una historia que sucedió antes de que llegaron los españoles, cuando nadie peleaba para vivir y los hombres se conformaban con dormir, amar, comer, y crecer.

Ese año había mucha felicidad con la gente del origen maya. Las lluvias habían caído para preparar sobre la siembra de maíz.

Los labradores fueron y lanzaron los granos de maíz tan blancos y parejos como dientes de una muchacha bella, inteligente y sencilla, la muchacha viva que es el. El espíritu de la mazorca que significa tiosíl desde el cielo miraba a los labradores y de premio quiso darles una mejor cosecha. Bajó desde el cielo a los maizales que ya daban mazorcas. Empezó a pasearse por la milpa y de alegría se movían por el viento.

Pero entre la milpa de maíz sus tallo se había golpeado con una seta de espinas. Que hirió el espíritu de la mazorca. Y de sus pies cayeron las gotas de sangre muy tibia y muy rojas.

La muchacha sintió dolor y se fue rápido a un casita dejando caer las gotas de sangre sobre los granos de una mazorca abierta por los hombres traviesos. Los granos de la mazorca abierta se volvieron de blancos en rojos.

Pasaron los días y los labradores cortaron la cosecha una cosa rara, encontraron una mazorca de granos rojos, rojos desde entonces hay maíz colorado cuando lo veas recuerda esta leyenda que solo sabían los abuelos de mi tierra.

The legend of colored corn

This is a story that happened before the arrival of the Spaniards, when nobody fought to survive, and men were content to sleep, to love, to eat, and to grow.

That year there was much happiness among the original Maya people. The rains had fallen to prepare the planting of the corn.

The laborers went and threw the corn kernels, as white as the teeth of a beautiful, intelligent, and innocent girl. A girl who lived was just so. She was the spirit of the corn cob which means tiosíl watching the laborers from the sky, and as a reward wanted to give them a better harvest. From the sky, she came down to the cornfields that had

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Spanish for “when it pooped, out came the seed”
already given crops. She began to pass through the corn, and happily moved in the wind.

But in the cornfield her stem had been hit with a spiny bristle that injured the spirit of the corn, and from her feet fell slow, red, drops of blood.20

The girl felt pain, and quickly went to a little house, leaving drops of blood falling on the kernels of a corn cob left open by foolish men. The corn kernels turned from white to red.

Days passed, and the laborers cut the harvest, and found a strange thing, one cob had red kernels, and from then on there is red colored corn. When you see it, remember this legend that only the grandparents of my land knew.

4. **San Antonio Palopó**

Cuenta con una extensión territorial de 34 kilómetros cuadrado una altura de 1590 metros sobre el nivel del mar y una población de 9709 habitantes con alto porcentaje del grupo Kaqchikel. Sus habitantes se dedican especialmente a la agricultura, elaboración de tejidos, producción de fibra de maguey y de tule.

**Siembra de Maíz**

La población de San Antonio Palopó elaboran la siembra de maíz, por lo que empieza a elaborar la tierra en enero a febrero de cada año. En la aldea de Agua Escondida empiezan en diciembre a enero.

Siendo así cada población tienen diferentes costumbres.

San Antonio Palopó, cuenta con una costumbre cuando se trata de la siembra de maíz la gente busca de la cosecha anterior las mazorcas grandes y buenas buscan una cantidad grande y lo llevan a la iglesia colonial en los días de la Santa Eucaristía siendo así el sacerdote lo bendice con incienso y con una oración para que la cosecha salga de lo mejor. Terminando la Santa Eucaristía las mazorcas se traen en la casa, se desgrana la cantidad que se necesite, y se prepara el sembrador para ir a cultivar.

Lleva lo que es el blanco, el negro, amarillo y rojo.

La gente de San Antonio Palopó empiezan a cultivar el 20 de mayo al 20 de junio de cada año.

Dos a tres meses después la milpa crece a una altura de un metro y medio. Nuestros antepasados dijeron que en cada fila de milpa se tienen que arrancar una hoja de milpa para hacer tamalitos, y una pequeña ceremonia.

El significado de estas hojas dicen que en cada hoja se pone dos tamilitos para que cuando salgan los elotes, salen dos o tres elotes en cada milpa y se convierte con el tiempo mazorcas gordos y grandes.

**San Antonio Palopó**

This is a territorial expanse of 34 square kilometers, at 1,590 meters above sea level, and

20 Here I have translated *seta* as bristle, but it could also be a spiny kind of mushroom. Regardless, the meaning is clear—something sharp pricked her foot.
a population of 9,709 inhabitants with a high percentage of the Kaqchikel group. Its inhabitants dedicate themselves especially to agriculture, producing cloths woven from maguey and tulle fibers.

Corn Planting
The Population of San Antonio Palopó carries out the corn planting, during which they begin to work the land in January through February of every year. In the village of Aguas Escondidas they begin in December through January. Being so, every population has different customs. San Antonio Palopó has a custom of the planting of the corn. The people search the past year’s harvest for the large, good ears of corn. They find a large quantity, and carry it to the colonial church on the days of the Holy Eucharist. And so, the priests bless it with incense and with a prayer for the crop to be of the best. At the end of the Holy Eucharist, the ears are carried home, and the quantity of kernels needed is removed from the cobs, and people prepare themselves to go plant. The next day, they prepare the seed to go to plant. They carry white, black, yellow, and red.

The people of San Antonio Palopó begin to cultivate between May 20th to June 20th of every year.

Two to three months later the corn plants grow to a height of one and a half meters. Our forefathers said that in every row of corn, one must pull a corn leaf to make tamalitos, and a small ceremony. For every leaf, one must put two tamalitos in. The meaning of that is so that when the ears of corn grow, two or three will grow for ever stalk, and there will be a time of large, fat cobs.

5. Cosecha Final Piscar
La gente de San Antonio Palopó tienen una costumbre cuando se trata de ir a piscar.

San Antonio Palopó cuenta con un grupo de gente para ir a tocar en las ceremonias. Llevan lo que es la guitarra y el violín y el acordeón. Siendo así el dueño de la milpa y los empleados se van muy de temprana hora para ir a piscar. Los invitados de la ceremonia empiezan a pedir permiso al dueño de la tierra y de la cosecha y al Dios del universo. Terminando eso empiezan a tocar los instrumentos hasta la hora del almuerzo. De almuerzo llevan el pulique y tamalitos, gaseosa para beber. Empiezan a tocar nuevamente hasta terminar la pisca. Los granos de maíz que se sembró se convierten en mazorcas... ¡Increíble verdad!

The Final Harvest, Corn Harvest
The people of San Antonio Palopó have a custom for when it is time to harvest corn.

San Antonio Palopó
This consists of a group of people who play music in the ceremonies. They carry a guitar, a violin, and an acordion. And so, the owner of the cornfield and the employees go at an early hour to harvest. Those who are invited to the ceremony begin to ask the permission of the owner of the land and the harvest, and from God of the
universe.
Once this is completed, they begin to play the instruments until lunchtime. For lunch they bring puliqué and tamalitos, soda to drink. They begin to play again, until the end of the harvest. The corn kernels that were planted turned into ears of corn...¡Incredible truth!
Appendix III
Other Narratives and Beliefs

1. Nixtamal
There was once a young girl who was married, and she was very sad and she missed her mother. She was trying to cook nixtamal to make tortillas with for her young husband. She kept checking on it, but it would not grow, and she was very sad. Again and again she looked into the pot, but the corn simply would not grow.

Note: This brief story was recounted by my host mother on February 24, 2014. I recorded it afterwards, so it is in my words, not hers, but recorded with the fullest accuracy possible. My host mother explained that the moral of the story was “no creció porque estaba viendo cada poco” and to make good nixtamal, it must stay covered while it cooks (Juana Fieldnotes Feb. 24, 2014).21

2. Why huisquil22 is a woman
Once there was a young woman who went to bathe in the temescal. While she was bathing, there was an earthquake, and the temescal came crashing down on her. Nobody noticed she was missing for a long time. When they finally went to look for her, there was a huisquil plant where she had died. That is why huisquil is a woman.

Note: Don Pedro also told me this story, but in his version there was no earthquake. The townspeople stood waiting and waiting outside of the temescal, and when the woman failed to emerge, they finally went in to look. What they found was a huisquil plant (Fieldnotes Feb 27, 2014).

3. Twin Corn
Virtually everyone I spoke with knew about this generally accepted belief. It is said that twin ears of corn, two cobs stuck together, are a sign of a good crop to come. They are not eaten, but are saved until it is time to sow seeds the following year.

4. The Three Marias
The three Marias are the three Saints (Catholic) of corn. There is one for each color; white, yellow, and black. I was unable to determine exactly what the Saints did, but was told that they watched over the corn for a good harvest. Two families I knew of had a portrait of the Saints in their home (Fieldnotes Pablo Feb. 25, 2014).

21 Spanish for “it didn’t grow because she was looking at it again and again”
22 Also known as chayote in Mexico, and in the US