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The Resilience of Indigenous Culture in El Salvador

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Introduction and Personal History

In the spirit of research, I recently took a *23 and Me* ancestry DNA test and the results gave me much to consider about my own roots. Given the historical framework of conquest and patterns of migrations across the Americas, I expected some of these results as the daughter of Salvadoran immigrants: 52% Native American with ancestors from El Salvador, 33% European with ancestors from Spain, 7% Sub Saharan African with Senegambian, Guinean, and Congolese ancestry, and 6% of my heritage being broadly traced to various, far-flung regions of the globe. The prominence of indigenous ancestry that was picked up in my DNA was evidence to me of the resilience of indigenous ancestors who were silenced through years of hegemonic rule—and that we are still here.

The indigenous people of El Salvador are still alive despite the notion that we have long been wiped out; either by force or by choice we have instead taken on cultural attitudes that have masked our roots in order to survive violent oppression. History is typically written by the victors and silences the voices of those they vanquish, which is reflected in the lack of documentation and archival records of indigenous groups in El Salvador, as well as the sheer difficulty of obtaining many officiated documents. Despite this, there are subtle ways indigenous culture has been kept alive in popular Salvadoran culture: our traditional foods, our vernacular, and celebrations all weave together vestiges of a culture that could not be vanquished. Regardless of the results of my DNA test these vital pieces of the culture I was raised in are embodied experiences that are my identity.

In order to fully analyze the breadth of the erasures and silences of the indigenous Salvadoran, I will be using a historical research approach that traces the ethnohistoric movement of indigenous people across the Central American isthmus, which has contributed to a great amount of shared cultural values. Visual analyses of common foods in Salvadoran cooking will aide in the understanding of the commodification of foods with a Pre-Hispanic past that have persisted in the Salvadoran gastronomy today. A brief filmic analysis of Salvadoran documentaries will show first-hand accounts of Salvadorans with memory of their indigenous heritage, while literary analysis of Salvadoran poetry based on traditional foods will show the sentimental value and cultural significance of foods that have persisted despite genocides and war.

The Matanza of 1932

Stemming from the conquest of the Central American isthmus, the indigenous peoples of El Salvador have faced centuries of persecution and government-funded ethnocides that have led many to believe that along with its peoples, indigenous culture has become extinct. This erasure can also be attributed to a largely prevalent racial hierarchy that has been a driving factor in the denial of indigenous roots in preference of a more Eurocentric or mestizo identity. One of the biggest benchmarks of the erasure of indigenous Salvadorans came as a result of the January 1932 *Matanza* in which many rural communities were destroyed. Located in the western region of El Salvador, the areas targeted were in the departments of Santa Ana, Ahuachapán, Sonsonate, Izalco, Juayua, Santa Tecla, Acajutla, Ilopango, La Libertad, and the capital, San Salvador. This specific attack on these regions was a brutal slaying by the Salvadoran government. Often cited as a peasant revolt, indigenous groups and rural peasants were lumped together in the lowest socioeconomic castes as “campesinos” who worked the highly-valued land in coffee plantations; the Salvadoran cash crop. The cycle of violence was perpetuated though the extremely tense relationship between

peasant and planter. Leftist leader, Agustín Farabundo Martí spearheaded the revolt against the ruling dictatorship and the Fourteen Families, who monopolized much of the land in this monoculture of coffee in the countryside.

With coffee being a highly monopolized crop in El Salvador, the revolt leading up to the massacre was “...no sudden impulse on the part of the Indian campesinos. It was, on the contrary, the result of a long chain of events...” in the economic and political climate of El Salvador at the time (Anderson, 1). The fear of the spread of communism as well as a classist disdain for the underprivileged working class were among some of many key factors in the peasant revolt. With practically no middle class between the very rich and very poor, approximately 90% of the country’s wealth was held by the one half of one percent of the country at the time, creating a perfect storm for a communist revolt (Anderson, 83). Foreign investment from the United States as well as Germany brought in a new class of superior wealth which further widened the socioeconomic gap in El Salvador. The rural poor campesinos and *cafetaleros* (or coffee plantation workers) were greatly affected as the economic depression aggravated the already profound chasm between proletariat campesinos and the landholding elites, or *terratenientes*. It was not long before the revolt was crushed by military forces.

The European conquering of pre-Columbian civilizations and periodical peasant uprisings aside, this is hardly the first ethnocide in Salvadoran history. Given a hegemonic understanding of the political agenda of then president General Martínez, what makes *la Matanza* one of the most recounted histories was the new-borne fear of the spread of communism coupled with the specific targeting and terrorizing of peasants and indigenous groups that lived in these rural communities. As a direct result of General Martínez’s outlawing the use of native language and dress:

...people in 'Indian' peasant dress were shot on sight, and in some areas indigenous campesinos were rounded up and machine-gunned by the hundreds. After tens of thousands of indigenous deaths in a matter of weeks, the Indians reputedly abandoned their ethnic identity, including their language and traditional dress, in order to survive (Ching, Tilley).

This insidious response to the peasant uprising became a pivotal moment in which indigenous people were forced to hide themselves and abandon their traditions and identities in order to survive violent persecution by the oppressive Salvadoran government. Because of this apparent abandonment of culture, it has been widely accepted that indigenous Salvadorans have either faded into obscurity and eventual extinction, or have assimilated into the fabric of society so well that they have become ethnically ambiguous *campesinos*, who are perceived to be of mixed race heritage. Often understood as a racially homogenous nation, El Salvador had undergone a "...complete miscegenation of the indigenous and Euro-immigrant populations" that have led many to believe that there are no more indigenous populations left to be observed, and that the majority of modern Salvadorians are mestizo (Tilley).

Highlighted by anthropologist Alejandro D. Marroquín in *El Problema Indígena* is the argument that indigenous identity was seen as inferior by those in the upper echelon, which carried over into sentiments of self-hatred among those with indigenous characteristics in favor of a mestizo identity instead (Marroquín, 750). Seen as animalistic and inhuman, this was the entire basis for the government's initiative to exterminate indigenous peoples and subsequent disappearance of census records, journals, and officiated documents that gave insight into indigenous histories. This recent ethnocide and erasure has left long lasting scars in Salvadoran society that have made it difficult for anthropologists and historians to research these devastated communities. According to historian Thomas P. Anderson, it is "almost certainly true" that almost

everyone in El Salvador has some indigenous heritage; citing a 1940 study of the population of El Salvador by Barón Castro, it is estimated that about 20% of the population identified as indigenous, 75% identified as mixed indigenous and white, and only 5% identified as white (Anderson, 15). This could be due either to the vast proportion of the population being of mixed heritage, or perhaps a means of survival in times of heavy indigenous persecution. Opting for a more whitewashed presentation, the indigenous Salvadoran shirked their roots and that often marked them for death. In a 2007 census report by the Central Intelligence Agency on the demographics of the country, the data reflected that 86.3% self-identified as mestizo, 12.7% self-identified as white, 0.1% self-identified as black, and 0.2% self-identified as “Amerindian” (the census included Lenca, Kakawira, Nahua-Pipil in this category) (CIA 2007). Over the years, the demographic profile of Salvadoran society has slowly become of an amalgamation of several different ethnicities.

The Massacre of 1932 was no isolated incident. With a string of genocides of *campesinos* for decades to follow, dead bodies in the thousands were haphazardly thrown into *fossas communes* (mass graves) as their final resting place. Mass graves were an attempt at covering up the estimated 30,000 lives that were taken during the Matanza as well as other mass murders, such as the one that took place at el Mozote in December of 1981. Salvadoran Army troops took several hundred civilians, including women and children out of their homes in and around this village and killed them during a December offensive against leftist guerrillas (including the FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which was formed post mortem). With more than just an infantry front, an aerial and artillery bombardment decimated el Mozote, right before the soldiers stormed the village looking for leftist insurgents. According to one Columbia University case study that followed eye witness accounts of the violent scene, the army’s path of destruction was widespread,

spanning from the Westernmost parts of the country to the East, where el Mozote is located (Meisler).

These mass graves from the thousands of murders are still being discovered, with the most recent sites currently being exhumed, and the remains of many missing Salvadorans still being identified. In the documentary, *El lugar más pequeño* (2011), the testimonies of the murders and disappearances that continues into the civil war in the 1980's described the same cyclical pattern of violence at the hands of the government that echoed the same fear of communism that silenced the voices of many Salvadoran campesinos. In the documentary, the testimony of one elderly woman in particular recounted the violent loss of her daughter and the trauma she faced when her corpse was brought back to be examined and identified:

When they brought her to me, I didn't recognize her. They'd removed her breasts. There was a stake nailed into her private parts. 'I can't bear it,' I said to myself. She was no longer my daughter. Impossible to bear any more. She was just a bundle, burnt. (Huezo).

Chilling recollections such as the ones in *El Lugar más pequeño* focus on the direct impact the of the civil war on a micro level in the remote village of Cinquera in the department of Cabañas. Recalling the excruciatingly difficult choices they had to make and the harsh realities they were forced to endure, the villagers' harrowing testimonies offer historical insight into the government's atrocious, 12 year attack. Hopeful, however, was one man's testimony, acknowledging that these emotional wounds had not healed many years after the war: "a people with memory is more difficult to oppress" (Huezo). Despite the government's various attempts to cover up its violent crimes against humanity, the persistence of memory is what has kept communities intact and has allowed them to rebuild from what had been destroyed. Like the many of the small villages of El

Salvador that were decimated in wartime, there is a distinct emotional trauma that clings to those who continue to live in the villages that rebuilt after they were burned down. The residents of the town of Cinquera honored their fallen with a mural and a piece of helicopter shrapnel from the aftermath of the destruction. Intimately connected to the land they have lived and worked on for generations, the villagers of Cinquera still do not own any of this land, reflecting the long-running oligarchy that has allowed a select few to maintain control over privatized land and wealth in El Salvador. Hopeful, however, was one man's testimony, acknowledging that these emotional wounds had not healed many years after the war: "a people with memory is more difficult to oppress" (Huezo). Despite the government's various attempts to cover up its violent crimes against humanity, the persistence of memory is what has kept communities intact and has allowed them to rebuild from what had been destroyed. By featuring these testimonies of the voices the Salvadoran government tried to silence, members of these broken communities are able to shed light on the oppressive systems they live in.

Attempts to Recommodify Indigenous Identity: Misleading Ethnohistories

With some efforts being more successful than others, the resilience of indigenous culture in modern day El Salvador has been a direct result of recommodification of native customs despite centuries of oppression. Claiming one's indigenous heritage has been complicated and discredited mainly due to violent oppression but also due to a lack of understanding of the political fabric that often ignores ethnohistories. The result of this has been a historically inaccurate understanding of indigenous Salvadoran groups. During the 1990's, indigenous cultures re-entered state discourse in response to reconstruction efforts post-civil war. There was a concerted, government-led effort to not only honor and reconstruct a Salvadoran national identity but to simultaneously attract international tourism.

The struggle to re-dignify Salvadorian indigenous groups became more complicated as neoliberal initiatives brought these forgotten and oppressed identities to the forefront. In order for an indigenous group to gain state recognition and “international benefits,” TIPM (Transnational Indigenous Peoples Movement) requires that groups must fit certain criteria outlined in the ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Draft Declaration, which were drafted through extensive consultations among indigenous groups, while carefully avoiding a clear definition of indigenous peoples (Tilley). These neoliberal policies were made with the intention of recognizing the aspirations of many indigenous groups for autonomy and identity, proposing that groups in search of recognition must first prove themselves and their unique cultural characteristics. This is difficult in a country like El Salvador, considering its history is riddled with genocides and state oppression that made it dangerous for indigenous groups to express themselves freely. Coupled with the notion of a defunct indigenous community, it has it then been a challenge to prove that the indigenous groups in El Salvador exist with their own distinct languages and customs that distinguish them as indigenous enough, especially on the basis that indigenous rights are derived from cultural uniqueness as mapped out in these policies.

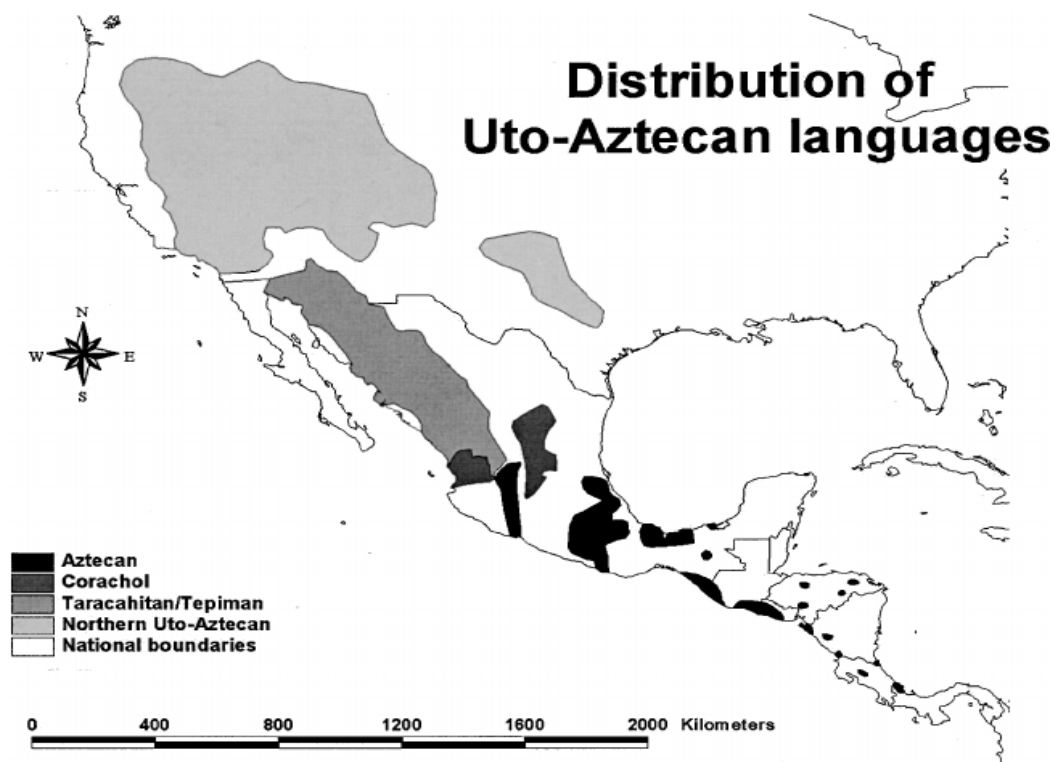
Common belief that the indigenous groups of El Salvador (primarily the Nahuat speaking Pipiles) are descended from Mayans was perpetuated through a tourist initiative that inaccurately glorifies the past. The “Mundo Maya” campaign, funded by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) deliberately “‘mayanized’ El Salvador’s Indigenous peoples” in an effort to attract international tourism to the country (Tilley). By doing this the campaign ignores the history, of indigenous groups that were not distinctly Mayan—with the Pipiles, for example, having historic ties to the Aztecs and Toltecs of Mexico. This belief and

“Ruta Maya” through Pre-columbian archeological sites leant to a false and tokenistic narrative that indigenous Salvadorans were Mayan at all.

According to Salvadoran anthropologist and expert on the philosophies of the Nahua-Pipil, Rafael Lara-Martínez contends that this tribe specifically belongs to the Uto-Nahua family, which extends as far north as Utah and California, with histories being traced through Mexico and Guatemala that lead to El Salvador. These series of movements were likely to have taken place between A.D. 800 to 900, and continued until the year 1350, migrating down the Pacific Coast of Central America with some pockets seen as far as Panama (Fowler, 194). Due to this affiliation there are shared similar features of the Nahua language that include linguistic and grammatical aspects, as well as commonly held belief systems. Hermeneutic and methodological studies of analysis and interpretation of religious phrases and principles have leant to the understanding that the myriad of cultural practices that were spread across the isthmus also included religion as well (Lara-Martinez). An archeological study on ancient ceramics and pottery by anthropologist Dr. Fabian Esteban Amador Berdugo echoes similar sentiments, concluding that the design and type of clay were telling of the movements of indigenous peoples. Carbon dating was key in analyzing the evidence that helped illuminate questions on the reaches of indigenous empires. The importance of studying the regional similarities established cultural identity of regions and helped define the magnitude of areas of influence and interactions in groups such as the Pipiles, who were characterized by ceramics in reverence to the Aztec god, Tlaloc (Amador Berdugo).

The migration of these indigenous groups has contributed greatly to the vast exchange of culture that greatly impacted regional languages, religions and customs. Specifically in Mesoamerica, migration was key in the dispersion of the Uto-Aztecan language family, which spanned from the

Great Basin of Mexico the Central American isthmus. Although there are extensive dialectal differences today between Nahuatl speakers of these vast regions preceding Spanish conquest, these differences are “minor given the geographical extent of the language” and can be thought of as various dialects (Beekman & Christensen). In a study on Nahuatl migrations through Mesoamerica, Beekman and Christensen include a “Distribution of Uto-Aztecan languages” tracing the lines of evidence of the movement of the language. In this figure it can be deduced that as the language traveled further down the isthmus it began to also take on different characteristics and dialects. These movements have been ongoing since the era of the Bering Strait land bridge, by which the first indigenous peoples were able to settle in what is now the Americas. Of these movements, the groups that migrated further South eventually became the “Triple Alliance,” or what is known as the extensive Aztec Empire (Beekman & Christensen).



Ideologies are important factors of that have shaped the cultural evolution throughout the isthmus. With such misleading representations of interwoven ethnohistories, it can be that much more difficult to begin the search for an accurate portrayal indigenous Salvadoran national identity that is not based on adaptations of other distinct indigenous groups, such as the Maya, that even incorporate “Apache, Navajo, and Lakota elements” into indigenous practices seen in activist groups in El Salvador, such as ANIS (Asociación Nacional de Indígenas Salvadoreños) (Tilley, 538).

The great difficulty of pinpointing an accurate representation of a culturally autonomous, Salvadoran indigeneity stems from obscured ideas of what indigeneity means and how it is manifested. The Salvadoran indigenous cultural identity is fragmented with many missing pieces in the full understanding of origin, and what would, by criterion outlined in the United Nations Draft Declaration as well as in ILO convention 169, give this group their own distinguishing characteristics. Pre-dating the arrival of Spanish conquest, there were already countless migrations of Mesoamerican groups (both Mayan and Aztec) from Mexico and across the isthmus with domination and acquisition of land as prime motivators. While there are distinct cultural aspects in Salvadoran indigenous traditions, one cannot claim it to be a homogeneous culture. Rather, it is a heterogeneous mixture of the indigenous practices that have evolved as various movements have shaped the Central American cultural landscape.

Linguistic and Cultural Ties to Food in Mesoamerica

Studying a chronological pattern of Mesoamerican migration can be insightful in tracing back languages and customs that give insight into indigenous practices and especially lexicon or common vernacular as evidence of a culture that give a history and framework of origin to begin

interpreting characteristics of indigenous Salvadoran groups. Deriving from the Aztecan Nahuatl, William Fowler argues that the divergent language of the Central American Pipil, Nahuatl, should be considered a distinct language (Fowler). While the Pipiles have their own distinct dialect it is important to note the similarities and even vestigial Uto-Aztecan indigenisms that insinuate a common connection from Mexico. Spread throughout the Central American isthmus in countries such as Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México and Nicaragua, there are commonly used words in the modern Salvadoran vernacular that designate a vastly regional and common understanding of native nature and vegetation (Cáceres-Lorenzo). Many of these Nahuatl words describing flora and fauna are still used today in the quotidian Salvadoran kitchen, or even spoken about wistfully by those with a memory of these culturally specific items:

atol, atole, coyol, mozote y pozol... ayote, capulín, cenzontle, chachalaca, chapulín, chichicaste, chichipate, chicozapote, copal, coyote, cuajilote, elote, guajolote, guate, guatusa, izote, jocota, nance, nopal, mapache, milpa, pepenance, tacuacín, zacate, zopilote...

Along with a variety of Nahuatl-derived words, many regions in El Salvador have their origins in indigenous language. This can be seen in Ahuachapán (from “*Ahuachia Apan*,” or splashing river), Chalatenango (from “*Shal, At, Tenango*,” or place of water and sand), Izalco (from “*Its, Sahl, Co*,” or place of black sand), Usulután (from “*Usulut, Tan*,” or city of ocelots), Coatepeque (from “*Cuat, Tepet*,” or hill of the serpent), and Panchimalco (from “*Panti, chimali, co*,” or place of flags and shields) (Fowler).

With a working understanding of the vast intermingling of Mesoamerican indigenous cultures across the Central American isthmus, it is then important to analyze the commonalities that

underlie the indigenous lifestyle. Of the numerous plants (such as beans, squash, chili peppers, potatoes and tomatoes) that were domesticated by Indigenous peoples, one of the most important basic staples of their diet was maize. Some cultures such as the Maya base the story of their origins on the maize that sustained them. The human creation narrative written by the Maya K'iche' people in the *The Popol Vuh* (often referred to as the “Mayan Bible”) states that mankind originated from maize when the goddess, *Xmucane* shaped them out of the crop, irrevocably tying their lives to the worship of these agricultural deities and to harvest (Coe). In Mayan theology, maize symbolized the cyclical nature of human life as well as a necessity of sustenance, as life would not be possible without it—maize was the cornerstone their entire existence. The Pipil people who established their territory of *Cuzcatlán* (now El Salvador) integrated some Maya groups in two centralized city states. Similarly to the Maya, the “maize-based Pipil agricultural economy produced cotton textiles, and carried on a wide-ranging trade network for woven goods and agricultural products” (Minority Rights Group).

Food as a Cultural Remnant In Spite of Colonization: Dietary Hegemony

One of the most significant ways the indigenous culture has been kept alive is through food. A nod to the notion of scientific racism, there was a dietary hegemony that existed in the colonies of New Spain, including El Salvador. The colonizers of the isthmus ascribed a heavy importance to food in relation to the humoralism (or genetic predisposition) of the indigenous people they conquered. Broader implications of this racial logic based on the humoral balance of the Spanish versus that of the Amerindians includes the notion that the foods that the natives cultivated and ate attributed to the “bodily differences that underpinned European categories of Spaniard and Indian” (Earle). Some of these proposed differences in cultures and bodies are what have led to the

explicit juridical and fiscal categories that were imposed by the Europeans, with the intention of taxing Indigenous peoples through tributes.

Caste identities and racial classifications formed as a result of a highly racialized colonial society, further implementing Caste Laws that attributed Indigenous identity with higher taxation. With diet believed to be linked to the creation of physical and characteristic differences between Europeans and Indigenous peoples, the idea of the racial purity of blood came into play. Proving one's racial purity became one of the ways one could attain an upwards mobility in their society so long as they were able to prove their heritage through documentation of one's genealogy. The "Limpieza de Sangre" then was a way for many to deny their roots in exchange for an upwards mobility that promised lower taxes and more opportunities in the Americas. By moving away from certain culinary practices the indigenous tribes of the isthmus were able to afford themselves blending with a new "mestizo" identity that was higher up in caste.

Despite dominant colonial ideologies that the flora and fauna of the Central American isthmus were "bestial foods fit for savage people," the Europeans developed a fondness for the foods cultivated by natives, such as pineapples, chili peppers and even chocolate (the word, "chocolate" originates from a typical cacao drink from the Izalco region). Today these same foods have been commodified into modern and mainstream culture that has an affinity for the sweet and savory foods that originate in Central American and indigenous cuisine, with many opportunist, mainstream supermarkets now appropriating and exploiting the cultures these foods come from—now readily available in the frozen dinner section.

The Salvadoran Kitchen: a Visual Analysis

The staples of the Salvadoran diet today is primarily based on the foods indigenous to the area, with a heavy reliance on corn and beans. This can be seen today in the modern-day pupusa: holding rank as the national dish of El Salvador, pupusas are made of a cornmeal based masa and stuffed with cheese, beans, pork chicharrón, and many other combinations. The humble origins of the highly popular Salvadoran dish can be traced back to the Pipiles, along with many other corn-based traditional delicacies, such as tamales, tortillas, atol, chicha de maíz, and cafe de maíz (Fowler). The traditional process in making the pupusas is more often passed down orally through generations of Salvadoran women rather than transcribing how to *tortear*, (flatten the corn masa in ones palms) which is an artform in itself. One need not look far in a Salvadoran household to see that home is also a place of remembrance and a preservation of ancient traditions that are used on a day to day basis. Interestingly enough, the mere act of bringing up Salvadoran food with other Salvadorans opens a dialogue, evoking fond memories of good, homemade food and the personal experiences and relationships one ties in with their own cultural and even national identity as Salvadorans.



FIGURE 1: 1,400 year-old clay vessel found in Joya de Cerén containing pumpkin seeds, covered in volcanic ash



FIGURE 2: Tweet featuring “Rio Grande” brand alguashte, which can be purchased at local Latin grocery stores, such as Todos Supermarket



FIGURE 3: *Process of roasting pumpkin seeds to make homemade alguashte*

Some of the most fascinating artefacts found in El Salvador's own Pre-Hispanic site, Joya de Cerén, were perfectly preserved remnants of food, such as these ancient pumpkin seeds. Buried in a layer of soot and ash, Joya de Cerén is a small village once inhabited in the year 600 when the eruption of the caldera volcano Ilopango caused long reaching damage to the isthmus (translated, cite prensa gráfica). With damage reaching as far north as the Yucatán Peninsula, the volcanic event actually enabled a local, "notable preservation of the architecture and the artifacts of its ancient inhabitants," giving us an intimate insight into their social lives, habits, and even cuisine (CMS Medios).

In figure 1, this vessel with pumpkin seeds found at the archeological site is particularly interesting considering what can be made using these seeds. Alguashte, a seasoning made of ground, roasted pumpkin seeds, is thought to have also originated from indigenous cuisine and is used in the modern Salvadoran kitchen. Despite being covered in soot, it can be inferred that these pumpkin seeds could be used to make alguashte and were being stored for later use. The re-

commodification of indigenous foods by local supermarkets have made *alguashte* an integral part of popular Salvadoran culture, making a piece of the past easily accessible at one's local supermarket, such as in figure 2. Labeled with its original indigenous name shows not only the resilience of indigenous culture through food but through language as well, as this culturally specific item (along with many other indigenous foods) has kept its name. Oral tradition has also been crucial in preserving traditional recipes such as *alguashte*, however, the digital age has made this process more accessible as well; a simple YouTube search will yield countless cooking videos for *alguashte* seen in figure 3, as well as tamales, pupusas, and a variety of other typical Salvadoran dishes.

Interesting also is the Twitter hashtag “*alguashte*” in figure 2, showing that this is a trending topic that many Central American twitter users (specifically Salvadorans) can relate to and share experiences with online. On one side of the spectrum, the commodification of these indigenous foods make them more palatable in a popular culture that is oblivious to the origins of cultures that are sometimes appropriated, discrediting and erasing those native to it. On the other side, this visibility in the mainstream culture and entrance into the modern discourse can be of great benefit to those who respect and understand the cultural implications of certain foods.

Indigenous Resistance through Food: a Literary Analysis of Salvadoran Poetry

Though Salvadorans may not always give much thought to the foods they enjoy and their indigenous origins, these foods are a form of resistance that has been kept alive despite volcanic eruptions and civil war. Salvadoran poet, Claudia Castro Luna sees the pupusa as a tribute to resistance, resilience and a memory of home: “Everywhere Salvadorans go, pupusas follow. For Salvadorans, pupusas are more than food. They are identity. In a sense, pupusas are living

historical artifacts of El Salvador's history; they hold both ancient corn tales and more recent war stories" (Castro Luna).

Written as a reflection of the imagist poet Wallace Steven's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Castro Luna reframes the idea that we are what we eat, and that Salvadorans "eat war" in her poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Pupusa." Her use of personal anecdotes in each vignette pays homage to her Salvadoran heritage and embodied experiences. The imagery Castro Luna paints in the fourth stanza is visceral, featuring her aunt (a survivor of the civil war) laboring over a *comal* to make pupusas. What Castro Luna highlights in this stanza with capitalization are the pupusa, the encrusted gun shrapnel, and civil war, which shows facets of her aunt's identity as a cook and as a survivor. The use of the word "comal," or griddle, is important as an ode to the indigenous kitchen and way of cooking that has been preserved for generations:

*IV. My aunt makes Pupusas for a living
She labors over a hot comal
Gun shrapnel
From the Civil War years
Encrusted in the flesh of her strong legs.*

In a similar, testimonial style as *El Lugar más pequeño*, Castro Luna also alludes to an intergenerational trauma that is a direct result of the violence of wartime. As Salvadoran women, the burden of traumatic social memory is survived in the technique of making pupusas by hand. In the twelfth stanza, the symbolism of birthing pupusas between a woman's hands is like the passing down of a type of suffering that has been relived a thousand times. The tradition of making pupusas is a pivotal, rite of passage for many Salvadoran women, with the oral tradition of the technique in itself heavily laden with historic significance. Just like an oral tradition, painful memory is also taught here. The final stanza alludes to the same intergenerational pain that is "[sloughed] off"

every time a pupusa is made. Within the context of the infamous Matanza of 1932, the tradition of making pupusas is a resilience to the war in itself. During a time when it was illegal to present or merely exist as an indigenous person, the survival of the pupusas, “within their curved boundary [is a] resistance recipe” that could never be suppressed, The vitally important, history of violence is then constantly being retold with the unconscious memory of pain in cooking techniques that have been around for centuries (Castro Luna). Though it is unclear if Claudia Castro Luna identifies as an indigenous woman, the vital pieces of her identity as a Salvadoran revolve around the foods she was raised cooking and consuming:

*XII. Women birth Pupusas
Between the palms of wet hands
To maker’s lifelines
Imprinting the masa
Her story—a thousand times told.
We eat War.*

*XIII. Each time
A Pupusa is made
War sloughs off
Undetected and unmeasured
Residues
Unstable atoms, half-lives.*

Pondering life on the margin of different identities due to epistemic oppression is the very basis of the erasure of indigenous culture. For many this brings into question not only national identity as Salvadorans of indigenous heritage, but also Central American identity. There are elements in

common that conform regions through geography, ethnohistories, and myths. The diasporic movement of Mesoamerican peoples across Central America has altered the significance of the past; knowing that these groups were always moving and exchanging customs wherever they moved to has led to the diversity of the region, implying that there are common cultural characteristics dispersed throughout not only El Salvador but the surrounding countries as well, primarily Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. This then further complicates the question of a unique identity that would characterize each indigenous group as outlined by ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Draft Declaration.

To prove indigeneity becomes a daunting task of proving that one has a cultural purity despite the isthmus being a combination of so many cultural practices. Though there are many indigenous groups with distinguishing characteristics in their culture, in El Salvador, "...as elsewhere in the region, it is very difficult to distinguish who is an Indian. Perhaps the best method is to say that an Indian is as an Indian does" (Anderson). With so many miscellaneous Central American indigenous characteristics as a result of the intermingling of cultures over time, it can be difficult to gauge one distinct culture. Anderson proposes that the strongest identifying factors are a result of one's embodied experiences and with whom they share cultural values; how one identifies then is based on the values they adhere to.

From Nahuatl to Nahuat

Cultural revival and a reclaiming of indigenous language has been resurging in the Salvadoran educational discourse. The persistence of words from the native language of the Pipiles, Nahuat, is an active resistance. Having survived thousands of years, words from the indigenous language are sprinkled into Salvadoran and Central American vernacular. The Pipiles spoke in a derivative

of Nahuatl, which came to be known as Nahuat (Nawat), which “belongs to a branch of languages that has been called variously Nahua, Aztec, Nahuatlan, [and] Aztecan” with the differences in this specific language “sufficient enough to require a distinct name in order to avoid confusion” (Campbell). The name This language is recognized to have been spoken originally in Mexico as Nahuatl, but with constant diasporic movements the language evolved over time to become more than just a distinct dialect used in El Salvador, but a language of its own.

According to Pipil language Specialist Lyle Campbell, (whose “fieldwork, collection of data, and analysis...were done during several stays in Pipil territory in the years from 1970 to 1976...” prior to the war) the language of the Pipiles is little used, spoken by only a few elders from mainly the Western departments of El Salvador (Campbell). Campbell corroborates the theme of erasure, stating that at the time any estimation of Nawat speakers was unknown, as many were still reluctant to even identify as speakers of the indigenous language. In the 30 years after the Matanza it seems that there were not as many young Nawat speakers, likely a direct result of the ethnicides and the fear of being killed for expression of one’s identity. This could be a large factor in why the language is no longer as widely spoken today, although there have been more recent, concerted efforts to immerse young students in the language.

In a 2003 study elaborated experts by UNESCO on the endangerment of languages defines the stages of the threat of language extinctions as: no risk (5) vulnerable (4), in threat of endangerment (3), endangered (2), critically endangered (1) and extinct (0). In the case of the indigenous Salvadoran language of Nawat, UNESCO rated the language’s condition in 2010 as a 1, or critically endangered, but in the last 8 years the situation has improved, with some experts saying the level had risen up to a stage 3 (Moreno).

Believed to have been wiped out along with the Pipiles, community based efforts to revive the language in rural primary school education as well as in classes for adults have had some success—although not widespread—in teaching and rescuing the Nawat language from obscurity. In a brief 2014 documentary by La Universidad Católica in El Salvador titled, “El rescate del Náhuat” a Nawat speaking school teacher in La Paz claims he was only one of fifty other Nawat professors who teach the basic forms and have the qualifications to teach the language in schools (UCA). Aside from teaching Nawat literacy, one of the goals of the language recovery initiative is to evoke a sense of Salvadoran pride in its rural students that incorporates themes of indigenous identity, with 2 hours of immersive Nawat lessons every day of the week for most of their grade school career. One of the students, Gerson, chose to take the language class as an adult because of an initial interest in tourism but quickly found a passion for acquiring what felt like a new language:

“I am learning Nawat because I want to preserve my culture...it’s like a new language that one carries inside of them that comes from our ancestors who are part of the indigenous culture” (UCA).

In the context of la Matanza and other mass murders, the intriguing idea that national identity is bound to the acceptance and revival of the Nawat language that simultaneously claims indigenous identity, are not considered mutually exclusive themes. For other students, the reception of the language acquisition is mixed. For some, the abandonment of indigenous practices, including its language seems best, in favor of learning Anglo languages such as English. This sentiment can also be seen as a self-inflicted erasure of ones roots, an echo of the generational pain from the era in which being indigenous could mean life or death. What those who doubt the

revival of indigenous culture through its language fail to see is that the culture is already so ingrained in Salvadoran idiosyncrasies:

My mom is really proud of me but my dad isn't—he doesn't like it. He says I'm trying to turn back time instead of looking towards the future, and that I should learn English instead (UCA)

In the documentary, it is clear that the schools in the municipality of San Juan Talpa (in which Nawat speakers are trying to implement their curriculum) are underserved, but are making efforts to collaborate with neighboring schools in the same municipalities. However, it is compelling to see that despite the lack of resources, this initiative is still underway, with many students over the 1 year mark of learning Nawat. This is true to the resilience of the culture, that despite many odds and lack of funding there is still a push to bring back this language from near extinction. Although it is being carried out on a very small scale, this local implementation of Nawat lessons in rural public schools is vital in reclaiming a language that at one time was absolutely forbidden to be spoken aloud. According to UCA, if the Nawat language goes extinct, El Salvador could be the “first monolingual countries in Central America, and one of the firsts in all of Latin America” (UCA) . However, despite the threat of the language’s extinction, these Nawat professors are offering hope that this last shred of indigenous culture will not die out. These Nawat learners, along with their professors, are the gatekeepers of a language that is on its way to being restored.

Sonia Megias, a Spanish musician and composer, travelled to El Salvador in 2017 to visit the rural areas in which she could learn from Nahuat speaking groups in hopes of aiding effort of language revival through music. Working within these communities, Megias was able to create

various compositions with Salvadoran choruses and along with orchestral accompaniment in her concert series called “*Ne Nahuat Shuchikisa*,” (meaning “Nahuat flourishes”). In this series, many Salvadoran Nahuat speakers were given a chance to help compose the pieces in their mother tongue, performing the concert at the Teatro Presidente as well as the Museo Nacional de Antropología (CCESV). This is important in giving a platform to native voices who are attempting to bring their nearly endangered language into the public arena.

Having historically fled persecution of all kinds, indigenous Salvadorans have also found a way to keep their own form of religion while conforming to the rigid structure of Catholicism imposed upon them by Spain during the conquest. Religious syncretism is a way of maintaining one’s religion through the guise of another in a way that fuses aspects of both practices. Such is the unique annual tradition of “Día de la Cruz” held in the spring. Celebrated after Holy Week and the brunt of most Easter celebrations, the Spanish-Catholic traditions of Day of the Cross are fused with the indigenous tribute to mother Earth and the god Xipec Tótec (Corvera). Día de la Cruz marks the beginning of the rainy season in El Salvador and celebrates harvest; one of these traditions involves hanging a cross made of native flowers and fruits, or decorating altars.

This patronal festival is also celebrated as Dia de Flores y Palmas in Panchimalco, during which the tradition of making beautiful, flower-covered palm frond wreaths (laboriously, handmade every year with millions of multicolored flowers) is passed on to younger generations. This patronal festival attract a large amount of tourist revenue as a result of the elaborate processions through city centers, bolstering the local economies in departments such as Panchimalco, where the festivities are held. The syncretic nature of this celebration implies a celebration with two underlying meanings. Indigenous Salvadorans were obligated to convert to Catholicism as the European presence in Central America grew stronger during the years of conquest. Ironically

enough, Dia de la Cruz was intended to be celebrated as a day based on rebuking the demons in ones' home and community by reciting three prayers during the morning, afternoon and evening. Instead this celebration was used by many indigenous Salvadorans as a way to continue worshipping in their own religions all the while using the façade of rebuking the devil from their home and their lifestyle by reciting, "*Vete de aquí Satanás, que parte en mí no tendrás, porque el Día de la Cruz, dije mil veces: Jesús*" (Clará de Guevara).

These are just a few of the many ways in which indigenous culture is being kept alive while currently being recovered after a long history of obscurity. Many Salvadorans today are the products of a resilient culture that has survived, if subtly, for the past few centuries. Salvadorans today are the survivors of various past traumas, and because so many share some form of indigenous heritage, are living proof of the resilience of the indigenous Salvadoran. With so much of the indigenous culture already imbossed in the fabric of all of Central America, it is just a matter of one recognizing these fragments as relics of a forgotten culture that is slowly flourishing and making a comeback.

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