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Person to Person in Ecuador

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Ecuador—October 26, 2013

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Ecuador

I talked with my host mother as we did the dishes together, she washed and I dried. It was a weekend and we had just finished eating a large and involved lunch of tacos with homemade beans and fresh-made guacamole. We were full and content, an excellent state for a conversation about food and culture. This large lunch we had, revealed a salient point about Ecuadorean culture: here, lunch is conceptualized as the largest and most important meal of the day. Consequently, dinner tends to be skipped or a smaller and less formal affair. My host mother also expresses her culture in that she wakes up incredibly early – often about 5 in the morning. There is a saying that reflects the local mindset: “a quien madruga, Dios le ayuda,” meaning, “God helps he who wakes early.” My host mother works as a teacher during the day, but unlike many lower-income Ecuadorean mothers she does not need to cook and clean when she returns home on weekdays. Instead, an indigenous woman is employed to complete all the chores while the family is out of the house. This includes the task of doing the laundry, which is done entirely by hand – the house has no washer and dryer.

This ties in to one of the most surprising elements of Ecuadorean culture: the division between classes which lines up more or less along the borders between indigenous people and mestizo people, or those of Spanish and indigenous decent. Like the majority of the middle class, my host family is mestizo, and they distinguish themselves from poorer people in certain implicit ways. For example, when I wanted to buy vegetable shortening to make a pie, my host

mother wouldn't allow it, saying "that is what the poor people eat because it is very cheap." She shops at large supermarkets rather than the cheaper street markets, a choice which automatically elevates the family's status. Also, Ecuadorean culture is extremely family-oriented; my host brother and sister, while 27 and 24 respectively, plan to live at home indefinitely until they get married and create their own families. My host mother is genuinely delighted about this fact, and sees it as very important that we all eat together when we are home, meaning that at times she will sit with me while I eat even though she is not hungry herself.

The conversation I had with my host mother helped me to realize how the tiniest details of daily life can speak volumes about a certain culture's norms and ideas. In particular, food seems to be an important marker of both class and cultural conceptions of community. This is not just true for Ecuador, but also the United States, where the name of your favored supermarket hints at your socio-economic standing and the increasing frequency of families eating separately reveals packed schedules and a more individualistic culture. It does, after all, make sense that the basic core of our subsistence should mirror our cultural organization. Perhaps we are not just *what* we eat, but also *how, when, where, and why* we eat it.

Interview: Sandra Santos (host mother) October 26' 2013