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Empowered through Labor and Buttressing Their Communities: Mayan Women and Coastal Migration, 1875–1965

David Carey Jr.

It made me very angry and I used to ask my mother: “Why do we go to the *finca*?” And my mother used to say “Because we have to. When you’re older you’ll understand why we need to come.” I did understand, but the thing was I was fed up with it all. . . . I realised we weren’t alone in our sorrow and suffering but a lot of people, in many different regions, shared it with us.

—Rigoberta Menchú¹

As indigenous females, Mayan women were among the lowest orders in Guatemala’s hierarchy of material power. Yet paradoxically, for some, the skills associated with their gender and ethnicity provided them both independence and an income that bested Mayan men’s earnings. Examining the history of Mayan *molenderas* (corn grinders and tortilla makers) reveals the nuanced workings of micropower within systems of domination. More broadly, the diverse experiences of Mayan females who migrated to the coast to work in the coffee

I am grateful to Ixk’at, Ixch’onik, and Ixkawoq for their assistance in conducting oral history interviews and to the staff at the Archivo General de Centro América for their support. Allen Wells, Kevin Gosner, Susan Kellogg, and Bill Nájuez all contributed valuable insights and critiques on earlier drafts of this article. I especially want to thank Mary Kay Vaughan and the anonymous *HHR* reviewers; their comments not only sharpened this article but also greatly improved the larger project about the history and historical perspectives of Mayan women to be published by Routledge. The American Historical Association, John Anson Kittredge Educational Fund, and University of Southern Maine generously funded this research.

1. Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (New York: Verso, 1984), 25.

economy during the late nineteenth century and twentieth centuries lay bare the threads that connect exploitation and empowerment, as well as the resulting friction. As Guatemala became increasingly integrated into the world market through coffee export production, how did local gender relations and national labor relations change?

Mayan labor on the coast was an integral aspect of liberal governments' development strategies in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century, especially in the coffee export sector along the Pacific piedmont. Women were a smaller, but nevertheless crucial, part of this coastal migration. Many Mayan women migrated to the Pacific Coast to pick and clean coffee; some established entrepreneurial activities, such as preparing food and washing clothes for workers. Although they suffered alongside men during stints of labor on the coast, their diligence and creativity opened spaces for them. Their earnings bolstered their indispensable roles within their communities and at times afforded them increased autonomy.

Liberal economic reforms often diminished the role and status of women.² Anthropologist Lauren Herbenar Bossen argues that female domestic dependency increased (or in some cases began) as a result of unequal gender opportunities in the expanding international capitalist economy.³ For Guatemala, historian David McCreery posits, "If at first coffee provided some women a new source of income, perhaps reinforcing their independence and value within the family, routinization and full development of the crop subordinated women's labor power to men in a way that traditional subsistence production did not."⁴

2. David McCreery, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: A History of Work in Latin America* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 62, 118, 126; Eleanor Burke Leacock, "Introduction," in Frederick Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972): 7–67; Eleanor Burke Leacock, "Women's Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution," *Current Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (1978): 247–75; Eleanor Burke Leacock, "Interpreting the Origins of Gender Inequality: Conceptual and Historical Problems," *Dialectical Anthropology* 7 (1983): 263–83; Donna Guy, "Women, Peonage, and Industrialization: Argentina 1810–1914," in *Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition: Women in Latin American History*, ed. Gertrude Yeager (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994), 108–10, 121.

3. Laurel Herbenar Bossen, *The Redivision of Labor: Women and Economic Choice in Four Guatemalan Communities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 6, 84, 130, 137–38, 145; Laurel Herbenar Bossen, "Women in Modernizing Societies," *American Ethnologist* 2, no. 4 (1975): 587–601.

4. David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760–1940* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), 278.

In contrast, my research indicates that although McCreery's assertion holds for those who picked coffee, women's traditional skills—channeled into entrepreneurial activities—could also empower them. Clearly, the coffee economy thrust women into working and living conditions that were deleterious to their health, and in most cases they earned lower wages than men. But some Mayan women improved their position vis-à-vis men by adapting to economic transformations in both mundane and innovative ways.

To a large extent, social relations were determined by Mayan women's labor, both paid and unpaid. As Michelle Rosaldo argues, "Woman's place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does (and even less a function of what, biologically, she is) but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions. . . . Gender in all human groups must, then, be understood in political and social terms, with reference not to biological constraints but instead to local and specific forms of social relationship and, in particular, of social inequality."⁵ Some women, such as molenderas and merchants, found ways to increase their earning potential beyond that of most men by fulfilling local needs and creating alternative economic opportunities on the coast. Although not overtly recognized by government officials, women's participation in this economic development was crucial for the state and for coffee *finqueros* (owners of large landed estates). As Irene Silverblatt argues, analysis that privileges the role of the state in history "blinds us to the human creation of economic and political forms."⁶ Despite the political and economic structures that favored men, these women found ways to improve their lot. Even those who earned less than men performing the same tasks alongside them in the groves reinforced their respected and complementary positions by sharing the experience. Likewise, those who stayed behind remained paramount to the survival of their communities; they protected property, took care of farms and livestock, and fulfilled other responsibilities.

By looking at the economic activities that Mayan women created and pursued, as Silverblatt suggests, and examining the meanings their "activities acquire through concrete social interactions," as Rosaldo instructs, we can better understand the role they played in Guatemala's coffee sector and how the agroexport economy affected their positions within their communities. As

5. Michelle Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs* 5, no. 3 (1980): 400.

6. Irene Silverblatt, "Interpreting Women in States: New Feminist Ethnohistories," in *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, ed. Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 156.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, “The crucial point that is often forgotten is that women are produced through these very [social] relations as well as being implicated in forming these relations.”⁷ Mayan women’s participation in coastal migration helped to perpetuate the coffee economy and, at the same time, to shape their identity. Mohanty goes on to critique “Western feminist discourse,” which, “by assuming women as a coherent, already constituted group . . . placed in kinship, legal, and other structures, defines third-world women as subjects *outside* of social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted as women *through* these very structures.”⁸ Oral histories not only allow Mayan women to explain their role in, and understanding of, coastal migration in the twentieth century; privileging their voices also avoids the tendency that Mohanty warns against: that is, presenting women in developing nations as a monolithic group.⁹

The experience of migration was not uniform among Mayan women; some never left their communities. Distinctions based on ethnicity, class, status, and position influence gender differences. Consequently, while the category “women” is necessary to show how women’s realities and histories are distinct from or parallel to those of men, such categories must also pay attention to the diversity of women’s experiences.¹⁰ Women’s labor on the coast was in some ways similar to, and in other ways different from, that of men. But tasks also varied from one woman to another. For instance, female field hands had more

7. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), 203.

8. *Ibid.*, 213 (emphasis in original).

9. *Ibid.*

10. Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992); Joan W. Scott, “Experience,” Butler and Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, 22–40; Cristina Crosby, “Dealing with Difference,” Butler and Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, 130–43; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999); Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), especially Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” 191–212; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s Text from the Third World,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in the Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870–1960* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19; Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History” (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1988).

in common with the men they worked alongside than they did with their fellow female molenderas. As such, the character of labor, as much as gender and class, affected relations among workers.

Because few Mayan men would accept conceding their role as primary providers, women who earned more than men almost *had* to live independently when they returned to their communities. As Verena Stolcke notes, “Cultural values informing gender hierarchies not only influence available options but also affect subjective responses to these options, because as members of households men and women have relationships, reciprocal responsibilities and claims that are shaped in particular ways.”¹¹ Even women who earned less than men nevertheless disrupted gender relations, as their income bolstered their confidence and autonomy vis-à-vis men. Yet because their community and nation were predicated on hegemonic masculinity (that is, social constructs and practices that perpetuate men’s dominance over women), Kaqchikel women’s empowerment was circumscribed.¹²

The “taunting mix of emancipation and limitation” and “evidence of an uneasy fusion of enfranchisement and exclusion” that Jean and John Comaroff attribute to neoliberal economics were evident in Guatemala’s coffee sector.¹³ Migrant labor offered highland Maya an opportunity to escape famine and unemployment in their hometowns, but seldom did they return with much cash. Yet even though migrants held subordinate roles in the coffee economy, their labor constrained the economic possibilities of the elites; at times, they made planters painfully aware of this constraint. As well, among Maya the exception of molenderas who often earned enough money to gain autonomy from men may have frustrated male and female field hands who remained impoverished. Thus, molenderas’ financial success, and the relative autonomy this afforded them, may have contributed to a certain form of alienation: they may have felt excluded from their highland communities because, by definition, their inde-

11. Verena Stolcke, “The Social Impact of the Crisis of Development: Adjustment with a Woman’s Face,” in *Eight Essays on The Crisis of Development in Latin America* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1991), 98.

12. Verena Stolcke makes a similar argument for women working in Latin America’s expanding informal economy; see Stolcke, “The Social Impact,” 100. For a useful critique of hegemonic masculinity, see R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (Dec. 2005): 1–31.

13. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 8.

pendence set them apart not only from men but also from other women. Their success disrupted the already-pliant gender roles in Mayan villages.

As the Menchú epigraph intimates, subalterns often have a keen sense of the international, national, and local forces that affect their decisions and lives. Likewise, as scholars have continued to analyze the multiplicity of forces that affect workers and capital, theoretical debates about class relations have become increasingly sophisticated. James Scott's pathbreaking work inspired much of this literature by focusing on "reciprocal manipulation."¹⁴ Because molenderas provided the very sustenance that energized the workforce, they held a powerful bargaining position with respect to plantation owners and managers. Studying gendered economic strategies reveals that, at least in some cases, women were more effective than men at (to elaborate on Eric Hobsbawm's observation) "'working the system' to its . . . minimum disadvantage."¹⁵ Yet their influence should not be overstated. Thanks to their political and economic capital, finqueros enjoyed greater resources and recourses than molenderas. Human agency and oppression both help create and are themselves shaped by larger structures and forces. The dialectic between the micro- and macrophysics of power means that men and women make history, but not under the circumstances of their choosing.¹⁶ Only by examining the diverse arenas where power is contested can historical accounts elucidate class relations. How did multiple and mobile power relations between international capital, the Guatemalan state, finqueros, labor contractors, and Mayan migrants evolve on coastal coffee plantations? And how did gender affect these interactions?

The intellectual rigor that demands "a synthesis that will reestablish the dialectic between structure and experience" in assessing the past must also be applied to oral histories and the nature of memory.¹⁷ Informants' recollections

14. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 309.

15. E. J. Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973): 13.

16. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852; New York: International, 1963); Emilia Viotti da Costa, "New Publics, New Politics, New Histories: From Economic Reductionism to Cultural Reductionism—in Search of Dialectics," in *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History: Essays from the North*, ed. Joseph M. Gilbert (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 20, 29; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), 98, 102; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 95–96.

17. Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Experience versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America—What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?" *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 36 (Fall 1989): 15.

of events are informed by their personal experience, the community's collective constructions of the past, and larger political, economic, social, and cultural forces, both at the time of the events and at the time of the telling. Oral histories are not merely a recounting of "facts"; rather, they are attempts by narrators to create texts that make sense of the past, situate themselves in the present, suggest strategies for the future, and perhaps call upon memory's healing powers. Articulating memories also requires extensive forgetting, both because narrators would be overwhelmed by the vast detail of their experiences and because they want to weave a story with a particular message. Since informants are performers, their stories also vary according to the audience or interviewer.¹⁸ Oral histories are vibrant social constructions, not static edicts. Just as historians craft narratives, Mayan raconteurs create views of the past that do not so much "invent tradition" as reinvent the past.¹⁹ Because they are so complexly layered, oral histories are ripe with pitfalls and require intense listening and observation;

18. Ruth Finnegan, "A Note on Oral Tradition and Historical Evidence," *History and Theory* 9 (Oct. 1970): 195–201; Florencia Mallon, "Editor's Introduction," in Rosa Isolde Reuque Paillalef, *When a Flower is Reborn: The Life and Times of a Mapuche Feminist* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 17; Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 183; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (Sept. 1998): 440; Steve Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004). The oral histories consulted for this article come from a larger project concerning Mayan women's historical perspectives. Most of the informants included here worked on coffee fincas and therefore have detailed recollections about coastal migration and labor. Since my research focuses on eight towns (and their hamlets) in the central highlands, by definition my informants are permanent highland residents who temporarily worked on the coast. This implicit selection criteria affected the topics this cohort deemed historically relevant. For example, most informants related how their experience on the coast affected their lives in the highlands. Due to the continued political volatility of Guatemala and recurrent human-rights abuses, I have preserved the anonymity of my sources for their safety. For the most part, I have used names that derive from the Mayan calendar. The majority of informants are female and they can be recognized by the "Ix" prefix to their one-word names. In contrast, male names have two words. A name in parentheses after the informant's citation indicates that one of my Kaqchikel female research assistants (Ixk'at, Ixch'onik, or Ixkawoq) conducted the interview; I performed all other interviews. All oral history interviews were performed in Kaqchikel in the communities where informants lived, and most often in their homes.

19. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); Joanne Rappaport, *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 206; Joanne Rappaport, *Cumbe Reborn: An Andean Ethnography of History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 125, 169–71.

silences are often as revealing as words. Lest historians avoid these primary sources altogether, Charles Joyner assures scholars, “Informants never lie to a good historian (although they may try to); they just reveal the truth in some unique ways.”²⁰ Joyner’s insistence that “lies” often reveal more truth than do facts resonates with Allesandro Portelli’s assertion that “errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings.”²¹ For these reasons, Daniel James finds oral history especially valuable for labor historians: “Oral testimony is more messy, more paradoxical, more contradiction-laden, and perhaps, because of this, more faithful to the complexity of working-class lives and working-class memory.”²²

Mayan women’s oral histories are informed by the world around them. Since they are increasingly part of a global economy—through trade, the media, and tourism—that offers financial opportunities but also threatens their livelihoods and lifestyles, histories about Mayan women’s early foray into the international economy permeate their conscience. As anthropologist Terence Turner asserts, “History is not merely a record of concrete events but also . . . a form of social consciousness.”²³ To inspire and caution, women share both tales of success and accounts of exploitation in the coffee economy. Oral narratives are influenced by the present, but women tell these stories because the past offers lessons and helps chart a course for the future. In his interviews with an Argentinean meatpacker, James observed, “It was not simply ‘the view from the present’ that shaped her remembering. Any view from the present is already profoundly imbricated with influences from past.”²⁴ At the same time, people use oral histories to reshape the past.

The Kaqchikel Maya reside in the central highlands of Guatemala, mainly in the *departamentos* (states) of Chimaltenango, Sacatepéquez, Sololá, Guatemala, Escuintla, and Suchitepéquez; the approximately 405,000 speakers comprise the third-largest Mayan language group in the country. By their nature, oral

20. Charles Joyner, “Oral History as Communicative Event,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Antbology*, ed. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 1996), 296.

21. Allesandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991), 2.

22. James, *Doña María’s Story*, 242.

23. Terence Turner, “Ethno-Ethnohistory: Myth and History in Native South American Representations of Contact with Western Society,” in *Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past*, ed. Jonathan D. Hill (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), 236.

24. James, *Doña María’s Story*, 223.

histories are emblematic of how Maya view themselves and their place in the past and present. As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall observes, “We are what we remember, and as memories are reconfigured, identities are redefined.”²⁵ In turn, archival sources—declarations by plantation administrators, internal correspondence from the Ministry of Labor, correspondence to and from Chimaltenango’s *jefe político* (political boss or governor), census data, and annual reports from Guatemala’s Ministry of Agriculture—corroborate or contradict oral testimonies, enrich the historical context, and provide new insights. Indeed, these documents buttress much of what Mayan women recount about working and living conditions, pay differentials, and employment options. Relations between the state, finqueros, labor contractors, and Mayan workers were complex; women’s perceptions of the past elucidate ways in which gender both mitigated and exacerbated migrants’ plights.

Local Labor in the International Economy

The export economy’s complex factors affected Mayan communities in distinct ways and at different times. As early as the 1850s, coffee expansion disrupted Mayan communities. But these intrusions were minor until the 1870s, because coffee production remained low and conservatives encouraged Maya to produce coffee. Nevertheless, thanks to efforts by José Rafael Carrerra’s second conservative regime (1851–65), by 1871 coffee comprised half of Guatemala’s exports. Even so, liberal politicians, under the early leadership of General Justo Rufino Barrios (1873–85), sought to transform Guatemala into a coffee nation. To this end, Barrios imposed forced-labor mechanisms and ordered *jefes políticos* to aid planters’ quest for workers. He also sought to deprive Maya of land by forcing them to obtain individual titles to their lands and usurping communal lands—both means to force them into the export labor force. Despite Barrios’s efforts and finqueros’ association with *habilitadores*—labor contractors who advanced money to workers in exchange for promises of labor or crops (usually coffee) and used debt peonage to ensnare workers—labor shortages persisted. Nonetheless, coffee exports quintupled from 1871 to 1884.²⁶

25. Dowd Hall, “‘You Must Remember This,’” 440.

26. Lowell Gudmunson and Hector Lindo-Fuentes, *Central America, 1821–1871: Liberalism before Liberal Reform* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1995); David McCreery, “State Power, Indigenous Communities, and Land in Nineteenth-Century Guatemala, 1820–1920,” in *The Indian in Latin American History: Resistance, Resilience, and Acculturation*, ed. John E. Kicza (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 191–212; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 337; Chester Lloyd Jones, “Indian Labor in Guatemala,”

Successive liberal leaders expressed concern over Guatemala's monocultural economy. Both General José María Reyna Barrios (1892–98) and Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898–1920) advocated diversifying agricultural production by redirecting the economy away from coffee production and toward subsistence agriculture and livestock, but neither administration was successful. Forced-labor mechanisms also were entrenched in Guatemala. It was not until the overthrow of Estrada Cabrera that the state outlawed *mandamientos*.²⁷ Debt peonage lasted until 1934 (with a two-year grace period), when General Jorge Ubico (1931–44) abolished it in favor of a vagrancy law, which required all males to carry work cards to prove they had worked the required number of days (100 or 150, based on their landholdings) for the state or private landowners. Finally, with the election of Dr. Juan José Arévalo Bermejo in 1945, Guatemala became the last country in the Americas to abolish state-sanctioned coerced labor. Under the democratic regimes of Arévalo (1945–51) and Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (1951–54), Guatemalans enjoyed free labor.²⁸

Coffee expansion did not immediately or universally threaten Mayan

in *Hispanic American Essays: A Memorial to James Alexander Robertson*, ed. A. Curtis Wilgus (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 311–12; Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., “Changes in the Nineteenth-Century Guatemalan State and Its Indian Policies,” in *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540–1988*, ed. Carol Smith (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1990), 68–70; Carol Smith, “Origins of the National Question in Guatemala: A Hypothesis,” in Smith, *Guatemalan Indians and the State*, 83; René Reeves, “Liberals, Conservatives, and Indigenous Peoples: The Subaltern Roots of National Politics in Nineteenth-Century Guatemala” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin–Madison, 1999), 86–175; Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821–1871* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1993); J. C. Méndez Montenegro, *444 años de legislación agraria, 1520–1957* (Guatemala City: Imprenta Universitaria, 1958); Julio Castellanos Cambranes, *Café y campesinos en Guatemala, 1853–1897* (Guatemala: Ed. Universitaria, 1985), 53–55, 81–119, 144; Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 64–67; David McCreery, “Coffee and Indigenous Labor in Guatemala, 1871–1980,” in *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 1500–1989*, ed. William Gervase Clarence-Smith and Steven Topik (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003): 191–99.

27. *Mandamientos* took two forms: an annual obligation to work on public-works projects in lieu of a tax and labor gangs that worked on privately owned farms.

28. David C. Johnson, “Internationalization and the Guatemalan Coffee Economy, 1890–1910,” *SECOLAS Annals* 34 (Oct. 2002): 72–73; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 161–93, 301–22; David McCreery, “Wage Labor, Free Labor, and Vagrancy Laws: The Transition to Capitalism in Guatemala, 1920–1945,” in *Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America*, ed. William Roseberry, Lowell Gudmundson, and Mario Samper Kutschbach (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995): 206–31.

communities, however. It was only gradually that the state and *habilitadores* encroached upon Mayan labor and land. Quetzaltenango, for example, was protected from the deleterious effects of coffee development because its land was at too high an altitude for coffee cultivation and its city too politically important to risk angering its K'ichee' population.²⁹ Some groups were adept at resisting state and private attempts to coerce their labor. At times, Kaqchikel successfully appealed to higher officials to protect themselves from local authorities, as was the case in 1898, when several Kaqchikel farmers appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture to avoid forced labor on the coast.³⁰ Nonetheless, most Kaqchikel oral histories purport that by the 1920s and 1930s, forced-labor mechanisms did not determine their migration to the coast; rather, a lack of resources and jobs and low agricultural production in their highland towns necessitated their exodus.³¹ McCreery notes, "In the early 1920's, it was becoming apparent that under pressure from a growing population and shrinking resources more and more of the inhabitants of the highland villages were not able to survive without *finca* wages."³²

Between 1871 and 1940 Guatemala suffered repeated corn shortages; in fact, until 1930 Guatemala remained dependent on corn imports. One can find correspondence in the 1930s from concerned *jefes políticos* inquiring about the supply of corn and wheat in highland towns and asking *alcaldes* (mayors) to limit the sale of maize to two quintals per person and to prevent *habilitadores* from taking workers to the coast until after they had sown corn and wheat; this hints

29. Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 111; McCreery, "State Power," 202.

30. *Memorias de la Dirección General de Agricultura 1902* (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional), 7.

31. Ixrusal, Comalapa, 6/28/01 (Ixch'onik); Ixch'i'l, Comalapa, 6/6/01 (Ixch'onik); Ixchali', Comalapa, 7/2/01 (Ixch'onik); Ixjinan, Comalapa, 6/10/01 (Ixch'onik); Ixkuch, Comalapa, 6/6/01 (Ixch'onik); Ixchajal, Comalapa, 6/27/01; Ixxowin, Patzicía, 8/23/03 (Ixkawoq); Ixpüj, Patzicía, 7/10/03 (Ixkawoq); David Carey Jr., *Our Elders Teach Us: Maya-Kaqchikel Historical Perspectives. Xkib'ij kan qate' qatata'* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2001), 87.

32. McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 304. See also Robert Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiche-Mayas of Momostenango* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 225; Raymond Stadelman, "Maize Cultivation in Northwestern Guatemala," *Contributions to American Anthropology and History* 6, no. 33 (1940): 105, 134; Charles Wagley, *Economics of a Guatemalan Village* (Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association, 1941), 31; Felix Webster McBryde, *Cultural and Historical Geography of Southwest Guatemala* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974), 74.

at the severity of the problem.³³ One reason for the shortage of maize was the significant growth of the Mayan population since the late nineteenth century. The populations of the Kaqchikel towns of San Juan Comalapa (henceforth Comalapa), Sumpango, and San Martín Jilotepeque (henceforth San Martín) more than doubled between 1880 and 1950. Likewise, the Kaqchikel towns of Patzicía and Santa María de Jesús experienced population increases of 35 and 43 percent, respectively, during the same period. Population growth was especially dramatic in the middle third of the twentieth century, partially due to increased access to improved biomedicine. Some communities complained they no longer had enough land to support themselves. An increase in seasonal migration from the 1930s to the 1960s further bears out Mayan reactions to diverse pressures. Indeed, coastal migration was so common by the twentieth century that some Kaqchikel used it to hide from personal problems in the highlands, as did Cruz Yancoba Sitán when he wanted to avoid paying child support.³⁴ Liberal policies designed to foment coffee exports combined with population growth, environmental calamities, and decreased agricultural productivity to undermine traditional Mayan livelihoods. Consequently, many Maya became more dependent on the cash economy.³⁵

33. Letter from jefe político to alcalde of San Martín Jilotepeque, Archivo General de Centro América (AGCA), Jefatura Política, Chimaltenango (JP-C), 1933, leg. 76; letter from jefe político to alcalde of San Martín Jilotepeque, AGCA, JP-C, 1937; letter from jefe político to alcalde of San Martín Jilotepeque, 5 May 1930, AGCA, JP-C, 1930, leg. 73. A *quintal* is one hundred pounds.

34. Leona Itzol contra Cruz Yancoba Sitán, 1 July 1939, Archivo Municipal de Patzicía (AMP), paquete (paq.) 45, Ramo Civil II.

35. Richard Adams, *Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944–1966* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1970), 170, 392–93; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 1–3, 148, 294, 308, 326–33, 341–42; Oliver LaFarge, “Maya Ethnology: The Sequence of Cultures,” in *The Maya and Their Neighbors*, ed. C. L. Hay (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940); McCreery, “State Power,” 192, 207–8; Guillermo Nájuez Falcón, “Erwin Paul Dieseldorff, German Entrepreneur in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala, 1889–1937” (Ph. D. diss., Tulane Univ., 1970), 323; Richard Adams, “La población indígena en el estado liberal,” in *Historia General de Guatemala*, vol. 5, ed. Jorge Luján Muñoz (Guatemala: Asociación de Amigos del País / Fundación para la Cultura y Desarrollo, 1995), 176; John Early, “Population Increase and Family Planning in Guatemala,” *Human Organization* 34, no. 3 (1975): 276; David McCreery, “Debt Servitude in Rural Guatemala, 1876–1936,” *HAHR* 63 (Nov. 1983): 758; Valentín Solórzano, *Evolución económica de Guatemala* (1947; Guatemala City: Editorial Jose de Pineda Ibarra / Ministerio de Educación, 1977), 319–20, 343; Johnson, “Internationalization,” 73; McCreery, “Wage Labor,” 217–19. John Watanabe asserts that Mam residents of Santiago Chimaltenango migrated to the coast because of a lack of land in their community; see *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1992), 146.

Kaqchikel communities in the department of Chimaltenango were among the earliest affected by Justo Rufino Barrios's land and labor reforms, as well as his creation of a central land registry (a general land code was not revised until 1894). All land, whether communal or private, had to be registered. The state assumed ownership of all unregistered lands, and persons or groups could petition for them to be auctioned and put in private or communal ownership. Shortly after assuming the presidency in 1873, Barrios transferred a large tract of communal land from Comalapa to ladinos (nonindigenous Guatemalans) who had assisted him in his liberal revolution of 1871.³⁶ In 1889 and 1890, Kaqchikel from Comalapa continued to complain about the loss of their land to ladinos, who were gaining some of the most arable and centrally located land there.³⁷ Competition and divisiveness among Maya also contributed to Barrios's land-privatization schemes. When denizens of San José Poaquil (henceforth Poaquil) requested their independence from Comalapa, Barrios quickly granted their entreaty under the stipulation that Poaquileños divide and title their landholdings. Kaqchikel leaders from Poaquil gladly complied.³⁸

One goal of the liberal encroachment onto Mayan lands was to disrupt their livelihood and thereby increase access to cheap labor. The loss of Mayan land through privatization occurred primarily between 1873 and 1910 in Guatemala. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, for example, a few ladino and Mayan landowners controlled most of the arable land in Comalapa. Furthermore, generally only these landowners had access to manure for fertilizer, which significantly increased their agricultural yield. Most Kaqchikel had to supplement the harvests from their small landholdings by renting land, working on a *finca de mozos* (agricultural estate that supplied laborers), or migrating to the coast.³⁹ As one Kaqchikel woman from Comalapa explains, "Our

36. AGCA, leg. 28734, exp. 2511; AGCA, Sección de Tierras (ST), paq. 8, exp. 2, p. 73. Ladinos define themselves in opposition to indigenous people; that is, they identify with the national or European, not Mayan, culture. Most ladinos have some Mayan blood but choose not to recognize or represent these cultural, social, or historical aspects of their identity. They are a minority in Guatemala, yet they are also the political and economic power holders. On ladinos, see Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*, 83–85; Kay Warren, *Symbolism of Subordination: Indian Identity in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1978); John Hawkins, *Inverse Images: The Meaning of Culture, Ethnicity, and Family in Postcolonial Guatemala* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1984).

37. AGCA, ST, paq. 8, exp. 2, pp. 71–74.

38. AGCA, ST, leg. 6, exp. 12, p. 108.

39. Kab'lajuj K'at, 6/27/98, Comalapa; Kaji' Tojil, 3/2/98, Palima, Comalapa; Jun Imox, Ka'i' Ajpu' and Oxi' Ajpu', 12/2/98, Panicuy, Comalapa; Wuqu' Kawoq, 1/29/98, Comalapa; Ixk'echelaj, 1/19/98, Comalapa; Luisa María Mazareigos Cordero, "De la milpa a la fresa:

people went to the coast because there was an economic crisis here. There was no money here. Even if you wanted to work here, there was none, so people had to go to the coast to look for work.”⁴⁰ A 62-year-old counterpart from Patzicía adds, “People went to the coast a long time ago because there was no fertilizer, so farming was poor. There was no corn here, so people went to the coast. One time frost hurt our milpa, so people had to migrate, and also because people drank and danced for the fiesta so they had to go to bring back money for the fiesta. That is why they went to the finca.”⁴¹

Although Kaqchikel oral histories belie reductionist arguments about the causes of coastal migration, large landowners and government officials frequently expressed the belief that indigenous people were indolent and would only work if compelled to do so. Some landowners insisted that Maya would only respond to corporal punishment, so they employed guns, dogs, and beatings to intimidate them. Many landowners constructed jails or stocks on their properties.⁴² Interestingly, the need to coerce labor attests to finqueros’ level of dependence on workers. When Maya refused to migrate or work, planters’ investments went to waste right along with the coffee berries rotting in the fields—an indication that hegemony was not omnipotent, but rather often at the mercy of subalterns’ decisions.⁴³ Certainly, Maya were cognizant of their

Cambios en la producción agrícola de la aldea Rincón Grande, Zaragoza” (thesis, Univ. del Valle de Guatemala, 1993), 35–41; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 201–3.

40. Ixki’ch, Comalapa, 6/29/01 (Ixch’oniik).

41. Ixpatz’, Patzicía, 8/1/01 (Ixkawoq). A *milpa* is a plot of corn, beans, and squash.

42. *Memoria de las labores del Ejecutivo en el Ramo de Agricultura durante 1923, presentada 1924* (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1924), 6; Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 66–68; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 219, 274–76; Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 182; Lloyd Jones, “Indian Labor,” 323; Cindy Forster, *The Time of Freedom: Campesino Workers in Guatemala’s October Revolution* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 39; McCreery, “Coffee and Indigenous Labor,” 199–200. For an argument that forced-labor mechanisms were necessary because wages were higher in their communities than on the coast (in the 1930s), see John Swetnam, “What Else Did Indians Have to Do with Their Time? Alternatives to Labor Migration in Prerevolutionary Guatemala,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 38, no. 1 (Oct. 1989): 89–112. One ladino historian argued that indigenous people were a retrograde influence on European immigrants, because they discouraged the latter from pursuing advanced technology; see Solórzano, *Evolución económica*, 341.

43. McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 270–76; McCreery, “Wage Labor”; Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 138, 153–56; Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*. In a similar vein, some scholars have argued that debt peonage was often a consensual system; see, for example, Alan Knight, “Mexican Peonage: What Was It and Why Was It?” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18 (1986): 41–74; Arnold J. Bauer, “Rural Workers in Spanish America: Problems

crucial role and thus their power. McCreery argues, “The indigenous population had the numbers and an awareness that without their participation the export economy would collapse.”⁴⁴ Nonetheless, planters’ political and economic resources afforded them more power than workers. Oral histories purport that most Kaqchikel with meager resources welcomed plantation labor as a relief from low agricultural output, drought, famines, and unemployment.⁴⁵ One female *oyonel* succinctly states, “You had to look for work on the coast to be able to eat each day.”⁴⁶ Personal narratives provide information not found in written documentation. Labor contracts generally mention only the males who were contracted to work, not the females who accompanied them and were an essential part of the group.

Migrants’ Plight and Flight

In the last third of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, women were among the permanent workers on coffee fincas. In some cases they outnumbered men; one coffee finca employed only females and children.⁴⁷

of Peonage and Oppression,” *HAHR* 59 (1979): 34–63; Friedrich Katz, “Labor Conditions on Haciendas in Porfirian Mexico: Some Trends and Tendencies,” *HAHR* 54, no. 1 (1974): 1–47.

44. McCreery, “Coffee and Indigenous Labor,” 199.

45. Carey, *Our Elders Teach Us*, 87–91.

46. Ixtol, Comalapa, 6/26/01 (Ixch’onik). An *oyonel* is a Mayan soul-caller or faith healer. It is primarily a spiritual position but also is related to physical and, more commonly, mental health.

47. Acta de Inspección for Finca San Antonio Petacalapa, AGCA, Instituto General de Trabajo, Correspondencia (IGT-C), June 1948, leg. 48758; Actas de Inspección for Finca Santa Isabel, Finca Viñas, Finca Villa Alicia, Finca Agrícola Nacional Montelimar, Finca Agrícola Clarita, Finca Cerro Redondo, Finca Agrícola Nacional Mundo Nuevo AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 48760; *Memorias de la Dirección General de Agricultura 1902*, 37; Ixkan, Patzicía, 9/1/01 (Ixkawoq); Ixeskit, Patzicía, 9/1/01 (Ixkawoq); Ixajb’al, Patzun, 9/1/01 (Ixkawoq); McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 278–81; Helen Sanborn, *A Winter in Central America and Mexico* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1886), 70, 166–67; Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls*, 144; J. W. Boddam-Whetham, *Across Central America* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1877), 84–85; Oliver LaFarge and Douglas Byers, *The Year Bearer’s People* (New Orleans: Tulane Univ., 1931), 59; Wagley, *Economics of a Guatemalan Village*, 30, 53; Anne Cary Maudslay and Alfred Percival Maudslay, *A Glimpse at Guatemala, and Some Notes on the Ancient Monuments of Central America* (London: John Murray, 1899), 100; Reeves, “Liberals,” 273–76; María Luisa Cabrera Pérez-Armiñán, *Tradición y cambio de la mujer K’iche’: Kib’antajik pe, Uk’exik pe ri K’iche’ Ixq’ib’* (Guatemala City: IDESAC, 1992), 62–64; Bradford Burns, *Eadweard Muybridge in Guatemala, 1875: The Photographer as Social Recorder*

Since finqueros faced chronic labor shortages during the harvest season, they welcomed the influx of not only men but also migrant women and children from the more distant highlands beginning in the early 1870s. The journey was long, arduous, and at times perilous. One man from Poaquil who was migrating to the coast with his two daughters, aged 12 and 14, lost them en route when he got drunk in Patzicía.⁴⁸ Kaqchikel towns were an important source of migrant labor in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁹ In the department of Sacatepéquez for instance, the jefe político boasted in 1890 that he garnered 6,215 workers for the finqueros, “not including the hordes of women cutters, who *voluntarily* offered [their services] to this work.”⁵⁰ As one 65-year-old woman explains, “Men could not earn enough here [Comalapa] to support their families, so they had to go to the coast. We followed the men there and cleaned coffee. It was fun because we could earn money.”⁵¹ Except for market vendors and petty merchants, most female labor in the highlands was unpaid. For many women, work on the coast was their first access to wage labor. So even though they were subordinate to planters and the male coffee pickers whom they worked alongside, this income often bolstered women’s confidence and disrupted the gendered balance of power in highland communities.

Migrants toiled under miserable and at times injurious conditions. Laborers complained that their clothes disintegrated on their backs due to long hours of physical labor in the rain and humidity. Except on the largest plantations, the cost and availability of mechanized equipment tended to be prohibitive. Consequently, few finqueros incorporated capital goods such as flumes, funiculars, or

(Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 96–129; Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 68. For evidence of an all-female permanent workforce, see “Declaración de Interventor Guillermo Tornöe” (El Tránsito property, Quetzaltenango), AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373. On most of his properties, women outnumbered men.

48. Letter to jefe político from Flavio Mazariegos, 12 Mar. 1923, AMP, paq. 24.

49. *Memoria de las labores del Ejecutivo en el Ramo de Agricultura durante 1937, presentada 1938* (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1938), 459–60; Lester Schmidt, “The Role of Migratory Labor in the Economic Development of Guatemala” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin, 1967), 369; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 278–79; Carey, *Our Elders Teach Us*, 87–89. In 1921, enough women from the department of Chimaltenango identified themselves as *cortadoras de café* (coffee pickers) that the census bureau recognized that category for the first (and only) time; see Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo de la Republica levantado el 28 de agosto de 1921. 40 Censo, parte II* (Guatemala City: Talleres Gutenberg, 1926), 313.

50. Solórzano, *Evolución económica*, 347. Solórzano cites the *Memorias de Secretaría de Fomento, 1890*, for this quote (emphasis my own).

51. Ixq’in, Comalapa, 6/8/01 (Ixch’onik).



Figure 1. Kaqchikel women sorting coffee, Osuna plantation, ca. 1920. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of CIRMA (Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica).

rail lines; rather, they depended on workers to transport coffee berries on their backs, secured to a *tapäl* (tumpline).⁵² “I went to pick coffee with my husband because there was no work here [in Comalapa] in November and December; you couldn’t find any work, so we went to the coast to look for a few cents. Many women carried coffee in sacks; they could carry a quintal. I couldn’t do that,” recalls one 70-year-old woman.⁵³ Women who worked in the fields had to perform the same labor as men, and many were just as productive. One former migrant explains, “You had to carry the coffee [beans] a long distance to where you had to turn them in, and you might fall and twist your ankle, or you

52. Schmidt, “The Role of Migratory Labor”; Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 68; Carey, *Our Elders Teach Us*, 89–90; Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 47; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 217; Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 377; McCreery, *By the Sweat*, 118; Tracy Bachrach Ehlers, “Debunking Marianismo: Economic Vulnerability and Survival Strategies among Guatemalan Wives,” *Ethnology* 30, no. 1 (1991), 7. A *tapäl* is a strap placed across the forehead and attached to a sling to carry a load, in this case coffee, on the back.

53. Ixtun, 6/7/03, Comalapa (Ixk’at).



Figure 2. Kaqchikel women cutting coffee, Candelaria plantation, ca. 1910.
Photographer unknown. Courtesy of CIRMA.

might see a snake and have to jump over it. . . . Even though you were a woman, you had to carry the coffee, and you might use a tapäl. You suffered.”⁵⁴ Coffee groves defied a sexual division of labor; women and men performed the same tasks. Nonetheless, the agro-export economy reflected highland agricultural practices and gender notions, where both men and women farmed, but agriculture was still considered a man’s domain. In general, coffee fincas defined *tareas* (tasks) by a man’s capacity.

Compounding the challenge of heavy physical labor, food provisions were scant. Because meals and wages could account for 50 percent of the cost of coffee production, many owners sought to make their operations more efficient at the workers’ expense. In some cases, owners required workers to bring their

54. Ixjey, Comalapa, 6/26/01 (Ixk’at). Traditionally, men used tapäles and women carried goods on their heads. Although occasionally Kaqchikel women used tapäles in their highland communities, that Ixjey stresses the use of a tapäl indicates that women were breaking some of the traditional gender roles and performing labor normally associated with men.

own food and prepare their own meals, a duty that almost invariably fell to the women.⁵⁵ The Villa Alicia coffee finca, which hired about 50 seasonal laborers, never provided rations, nor did it have enough land to allow workers to plant their own crops.⁵⁶ Many owners did not consider food provision part of their responsibility.⁵⁷ In contrast, most German-owned fincas in the early 1900s provided maize, beans, salt, lime, and coffee, the cost of which some owners deducted from their workers' pay.⁵⁸ "Women went to the coast to harvest coffee. Some took their children with them. My whole family went because my husband went to the coast. You arrive there, and they give you corn and beans, and then you have to make tortillas and food. Then you help with the work. Once the food is prepared, then you go with your basket to harvest coffee," explains one 68-year-old former migrant.⁵⁹ When fincas did furnish meals, they tended to be sparse. One woman notes, "They would only give you six or seven tortillas and a small plate of beans at midday, sometimes they would give you greens with chili sauce and six tortillas."⁶⁰

Because food provisions were so meager, some migrants sought ways to supplement their diet. One female octogenarian recalls, "Finqueros gave families a ration of corn and some lime, and you had to stretch it to make it last for everyone, but it never did. . . . So then you had to think about establishing a business, because otherwise you could not earn your food. So we bought bananas and *zapote* [sapidilla plum] to sell on the finca."⁶¹ By forcing migrants to supplement their subsistence, parsimonious planters compelled some laborers

55. Ixsirinte', Comalapa, 7/5/01 (Ixk'at); Acta de inspección: El Prado, and Acta de inspección: Clarita, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 48760; Mazariegos Cordero, "De la milpa a la fresa," 45; Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 370; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 218, 281, 294; Bachrach Ehlers, "Debunking Marianismo," 7; Richard Applebaum, "Seasonal Migration in San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán: Its Causes and Its Consequences," *Public and International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (1966): 145–46.

56. Acta de inspección: Villa Alicia, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 48760. For further evidence of working without rations, see letter from workers at Finca Luarca, 27 Oct. 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, Oct. 1948, leg. 48762; and Acta de inspección: Mundo Nuevo, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 48760.

57. Letter, 11 Sept. 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, June 1948, leg. 48758.

58. AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373; "Declaraciones de dueños de Bola de Oro" and "Declaraciones de dueños de Melodía y Filipinas," AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373. In this context, lime is calcium oxide used in the preparation of tortillas (not the fruit).

59. Ixwuxun, Comalapa, 6/8/03 (Ixk'at).

60. Ixjey, Comalapa, 6/26/01 (Ixk'at).

61. Ixsirinte', Comalapa, 7/5/01 (Ixk'at).

to become petty merchants. That Kaqchikel migrants acquiesced to this exploitation is a testament to how desperately they needed work.

Housing provisions also ranged from undesirable to nonexistent. One 80-year-old woman recalls that when she went as a young girl, the owners provided no housing, so her family made a structure out of banana-tree leaves, which left them exposed to health threats such as mosquitoes.⁶² Another woman adds, "There were no housing structures where they slept, so people slept in the weeds and made their home out of nylon, which they brought with them."⁶³ As recently as the 1960s, laborers were sleeping in self-constructed nylon structures on plantations. According to some informants, housing conditions on the fincas were so poor, it was preferable to sleep outside. In 1947, one labor inspector opined, "Workers have a right to complain, not even the pigs could occupy these lodgings. The problem of the rains is that [the roof] is a sieve and the floor, because it is dirt, remains moldy and damp. Another thing . . . the pigs encircle the housing. In short, they are victims of all the inclemency of the weather. As the workers made clear to the patrón, they are more secure under the canopies of the trees."⁶⁴

Unhygienic living conditions, diets low in calories and nutrients, the lack of sewers or potable water, and drastic climatic changes caused health problems and hardships for highland Maya. In the late nineteenth century, Kaqchikel from Santa María de Jesús, Sumpango, and Santiago Sacatepéquez all complained of pernicious health effects brought on by the dramatic temperature change, disease-bearing insects (especially mosquitoes), incessant rains, and dehydration. They claimed that many had died on the coast. In fact, mortality rates were higher on the coast than in the highlands through the 1920s, and migrants commonly brought malaria back to their highland towns.⁶⁵ Similarly, female

62. Ixq'a'n, Comalapa, 7/3/01. A number of other studies have revealed the atrocious living conditions for migrant workers in Guatemala; see, for example, Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 48–49; Thomas Melville and Marjorie Melville, *Guatemala: The Politics of Land Ownership* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 169; Bossen, *The Redivision of Labor*, 134, 145; and Applebaum, "Seasonal Migration," 145.

63. Ix'ajmaq, Poaquil, 7/1/01.

64. Letter from labor inspector, 16 Dec. 1947, AGCA, IGT-C, Oct. 1948, leg. 48762 (actual no. leg. 69).

65. Ruth Bunzel, *Chichibastanango: A Guatemalan Village* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1952), 143; George Cheever Shattuck, *A Medical Survey of the Republic of Guatemala* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1938), 104–5; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 220–21, 267, 276, 392n95; Marilyn M. Moors, "Indian Labor and the Guatemalan Crisis: Evidence from History and Anthropology," in *Central America: Historical Perspectives on the Contemporary Crisis*, ed. Ralph Lee Woodward Jr. (New York:

informants remarked that they were susceptible to lowland diseases because they were not accustomed to the climate or environment. They often returned complaining of fevers or cramps, both symptoms of malaria.⁶⁶ One mother and daughter became so ill in Escuintla that authorities there notified the alcalde of Patzicía that the women were too sick to return to their highland town.⁶⁷ Women also stress that many fincas did not have running water; often migrants left their highland communities knowing they would not bathe again until they returned. Consequently, many came back with lice and other insects embedded in their skin and hair.⁶⁸ “Many people contracted an illness on the coast, and when they came back, they spread it to others because it was contagious. They did not know what medicine to use, because to them it was a new disease. They had to find a new medicine,” notes one woman.⁶⁹ In some cases, fincas provided free medicine and housed health clinics, but few Kaqchikel report using (or even knowing about) these services.⁷⁰ Sadly, some migrants spent their earnings to cure themselves and their families of diseases they contracted on the plantations.

One group of workers on the Finca Australia demanded food rations and improved working conditions. Their complaints echo Kaqchikel oral histories: “We campesinos are [suffering from] bad conditions, poor vision, bad food, and poor sleep and we cannot live happily nor sleep happily. . . . [W]e cannot endure it any longer.”⁷¹ Conditions were so deplorable that some women (and men) fled, at which point the government and finqueros pursued them as fugitives who had broken their contracts.⁷²

Greenwood Press, 1988), 71; Applebaum, “Seasonal Migration,” 147; Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 21–27, 33–42.

66. Ixsum, Tecpán, 6/1/08; Ix’aj, Comalapa, 6/20/01; Ixwatzik’, Xiquin Sanahi, Comalapa, 12/17/97; Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 48–49.

67. Letter to juez de paz of Patzicía, from juez de paz of Escuintla, 4 Dec. 1941, AMP, paq. 237.

68. Ix’ajmaq, Poaquil, 7/1/01; Ixki’ch, Comalapa, 6/27/01; Ixq’in, Comalapa, 6/8/01 (Ixch’onik); Ixkotz’i’, Pamamus, Comalapa, 7/3/01.

69. Ixki’ch, Comalapa, 6/29/01 (Ixch’onik).

70. Schmidt, “The Role of Migratory Labor”; Applebaum, “Seasonal Migration,” 147.

71. Letter to president of Guatemala, 24 Oct. 1947, AGCA, IGT-C, Oct. 1948, leg. 48762 (no. actual leg. 69).

72. Letter from jefe político, 2 June 1944, AGCA, JP-C, 1944, leg. 88A; letter from Finca Santa Margarita (Sanidad Publica) to intendente municipal of Patzicía, 26 Feb. 1941, AMP, paq. 237.

Compressed Compensation

Cultivating and harvesting coffee were labor intensive. By the 1930s, most plantation owners had invested in capital equipment to mechanize the separating and cleaning of coffee beans, but they remained dependent on manual laborers to pick and transport the berries to the processing plant. Nonetheless, the real value of wages decreased from 1870 to 1917 (in part because of an international coffee crisis from 1898 to 1910, when prices dropped so low that many finqueros went broke). They increased modestly and stabilized until the late 1920s, then decreased again during the Depression. In 1900, a coastal laborer earned 10 cents a day. But as late as the 1930s and early 1940s, coastal wages had remained constant or in some cases increased to only 15 or 20 cents a day. Agricultural wages increased to a daily range of 40 cents to 1.07 quetzales from 1945 to 1965. Wage levels were not meant to reward laborers but to protect landowners from volatile international commodity prices.⁷³ Moreover, compensation was oftentimes well below what migrants had been promised. One woman shares, “My grandfather and mother told me how they went to the coast and earned a little money, but there was a problem. They told you they would pay you for doing between one and three quintales a day, but they did it *por tarea*. So even if you did more than one quintal a day, they would only pay you for one. The rest was for the owners and foreman. That increased the exploitation.”⁷⁴

Corruption eroded Mayan remuneration. Informants stress that in some cases foremen adjusted weight scales to their benefit, while in other cases they refused to pay the agreed-upon price for the berries.⁷⁵ For example, in 1883, Kaqchikel from Santiago Sacatepéquez complained about a foreman who

73. Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 73, 370, 386–94; Handy, *Gift of the Devil*, 68; Carey, *Our Elders Teach Us*, 88–91; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 215, 217, 228; Moors, “Indian Labor and the Guatemalan Crisis,” 73; Wagley, *Economics of a Guatemalan Village*, 75; Sanborn, *Winter in Central America*, 70, 166–67; Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls*, 136; John P. Young, *Central American Currency and Finance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1925), 39. For a Guatemalan’s frustration at the extreme fluctuations that characterized wages and work on coffee estates, see McCreery, “Wage Labor,” 216. At times, the government attempted to establish a minimum wage. In 1915, the government set the minimum daily wage at six pesos and raised it to eight pesos (\$0.13) in 1923. The devalued state of the peso (about 60 pesos to the U.S. dollar in 1928, and as high as 200 pesos to the U.S. dollar) prompted the government to change the currency to the quetzal and peg it to the U.S. dollar. For a good description of these fluctuations, see Nájuez, “Erwin Paul Dieseldorff,” 324–28. The quetzal maintained its equivalence to the U.S. dollar until the Guatemalan economic crisis of 1984.

74. Ixki’ch, Comalapa, 6/29/01 (Ixch’onik).

75. Ixki’ch, Comalapa, 6/27/01.

increased the workload without increasing wages. Maya realized that landowners and foremen constantly sought to extract as much from their laborers as possible. Inspectors cited foremen and owners for requiring that their workers carry more weight in their box than the legal limit of 125 pounds (an amount that exceeded or approximated the body weight of many workers).⁷⁶ Often finqueros and foremen did not accurately record work days or tasks or did not duly pay laborers for their work.⁷⁷ Although debt peonage was more common among *colonos* (resident workers), some Kaqchikel had to work off debts to landowners.⁷⁸ Even though Leona Sirin had not seen or heard from her husband since he had abandoned her 18 years earlier, authorities incarcerated her for the debt her husband left when he died on a finca!⁷⁹ Illiteracy prejudiced migrants, especially Mayan women, since they were more likely than Mayan men to be monolingual. “The patrón kept track of the records because our people did not speak Spanish. They would ask the patrón for five quetzals to take care of their sick child. He would tell them they had to work it off, but the patrón wanted to earn more money, so instead of writing 5 quetzals in his book he would write 15 quetzals. The worker did not know. That is how patróns became rich during that period,” explains a teacher.⁸⁰ Another woman noted that compensation was so low that a barter system of essential goods developed among Maya.⁸¹

Some workers led illegal strikes to protest low salaries.⁸² In 1948, Rómulo

76. Acta de Inspección: Finca Managua, 21 June 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 48758; letter from labor inspector, 16 Dec. 1947, AGCA, IGT-C, Oct. 1948, leg. 48762 (actual no. 69); Acta de Inspección: Finca San Antonio Petcalapa, 21 Aug. 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 48760.

77. McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 271–74; McCreery, “Debt Servitude,” 750; Sol Tax, *Penny Capitalism: A Guatemalan Indian Economy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), 107; Applebaum, “Seasonal Migration,” 142, 156; Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 23–24, 34–35, 40–42. McCreery notes that confusion about salary and credit agreements was rampant. Not all discrepancies were related to foremen’s or finqueros’ corruption, however. In some cases, Maya may have inaccurately recalled their work days/tasks, see McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 271–72.

78. Ixkoy, Patzun, 9/1/01 (Ixkawoq); Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 23–24; W. F. Jordan, R.R. Gregory, and W. Cameron Townsend, *The Cakchiquel Album*, ed. Ethel E. Wallis (Costa Mesa, CA: Gift Publications, 1981), 43.

79. Appeal of Leona Sirin, 7 May 1904, AMP, paq. 45, Ramo Civil II 1.2.

80. Ixch’i’p, Comalapa, 6/30/01 (Ixch’oni’k). McCreery also recognizes the problems of illiteracy for Maya who could not write down their debts or payments, see McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 230–31.

81. Ixtojil, Santa Catarina Barahona, 2/7/98.

82. Applebaum, “Seasonal Migration,” 143–44.

Simay and other finca workers who were paid 30 cents a day complained that they “do not earn enough to sustain their families.”⁸³ That same year, workers at Finca Maricón in Retalhuleu demanded a pay raise because they only earned 25 cents for an eight-hour day, “with which they could not do anything because the cost of living is so expensive.” When a labor inspector intervened, the workers accepted a pay raise to 35 cents a day and 40 cents for overtime, but as part of the negotiation they also asked that the administrator “prohibit his employees from insulting and threatening their workers.”⁸⁴ They demanded not simply a fair wage but also respect and security. As Scott argues, despite their subordinate position, peasants were unwilling to accept abuse as an inevitable aspect of class (or ethnic) relations.⁸⁵

While exploitation was rampant on plantations, sexism further limited women’s earning potential. Helen Sanborn, who traveled to Guatemala in the mid-1880s, observed that women were paid half as much as men to harvest and process coffee.⁸⁶ Women who worked in the coffee fields continued to face discrimination in the twentieth century. In 1919, Kaqchikel women from San Juan Sacatepéquez who worked at the Osuna-Rochela plantations were paid the same amount as children—less than half as much as men.⁸⁷ Tellingly, between 1913 and 1919, the Las Viñas, Monterey, and Los Diamantes fincas paid a labor contractor twice as much for recruiting men as they did for women.⁸⁸ Salary discrepancies persisted in the 1950s and 1960s. “A man made 40 cents a day, but as a poor woman looking for work you did well if you earned 8 to 9 cents a day,” notes one 56-year-old woman.⁸⁹ Until they mastered the requisite skills, their pay was even more meager. One woman explains, “We were very poor, so we had to go to the coast to work in coffee. The first time it took me one day to do a pound of coffee, because I could not pick much. So I only earned 15 quetzals a

83. Letter from workers at Finca El Cachuíte, 25 June 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 4876.

84. Acta de Inspección: Finca Maricon, 29 July 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, Aug. 1948, leg. 4876o.

85. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 309, 322–40.

86. Sanborn, *A Winter in Central America*, 166–67.

87. “Declaraciones dueños de Osuna-Rochela,” 1919, AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373.

88. “Declaraciones de dueños Hanseatische Plantagen-Gesellschaft,” 1919, and *habilitador* contract with José María Fernández, 26 Feb. 1913, AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373.

89. Ixjey, Comalapa, 6/26/01 (Ixk’at). In some cases, the efforts of women and children were subtracted from men’s labor; see letter, 20 Apr. 1948, AGCA, IGT-C, June 1948, leg. 48758.

month. I was 15 years old.”⁹⁰ In addition, labor that demanded significant physical strength put women at a disadvantage. Some female informants readily admit they could not perform all the same tasks on par with men. Consequently, pay scales based on piecework favored men. Likewise, historian Cindy Forster concluded that while generally men picked and hauled at least 100 pounds of berries a day, “children and women typically pick 40 to 75 pounds.”⁹¹ Yet according to Kaqchikel oral histories, some women matched the productivity, but not the pay (a few exceptions notwithstanding), of their male counterparts.⁹² In addition to the injustice of unequal compensation for fieldwork, the system failed (or refused) to recognize distinctions among women and remunerate them according to their capabilities. In other words, although many women did not pick or haul as much as men, some did; but because of their gender, finqueros and foremen assumed female field hands were less productive or simply did not feel obliged to pay them fairly. Ironically, the same gender notions that disadvantaged women in the groves provided them almost exclusive access to one of the coffee economy’s most lucrative positions for migrants: molenderas.

From Double Duty to Double Income

Many women who worked in the fields also fed their families and the men who worked alongside them.⁹³ As one 45-year-old woman notes, “The majority of women went to the coast. . . . My mother went to the coast. She picked coffee and she fed 30 men. She had to get up early to feed those 30 men, and then she had to pick coffee also.”⁹⁴ Preparing tortillas was especially time consuming prior to the advent of the motorized mill. Women had to rise at two or three in the morning to prepare the corn dough with their *kaj* (stone mortar and pestle). One 81-year-old woman recalls having to carry firewood from the highlands

90. Ixxeq, Poaquil, 7/1/01.

91. Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 47.

92. “Declaraciones dueños de Osuna-Rochela,” 1919, AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373. The owners of the Osuna-Rochela finca paid male and female seasonal laborers from the department of Baja Verapaz the same amount (and less than half that to children). Since Baja Verapaz is more remote than Kaqchikel-speaking regions, perhaps the owners needed to entice women with equal pay to convince them to make the long journey.

93. Ix’ajaw, Panabajal, Comalapa, 6/29/01; Ixb’aq, Santa Catarina Palopó, 7/13/98; Ixeskit, Patzicía, 9/1/01 (Ixkawoq); Ixajb’al, Patzun, 9/1/01 (Ixkawoq); Ixwuxun, Comalapa, 6/8/03 (Ixk’at).

94. Ix’otzoy, Comalapa, 6/28/01 (Ixk’at). For evidence of a molendera who picked coffee to supplement her wages, see Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 33–34.

for cooking on the coast.⁹⁵ “Boys and girls both went to the coast. Both had to work. Women made the tortillas and cleaned the coffee *so the work of the men was also the work of the women*, but women also had to grind corn. That was the law a long time ago,” explains Ixkujkuy, a 59-year-old weaver.⁹⁶ Ixkujkuy’s observation reflects Kaqchikel discourse on gender that portrays agriculture as a male domain, even while she delineates women’s work in the fields. But her silence is also telling: The work of the women was *not* the work of the men. One 64-year-old woman recounts, “Women went to the coast. . . . They fed [workers] and ground corn to make dough. You didn’t sleep because there was always more corn to grind . . . and tortillas to make.”⁹⁷

Because cooks awoke hours before fieldworkers, coordinated food production according to the tight time schedule of workers’ meal breaks, and protected their inputs from theft and spoilage, they had more demanding and complex jobs than their counterparts in the field. That some women worked in both the groves and the kitchen speaks to their acumen, dexterity, and endurance—especially since most were sleep deprived. Although never articulated, perhaps *finqueros*, foremen, and male workers (who were complicit with wage differentials, often to the detriment of their own families) could justify paying female field hands less than males, because they assumed women’s energies were diminished by their other tasks.

In some cases, comparable or superior financial opportunities were available for women who avoided working in the fields altogether. Since a large number of the laborers were men who traveled without their families, some women worked full time preparing meals and tortillas.⁹⁸ In the early twentieth century, *molenderas* often earned the same amount as those who worked in the fields, except when fieldworkers were paid by the piece and therefore had the possibility of surpassing *molenderas*’ daily wages. For example, on the Finca Las Viñas in 1915, *molenderas* earned 50 cents a day, which is what coffee workers were paid for a day’s work or a box of berries.⁹⁹ One 70-year-old woman recalls, “Women made the food for the men, but someone else would be assigned to bring the food to the men in the *cafetal* [coffee grove], because women did not have time to take the food to the men; they had to be preparing it all the time.

95. Ixch’anin, 6/8/03, Comalapa (Ixk’at).

96. Ixkujkuy, Comalapa, 7/3/01 (Ixk’at) (emphasis my own).

97. Ixmutz’utz’, 9/1/01, Patzicía (Ixkawoj).

98. Applebaum, “Seasonal Migration,” 146.

99. “Declaración de dueños Hanseatische Plantagen-Gesellschaft,” contract of habilitador Manuel Estrada, 6 Mar. 1915, AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373.

They would always hurry. They would not take their time because the time was recorded."¹⁰⁰ Women were responsible for providing daily meals for between 20 and 80 workers. Often women would cook breakfast and dinner, and prepare enough tortillas for the workers to take to the fields for lunch.¹⁰¹ The work was long, tiresome, and susceptible to abuse and exploitation, but it provided autonomy from labor in fields and by the second half of the twentieth century often resulted in greater income. In the 1960s, for example, Kaqchikel women earned 5 cents a day per worker. Consequently, women could earn between one and four quetzals a day at a time when coffee laborers were earning between 30 and 80 cents a day.¹⁰²

As women's autonomy increased, so did their earning power. In 1948, the owner of an electrical workshop paid Juana Cajas 40 cents per person to provide meals for his workers, who themselves only earned 50 cents a day.¹⁰³ As an independent contractor, Juana had more responsibility and assumed greater risks than women who worked for a finca, but her earnings also more quickly outstripped those of men.

A number of females utilized employment on the coast to enhance their independence in their highland communities. Ixpwäq, a 70-year-old woman, migrated to the coast alone when she was 20 years old. She worked at a finca and eventually earned enough money to buy a plot of land in her highland community. She explains:

I worked on the coast to buy my land. The first time I went, I cleaned coffee. [Then] I fed the workers. I made tortillas and food for 70 men. I used 140 pounds of corn a day, and I would do this work for 30 days and then I would change. At first I earned one and a half quetzals a day, but eventually the wage increased to five quetzales a day. But 45 years ago a man made 40 cents working in the fields, and I made two and a half

100. Ixtokal, Comalapa, 6/26/01 (Ixx'at).

101. Ix'ajmaq, Poaquil, 7/1/01; Ixkalel, Comalapa, 6/25/01; Ixchoy, Patzicía, 6/30/01; Ixq'anil, Comalapa, 6/19/01; Ixte', Comalapa, 6/20/01; Ixch'ab', Comalapa, 7/5/01; Ixkayb'al, Comalapa, 6/27/01; "Declaración de dueños Hanseatische Plantagen-Gesellschaft," contrato de habitador Manuel Estrada, 6 Mar. 1915, AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento, B leg. 129, exp. 15373.

102. Ixxeq, Poaquil, 7/1/01; David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder: Westview, 1999), 56; Applebaum, "Seasonal Migration," 142; Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls*, 136; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 278–79.

103. Log of workers' complaints, AGCA, IGT-C, Oct. 1948, leg. 48762 (no. actual 69).

quetzales [a day] when I fed them. I could also clean 15 quintals of corn and earn one and a half quetzales. Men still only made 40 cents a day. You could make 10 cents for washing a quintal of corn and *all the men could do was work in the fields*. I worked on the coast for 15 years and bought my land here [in Comalapa]. Then I established a business and sold vegetables. It has been seven years since I last went to the coast.¹⁰⁴

Ixpwäq “freed” herself from her husband and eventually from having to return to the coast each year. At times, the sexual division of labor benefited women. Their ability to perform a wide range of tasks made them more valuable than men, who could only offer agricultural labor.

Long hours, taxing physical labor, on-time coordination of meals, and entrepreneurial risks discouraged many from pursuing this profession; a few refused even to consider it. But in some cases women’s earning potential was six times that of men. The job was lucrative enough to encourage at least one man to transgress the sexual division of labor: in the 1940s, Ka’i’ Imox worked as a cook on the coast and saved enough money to buy 13 *cuerdas* of land in an *aldea* of Comalapa.¹⁰⁵ But since “skill definitions are saturated with sexual bias,” his flexibility was the exception; for most men, the social pressure to adhere to gender conventions was more powerful than the enticement of increased earnings.¹⁰⁶ Transporting highland constructions of gender to the coast altered power relations among Maya, and in some cases women came out on top.

In the coffee economy and especially in food preparation, gender was a crucial component of the organization of production. Even though the structure of the agro-export economy privileged male labor and pay, because it was predicated on the subordination and exploitation of fieldworkers, some female labor outside the confines of the coffee grove held significant financial potential. The paradox of poor Mayan women succeeding in an elite, ladino, patriarchal structure was born, in part, from molenderas’ provision of the very sustenance that kept workers going. Moreover, because of Mayan and Guatemalan notions of gender, *finqueros* had little control over who would cook; it was almost invariably women. Although they did not dictate the terms of agreement or invert

104. Ixpwäq, Comalapa, 7/7/01 (emphasis my own).

105. Ka’i’ Imox, 6/21/03, Panabajal, Comalapa; Appeal of Leona Sirin, 7 May 1904, AMP, paq. 45, Ramo Civil II 1.2. A *cuerda* is approximately 0.3 acres, although the size varied throughout highland Guatemala. An *aldea* is a village.

106. Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes towards a Feminist Economics,” *Feminist Review* 6 (1980): 79.

power relations with the planters, molenderas were empowered. Nonetheless, this privileged group whose wages outstripped men's were the exception; most women returned to the highlands with less money (if any) than their male counterparts.

Despite the hardships, most impoverished women who migrated to the coast appreciated the opportunity to work. Coastal migration was "how we bought corn, firewood, and other things. It was tough, but it was good because it relieved us of our poverty," asserts one woman.¹⁰⁷ Informants emphasize that when they returned to their villages they could buy food, clothes, and (beginning in the 1960s) chemical fertilizer.¹⁰⁸ By the late 1950s, chemical fertilizer became more readily available in the central highlands. Agricultural promoters from the Fomento de Economía Indígena (Development of Indigenous Economy) organization arrived in Comalapa in the 1960s to encourage its use. Although highland farmers were at first reluctant to introduce foreign inputs, when migrants used their income from the coast to purchase chemical fertilizer they enjoyed higher yields. In turn, since increased agricultural production met year-round subsistence needs, chemical fertilizers relieved many Kaqchikel from having to migrate, at least temporarily. In Poaquil for example, emigration declined precipitously in the 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, by the mid-1970s, the rising cost of chemical fertilizer initiated a cycle of dependency whereby Maya had to work on the coast to earn enough money to purchase agrochemicals.

Many women viewed their labor as part of a collective endeavor to provide for their families, not as an opportunity to increase personal wealth. But women who earned cash also elevated their status in the household economy, where generally men had greater earning potential. By pulling women out of highland communities and offering them wage opportunities, the agro-export economy disrupted Mayan gender relations.

Kaqchikel oral histories lend themselves to comparisons with Cindy For-

107. Ixch'oy, Tecpán, 11/21/97.

108. Ixkatu, Comalapa, 6/28/01 (Ixch'onik).

109. Miguel Angel Sotz O., "Mongrafía de Comalapa, Diagnóstico Comunitario 1994," Proyecto 2439 Chuwi tinamit: Comalapa (typescript, n.d.), 9; Wuqu' K'at, "Libreta de Apuntes" (typescript, n.d.); "Campos de ensayos y de demostraciones, prácticas del Programa de Fertilización de 'FAO-SFEL' en San Juan Comalapa, Chimaltenango," *Comalapan* 1, no. 1 (Sept. 1966): 6; "Técnica sobre la agricultura: Servicio de Fomento de Economía Indígena cuenta con programas de ensayo sobre fertilización," *Comalapan* 1, no. 1 (Sept. 1966), 7; Ixsu't, Comalapa, 5/4/98; Ka'i' Kame, Saqirtacaj, Poaquil, 4/29/98; Carey, *Our Elders Teach Us*, 102–8, 111–12.

ster's research on Mam migrants, which also combines oral histories and archival evidence. While the Mam speak a different language and live in the western (not central) highlands, they participated in the same labor system from the 1930s to the 1950s. Despite similar descriptions of the material and working conditions, Mam women fail to see themselves as empowered through labor migration in the way that so many Kaqchikel women do. Although Forster's research focuses on field labor and does not address other economic opportunities in the migrant camps (such as molenderas), my research indicates that even some Kaqchikel female fieldworkers felt this process bolstered their positions vis-à-vis men. Since female Kaqchikel fieldworkers earned the same amount as Mam women performing the same tasks, other factors must explain the discrepancy in their views. Personal safety emerges as one of the starkest contrasts. Forster's deft documentation of violence and rape on coffee estates—a constant threat to Mam women's security—resonates with the findings of other historians and to a lesser extent my own archival research.¹¹⁰ Many women never reported sexual abuse for fear of jeopardizing their honor, livelihood, and lives. Consequently, many of these crimes against women have been silenced. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Kaqchikel female informants did not report incidents of rape or sexual abuse at the hands of finqueros or foremen. Methodology may have contributed to this omission. As a man, women would be unlikely to share these experiences with me; however, female research assistants also failed to uncover evidence of sexual exploitation or abuse. Moreover, women talked about other threats to their physical safety on the coast and domestic violence in their communities. Certainly, the experience or even the threat of violence would have detracted from feelings of empowerment. In

110. Cindy Forster, "Violent and Violated Women: Justice and Gender in Rural Guatemala, 1936–1956," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 55–77; Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 46, 63–72, 158, 172–75; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 280–81; Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 32; AGCA, indice 116, leg. 17C, exp. 53, Chimaltenango 1916. In the archives, reports of violent and sexual crimes against Kaqchikel women are more common in the highlands than on the coast. Since my informants all returned to live in their highland communities after their relatively short stints on the coast, they would have had less exposure to sexual crimes on the coast than Forster's informants, some of whom lived and worked on coffee estates for longer periods; see Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, 42–43, 223–29. In addition, I considered oral histories from anyone who had migrated to the coast, whereas Forster interviewed a number of trade unionists and their family members (11—roughly a third of her Mayan informants), who may have a more radical perspective than many of my interviewees; *ibid.*, 223–29.

contrast to Mam women, Kaqchikel women's sense of physical safety—even if not necessarily historically accurate—may have reinforced their perceptions of empowerment.

When working with oral histories, historical perspectives and the (re)-shaping of memory are often more informative than facts. Kaqchikel women's accounts of coastal migration are authoritative because of their firsthand experiences. Yet, as Daniel James and literary critic Frank Lentricchia point out, such firsthand stories can also be representations of an idealized past or descriptions of history as it should have happened.¹¹¹ Informants' ability to shape their oral histories underscores the importance of listening carefully for clues of this process. Molenderas who enriched themselves and expanded their autonomy serve as examples of the transforming potential the international economy presents for Maya women. These accounts are especially relevant because—unlike their forebears, who confronted the export economy only a few months a year—the international economy is ever-present in contemporary Mayan communities, via local markets, regional factories, the media, the Internet, and Peace Corps volunteers. Even though it was exploitative and dangerous, Kaqchikel women found ways to benefit from the coffee economy. Kaqchikel women's oral histories not only reveal how international and national forces affected them in the past but also offer strategies for confronting similar challenges today.

Conclusion

Because they wanted to contribute to the family income, and in some cases establish their independence, Mayan women endured the hardships of coastal climates, landowner and foreman exploitation, abhorrent living and working conditions, and disease. During times of famine, work on the coast helped to feed people. Women were aware of the agro-export economy's exploitative conditions, but they fervently desired to provide food and income at a time when neither was secure in highlands—an indication that “the impact of global forces was decisively conditioned by regional and local dynamics.”¹¹²

Kaqchikel women also had a keen understanding of the patriarchal structures upon which the export economy was built. Often women who performed

111. James, *Doña María's Story*, 209–10; Frank Lentricchia, “In Place of an Afterword—Someone Reading,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas L. McLaughlin (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 429.

112. Putnam, *The Company They Kept*, 4.

the same labor as men in the coffee grove received half the pay. Tasks that took place outside the confines of the grove, such as cooking and cleaning, largely fell to women. Consequently, women invariably had longer, more arduous days than men. By design, the agro-export system subordinated workers and sought to maximize the exploitation of labor. Despite Mayan women's position at the very bottom of this economic system, at times they reaped the greatest benefits. Examining the smaller, almost invisible economy of migrant food preparation within the coffee export sector reveals the complex, dynamic, and even contradictory nature of political, economic, and social structures of power. The combination of macro and micro forces resulted in a very specific subaltern success story: Mayan molenderas.

The coffee economy shifted the structure under which women provided the "means of reproduction" from kinship obligations to market exchange.¹¹³ As a result, preparing meals (which was unpaid labor in the highlands) was one of the most lucrative opportunities for women on the coast. By extending a private activity (grinding corn and cooking for the family in the home) into the public sphere (grinding corn and cooking for coastal laborers), molenderas increased more than their income: they also increased the public visibility of formerly private activities and in this way made their worth more readily apparent to family and community members. Because these activities seemed like natural extensions of women's gender roles, they met little resistance. In this way, the global economy attenuated the already-malleable gender notions in Mayan communities. Examining social and economic interactions at the local, personal level, as Rosaldo and Silverblatt encourage, elucidates women's sundry experiences, which ranged from empowerment to alienation and complex combinations of the two.

Many women used their income to reinforce their role as indispensable familial contributors in their highland communities and at times become independent of men, as in the case of Ixpwäq. Even those with meager earnings proved their diligence, solidarity, courage, and sense of adventure by traveling to the coast—and in this way expanded Mayan women's mobility. Brenda Rosenbaum's study of Chamula, Chiapas, underscores this point; she argues that women's failure to migrate to the coast (ostensibly to protect Chamula cul-

113. In truth, since some women sold food and tortillas in their highland communities and some female migrants prepared meals only for their families on the coast, the distinction between kinship obligations and market exchange was not solely attributable to (or even always present in) the plantation economy. Lara Putnam makes a similar argument about women's labor in Caribbean Costa Rica; see Putnam, *The Company They Kept*, 51–55.

ture) reinforced Chamula ideology, which envisioned men as bold risk takers and women as passive, vulnerable, timorous creatures in need of the protection of home and thus ill-equipped for coastal migration. Consequently, Rosenbaum asserts, this ideology justified the limitations placed on women's mobility.¹¹⁴ By migrating to the coast, Kaqchikel women created spaces—both psychological and physical—for themselves within and beyond the confines of their communities. Their concrete social and economic actions helped to define who they were.

In many ways, Kaqchikel benefited from coffee production, while other Mayan groups (especially those located in the coffee piedmont) suffered detrimental effects. McCreery adeptly highlights “coffee's uneven and contradictory effects on the rural population.”¹¹⁵ Since the milpa and coffee economies complemented each other in highland Guatemala, coffee finqueros could access Mayan labor without disrupting their subsistence farming. As a result, coffee growers saved money because they did not have to pay for year-round workers.¹¹⁶ In turn, Kaqchikel used coffee income to sustain their highland communities at a time when their crops were not yet ready for harvest (October to December) and their communities lacked food and income. Furthermore, since they only worked for one or two months at a time, this outside labor was not excessively intrusive. Kaqchikels' income from coffee labor allowed them to remain autonomous from year-round incursions and threats to their livelihood. As Elizabeth Dore notes for Nicaragua's contemporaneous coffee economy, “Both the exploiting and exploited classes came to regard the system as necessary for their survival.”¹¹⁷ For Guatemala, McCreery and Richard Adams point out, coffee labor did not necessarily destroy indigenous communities; it

114. Rosenbaum, *With Our Heads Bowed*, 28–29.

115. McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 332. Valentín Solórzano uses census data to show that between 1880 and 1921 highland emigration to the coast (as well as to Guatemala City and Mexico) caused population decreases in some departments (such as Totonicapán, Zacapa, Quetzaltenango, Quiché, Baja Verapaz, Jalapa, and Huehuetenango); see Solórzano, *Evolución económica*, 388–90.

116. Wade A. Kit, “Costumbre, Conflict, and Consensus: Kekchí-Finquero Discourse in the Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, 1880–1930” (Ph.D. diss., Tulane Univ., 1998); McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 333–34; Moors, “Indian Labor and the Guatemalan Crisis,” 68–69; Aidan Foster-Carter, “Can We Articulate ‘Articulation?’” in *The New Economic Anthropology*, ed. J. Clammer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978): 210–49; Pierre-Philippe Rey, *Las alianzas de clases*, trans. Felix Blanco (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1976).

117. Elizabeth Dore, “Debt Peonage in Granada, Nicaragua, 1870–1930: Labor in a Noncapitalist Transition,” *HAHR* 83, no. 3 (2003): 558.

often buttressed them.¹¹⁸ Both hegemon and subaltern realized some—albeit unequal—benefits.

As Mohanty reminds us, women were both agents in this process and products of it. Their disparate identities and positions within the community were related to the coffee economy and its impact on women. The economic and political forces that precipitated coastal migration both empowered and oppressed women. Even while they were subject to its unsavory work regimen, deplorable living conditions, and low pay, Kaqchikel women shaped the coffee economy and, in turn, their highland communities. By providing labor in the fields and sustenance for the workers, migrants ensured the success of the coffee harvest. Women helped to determine economic realities on the coast and parlayed their benefits into increased autonomy and esteem in their communities. Despite exploitation, discrimination, and subordination, many Mayan women—particularly molenderas—improved their lot, some to the extent that they eventually could forego coastal migration. Clearly, molenderas were more effective than coffee pickers at “‘working the system’ to its . . . minimum disadvantage.” But even female field hands appreciated the opportunity to earn money and often felt enabled by their experience.

Kaqchikel women influenced their communities by challenging gender norms and increasing their level of independence. They may not have decided to go to the coast of their own accord; once there, however, they demonstrated subalterns’ capacity to leverage cracks in the system. Through increased wages, responsibilities, and mobility, Kaqchikel women exercised their micropower to enhance their autonomy within the dominant structures and forces that constrained their lives.

118. Adams, *Crucifixion by Power*, 182; McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 333.