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The Promises and Perils of Radio as a Medium of Faith in a Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic Community

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The Promises and Perils of Radio as a Medium of Faith in a Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic Community



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S*abias que en Guatemala hay mas celulares que gente?*” (Did you know there are more cellphones than people in Guatemala?) My cousin offered this factoid while we were waiting to get a SIM chip for my smartphone. The idea struck me as at once both preposterous and totally reasonable. “Weird, but, I guess, how else are people supposed to communicate with each other in 2016?” I responded. A brief internet search later confirmed there are an estimated 19 million registered cellphones active in a country with a population of 15.4 million,¹ so one would presume that indeed a lot of communication is happening via cellphones. While browsing the range of phones on display at the Claro store overlooking a Walmart-owned Hiper Paiz supermarket, I noticed something that seemed a little odd at first: several of the cheaper phones listed an FM radio tuner as a key feature.

I was in Guatemala to follow up on research that I had started over a decade earlier with Q’eqchi’-Maya Catholics, and one of the things that I was interested in was the role that mass-mediated communication played in their religious lives. Serendipity then that these hybrid objects that seemingly joined what felt like two very different eras of communications technology—cellphones hailing a future-looking present of narrow-casted peer-to-peer connectivity, and radios harkening back to older models of asymmetrical mass broadcasting—were complicating the question, “How are people supposed to communicate in 2016?”

In this technophilic age when people are increasingly connected to each other through a proliferating array of new media platforms, FM radio may seem like a quaint technology whose time has passed; but as I hope to show here, FM radio is a crucial medium through which Q’eqchi’-Mayas in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala can communicate with each other en masse and as such offers them the means for establishing a distinctive cultural space for themselves. Yet, for all its promise, radio also raises certain problems for the creation of this imagined community. Radio is for all intents and purposes a one-way medium of communication, and so it is impossible for broadcasters to gauge in real-time how the putative publics they are addressing through it are responding, or if they are even there to receive the

1 Edwin Pitán, “Unos 16 millones de celulares están registrados en la SIT,” *Prensa Libre*, March 24, 2016, retrieved September 15, 2018, <http://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/comunitario/unos-16-millones-de-celulares-estan-registrados-en-la-sit>.

messages being broadcast in the first place. The uncertainties inherent in radio can be especially fraught for Catholic leaders in rural Guatemala as they try to create and maintain a sense of religious community across a dispersed population through radio broadcasting.

As Brian Larkin has argued, it is an error to assume that media technologies are understood and used in the same ways in all times and at all places:

What media are needs to be interrogated and not presumed. The meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence, but something worked out over time in the context of considerable cultural debate. And even then, these meanings and uses are often unstable, vulnerable to changing political orders and subject to the contingencies of objects' physical life.²

Scholars thus need to be cognizant of the multiple ways that media can be imagined and utilized, and sensitive to how they articulate with other social, cultural, and political dimensions of life, not the least of which is religion. Thus, to understand how Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics use radio we need to begin by understanding the cultural logics that shape the use of this medium in rural Guatemala.

RADIO IN RURAL GUATEMALA

Despite the apparent overabundance of cellphones in the country, they remain out of reach for many Guatemalans. Cellphones are relatively expensive requiring not just the purchase of the device itself but also regular payments for access; one must have regular access to a power supply to keep them working; and data coverage can be unreliable in mountainous areas. Battery-operated transistor radios, on the other hand, are inexpensive and cheap to use, and as such are the most basic electronic appliance likely to be found in a rural Maya home.³ Moreover, FM radio frequencies travel across the mountainous terrain of highland Guatemala much

2 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389316>.

3 Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil (AKA Waq' Q'anil), *Configuración del Pensamiento Político del Pueblo Maya (Primera Parte)*, 2nd Ed. (Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 2004).



more quickly and easily than people or automobiles, and in fact the mountains actually help radio, since some of the highest peaks serve as homes for repeaters, enabling transmissions originating from urban areas to leapfrog the *cerros* (mountains) and reach audiences several hours of travel by land away. It estimated that radio broadcasts reach more than 99% of the population of the country,⁴ so that even in *aldeas* (villages) with no electricity one can hear the sounds small transistor radios powered by a pair of alkaline batteries emanating from homes. In sum, radio is the means of mass-mediated communication that is both most accessible to rural Q'eqchi'-Mayas.⁵

Radio is used not just for commercial and entertainment purposes, but also as a means for a range of entities including the state, NGOs, and churches to disseminate their messages to otherwise hard-to-reach audiences. Broadcasters know the reach that radio has in rural areas and count on the fact that people are at home and listening during prime times that accommodate an agricultural production schedule (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon and nightfall), so that not only is general news aired during these times, but messages directed at specific individuals are also sent out via this medium. Paradoxically, then, FM radio broadcasts, which are by their nature public and can be heard by anyone with receiver tuned to the right frequency, are regularly used to directly address specific persons in the absence of what we might tend to think of as more targeted means of communication such as telephone and mail.⁶ For example, community tourism organizations pay to have an announcement read on the radio to notify hosts in cloud-forest villages that groups of backpackers are on their way;⁷ hardware stores regularly name people who have overdue bills to pay along with the advertisement of weekly specials; and

4 Rick Rockwell, "Finding Power of Hidden Radio Audiences in the Fields of Guatemala," *Journal of Radio Studies* 8 No. 2 (2001): 434, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506843jrs0802_14.

5 Richard Wilson, *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1995).

6 Guatemala's mail system has not been particularly reliable since at least the mid-20th century. In true neoliberal fashion, the government gave the franchise for mail delivery to a Canadian company in 2004, and by the time of this field work, the system has all but collapsed due to budgetary issues.

7 Paul Kockelman, *The Chicken and the Quetzal: Incommensurate Ontologies and Portable Values in Guatemala's Cloud Forest* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374596>.

the municipal government uses the radio broadcasts to notify individuals about pending legal issues that require their presence in town. The system works even if the person directly being hailed by the broadcast doesn't hear the message, because there is a general social expectation that someone who does hear it will notify the addressee—a woman listening while cooking the day's tortillas may hear her husband's or a neighbor's name and know to pass the message along, for example. This is all to say that in this context radio's mass mediated broadcasts articulate with face-to-face social relationships to achieve their communicative ends.

In rural Guatemala sending out directed messages over expansive airwaves works well enough in the absence of other forms of narrowly-directed mediated communication. However, there is a high degree of uncertainty built into this arrangement since there are potentially myriad reasons why an addressee might not receive or respond to the message (e.g. he was away or out of batteries, nobody thought to tell him, he chooses to feign ignorance). We must not forget, though, that this solution to the problem of communication over distances is a contingent (rather than inevitable) outcome of the conjunction of the particularities of the physical environment, organization of society, and culture which opens up certain possibilities while foreclosing others. This has been no less the case in religion than in other social domains.

RADIO AND RELIGION

Radio has played a crucial role in Guatemala's shifting religious ecology over the last half century. Much has been written about the religious pluralization of Latin America in the 20th century,⁸ and Guatemala has in many ways provided one of the richest case-studies of the process. Protestant missionaries began to be active in Guatemala in the late 19th century, and while their churches only experienced very modest growth for most of the 20th century, this changed significantly after

8 For a discussion of this process see David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); R. Andrew Chesnut, *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).



1976.⁹ Since the 1980s Pentecostal and Evangelical churches (whose members are often glossed as *evangélicos* or simply *crístianos* in contrast to *católicos*) experienced explosive growth, tilting the religious demography of the country, so that by the end of the first decade of the 21st century Protestants accounted for more than 40% of the population and Catholics less than 50%.¹⁰

Scholars interested in explaining this shift have tended to focus on how Protestant Christianity introduces novel forms of social relations and imaginaries that appeal to people in the face of modernity's economic and political insecurities.¹¹ The narrative that has emerged from this literature also suggests that Protestants are successful in doing so thanks in part to their mass media savvy,¹² including their successful adoption of radio as a means for proselytization.

The Central American Mission—a dispensationalist Evangelical organization founded in Texas in 1888—was responsible for the earliest religious uses of radio in Guatemala. In 1946 they began purchasing airtime on secular stations to run their religious programming, and experienced enough success so that by 1948 they were operating their own station.¹³ Other missions and denominations followed suit, and though evangélico radio broadcasting was typically initiated by foreigners (primarily based in the USA), its daily workings were quickly picked up by Guatemalans.¹⁴ Not to be left behind, the Catholic Church soon found its way into

9 Henri Gooren, "Reconsidering Protestant Growth in Guatemala, 1900-1995," in *Holy Saints and Fiery Preachers: The Anthropology of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America*, eds. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 169-203.

10 "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region," Pew Research Center, November 13, 2014, retrieved December 10, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america>.

11 See e.g. Sheldon Annis, *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Living in the New Jerusalem: Protestantism in Guatemala* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1998); Kevin Lewis O'Neill, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Andrea Althoff, *Divided by Faith and Ethnicity: Religious Pluralism and the Problem of Race in Guatemala* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614515081>.

12 See e.g. O'Neill, *City of God*, 10.

13 Garrard-Burnett, *Living in the New Jerusalem*, 109.

14 Quentin J. Schultze, "Catholic vs Protestant: Mass-mediated Legitimation of Popular Evangelicalism in Guatemala," *Public Relations Review* 18 no. 3 (1992): 257-263, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111\(92\)90053-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111(92)90053-2).

the medium, with diocesan and para-church organizations establishing their own radio stations and producing their own programming to compete with those of evangélicos.¹⁵ Today, there are at least 60 religious radio stations (out of a total of about 620 licensed stations) operating legally in the country across both the AM and FM radio frequencies.¹⁶ There is no doubt that radio plays an important role in Guatemala's religious ecology, although just how it does so has not been explored as fully as it might be. There are abundant references to evangélicos setting up and running radio stations as part of a generalized characterization of them as "media savvy," but not much extended analysis about how they conceive of these media or to what concrete uses they put them, in effect reproducing the errors that Brian Larkin warns against.

There are hints in the ethnographic literature, though, about how evangélicos construe radio broadcasts as part of their vision of religious conversion. In one of the earliest monographs on conversion to Protestantism among Mayas in Guatemalans, Sheldon Annis identifies a common conversion narrative people tell in which they had experienced some loss, usually due to "profligate behavior," before eventually coming into contact with a spiritual guide that allows them to see the error of their ways and leads them to a conversion experience.¹⁷ Although that guide is sometimes a person (e.g. an intimate who has already converted or an evangelist encountered in a public space), it is just as likely to be a mass-mediated artifact such as a radio broadcast of a sermon or a religious tract discovered on a bus bench. The faith that radio can serendipitously spark conversions is also attested to by Robin Shoaps' observation that evangélicos in Sakapulas sometimes play religious radio stations at loud volumes and with their speakers pointed outwards in the hope that the sounds might reach the ears and then the heart of a católico

15 Edward L. Cleary, *The Rise of Charismatic Catholicism in Latin America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2011), 253-4, <https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813036083.001.0001>. See also Schultze, "Catholic vs Protestant," 259.

16 Rachel M. McCleary and José de Jesús Pesina, "Religious Competition, Protestant Syncretization, and Conversion in Guatemala since the 1880s," (working paper, April 2011), 14, retrieved December 15, 2018, http://www.asrec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/McCleary_Religious_Competition_Guatemala.pdf.

17 Annis, *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town*, 87



neighbor.¹⁸ These examples of practices that figure mass mediated speech as a potential catalyst for individual moral change would seem to line up neatly with evangelicos' general emphasis on evangelization and personal conversion as key components of religious life. Without wanting to reify a difference between Protestants and Catholics, this should also spur us to ask if there are distinct ways in which Catholics might use radio to address the concerns that they find pressing.

A crucial concern for the Catholics that I work with in the parish of San Felipe (a pseudonym) is the formation and maintenance of a church community. Though the specifics of how they have tried to do so has changed over the last four decades, the parish's mission has consistently been framed as that of evangelizing and catechizing rural and peri-urban Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics in the municipality of Cobán, with the idea that this population inhabits a distinct social and cultural position in the region. Although San Felipe's parish center is located in the city, its administrative area is large, dispersed, and overwhelmingly rural. The terrain that it covers is mountainous and has only a rudimentary system of roads making travel to some parts of it onerous. Travel into Cobán to attend Mass is prohibitively expensive and time-consuming for cash-poor subsistence farmers living in the more remote villages and hamlets. The priests who serve the parish travel to hold Mass in these communities regularly but can only visit some of them two or three times a year. Consequently, the institutional Church's presence in many of these communities can seem quite weak, and the parish relies on a network of native lay leaders (*catequistas* or catechists) to manage and maintain the religious life of each hamlet or village.¹⁹ While this system works well enough for maintaining the ceremonial life in the aldeas, the parish leadership also worries that if left unattended some of these lay leaders might lead their communities in unorthodox practices and so the question of how to oversee and communicate with their constituency is a persistent one. The growth of Charismatic Catholicism in the parish since the early 2000s

18 Robin Shoaps, personal communication.

19 For more detail on how catechists are selected and trained, their duties and relationship to clergy see Eric Hoenes del Pinal, "How Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics Become Legitimate Interpreters of the Bible: Two Models of Religious Authority in the Giving of Sermons," in *The Social Life of Scripture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, ed. James S. Bielo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 80-99.

(not to mention the presence of non-Catholic Christian churches) has further compounded the worry that the semi-autonomy of individual communities might in some cases work at odds with the parish's mission. Moreover, Q'eqchi'-Mayas' attempts to re-establish their place in Guatemala following the political repression they experienced during and after the violence of the 1980s has meant that questions of community formation and maintenance tend to be at the forefront of people's minds in San Felipe.

Although we could subject the discourse of community as it is used in the parish to further scrutiny, largely what people mean by the term is something along the lines of a collectivity of people bound by reciprocal social relations that are in large part enacted through participation in activities with shared goals. As Q'eqchi'-Mayas conceive of it, religious life is ideally something that is to be cultivated as part of a group, not as an individual (though to be sure, individuals make different efforts and take different paths to do so), through ritual practices. Members of these collectivities are understood as having ethical obligations to each other as well as to other-than-human actors invoked by the rituals. Moreover, as practitioners of a self-consciously inculturated Catholicism, San Felipe's parishioners understand themselves as the bearers of a unique spirituality that is grounded in both Catholic Christianity and a Maya cosmivision.²⁰ Some Q'eqchi'-Mayas fear that their unique perspective on the world is being eroded by external social, economic, and political pressures, and so it has become increasingly important to them to discursively construct an identity that distinguishes them from other religious and ethnic groups in Guatemala.

For all the reasons described in the previous section, radio is the mass medium most available for addressing the issue of community formation in San Felipe. The following ethnographic vignettes illustrate two ways that the parish leadership has experimented with radio broadcasting as a means of bringing together people in the parish and examines how the medium itself both opens up possibilities for success as well as introduces anxieties about failure. The first of these is about how the

20 Eric Hoenes del Pinal, "Reading *Laudato Si'* in the Verapaz: A Case of Localizing Catholic Teachings" *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context* 48 no. 3 (2019): 291-301.



Hermandad de San Felipe used radio to promote parishioner involvement in public rituals during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) in 2005. The second vignette tells of the modest successes and ultimate frustration some of the very same people experienced when trying to start a Q'eqchi' language radio station to serve the parish in 2016. Though a decade separates the vignettes, they both illustrate how FM radio both enables and frustrates the creation of a Catholic community in San Felipe.

SAN FELIPE 2005: SPEAKING INTO THE AIR

Semana Santa is an important time of the year for Guatemalan Catholics, who famously enact the Passion story through a series of processions in which santos standing on enormous biers are carried through the streets temporarily carpeted in intricately patterned *alfombras* made of colored sawdust. It takes a week to perform the full cycle of processions, with each day's event dramatizing a specific part of the Passion narrative (e.g. Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem, his Calvary march, the crucifixion, and resurrection.) Moreover, different sodalities (*hermandades*) attached to different parishes take on the responsibility for sponsoring each of the processions, making the full ritual cycle a city-wide effort. They do so without any specific oversight or direct institutional management from above relying instead on the idea that each group knows the part it needs to play and will organize itself to do so.

Preparing to perform these spectacular events is, not surprisingly, a labor-intensive process that demands the coordination of a great deal of material, financial, and human resources on the part of each sodality's leadership. The colorful images of the processions that circulate in newspapers, tourism guides, and international publications tend to obscure the great sacrifices of time, money, and labor that go into them. Moreover, they entirely occlude the extent to which participants can feel quite uncertain about whether their performance will ultimately succeed. This is especially true in socially marginal parishes like San Felipe, where cash is scarce and where the majority of parishioners live far from the parish seat.

The Hermandad of San Felipe is tasked with performing the Holy Wednesday procession, and preparations for the event begin well before Lent. Although activity picks up in the weeks before Semana Santa, the *qawachines* (elder men) begin

planning for it as early as January (just days after they finish celebrating the parish's *santo patron*—the Black Christ of Esquipulas²¹—in January).

There are myriad material and financial needs to be taken care of for Holy Wednesday itself as well as for the smaller processions that are performed during Lent. Although these are annual events, their success is never taken for granted nor seen as guaranteed, and the sodality's leaders never discount the possibility that something might go awry. Moreover, because the stakes involved in the ritual are high not just for the sodality, but also for the larger Catholic community of the city, the possibility that something might fail is not easily dismissed or discounted. Money is always scarce in the parish, so concerns about how to pay for materials needed to decorate the *santo's* bier, as well as for the fireworks and musicians that accompany the procession are always present. Of equal concern is that they might not be able to marshal the devotional labor needed to successfully perform the procession. After all, having fewer flowers on hand than expected to lay at Jesus's feet would be a much less serious blow to the ritual than a lack of penitents to help bear his weight as he winds his way through the city.

Securing man-power²² is thus a priority, and the Hermandad engages in a number of activities to promote active participation. This includes buying airtime on the radio station owned by the diocese of the Verapaz to broadcast a program directed at the parish's rural population.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays at about 6:50 p.m. during Lent in 2005 a handful of the sodality's leaders would meet at the offices of Estéreo Gerardi²³ which broadcasts out of the second floor of the old 18th-century convent that now serves as the

21 For a historical treatment of this religious image's importance in Guatemala more generally see Douglass Sullivan-González, *The Black Christ of Esquipulas* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1d98973>.

22 The gendered language is deliberate, as it is all men who carry the *santo*. Women participate in the ritual in a complimentary fashion to the men. Although women carry an image of Mary, this figure is much smaller, and I never heard anyone express worries that there would not be enough women to carry out that task. Likewise, the auxiliary work that women do for the rituals, like helping prepare and serve meals at the Hermandad leader's house, didn't seem to be in peril.

23 This station is run by the Diocese and is named after the former Bishop of the Verapaz, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, president of the Guatemalan Episcopal Council, and martyr Juan José Gerardi Conedera (1922-1998).



seat for the Diocese of the Verapaz offices. The men would crowd into the small broadcast booth and, with the help of one of the station's regular employees to run the equipment, broadcast a live radio show from 7 to 8 p.m. The show consisted of procession music, a Bible reading, a short sermon, on one occasion an interview with me about Holy Week,²⁴ and most importantly repeated pleas for money and participation from the listening audience. Specifically, they wanted the lay leaders of the parish's base communities to make the trip into town to deliver their community's monetary donations to the parish and confirm the minimum number of people they would bring to help carry the *santo* on the day of the processions. They also called on parishioners more generally to come help carry the *santo* in the processions, explaining why this was to their personal benefit and how it was part of what one needed to do to be a good Catholic.

A full examination of the discourse used during these appeals is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that they were structured as something like ritual speeches. By using the prosodic and poetic features of ritual speech (e.g. a slow cadence and line parallelism), the Hermandad's representatives invoked their standing as lay community leaders and religious authorities.²⁵ In doing so, they construed their audience as a virtual congregation with a moral obligation to follow their leadership and concomitantly play their part of the forthcoming ritual. The funeral music they played between speeches likewise evoked the larger context of the procession, ideally drawing listeners into the sensorium of the forthcoming ritual event and priming them for future participation.²⁶ The radio program's content thus mediated this community of religious practice across space and time,

24 The interview sought to leverage my cultural capital to bolster the prestige of the event. Though born in Guatemala, and living with relatives in Cobán, I still counted as a *q'an iis* (literally "yellow hair," though my hair is anything but that color) foreigner whose interest in Q'eqchi'-Maya religion and culture helped validate it in a larger social context in which it is regarded more generally with *desprecio* (disdain or disregard).

25 Hoenes del Pinal, "How Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics Become Legitimate Interpreters of the Bible." Eric Hoenes del Pinal, "A Ritual Interrupted: A Case of Contested Ritual Practices in a Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic Parish," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31, no. 3 (2016): 365-378, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2016.1206251>.

26 Although sonically quite different from Christmas carols, like them the genre of procession music connotes a distinct season in Guatemala. The music is typically only heard during Lent and Holy Week and has powerful affective connotations for Catholics.

positioning them as co-participants in a future activity.

Yet, there was something a bit uncanny about using ritualized speech and playing processions music in the radio booth. As John Peters notes, “Broadcasters, if not quite audience blind, see their audiences through a glass darkly.”²⁷ Without a co-present audience and with no means of getting immediate feedback, all that was left at the end of the Hermandad’s broadcast was the hope that someone, somewhere would heed their call.²⁸

SAN FELIPE 2016: A PROBLEM OF PRESENCE

It had been over a decade since I’d been to San Felipe, but in 2016 I found it abuzz with new activity that included new evangelization projects,²⁹ new social projects, a restructuring of lay leadership, and also a new radio station operating right out of the parish church.

Radio Cobán began broadcasting in May 2016 out of a space that had formerly been a side chapel of San Felipe’s parish church.³⁰ A new door had been cut into the main church building leading into the radio station’s reception area which was simply furnished with a wooden table and some folding chairs. Directly across from the door stood a wall covered in cedar paneling on which letters cut out of white construction paper had been arranged to spell out a greeting in Q’eqchi’. Below the lettering a plexiglass window allowed visitors to see into the broadcasting booth. Inside the broadcast booth the arm of a microphone stand telescoped over the junction of two tables organized into an “L” shape. The desk to the left supported the soundboard and other audio equipment, while the one to the right

27 John D. Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 210, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922638.001.0001>.

28 Though, to be fair, they also had a good sense based on past participation and their knowledge of the current conditions in the parish of which communities could reasonably be expected to contribute money and labor to the procession.

29 The parish was deep into a project under the rubric of the *Santa misión popular* that sought to energize the laity by making them active participants in a new evangelization of the continent. The project was inspired by conclusion that the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) published from its fifth general conference at Aparecida, Brazil in 2007.

30 The chapel had previously held three old wooden crosses where people would make special petitionary prayers that included lighting candles and sticking coins, feathers, and animal hair to the crosses with tree resin.



(beneath the window looking out to the reception area) held a computer monitor and offered broadcaster some physical space to work from. From a swiveling office chair a single person could self-produce a broadcast. Cables ran from the broadcasting booth up through the ceiling to the transmission tower above and into the wall shared with the church's nave to patch into its sound system so that Mass could be broadcast live and direct. A storage space on the opposite side of the broadcast booth from the reception area had been fitted with foam acoustic panels to create a make-shift recording studio.

Qawa Hugo,³¹ who had always helped with the *Semana Santa* program in 2005 and was one of the three people most responsible for running the station, explained to me how a fortuitous set of circumstances had led to the establishment of Radio Cobán. During a trip to one of the more remote corners of the parish in 2012 Fr. Michel (a Haitian priest who has a special interest in social work in the parish) had the idea to start a Sunday morning radio show so that people in the aldeas would have some form of regular contact with the clergy between his quarterly visits. He took the proposal to the Diocese and got the approval to go ahead with the project.

Fr. Michel's show began broadcasting live on Estéreo Gerardi on a weekly basis. However, they soon realized that station's commercial interests took precedence, since Fr. Michel's live show would sometimes be pre-empted to cover soccer matches. Before long they decided that pre-recorded shows made more sense than live broadcasts, and Fr. Michel was able to secure some money through his religious order (*Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae*, or the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) to purchase equipment and set up a small recording studio to produce the show.

In a fortuitous twist, a couple of years after the studio was set up, a man approached Fr. Michel to see if the parish would be interested in taking over the license of a radio frequency that he owned. It wasn't entirely clear if the frequency had all the proper government documentation to operate legally, though, and the other priests

31 All personal names are pseudonyms.

in the parish worried that they might end up running a pirate station³² that could cause legal problems netting them fines or potentially jail time. In fact, well after Radio Cobán had already started broadcasting, it still wasn't clear if the previous owners of the license had obtained it following the exact letter of the law; although as best as the parish's lawyers could tell, San Felipe itself had obtained it legally and they theoretically had all the right documents from the state to run the station.

They were given the approval to run the station because Fr. Michel's goal of expanding his work with rural Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics through radio was in-line with Diocesan aims to strengthen their ministry with that population. Radio Cobán, emanating from a parish that was dedicated to serving the Q'eqchi'-Mayas, would be a direct means of ministering to that population and would circumvent the programming problems that the Diocese's two stations faced in having to split their programming time to cater to the four distinct ethno-linguistic groups they served—Ladinos (i.e. Spanish-speaking *mestizos*), Q'eqchi'-Mayas, Poqomchi'-Mayas, and Achi-Mayas.³³ The plan was ambitious, but given that the parish was increasingly viewing itself as a missionary vanguard in the Diocese's larger *Santa mission popular* project, it also seemed like a necessary step to take.

The station launched as an on-line streaming service while they set up a broadcast booth, built a radio tower on the roof of the church, and secured funds to lease a terrestrial radio transmitter; and as of May 2016, they started broadcasting daily on the upper end of the FM dial. Sadly, this would not last long and a year later Radio Cobán was no more.

Given that the radio only operated for a few of months and that no one working there had a much experience producing radio programming (nor were they being paid a salary to do so), Radio Cobán was a modest success. As Qawa Hugo

32 There are at least 240 radio stations run by Maya communities in Guatemala without proper government documentation. Mark Camp and Agnes Portalewska, "A Question of Frequency: Community Radio in Guatemala," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (2005), <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/guatemala/question-frequency-community-radio-guatemala>.

33 For a discussion of how the Diocese conceives of these distinctions in relation to its policies see Eric Hoenes del Pinal, "From Vatican II to Speaking in Tongues: Theology and Language Policy in a Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic Parish," *Language Policy* 15, no. 2 (2016): 179-197, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-015-9364-0>.



explained it, the vision for the station was that it would not only bring Catholic religious programming to the parish's remote aldeas, but also important cultural and social programming. He and Fr. Michel wanted the station to truly be a Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic enterprise that could help launch other projects for the community. As their website put it, their guiding principle was, "Extolling the values of our Q'eqchi' culture." To do so the station would broadcast a mixture of music and talk from 5 a.m. until 7:45 p.m. Although much of their programming was produced by other entities,³⁴ they also broadcast the parish's daily Masses, and had plans to increase the amount of programming produced in-house in Q'eqchi' for a Q'eqchi'-Maya audience. That programming would eventually include translating summaries of news and long-form journalism pieces from Spanish language sources into Q'eqchi' and setting up a weekly health education program with a doctor; there was also talk of starting a show with a lawyer who could offer legal advice and of broadcasting live concerts of the parish communities' marimba choirs, though these never came to be.

Despite all this ambition and the work that they put into the enterprise, in an interview from August 2016 Qawa Hugo also expressed his worries that the station might not continue to be on the air for very long. The main problem Radio Cobán had was power, or, to be more specific, wattage. While the parish was able to get enough money together to buy basic broadcasting equipment and build a radio tower on the roof of the church, the transmitter they were leasing wasn't powerful enough to do the work they wanted it to. The tower's relative elevation in the city (atop a church atop a hill) meant that their signal strength was quite good in the urban area and could even be heard in the neighboring towns of San Pedro Carchá and San Juan Chamélco to the west. However, mountains blocked its signal from reaching rural areas north and west of the city where Radio Cobán's ideal audience lived. The physical environment frustrated the station's ability to reach its intended audience, and without that audience it wasn't clear that the station served a purpose. The people within its existing listening range already had access to a variety of radio stations, including both Catholic and Q'eqchi' programming, and in any case

34 For example, they ran an educational program (*Escuela para todos*) produced in Costa Rica, and tapped into the Guatemalan state's radio for the national morning news.

the parish leadership viewed the urban audience's needs as distinct from those of the rural congregations the station was targeting. Ironically, Radio Cobán couldn't reach the audience that they felt needed them, and the audience that they could reach didn't really need them.

Upgrading the transmitter was thus a priority, but it also presented a tricky financial proposition. People in the aldeas had agreed in principle to contribute money to the station, and there were also business willing to pay to advertise on Radio Cobán,³⁵ but those parties would only give the money once the broadcasts actually reached their target audience. The station was caught in a double-bind—they needed money to upgrade the transmitter and expand their broadcast audience, but they could only earn that money by broadcasting to that audience. There was some hope that donations could be found from abroad to help make the investment, but none materialized and ultimately the plans for Radio Cobán would not bear fruit. Less than a year after they began broadcasting, the parish had to abandon its radio license because there was simply no money left to renew it. Without the broadcasting license, the transmitter no longer held promise as it once had.

On a subsequent research trip in 2017 I found Radio Cobán's office was shuttered. Qawa Hugo was working part-time at Estéreo Gerardi helping to run the broadcast booth at the end and beginning of the broadcast day and staying overnight in the offices as a watchman. He lamented that they had had to give up on Radio Cobán, but hoped that maybe one day it would be revived if they could find financial backing. After all, the broadcast booth was still there, and the needs of the community were perennial.

A final irony to the story was that although the people for whom the station was intended likely never heard it, back in North Carolina between research trips I could navigate to their webpage and open a digital stream of Radio Cobán. Qawa Hugo and I communicated via Facebook periodically, and if he knew I was listening he would send a greeting, mentioning my name and location alongside those

35 Rockwell, "Finding Power of Hidden Radio Audiences," suggests that radio producers have seen rural Mayan audiences as a desirable (if niche) advertising demographic since the late 1990s, even if they have not always known how to reach them.



of others who made up his listenership. In doing so he interpellated me into the virtual community of Q'eqchi' radio listeners and signaled to his audience that the station, parish, and by extension Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics more generally had supporters far beyond the geographic limits of Alta Verapaz. Though the limitations imposed on terrestrial radio by the conjunction of physical terrain, technology, and the vicissitudes of the Guatemalan economy and legal system ultimately foreclosed Radio Cobán's ability to materialize a mass-mediated community locally, its parallel life as an on-line radio station briefly allowed its producers to style themselves as active participants in a transnational mediascape.

CONCLUSION

These two vignettes highlight the possibilities and difficulties that radio broadcasting has presented for San Felipe's Catholics across two decades. If on the one hand FM radio offers an accessible and reliable means to broadcast messages calling on Catholics to come together as a religious community; on the other hand its very form raises the problem of whether a one-way medium of communication can adequately serve as the grounds for reciprocal social relations. When a voice calls out over the air, will anyone respond? Is there even anyone there who could respond? Even if they are there, what else is needed before the imagined community of radio listeners becomes a face-to-face community of social actors?

In 2005 the Hermandad used its radio broadcasts during Lent to help coalesce a community of ritual co-participants around the processions, but in doing so they had to grapple with the possibility that not enough people might actually show up to carry it out. The calls that went out for participation did not receive a response until the community materialized to perform the ritual. That the efficacy of those calls could not be gauged until after the fact, led to a great deal of uncertainty about the role that Q'eqchi'-Mayas played in Catholic life in Cobán.³⁶

36 I don't know first-hand how the 2005 season compared to others in terms of participation, but no one I talked to seemed to think that the event had failed, though there were laments that San Felipe's procession did not draw as many people as those of other parishes. Twelve years later, however, there was a sense that the Hermandad was in trouble and that its current leadership was not doing enough to ensure broad participation. It remains an open question for me and them what the processions will look like in future *Semanas Santas*.

The frustrations the parish encountered in trying to launch Radio Cobán as a distinctive voice for Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholicism in 2016 raised a related problem. The parish's aim was to use this technology (alongside internet radio) to help constitute a semi-autonomous Q'eqchi'-Maya religious and cultural public. But what point was there in hailing this public if the signal simply couldn't reach them? The economic realities of the parish ultimately shut down the promise the technology seemed to hold for the parish's religious life.

These problems point to a more constant worry for San Felipe's Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholics. Throughout my engagement with San Felipe over the last two decades, one recurrent theme in parishioners' talk has been about the extent to which their culture and communities can continue to exist in their present form. In a country in which the Catholic Church's cultural ascendance is no longer taken for granted, in which religious (not to mention indigenous) identity is typically politically charged, and in which few things ever seem stable or secure, these questions are fraught with all sorts of uncertainties and tensions. And yet, membership in these (and other) religious communities can offer a modicum of relief from the insecurities and indignities of life in post-war Guatemala.

San Felipe's Catholics see pressures from both inside and outside the parish, inside and outside the Catholic Church, and inside and outside Guatemala asking them to alter the way they lead their lives. FM radio broadcasts may provide an accessible way to help mediate these worries and perhaps even a communicative space through which they can build Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic counter-public, but the outcomes of these efforts are anything but certain. And in any case other media platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp may provide an entirely different means of imagining the community, even if in doing so they will also inevitably give rise to other sets of problems to contend with.

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