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**AID, MARGINALIZATION AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN
GUATEMALA**

by

MEGAN FENTON

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR NANCY NEIMAN AUERBACH
PROFESSOR MONA G. MEHTA**

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Table of Contents	
Acknowledgements.....	2
Chapter One: An Introduction	3
Literature Review.....	6
Hypothesis and Methodology	12
Case Study	13
Chapter Two: Understanding Indigenous Marginalization.....	16
Indigenous In Guatemala	16
From Land Reform to Genocide.....	19
<i>Aldeas Modelos</i>	24
Chapter Three: Rabinal: A Case Study.....	27
Plan Guatemala	28
Qachuu Aloom	30
Chapter Four: Conclusion and Analysis	39
Bibliography	42

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Chapter One: An Introduction

In much of Latin America, indigenous people have a complex relationship with the state. This relationship defines many aspects of an individual's life, influencing their social, political, and even economic abilities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Guatemala, which has had a more tumultuous relationship with its indigenous population than most of its neighbors.

Official census numbers show that about 40% of Guatemala's population identify themselves as indigenous. The other 60% identify as ladino, which is the Guatemalan term for people of European or Meztizo descent. Less than 1% identified themselves on the census as anything "Other" than from these two groups.¹ However, Eduardo Sacayón, director of the Interethnic Studies Institute at Guatemala's University of San Carlos, argues that the percentage of indigenous people reported is inaccurate, as indigenous people are more likely to not be included in the census, and that the true figure lies closer to 60%.² Most experts on the subject agree that Sacayón's figure is more accurate, and most estimates land in the 50-60% range.³

Whatever their percentage in the total population, indigenous Guatemalans are overall worse off than their ladino counterparts. A report given to the United Nations in 2010 on Guatemala's progress on the Millennium Development Goals

¹ CIA Factbook, "Background Note: Guatemala", *U.S. Department of State*.

² Danilo Valladares, "Forgotten Promises Leave Indigenous Peoples Poorer and Hungrier", *IPS Inter Press Service*.

³ Adams, Richard N., "A Report on the Political Status of the Guatemalan Maya" in *Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America*, p. 156

made this abundantly clear. Nearly 80% of indigenous Guatemalans are poor, while among the non-indigenous the rate is 40%. Furthermore, while poverty in Guatemala fell, from 56.2% in 2000 to 51% in 2006, extreme poverty, which primarily affects indigenous people, fell less than half of a percentage point in that same time. Indigenous children are far more likely than their ladino peers to be chronically malnourished, as of 2009 (58.6% of indigenous children are, compared to 30.6% ladino children). While these numbers have improved since 2002, the gain for indigenous children has been miniscule (falling less than 2%, from 60.5%), especially compared to the gains made by ladino children (falling from 35.7%).⁴ The differences in these statistics between ladinos and indigenous people are considerable. Not only are indigenous people far behind the ladinos in all of these markers, any assistance they are receiving is clearly not making an impact.

Because of these gaps, aid organizations have been channeling aid to Guatemala for many years. For example, between 1962 and 1979, the Inter-America Development Bank (IDB) funded numerous projects in Guatemala, covering everything from agriculture to public health, ultimately providing the country with more than \$384.7 million in programs. Today, Guatemala receives more food aid from USAID than almost every other country in Latin America, the only exception being Haiti.⁵ Annually, they receive more than \$32 million in food aid from the US.⁶

⁴ Christian Tomuschat, Alfredo Balsells Tojo, and Otilia Lux De Coti, *Guatemala: Memoria Del Silencio* for Historical Clarification Commission

⁵ "Guatemala", *U.S. Agency for International Development*.

⁶ "Programmed U.S. Food Aid for FY 2010," *United States Department of Agriculture: Foreign Agricultural Service*

From 2004 until 2008, total estimated funding for USAID's program in Guatemala reached \$192.5 million.⁷ In addition to these large international organizations, Guatemala has become home to numerous smaller organizations. Since the end of the Guatemalan civil war, the Guatemalan government has permitted civil society groups to operate in Guatemala.⁸ These are often organized as non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, that are relatively small and work on a local level.⁹

In addition to these outside organizations, both large and small, the Guatemalan government has created programs in order to address indigenous needs. However, these programs are often severely handicapped; one of the priorities for the Guatemalan government is to increase national unity. During the preparation of an IDB report, multiple senior government officials stressed that the government "is determined to avoid measures which may promote ethnic tensions and divisions within Guatemalan society."¹⁰ The Guatemalan Constitution, however, recognizes the indigenous people of Guatemala, and compels the government to respect and promote their cultural rights. In 2004, a more serious national dialogue began to focus on the economic, political and cultural status of indigenous groups, resulting in legislation and funding meant to promote and protect indigenous languages and provide money for bilingual education. A report by the Minorities At Risk Program

⁷ U.S. Agency for International Development

⁸ John Booth, "Global Forces and Regime Change: Guatemala within the Central American Context," 1998.

⁹ B. Abom, "Social Capital, NGOs, and Development: A Guatemalan Case Study" in *Development in Practice*, 2004.

¹⁰ Roger Plant, *Indigenous Peoples and Poverty Reduction: A Case Study of Guatemala* for Inter-American Development Bank, 1998.

notes however, that this essentially amounted to lip-service, and actual follow-through is yet to be seen.¹¹ Ultimately, the Guatemalan government attempts to specifically address the needs of indigenous people, but ends up adapting their programs to address broader issues, such as poverty or education, rather than adapting the programs to serve indigenous communities.

While there are all of these programs and organizations currently operating in Guatemala, it is clear that they are not functioning as they should for Guatemala's indigenous population. This is clear from the lack of improvement in any of the economic markers noted above, such as poverty, health and education. Furthermore, these same programs are functioning for Guatemala's ladino population, which has seen an improvement in their living conditions. The difference in the results between these two groups naturally raises the question of why this type of program is significantly less effective for Guatemala's indigenous population than it is for its ladino population. Why are these programs not reaching this portion of Guatemala's population? Additionally, there are some programs that are beginning to see some initial success on a local level, such as Qachuu Aloom, a garden project in Rabinal, Guatemala. Why might this project be succeeding, when other similar projects are not?

Literature Review

When considering economic and political development in underdeveloped countries, there are two major camps of thought, that of modernization theory and

¹¹ "Assessment for Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala." *Minorities At Risk*.

that of dependency theory. These two theories differ on many aspects, but perhaps the biggest difference between them is what they view as the restrictions or obstacles to development that underdeveloped countries face.

Modernization theory consists of the idea that development happens in an essentially linear fashion. It holds that all communities or societies follow the same general template in order to achieve modernity. This “template” is based on the historical development of countries such as the United States, Germany and France, to name only a few. Because of this, all developed countries were once in a state similar to the state underdeveloped countries are currently in. Under modernization theory, the way to help underdeveloped countries out of poverty and into a more developed state is by accelerating them along this common developmental path. This is often done through investment by developed countries. Additionally, industrialization is valued under modernization theory, as technology is seen as a prime marker of whether or not a country is developed. A current case that is often pointed to as an example of modernization theory in practice is that of China, which has forged ties with more developed nations in order to grow its own economic future.

Modernization theory views underdevelopment as a direct consequence of a country's internal characteristics, directly connected to the continuance of traditional economies, traditional psychological and cultural traits, and traditional institutions.¹² From this perspective, traditional values are not only mutable but must be replaced

¹² Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, 1958; Myron Weiner, *Modernization: The Dynamics of Growth*, 1966.

by modern values in order for these societies to follow the path of capitalist development. Modernization theorists might argue that the reason that aid organizations and aid programs are not working in Guatemala is because they still put too much emphasis on cultural differences. In order for indigenous people to catch up developmentally with the rest of Guatemala (and for Guatemala to catch up to the developed world), traditional Mayan values and institutions would need to be put aside.

One of the central claims of modernization theory is that economic development is linked to predictable changes in culture and social and political life. Stephenson notes, "The concept of modernization has to do with a transformation of culture and of personality in so far as it is influenced by culture."¹³ Inglehart and Baker agree, saying "the rise of industrial society is linked with coherent cultural shifts away from traditional value systems, and the rise of postindustrial society is linked with a shift away from absolute norms and values toward a syndrome of increasingly rational, tolerant, trusting, post-industrial values."¹⁴ In this view, the biggest obstacle for the development of Guatemalan indigenous people is their own self-identification as indigenous (and the values and traditions that go along with that self-identification). In order to develop, they must shift away from this identification, and thus, any aid that acknowledges or makes special concessions for this identity is actually hindering their ability to develop.

¹³ John B. Stephenson, "Is Everyone Going Modern? A Critique and a Suggestion for Measuring Modernism" in *American Journal of Sociology*, 1968, p. 265

¹⁴ Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values" in *American Sociological Review*, 2000, pg 49

Dependency theory, on the other hand, has a very different view of the development process. Dependency theory first emerged as a response to modernization theory, and it argued that the aid that modernization theory presented as necessary for development actually had a very different purpose. Instead of serving as a way to empower and help develop those receiving the aid, dependency theorists see aid as a way to make the recipients become indebted to the givers. By receiving aid instead of having to provide for the goods or services themselves, underdeveloped countries become dependent on receiving this aid from more developed countries. Furthermore, dependency theory argues that not all countries develop along the same lines, rejecting the “template” model previously outlined. Instead, each country has its own specific traits and characteristics that direct and shape the ways in which it develops.

Dependency theory notes that poorer nations, or “periphery” nations, are at a social and economic disadvantage to more developed nations, or “core” nations. In part, this is because periphery nations’ economies are substantially composed of importation and exportation, rather than internal trade. Because of this, periphery nations structure their production, not so that it fulfills their needs, but rather so that it fulfills the needs of the core nations with which they trade.

Dependency theorists would argue that the reason so many of these aid organizations and aid programs fail is that they are too intent on achieving some external marker of “developed.” Instead of accepting aid in the form of modern technology and amenities, it would be better for Guatemala to be able to decide what they need most and what they are able to provide internally.

There is another method of looking at development, which is neither modernization theory nor dependency theory, although it bears many resemblances to dependency theory. In their book, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Global Economy*, Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomas craft and define a new approach to examining how economies (and the cultures that frame them) develop. Like dependency theory, the subsistence perspective views international trade as being exploitative towards the oppressed parties or nations.

The subsistence perspective, like dependency theory, believes that the catch-up development model espoused by modernization theory is not only undesirable, but is not even possible under the current global system. It is not desirable because it prioritizes a Eurocentric model of development; the proponents of the subsistence perspective point out that capital accumulation does not, in and of itself, fulfill any needs, except for making it possible to participate in the global market. Unlike dependency theory, which still defines development within a capitalist framework, the subsistence perspective focuses on what they call the “view from below,” which values an individual’s ability to “produce and reproduce their own life, to stand on their own two feet and to use their own voice.”¹⁵ This is contrasted with the “view from the top,” which is primarily concerned with the growth of the invisible forces of the market and assumes that everyone’s life would be better off with the accumulation of more capital. Instead, the subsistence perspective values subsistence production over commodity production, and advocates for local markets that serve

¹⁵ Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalized Economy*, 1999, p. 3

local needs (rather than local needs being served through imports and long-distance trade).

In addition to examining the ways in which economic relationships can disadvantage and oppress one of the parties (which dependency theory also examines), the subsistence perspective claims that social and political oppression is the root of the economic oppression. The authors of *The Subsistence Perspective* examine this primarily from a feminist perspective, but it also applies to other, similarly unbalanced economic relationships, such as those between peripheral and core nations. As part of their argument establishing the subsistence perspective as a feminist perspective, the authors discuss how the violence of the on-going, continuous colonization of women reinforces global capitalism.¹⁶ Part of this colonization is the systematic oppression and devaluation of women in the market economy. They argue that looking how the group has been marginalized and oppressed serves as a way to combat the actual effects of hegemonic ideas, which is more helpful for substantial development than simply trying to reduce dependency. Approaching the Guatemalan case from a subsistence perspective, one would argue that the majority of aid projects fail because they do not attempt to understand the social and political oppression of the indigenous people of Guatemala, which leaves them unable to actually change the heart of the problem; instead, they only can treat the symptoms: poverty, poor health and poor education.

¹⁶ Mies and Bennholdt-Thomas, p. 30

Hypothesis and Methodology

While there have been millions of dollars and many organizations working in Guatemala to effect economic change, results have for the most part been negligible. However, Qachuu Aloom, a NGO in Rabinal, Guatemala, has seen some success. Looking at this case through the subsistence perspective, we would expect to see certain characteristics, both in the relationship between the indigenous population and the state, and in the organization's methods that are apparently effective.

First, the subsistence perspective looks at the relationship between the two groups or parties at issue: the relationship between the oppressed and the hegemonic economic system doing the oppressing. For the authors of *The Subsistence Perspective*, the oppressive hegemonic economic system that they were concerned with was the patriarchy; for this case, it is the Guatemalan state and their attempts to enter the global capitalist marketplace. Through the lens of a subsistence perspective, we need to understand this relationship, and the ways in which the indigenous people of Guatemala have been oppressed, because in order for there to be developmental progress, the marginalization needs to be combated directly. In order to understand this relationship, the history of the indigenous people of Guatemala must be examined closely for the development of marginalization and oppression.

Once the sources of the oppression have been identified, we can actually look at the organization, Qachuu Aloom, and its practices. Below is a description of how the case study of Qachuu Aloom was conducted. We will also briefly examine another organization in Rabinal that is not seeing similar results to Qachuu Aloom,

Plan Guatemala, and its success (or lack thereof) at addressing the oppression of indigenous people.

Finally, we will be able to evaluate whether Qachuu Aloom is actually addressing the oppression of indigenous people and is effective for that reason, or if there appears to be a different reason for its success. The subsistence perspective may allow us to better understand how aid can best serve those who need it the most.

Case Study

Qachuu Aloom was chosen for this case study for a variety of reasons. First, they work almost exclusively with indigenous people in Guatemala; most of the participants are part of the Maya Achi people, and the board of directors is composed of indigenous people as well. One of the co-founders, Sarah Montgomery, is from the United States, but the project has largely been spearheaded by Achi members of the community. This is important because one of the features of a subsistence orientation is that it is perpetuated on a local level by people involved in the community. Additionally, it is important because having an Achi co-founder and being led by an Achi board of directors is atypical in Guatemala. The second factor that led to Qachuu Aloom's selection is that it is unusual among aid projects due to its methodology and missions, many of which are compatible with a subsistence orientation. Qachuu Aloom encourages gardens not so that its participants can sell the produce, but rather to provide produce for the participants, who are also encouraged to work with and share information with neighbors and friends. The third reason Qachuu Aloom was chosen is that I had previous personal experience with the

organization. Because of this, I am familiar with the setup of the organization and could add my own personal knowledge to the case study. Furthermore, because I had previously worked with the organization, I already had connections to various members of the organization, better enabling me to perform interviews with the key players in the organization.

In order to create the case study of Qachuu Aloom, several interviews were conducted. The most substantial were with Sarah Montgomery, one of the two co-founders of Qachuu Aloom. Montgomery was interviewed twice: once by email, in January of 2012, and once through the video chat service Skype, on February 10, 2012. Additional email correspondence was also conducted with Montgomery. Additionally, Cristobal Chen, the second co-founder of Qachuu Aloom was also interviewed via Skype, also on February 10, 2012. Finally, Edson Xiloj, the director of Qachuu Aloom, was interviewed, also via Skype on February 10, 2012. Besides the interviews, Qachuu Aloom's website and the content posted on it were accessed, and I was able to add my personal knowledge of the organization; in 2007 I spent 6 weeks working with them in Rabinal, Guatemala.

In addition to the case study of Qachuu Aloom, another organization, Plan Guatemala, will be briefly examined. An evaluation of Plan Guatemala that was created for Plan International, the parent aid organization was used, as was Plan Guatemala's website. Plan Guatemala was selected in part because of this evaluation's availability; actual, in-depth critiques of individual aid projects can be difficult to find on-line. In addition to this, Plan Guatemala was chosen because, as a

local branch of an international organization, its methods and even its goals were likely to be very different than those of Qachuu Aloom.

Chapter Two: Understanding Indigenous Marginalization

Under subsistence perspective theory, it is essential to not only acknowledge the fact of oppression and marginalization, but to understand the source of that oppression. The historical context is necessary; in order to be able to move on and develop, one must counter the hegemonic ideas that led to the oppression in the first place. In this section, a deeper understanding of the indigenous people of Guatemala and their relationship with the state will show how first isolation was used to depoliticize the indigenous people. Next, hostile actions, such as genocide, were used to terrorize indigenous people by utterly annihilating huge portions of the population, which served to oppress and control indigenous people through fear and violence. Finally, through forced relocation and *aldeas modelos*, or model villages, the state was able to further dissolve ties, not only between the state and indigenous people, but among indigenous people and between indigenous people and their land, making political mobilization and representation near impossible.

Indigenous In Guatemala

Examining the indigenous population of Guatemala can be difficult, as there is no set definition of who qualifies as part of that population. “Up to, and including, the 1985 constitution, there is still no legal definition of who may be regarded as an *indígena*.”¹⁷ It is not clear that there even is a way to define who is a part of the indigenous population, as many proposed indicators are based on mutable social characteristics. How many indigenous people live in Guatemala “depends on how

¹⁷ Adams 1994, p. 156

one defines who is a Maya, a question that is complicated by factors of perception, social definition, identity, social change, politics and technical usage.”¹⁸ The main factors typically considered when identifying the indigenous include land, religion, language, clothing, and beliefs. However, in Guatemala, land ownership is highly contested, and religions can be converted, languages learned, clothing changed. Ultimately, most scholars have allowed their basis to be one of identity: an indigenous person of Guatemala is one who self-identifies as such.

The history of the indigenous in Guatemala is a complex one. Lovell comments that for Guatemalan Maya, conquest is not a remote, historical experience, but a visible, present condition.¹⁹ This may be in part due to the way in which Guatemala became an independent country. The official withdrawal of Spain and Portugal from Latin America in 1821 had less of an impact than the withdrawal of colonizers in post-imperialism Africa and Asia. “The [indigenous] peoples in much of the region had been not only conquered, but invaded, occupied, and internally colonized.”²⁰ The former rulers did not return to Europe, like the colonizers of Africa and Asia mostly did. Rather than a fresh start, many of the Europeans and Mestizos remained in power, ultimately altering the inherent social and political structure of these countries very little.

¹⁸ Adams 1994, p. 156

¹⁹ George W. Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, "A Dark Obverse: Maya Survival in Guatemala: 1520-1994" in *Geographical Review*, 1996.

²⁰ Richard N. Adams, "Ethnic Conflict, Governance, and Globalization in Latin America, with Special Attention to Guatemala," in *Ethnic Conflict and Governance in Comparative Perspective: A Workshop Report (Working Paper Series)*, 1995, p. 52-3

Since then, Guatemalan indigenous people were, for the most part, not assimilated into the European-Guatemalan society and culture, nor was there much of an attempt to do so, by either side. A government agency, the National Indigenous Institute was formed, but was given minimal funding and was never able to create any projects that would have any very significant impact on the Indian population. Its funding was cut constantly and later abolished entirely.²¹ Instead, indigenous people were generally dismissed and excluded from society. “The general pattern of civil response to Indians has traditionally been to ignore them as much as possible, to shunt them aside or to try to negotiate a quick and easy solution.”²² The Maya population, despite being a significant percentage of Guatemala’s overall population, was unnecessarily marginalized and not afforded the same rights and opportunities as ladinos.

However, we must be clear that this was de facto discrimination, not de jure. “In Guatemala ‘fact’ and situations that seem to be realities do not appear in the national legislation. Nevertheless... legal documents do not establish discrimination against the indigenous people.”²³ All of these factors led to indigenous people having very little political agency and being excluded from the general Guatemalan society. However, the relationship between indigenous people and the Guatemalan government was, at this point, not a hostile one. Instead, the two parties mostly

²¹ Adams 1995, p. 54

²² Adams 1994, p. 159

²³ Rodolfo Stavenhagen, *Derecho indigena y derechos humanos en América Latina*, 1988, p. 271

ignored the other; while indigenous people did not participate in the political sphere, they also had very few regulations placed on them.

From Land Reform to Genocide

From 1944 until 1954, there existed a period of Guatemala's history known today as the "Ten Years of Spring." During this time, Guatemala's first democratically elected president Juan José Arévalo and his successor, Jacobo Arbenz, ushered in a society far different than Guatemala had seen before, complete with sweeping reforms, a society in which liberal ideas and ideals were taken seriously. President Arbenz was able to institute substantial agrarian reforms, expropriating more than half a million hectares of land and redistributing it to roughly 100,000 peasants. The majority of these peasants were Maya, and the chance to own the land that they worked on would have been unimaginable to their parents or grandparents. This was one of the biggest steps for Guatemalan indigenous rights that had occurred up to that point in Guatemalan history. Additionally, it helped give the indigenous a voice in the political sphere, as becoming land-owners gave them ties to Guatemalan society. Prior to this, few Maya actually held the deed to their land, and most worked on the farms of ladinos.

However, the idealism and liberal society promoted by Arévalo and Arbenz came to an end in 1954, when a group called the *liberacionista* army, aided and equipped by the CIA, invaded. Fear of the United States led the army to pressure Arbenz into resigning and going into exile. The *liberacionista* regime essentially reversed all of the liberal reforms undertaken by Arévalo and Arbenz. The agrarian

reforms were rolled back immediately, and the indigenous lost the land they had just recently been granted. This understandably created a lack of goodwill towards the state from the Indians.

In 1958, the army openly intervened in an election for the first time, by impeding voting for anyone other than their candidate, General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes.²⁴ For nearly 30 years (until 1985) Guatemala was led a series of what were essentially military dictators: although most of them were supposedly democratically-elected, the military is known to have interfered in the elections.²⁵ Not all of the presidents during this time were elected; several took the reins through the use of a *coup d'état*. During this time, the military was in a strong political position, which allowed them to implement a constant state of siege, suspend a majority of basic rights (including habeas corpus), and carry out assassinations, kidnappings, and something that became known as the cavalry of terror.²⁶

During this period, the president-generals focused on counterinsurgency efforts against political opposition, which effectively prevented others from participating in the political process. "The counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1970s permitted the military to deepen its control over state and civilian institutions, and to strengthen and make permanent its presence in the western highlands, where it had traditionally been weak or absent."²⁷ The western highlands were where the majority

²⁴ Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project: a violence called democracy*, 1998, p. 17

²⁵ Robert Trudeau, "The Guatemalan Election of 1985: Prospects for Democracy" in *Elections and Democracy in Central America*, 1989, p. 94

²⁶ Jose Luis Cruz Salazar, "El Ejército Como Una Fuerza Política" in *Estudios Sociales*, 1970, p. 96

²⁷ Schirmer 1998, p. 18

of Guatemala Maya communities were located, and many of the “counterinsurgency efforts” targeted indigenous leaders, as they were seen as potentially having a political base.

As the military began to focus on this area, younger, educated indigenous *campesinos* began to attempt to exercise some power of their own within Maya communities, and began mobilizing strongly for guerrilla groups.²⁸ As the Guatemalan military began to be more and more controlling over every aspect of government, Indians became more disillusioned with the government in general. By 1981, an estimated 250,000-500,000 in the Indian community supported the guerrillas. Army intelligence estimated that there were at least 360,000 Indian members of the largest and most organized guerrilla group, Ejército Guatemalteco del Pueblo (Guatemalan Army of the Poor, or the EGP).²⁹ This was a way that indigenous people could participate in the political sphere and exercise their voice against the government that had oppressed them and isolated them for so long.

Throughout most of the 1970s, counterinsurgency campaigns had been focused very selectively, with the focus being solely on those individuals who were actively involved in the guerrilla rebel groups or attempting to participate in politics themselves. However, when President-General Romero Lucas García (1978-82) saw that this method was unable to “eradicate the root of subversion,” the army moved steadily from selective repression in 1978-79 to massive killings. The Panzós

²⁸ Arturo Arias, "Changing Indian Identity: Guatemala's Violent Transition to Modernity" in *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988*, 1990, p. 251-252

²⁹ Arias 1990, p. 255

massacre in May 1978 of 150 Kekchí Indians resisting having their land taken away from them was carried out by a Guatemalan Special Forces Unit. Unfortunately, this was only the beginning in a series of massacres.³⁰

The military began operating under what is known as a “scorched-earth” policy, where everything is killed or burned to the ground, in order to prevent both survival and the possibility of regrowth. “The primary objective of this scorched-earth campaign—[known as] “OPPLAN Victoria 82” or “*la pacificación*” for short—was to separate and isolate the insurgents from the civilian population with full military support.”³¹ This meant that anyone could become collateral damage.

The absurd contradiction of scorched-earth tactics, however, is that in order to accomplish this isolation, certain areas are targeted for massive killings: that is, the military must treat the civilians they are to “rescue” as though they are combatants, killing and burning all living things within the secured area. No distinction is made between combatant and noncombatant. Indeed, in the eyes of the army, there were no distinctions. If you weren’t for the army, you were necessarily for the guerrillas. Colonel Noack, one of the leaders in the field during this time, later commented that what the army failed to understand was “the phenomenon of *campesinos* being between two armies and not necessarily belonging to either.”³²

In this brutal campaign, the military was employing a strategy famously espoused by Mao—they were trying to “drain the sea of water [civilians] to expose

³⁰ Gabriel Aguilera Peralta, *Dialéctica Del Terror En Guatemala*, 1981.

³¹ Schirmer 1998, p. 45

³² Schirmer 1998, p. 48

and kill the fish [guerrillas].” By depopulating an area and razing and burning it to the ground, that piece of real estate is essentially drained of the resources that the guerrillas need, depriving them of a fighting force, their logistical base, any sources of intelligence, and their capacity to blend in with the general population.³³

Many times, there was a lack of distinction between the guerrilla fighters and the civilian population; ethnically, socially and geographically, they were cut from the same fabric. Indigenous people who were otherwise uninvolved with the rebel movement would help and cover for the rebels. This deepened the separation between the indigenous population and the state: while the Indians felt no personal connection to the military and even felt a certain disconnection, the guerrilla army was composed people like them—often even their neighbors and relatives. The guerrillas also went out of their way to help small indigenous communities. One officer noted, “We would arrive at a village, and despite the shelling, we would find no dead, no wounded, nobody...Later, we found out that the wounded or dead had been hurriedly carried by back up to the subterranean guerrilla hospital.”³⁴ Ultimately, however, this only enraged the army, and caused them to strike back harder against indigenous populations.

The UN-sponsored Commission on Historical Clarification (“CEH”) undertook a complete evaluation of the situation in 1999, and ultimately termed it genocide against the Maya, despite the fact that the Maya were not the only ones

³³ Kelly Greenhill, “Draining the Sea, or Feeding the Fire?: The Use of Forced Migration in Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency Operations,” 2004, p. 1

³⁴ Quote from Shirmer’s interview with a colonel who was a captain in the Ixil under Lucas: Shirmer 1998

killed, saying that genocide is defined by the intent to destroy a specific group, not by the motive or reasoning. “For example, if the motive behind the intent to destroy an ethnic group is not of a racist character, but rather a military objective, it still is considered genocide.”³⁵ Using the estimates of the CEH that 200,000 died (of which only 42,275 deaths were documented) and a 1979 population of 6.8 million, one of 34 Guatemalans died. However, of the documented deaths, 83% were Mayans. If we assume that proportion for all deaths, and further assume that half of Guatemala’s population is Mayan (a conservative estimate) then 1 of every twenty Mayans died.³⁶ However, this number may be artificially low; assuming that documented deaths and undocumented deaths had the same proportion of Mayan victims is problematic. Since Mayans in Guatemala are more distrustful of the government and have less agency than ladinos in Guatemala, it is likely that Mayan deaths were under-reported relative to ladino deaths, leading to a higher percentage of Mayan deaths in the undocumented deaths than in documented deaths.

Aldeas Modelos

After OPPLAN Victoria, the military’s next course of action was placing refugees in *aldeas modelos* (model villages), under a strategy called the Plan of Action in Areas of Conflict (PAAC). This plan was known as “*Techo, Trabajo y Tortilla*” (Shelter, Work and Food), and the idea was that “tamed Indian communities—no longer a political threat—would generate new income for themselves and the tottering national economy by farming and selling new cash

³⁵ Tomuschat et al., section 855

³⁶ Jack Spence, "Central America and Political Terrorism," 2004, p. 29

crops.”³⁷ This program relocated thousands of Maya to state-run housing, where they were kept employed through work in the fields, growing cash crop staples such as corn, coffee or bananas.

These *aldeas modelos* had three major effects on the marginalization of indigenous people in Guatemala. The first was from isolating them from their communities. Villages were not necessarily kept together in the same *aldea modelo*, which decreased individuals’ ability to mobilize by separating them from people they knew and trusted.

The second major effect of the *aldeas modelos* was from the forced relocation of the indigenous people. As discussed earlier, land ownership was a highly contested subject in Guatemala. Very few indigenous people actually owned the land they lived on, in the eyes of the state. They did not have deeds to the land, for example. This meant that when they were eventually released from the *aldeas modelos*, they did not really have anywhere to go back to. If they did, it was possible that someone else would have claimed their land and they would have no legal recourse. Additionally, even if no one else had claimed their land, because of the scorched earth practices, most homes and towns had been utterly destroyed and razed to the ground.

The third major effect of the *aldeas modelos* was from the use of cash crop farming. This established cash crop farming in Guatemala as a dominant economic tool. When people were released from the *aldeas modelos*, they had become familiar with the tools and practices necessary for growing and harvesting cash crops.

³⁷ George Black, Milton Jamail, and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, *Garrison Guatemala*, 1984, p. 141

Additionally, since they had no land that they had ties to, many of them began working on larger farms, rather than working their own land. Many of these larger farms produce cash crops for the purpose of exporting it.

Ultimately, the *aldeas modelos* allowed the state to isolate and marginalize indigenous people even more than before. However, with the *aldeas modelos*, indigenous people as a group were not being separated from the state. Instead, the *aldeas modelos* served to isolate individuals, by separating them from their support system, and by relocating them and making it near impossible to return to their land.

Chapter Three: Rabinal: A Case Study

Rabinal is a small municipality in the department of Baja Verapaz. It sits nestled in the Sierra Chuacas Mountains in the central part of Guatemala, less than 100 km from Guatemala City. Despite its relative proximity to the capital of Guatemala, Rabinal is fairly isolated; getting there by bus takes at least 4.5 hours, if not more.

Rabinal is predominantly Mayan—the latest census data shows that of the approximately 31,000 people, 82% identifies themselves as indigenous, which is significantly higher than the national estimate.³⁸ While Spanish is taught in schools, many people also speak the native Mayan language Achi', either as their first or second language. Its high number of indigenous people led to Rabinal being targeted especially heavily during the massacres carried out against Mayan communities during the 40-year civil war that engulfed Guatemala. The Río Negro Massacre, the largest documented massacre carried out during the war with nearly 500 killed, took place in Río Negro, a community in Rabinal.

The combination of being predominantly Mayan and being home to some of the worst human rights abuses of the civil war has caused Rabinal to have especially high levels of poverty and poor health. This has also made it home to many aid organizations anxious to rectify the damage done during the war. These organizations, however, have had mixed success.

³⁸ "Perfil De Municipio Rabinal," *Municipios Por Guatemala*.

Plan Guatemala

One such organization is Plan Guatemala, the Guatemalan affiliate of Plan International. Plan Guatemala has programs in 6 municipalities in Guatemala, including one in Rabinal.³⁹ Plan Guatemala acts as a contractual partner of the national government's Ministry of Health, and works to help the ministry put its policies into action. For many people living in rural Guatemala, the government is largely represented through contracts like this one.⁴⁰

However, this relationship with the government is constantly tenuous. An internal evaluation of Plan Guatemala that was recently made public noted that “there remains a high level of skepticism within the government towards international NGOs,”⁴¹ which affects the work that Plan Guatemala is able to do. The evaluation noted that Plan Guatemala has little ability to advocate for “alternative government plans” and cannot organize public pressure on the addressing of human rights concerns, as they fear risking their relationship with the government. This means that their overall approach to development tends to be fairly orthodox. Additionally, they gain traction within communities by taking advantage of existing community structures, often working with city councils or the offices of local government officials.⁴² While this has some benefits, such as an existing network

³⁹ Plan International. "Plan Guatemala." *Plan International, Guatemala*.

⁴⁰ Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken, Uwe Gneiting, Hans Peter Schmitz, and Otto Valle, *Learning from Plan Guatemala: An Evaluation of Plan's Strategy in Guatemala*, 2009.

⁴¹ Bruno-van Vijfeijken et al., 2009

⁴² Bruno-van Vijfeijken et al., 2009

and access to an established local authority, it also discourages true change, as it connects Plan Guatemala with the establishment of the state.

Plan Guatemala, like many other aid organizations, gives out material goods as part of their projects. The material goods vary depending on what the project is, but in the past have included water purifiers, fertilizer, and medicine. However, when the evaluation was being conducted, community members “frequently expressed their regret at not receiving more material help by Plan.”⁴³ People were so accustomed to receiving material aid that they felt Plan Guatemala was not giving them enough supplies.

Although Plan Guatemala has the support of both the state and the international organization behind it, the evaluation noted that it is struggling to gain footing in Rabinal, like many other organizations had. Oxfam, Action Aid and Save the Children had all had offices in Rabinal since 2008, and all of them are no longer operating there. Plan Guatemala at one point worked in 22 communities throughout Rabinal, but is now down to only 9. Furthermore, follow-up interviews in communities after Plan Guatemala “phased out” its operations show that the work done thus far has not been sustainable. “Community respondents observed a decrease in municipal activity and responsiveness after Plan terminated its activities in the area.”⁴⁴ As a result, the patterns of dependency continue to exist in the area. This calls into question the effectiveness of Plan Guatemala and similarly-structured

⁴³ Bruno-van Vijfeijken et al., 2009

⁴⁴ Bruno-van Vijfeijken et al., 2009

projects. As one manager self-critically reflected, “I am not sure that you will see [Plan Guatemala] ten years from now.”⁴⁵

Qachuu Aloom

In 2003, Sarah Montgomery came to Rabinal with the intent of starting an organization for widows of the massacres on a home-gardening project. She quickly realized that many larger organizations had already been created with similar goals—but the projects had fallen apart relatively quickly. While local families would participate in the projects, their participation would only last for as long as the aid organizations were active in the region. Montgomery notes that “when the aid organization moved on, the families would stop planting their gardens.”⁴⁶ Montgomery (and Plan Guatemala)’s experience with this is not unusual.

When she asked local women, Montgomery was told that the reason that the projects did not continue after the aid organizations left was that the materials needed to continue the project were too expensive to buy if an organization did not give them the materials for free. Without chemical fertilizers, hybrid seeds, and pesticides, the families did not know how to continue the project they had been left with—after all, they had been told that these supplies were not only better than their previous methods, but that these supplies were necessary.

Unfortunately, supplies like these are part of the problem. Chemical fertilizers deplete the soil of nutrients. Aid organizations typically offer hybrid seeds, which produce bountiful crops, but do not produce well in the second planting,

⁴⁵ Bruno-van Vijeijken et al., 2009

⁴⁶ Sarah Montgomery, "Qachuu Aloom," Video interview with Megan Fenton, 2012

which discourages farmers from saving seeds. As pests became resistant to the pesticides, they had to use more and more of them. Because of these factors (and others), the departure of aid organizations do not leave the farmers better off than they were prior to the aid—in fact, they are worse off, as their soil is depleted, they have to buy seeds to plant the next season, and the pests are stronger and resilient.

As Montgomery considered these factors, she was approached by Cristobal Chen, an Achi farmer who had lived in Rabinal all his life. In 1980, the Guatemalan Army killed his newlywed wife and their child before his eyes, during the Río Negro massacre. Chen had heard about Montgomery's plans, and wanted to work with her. He told her that he had approached other organizations in the past, but none had been willing to work with him to change their model.

Chen was interested in implementing the Campesino a Campesino model (CAC) in order to protect traditional Mayan agriculture. CAC is essentially a model that facilitates farmers innovating and sharing their knowledge with their fellow farmers. While variations of this model have existed for hundreds of years, the more contemporary and more formalized version was developed locally in Guatemala and spread through Mesoamerica beginning in the 1970s.⁴⁷ It is based on farmer-promoters who have come up with new solutions to problems that are common among many farmers or who have recovered or rediscovered older traditional solutions, and who use popular education methodology to share them with their peers. A fundamental tenet of CAC is that farmers are more likely to believe and

⁴⁷ Eric Holt-Giménez, *Campesino a Campesino: Voices from Latin America's Farmer to Farmer Movement for Sustainable Agriculture*, 2006.

emulate a fellow farmer who is successfully using a given alternative on their own farm than they are to take the word of an urban agronomist or aid worker. This is even more the case when they can visit the farm of their peers and see the alternative functioning with their own eyes. Chen had worked with CAC in the past with other farmers, and wanted to implement it in Rabinal.

Montgomery and Chen together founded an association which they named Qachuu Aloom, which means “Mother Earth” in Achi’. Qachuu Aloom was created to address the problems seen by each of its founders. It was a garden project, yet utterly unlike those that had been brought to Rabinal in the past. Instead of dispensing materials like fertilizers and pesticides, Qachuu Aloom led classes on traditional methods and on seed production. While they did give out seeds, they would require the farmers to pay back the seeds after the harvest, in order to encourage the farmers to let a portion of the harvest go to seed. This allowed the farmers not only to “pay back” Qachuu Aloom, but to collect seeds for themselves for the following year.

This was not an easy sell to the farmers of Rabinal. In our interview, Montgomery recounted the response she and Chen would receive.

“The first year as we went village to village trying to promote the project, we would contact a community leader and have them get people from the village together. When we explained the idea, people would raise their hand and ask, “What are you going to give us? Metal for our roofs, seeds, fertilizers, animals, water tanks?” And when we would explain that we were not going to give anything away for free, more than half of the room would get up and leave. They were not

interested... It was much easier to wait for the hand-outs from other projects.”⁴⁸

The fact that they received the same (or a similar) response as Plan Guatemala did only emphasizes how deeply engrained dependency is within this population.

Despite this, Chen and Montgomery were able to organize a core group of 12 Achi individuals, both male and female, who were interested in the missions of Qachuu Aloom. As they began to work with this group, Chen encouraged them to use the CAC model in order to spread their knowledge to their neighbors. “At first, they said they felt embarrassed because their neighbors would make fun of them for carrying cow manure and making compost piles. But then when those same neighbors saw the results and realized that with a little work you could have free fertilizer by making your own compost, they began to copy us,”⁴⁹ he told me. By the end of the first year, Qachuu Aloom was working with 50-60 individuals across Rabinal.

Qachuu Aloom looks at individual gardens as serving three functions. They produce vegetables for home consumption, alleviating the need to buy food from others. They allow for some plants to go to seed; as the seeds that are given out by Qachuu Aloom are open-pollinated (also known as heirloom) rather than hybrid, the second planting of these seeds does not suffer the same problems as that of the seeds given out by aid organizations. This helps break the dependency on outside aid projects or on buying seeds from a store. Finally, (and this is seen as the least important of the garden functions), they also produce vegetables for sale in the

⁴⁸ Montgomery, 2012

⁴⁹ Cristobal Chen, "Qachuu Aloom," Video interview with Megan Fenton, 2012

market, which both lowers the price of these vegetables for others by increasing supply and provides for some cash income for the individual farmers.

Today, Qachuu Aloom works with about 500 families throughout Rabinal. Not all of these families are Achi, but the vast majority is. They have expanded the ways in which they work beyond classes and gardens, although those are still their primary focus. Today, Qachuu Aloom buys surplus seeds from families and markets them around the country. They promote these seeds to some larger aid organizations, such as the FAO, CARE, SHARE, Catholic Charities, and Save the Children, all of which now buy seeds from Qachuu Aloom. While working with larger aid organizations may initially seem contrary to Qachuu Aloom's goal of reducing dependency, Montgomery suggests that selling to these organizations does work towards that goal, as doing so allows "more small family farmers gain access to these heirloom seeds again. Even if they received the seeds from an aid organization initially, they don't have to continue working with [the aid organization] in the future but they'll still have access to the seeds."⁵⁰

In addition to their national seed market, Qachuu Aloom has a garden of their own, which they use as teaching center to demonstrate the traditions and techniques to others. They also use this teaching center as "sort of a community center," as Montgomery described it to me. They host events there that celebrate Mayan traditions and culture. Individuals involved in the project also will bring work there and do it in a communal fashion. For example, Chen described to me groups of women gathering to grind amaranth into flour and package it together; each woman

⁵⁰ Montgomery, 2012

brought her own farm's harvest of amaranth, and left with her own amount of flour. This Qachuu Aloom garden contains "a seed storage facility, rain-water catchment tanks, a medicinal plant garden, compost piles, worm-bins for composting, a solar plant drier, a solar energy-powered well, a cob building and a bamboo education center."⁵¹

Furthermore, Qachuu Aloom has begun to receive visits from groups, both national and international, who come to learn more about their development model and their implementation of CAC. They also have started a micro-lending program that has given loans of \$50 to \$200 to more than 100 of their families to help them start small businesses, and have a scholarship program that helps about 10 girls a year attend school.

As Qachuu Aloom has expanded, it has faced opposition from outside forces. Initially, local officials opposed Qachuu Aloom because they, like the farmers, liked the type of development projects that brought in free materials. Often, local leaders receive benefits from helping aid organizations manage donations. However, as they saw the results and more people began working with Qachuu Aloom, Montgomery saw this opposition fade away.

More serious opposition comes from the systematic devaluation of the type of work that Qachuu Aloom does. The University in Guatemala City's Agronomy department, for example, requires students to do an internship at a related organization or on a large farm prior to graduation. They sent an intern to Qachuu Aloom one year, but then determined Qachuu Aloom was "too radical" and no

⁵¹ Qachuu Aloom, "Qachuu Aloom, Guatemala," *Permaculture, Garden's Edge*.

longer approve Qachuu Aloom internships. Edson Xiloj, who had been the intern who was sent to Qachuu Aloom, continues to work with the association today, as its director. He explained, “They want their students to graduate and work for large fincas [farms] who are exporting to the US. Many of the professors get their research money from large companies like Monsanto, and some of them work for these companies on the side, so they have a very different agenda, and want their students to follow more conventional export models of agriculture.”⁵² He also noted that the university classes taught that organic agriculture doesn’t work, and that local seeds are useless. Xiloj was the only indigenous person in his class at the university.

It is not just the agricultural methods that are denigrated, however. Qachuu Aloom also works to preserve the more ceremonial Mayan traditions that surround agriculture. Montgomery noted “Because there is so much racism here, a lot of these traditions are looked down upon.”⁵³ When Xiloj first interned with Qachuu Aloom, he viewed Qachuu Aloom’s workshops on these traditions as a waste of time. As he became more familiar with the association, however, his views began to change. Montgomery recalls how as he began to participate in the workshops, Xiloj told her, “Sarah, this is nothing new; this is what I learned from my grandparents.”

However, Xiloj’s initial distaste for the traditions and workshops is not uncommon, especially among the more educated. Qachuu Aloom has been described as an “atraso.” In Spanish, this literally means “backwardness”—it is seen as going back in time, not into the future. By incorporating ancient practices that have only

⁵² Edson Xiloj, "Qachuu Aloom," Video interview with Megan Fenton, 2012.

⁵³ Montgomery, 2012.

recently fallen out of use in modern times, Qachuu Aloom is accorded little value, much like Maya culture in general.

Besides the University, other aid programs oppose Qachuu Aloom. Montgomery believes it is because they are having a more difficult time organizing projects in the communities Qachuu Aloom works in. Because people now have their own seed source to use to replant their gardens, as well as seeds to sell to bring income to their families, they no longer are dependent on these other projects. Montgomery added, “many times [the people] refuse to participate or force that project to come to us to buy their seeds. The families we work with are seeing the results of the project and learning to protect their seed source.”⁵⁴

Today’s Qachuu Aloom is run by a board of directors and registered with the Guatemalan government as a legal Non-Governmental Organization, or NGO. This allows Qachuu Aloom to receive internal funding via grants and donations. The board was initially made up entirely of Achi who had participated in the first few years of the project. Montgomery notes the difficulty of this, since most of the participants have little to no formal education. “Some of the women don’t speak Spanish, only Achi’, and can’t read or write; many of the men speak Spanish but it is a mixture of Spanish and their Native language Achi’.”⁵⁵ However, to qualify for grants (especially large government grants), Qachuu Aloom needs people with a higher education level to help manage and run the programs. Montgomery explains, however, that the problem is that “there is a large difference between the realities

⁵⁴ Montgomery, 2012

⁵⁵ Montgomery, 2012

that they have lived versus the *campesinos* we work with on our staff, on our board and in the communities. They use words that are too big, or talk too fast for people to understand.”⁵⁶

Overall, Montgomery feels that Qachuu Aloom has remained true thus far to its initial mission. Qachuu Aloom has managed to reintroduce several native varieties to the Rabinal area that had been lost. Additionally, the lives of the families who participate in the program have improved—she notes that “many of our members tell us they no longer need to go on seasonal migrations to work on the coffee or sugar plantations on the coast.”⁵⁷ Instead, the members are able to provide enough food for their families and generate enough income to support their families through selling seeds and vegetables at the local market.

Furthermore, Montgomery points out that Qachuu Aloom is set up so that it does not need to be an active force for its projects to continue. Unlike the previous aid projects in Rabinal, Qachuu Aloom focuses on providing workshops educating the participants on the specific methods necessary to maintain and carry on the project themselves. This means that if Qachuu Aloom were to be disbanded, the current members would not lose this source of food and income, the way that they did when aid organizations stopped providing fertilizers and hybrid seeds.

⁵⁶ Montgomery, 2012

⁵⁷ Montgomery, 2012

Chapter Four: Conclusion and Analysis

In order to understand Guatemala's indigenous people and how to best use aid to actually make a substantial difference in their lives, it is essential to understand the context of how they reached the point they are currently at. The subsistence perspective advocates this, but many aid organizations ignore this in favor of a more modernization-based approach.

Plan Guatemala, for example, uses a fairly orthodox modernization-based approach in Rabinal, Guatemala. They attempt to make substantial change by gifting material aid. However, they have not seen much of a change. Their own project managers are discouraging about the future of Plan Guatemala.

Qachuu Aloom, on the other hand, uses more of a subsistence approach, which pays attention to the ways in which individuals have been marginalized in the past. By doing this, the thought is that aid is actually able to combat the marginalization itself, and not merely the economic side effects of that marginalization.

In Guatemala, the indigenous people have had a long and violent history with the state. One of the clearest consequences of this is their complete and utter isolation. They have long been isolated from the state and the economic market, as indigenous people as a group were discriminated against and have no institutional power. The state's use of *aldeas modelos* also fostered isolation, albeit of a different nature. That isolation came from the breaking down of support systems and communities. The social capital that comes from a community can help mobilize and

organize groups that are being oppressed, and the Guatemalan state destroyed that capital for its indigenous population. In addition to becoming individually isolated from one another, the *aldeas modelos* also severed indigenous ties to their land. Not having land means that individuals are going to be more dependent on others, and in many cases this meant that the landless individuals would go to work on a large, internationally-owned finca, which only worsens Guatemalan dependency.

Qachuu Aloom's methods work to counter this isolation. By encouraging people to plant home gardens, rather than work on a finca on someone else's land, new ties to the land are being built. Additionally, these ties are strengthened through Qachuu Aloom's workshops that teach methods of improving the resources available, such as natural fertilization or tiered gardens, as this promotes greater understanding and familiarity with the land.

Far more important however, than ties to the physical land, is the social capital that Qachuu Aloom is helping its participants gain. The Campesinos a Campesinos model that they use encourages user-to-user communication and collaboration. In addition to fostering a sense of community, they are also alleviating the need to participate in the market that isolated them in the first place.

These methods, while irregular, do appear to be effective in the case of Qachuu Aloom. Health and nutrition are improved among its participants, and other markers not directly related to the gardening, such as school attendance among children, are also improving.

It must be noted that this is only one case. Furthermore, the results have not yet withstood the test of time; Qachuu Aloom is less than a decade old. However,

neither of those facts lessens the validity or the effectiveness of Qachuu Aloom. More research would have to be done before being able to say, with certainty, about the overall effectiveness of these methods across organizations and cultures, but these initial results are promising.

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