The Dynamic Relationship of Food and Indigenous Language: A Case Study of K’iche’ Food

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Abstract. This paper draws on anthropological linguistics and food studies to examine how K’iche’ Maya foodways are elucidated by the study of interactions between language and the materiality of food. The meaning and symbolism of food emerge from the diverse social and cultural settings in which people live. How people talk about food relates to how their cultural identities form around it, all of which become embedded in its physical substance. Thus, the conceptual development of food is inseparable from the structural development of language. In this sense, Indigenous languages in K’iche’ communities highlight the importance of cultural meaning, spirituality, and agricultural practices that are interwoven with foodways. From this perspective, the conceptual and structural ties between food and language highlight their intrinsic relationship. By exploring this relationship, this paper examines how K’iche’ Mayan language gives food culture a legacy of meanings that have persisted through time.

Keywords: Food, Language, K’iche’, Guatemala, Foodways.
Since 2018, I have carried out a long-term study of K’iche’ foodways with a sample of ten women and their families in a small K’iche’ Maya community located in Chi u wi’ meq’in ja’ (Totonicapán), in the Guatemala highlands. Once, I asked these women why wa (i.e., corn-based food like tortillas or tamales) are so important to them. One woman responded “without wa in the meal, we don’t have food.” In my personal and professional experience as a Guatemalan Maya, the conceptualization of corn-based food through the Mayan root “wa” is a crucial concept anchored in a legacy of food, language, and identity which is central to K’iche’ Maya foodways.

Through more interviews, I acquired more information about why people associate with food and language. One quote from a K’iche’ Maya woman I interviewed was particularly enlightening. After asking her about the meaning of Ixim (Maize) to her, she responded (also, see Figure 1):

“Ri jal q’an are’ kaq’alajsínik ri qawochib’al
Ri jal saq are’ kaq’alajsínik ri kasaqarík
Ri jal rexwach are’ kaq’alajsínik ri uqajab’al ri q’ij”.

The yellow cob represents our equality
The white cob represents the sunrise
The black cob represents the sunset.

I collected data through ethnographic and pragmatic linguistic research methods, including dietary records, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation. The collected data document both the material and sociolinguistic conditions that influence how K’iche’ women make decisions about feeding themselves and their families. For most of my time in the community, I ate a lot of meals (during mealtimes), bought food, helped in food preparation, and accompanied in agricultural activities. This allowed me to connect with the K’iche’ food concepts in the local language. I randomly assigned myself to families to collect data on food classification via semi-structured interviews, dietary records, and participant observation. I was part of them, as some women called me “mijo’ (son), “don” (mister), and Kel which is my name in K’iche’. I focused on my primary interlocutor, the woman of the family, as well as secondary interlocutors that helped in food issues. The data presented here mainly derive from mealtimes as a broader synthesis of my participatory observation. To exemplify this, I examine the food lexicon of the K’iche’ Indigenous Mayan language and its interconnections with enduring cultural concepts. Each of the K’iche’ food domains – summarized throughout this paper – must be considered to understand the multifaceted relationships between food, language, and cultural contexts.

Foodways as Food and Language

The concept of foodways has arisen as a framework for understanding the cultural attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to food elements. As first defined by Anderson (1971:2), foodways are “the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, and consumption shared by all members of a particular group”. As practices, foodways inform how people use their language and food knowledge to conceptualize and interact with social, cultural, and economic issues (Riley 2017, 2019). With a particular focus on the practices and beliefs that surround food consumption, a foodways framework allows for an understanding of cultural categorization of food; i.e., how people in a community allocate and organize food through
language. Foodways also address the expression of identity and agency through food. Thus, foodways are a pragmatic theoretical framework used to explore how the formal representation of knowledge and the meaning of food are organized within communities.

Foodways are also defined as material and symbolic practices linked to the production and consumption of food with a particular focus on the role of food and food-related behavior (Riley and Paugh 2018:4-8). As such, foodways offer a crucial entry point to understand the complex contours of the social, cultural, and economic facets of food. Linking food and language within the framework of foodways allows us to understand how people use language and food-related knowledge to conceptualize food (Riley 2017, 2018).

**Figure 1.** The *Ixim* Colors (all photographs by the author).
Language works as a system that provides organization, structure, and hierarchy to the meaning and symbolism of food (Neuenswander and Arnold 1977; Riley and Paugh 2018; Staller and Carrasco 2009). Food and languages shape concepts in relation to one another – both dynamically and reciprocally – to articulate and elucidate food based on its specific cultural meaning. Within the context of foodways, language refers to a dynamic categorization system of semantics and semiotics. In other words, food-related language is treated as a set of symbolic and semantic resources that follow the logic of distinct foodstuffs (Duranti 1997; Riley and Paugh 2018; Salzmann et al. 2014).

Food extends beyond the classic definition of biological and chemical building blocks, specifically nutrients, to become a principal medium and object for social interaction with cultural aspects. As such, food contributes to the construction of group and individual identity (Hastorf 2020; Riley and Paugh 2018). The cultural construction of food and language may illuminate the ontology of food among Indigenous communities (e.g. K’iche’ Mayan) since, to these communities, food is not only culture but a direct connection with the earth; a way of seeing the world that is both social and spiritual (Pesantubbee and Zogry 2021).

Food and language, as central elements of foodways, trigger experiences that in turn shape identity (Szatrowki 2004). In this sense, people use verbal descriptions of food when talking about its significance as an identity practice. Language also provides context for knowing and talking about food (Boerboom 2015): its production, use, exchange value, and the rituals of its consumption constitute a kind of food language with real-world implications. Food language thus illuminates the interconnectedness between people and the impacts of globalization (Jurafsky 2014); the words used by individuals to describe food illuminate both the past and present. Food and language also have symbolic elements that work to maintain transnational identities, from conceptual ideas to concrete realities, which in turn shape cultural food practices and meals (Balirano 2019). Thus, food and language reflect intimate and meaningful manifestations of cultural experiences.

In southern Mesoamerica, the cradle of Maya civilization, the legacy of Indigenous Mayan languages and food interactions is particularly rich. The cultural practices of contemporary Maya communities reflect certain continuities from past to present. For example, ancient Maya representations from ceramic vessels and stone stelae found in archaeological context often describe food elements shared by modern Maya cultural traditions (Demarest 2004; Houston 2001; Staller and Carrasco 2009). These archeological records suggest that food-related terminology and its related structures are deeply embedded in Maya culture, including that of K’iche’ people (Aissen et al. 2017; Justeson 1986; Kaufman 1987; Macrì 1997; MacNeil 2009; Taube 1989). Thus, the interwoven domains of food and language may lay the groundwork for the identity practice of contemporary K’iche’ Maya communities.

**Figure 2.** Food Domain of Wa.
K’iche’ Maya Foodways

Modern Guatemala has two main population groups: Ladinos (of Indigenous and Spanish ancestry) and Indigenous Mayas. According to the National Institute of Statistics of Guatemala, 41.7% of the population is Indigenous, representing 22 linguistic Mayan communities with distinct languages and cultures (CENSO 2018). K’iche’ Mayan is the largest linguistic group, with about one million speakers. Most of the K’iche’ ethnic group lives in the Western Highlands of Guatemala in the departments of Quiche, Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, and Sololá. Most K’iche’ speak their native language and a variable amount of Spanish, but some isolated, rural communities speak only K’iche’ (Lewis 2001). Importantly, K’iche’ people understand and articulate food concepts through the K’iche’ language.

While most scholarship on Mayan languages has focused on their linguistic structures independent of a consideration of foodways (e.g. Aissen 2017; Kaufman 1974; Mondloch 2017; Sapón 2000; Tumm 2001), a few studies have explicitly studied these as related phenomena. For example, in Guatemala, Butler and Arnold (1977) document how Tzutujil Maya communities classify maize based on land and climate in order to produce specific meanings that shape local cultural concepts of maize based on their language. Neuenswander (1977) describes how the K’iche’ of Chi uwi’ la (Chichicastenango) have domains of wa (corn-based food) and riki’l (food served as a side to a meal). Trabanino (2012) also describes how K’iche’ women of Chi u wi’ meq’in ja’ (Totonicapán) use the food concept of Joch’ (hot local beverage), which is consumed during community celebrations to commemorate religious practices.

Wa and Ixim

Exploring the dynamic relationship between K’iche’ food and language can shed light on the ancient Maya heritage of contemporary foodways. For centuries, writing, phonetics, and speech have maintained the legacy of food. Archaeological and ethnohistoric data suggest that corn-based foods such as tamales and tortillas are represented by the word wa in Classic Maya art and text (Hull 2010; Justeson 1986; Macri 1997; Taube 1989). Linguistics also demonstrates how wa has been consistently used since the Classic Period (250–900 CE; Staller and Carrasco 2009; Staller et al. 2016). K’iche’ people use the word wa in the context of corn-based food and as a root for the intransitive verb -wa’ik (to eat). Additionally, the root wa is used to describe a domain of food as well as relevant sub-categories in current K’iche’ communities (Figure 2).

Similarly, linguistic and archaeological documentation holds that ixim is the ancient Mayan word root for maize and that it has been consistently used for millennia (Brown 2006). In fact, some forms of the ancient Mayan hieroglyph for ixim may also have referred to the Maize deity as a way to embed the concept of ixim in concepts of sacredness (Bassie 2014; Wagner 2017). For the K’iche’, ixim signifies sustenance and forms the basis for the cultural, agronomic, and religious organization of communities. The uses of the term ixim can shed light on fundamental elements that support communal connections in the Maya area. Even the Popol Wuj, a written account of the origins of K’iche’ people transmitted orally for generations, describes the centrality of ixim in the identity of Maya people (Tedlock 1969). For example, the Popol Wuj describes how human beings were created with ixim (Colop 1999: 120, Figure 3). As Christenson holds, “This symbolic
The connection between maize and human beings is an ancient concept evident also in the Popol Vuh. In the account of the creation, the gods came together in the primordial sea to determine how the world was to be made" (2009:581). Ixim is a vital element coined in the food identity of K’iche’ population. Accordingly, ixim is not only the staple food of Maya communities, it is also the main element connecting the individual and the nuclear family with the rest of the community. In this context, ixim becomes a central element through which support systems, kinship, and spiritual connection become evident (De Beausset and Cuj 2016). The distinctive cultural elements around ixim production, transformation, and consumption are revealed by examining its uses as food, especially in symbolically rich meals and beverages. Clearly, the concept of ixim is quite significant for K’iche’ communities.

The examples of wa and ixim highlight the historical relevance of these roots in K’iche’ language. Even today, both words have been adapted to express new concepts in K’iche’ food language. For example, kaxlan wa refers to foreign food (bread and cookies) and Iximulew (the land of maize) is the K’iche’ word for Guatemala.

Food and Language Legacy among the Contemporary K’iche’

Archaeological and epigraphic work has documented additional foods that were particularly significant to the ancient Maya, such as cacao (Carter and Matsumoto 2020; McNeil 2009) and beans (Brown 2009; Tokovinine 2014). Beyond maize, these studies highlight how multiple traditional Maya foods...
have deep ancestral roots which make them legacy resources for forming cultural practices and identities.

Today, the people of *Chi u wi’ meq’ín ja’* (Totonicapán) use their K’iche’ language to give meaning to food experience beyond the traditional *meq’in* (hot) and *joron* (cold) concepts. The organoleptic (sensory) properties of food describe its physical characteristics as perceived by the senses, such as its taste, texture, smell, color or temperature. Yet, conventional organoleptic categories do not fit how K’iche’ people describe their sensory experience of food in their indigenous language. Indeed, culturally-specific K’iche’ categories describe food experiences based on local knowledge about flavors and smells (Table 1).

Table 1 showcases the ways in which the K’iche’ use language to underline the importance of identity, cultural meaning, and consumption practices interwoven with food. K’iche’ sensory characteristics of food are influenced by cultural values and categories that operate in relation to the land and communities within which individuals are born and grow, as well as in relation to localized sociolinguistic traits. K’iche’ foods have symbolic meaning beyond purchase and preparation for meeting the physical needs of the family. Beyond substance, flavor, and texture, the K’iche’ have sociolinguistic categories for food defined by temporality. Such categories include “solid corn food base”, “solid non-corn food base”, “spicy food”, “liquid food” (including drinks and hot beverages), and “food served between meal times” (Cuj 2020; Cuj et al. 2020; Cuj et al. 2021).

The sociolinguistic domains listed in Table 2 show how K’iche’ people have maintained community, social cohesion, organization, and Indigenous knowledge to preserve traditional food as well as to incorporate newly available—and often heavily advertised—foods in local markets (e.g., *Xaq munil* to refer to snacks). K’iche’ food categories engage with the complex roles of foodways in many spheres of cultural ideation in ways which differ from conventional western food groups. Indeed, sociolinguistic domains of K’iche’ food are based on cultural concepts and language that differ from biomedical and nutritional knowledge. These characteristics reflect how the K’iche’ Maya have maintained community cohesion, social organization, and indigenous knowledge to preserve food and language elements threatened by current food transitions despite adverse systemic pressure. In other words, K’iche’ people use an organized and allocated food logic to give cultural interpretations that constitute an Indigenous ontology of food. This ontology reflects how the dynamic relationship between food and K’iche’ language is a central tie for binding communities together.

**Table 1. K’iche’ Food Adjectives of Flavor.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K’iche’</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ch’ a’m</em></td>
<td>Sour</td>
<td>Agrio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>K’a</em></td>
<td>Bitter</td>
<td>Acido</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ki</em></td>
<td>Sweet</td>
<td>Dulce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tza</em></td>
<td>Salty</td>
<td>Salado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>K’ok’</em></td>
<td>Aromatic</td>
<td>Aromaticico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Chu’</em></td>
<td>Pestilent</td>
<td>Pestilente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nin</em></td>
<td>Rancid</td>
<td>Rancio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Poqon</em></td>
<td>Spicy</td>
<td>Picante</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Chaqo’n</em></td>
<td>Thick food</td>
<td>Comida espesa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kok’</em></td>
<td>Not thick food</td>
<td>Comido no espesa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The commensality of mealtimes – when social groups gather to eat and talk – provides the perfect occasion for culturally-specific aspects of K’iche’ foodways. For example, K’iche’ women eat around the traditional *q’aq’* (local Maya stove, see Figure 4) to ensure that the food is hot and adequate to eat while men eat at the table. Around the *q’aq’*, K’iche’ women use an index language to describe cooking processes with onomatopoeic verbs. For example, the verb *poq’owik* (to boil) emulates the sound of boiling water. K’iche’ women also use the verb *lejenik* (to make tortillas) which emulates the sound of shaping the tortilla dough. Through this practice, K’iche’ women use their language to reproduce K’iche’ terms about their foodways (see figure 5).

Other good examples of K’iche’ terms and foodstuffs (as displayed in Figure 5) include *sub’*
People eat food, not nutrients, as noted by several scholars studying the cultural elements of food (Hastorf 2016; Hawkins 2007; King 2003; Neuenswander and Arnold 1977; Staller and Carrasco 2009; Staller et al. 2016). The ways in which a given people speak about food stem from shared cultural elements as well as linguistic structures, individual experiences, and perceptions. The language we use to talk about food thus reflects a culture of eating and provides a framework to interpret food-related behavior. Language and food advocacy—along with many other disciplines and Indigenous activism—needs to consider the central relationship between food and language in shaping broader cultural approaches to food. Importantly, the fact that food has been popularly understood in terms of biology does not mean that cultural conceptions of food have less value. This approach can contribute to understanding how food and its logic impact ontology and language according to varying cultural contexts.

Food and language are fundamental elements of cultural identities. K’iche’ foodways open a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K’iche’</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wa</td>
<td>Corn-based food</td>
<td>Comida a base de maiz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riki’l</td>
<td>Non-corn-based food (served as a side to a meal)</td>
<td>Comida no basada en maiz (servido como acompañamiento de una comida)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunel</td>
<td>Seasoning / condiment</td>
<td>Sazonadores / condimientos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xaq munil</td>
<td>Snacks</td>
<td>Meriendas / Bocadillos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xaq kaqatijo</td>
<td>Food served between meal times</td>
<td>Refacciones (comida servida entre comidas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meq’in</td>
<td>Hot Beverage</td>
<td>Bebidas calientes (Atoles)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. K’iche’ Food Groups.

(corn-tamalitos), joch’ (local hot beverage), kinaq’ (beans), and q’or (corn dough). Through these mealtime exchanges around the q’aq’, this food terminology becomes part of the daily commensal practices of K’iche’ women. In this food context, K’iche’ language reproduces native words in meal, food, and nutrition conversations that women use to maintain food and linguistic identity. From a language perspective, cultural food practices focus on people’s relationships with food and how these impact individual, familial, and community behaviors surrounding commensality, especially through food language. These practices include beliefs and behaviors surrounding food which shape cultural and linguistic practices. Food language encompasses the way in which people express personal and sociocultural meanings through their food habits (Riley and Paugh 2018), including the production, marketing, preparation, and consumption of foodstuffs.

Discussion
pragmatic avenue evaluate the importance of cultural practices such as digestibility, cooking, and eating Indigenous context. Since Guatemalan Indigenous Maya people are some of the most affected populations with regards to food issues such as chronic malnutrition (Bogin 2022), it is of paramount importance to harness the approach of social sciences in highlighting the centrality of culture and language in defining foodways.

As Christenson points out, specifically Maya foods such as ixim are essential to all the aspects of their cultural identity, ritual practices, familial relationships, and even their ability to speak their language properly (2009:599). K’iche’ mealtimes constitute private-family spaces where food and language elements arise to tie livelihood and are perfect sites to capture cultural food concepts. The seating orders at the table and around the q’aq’ define commensal spheres of exchange for Maya dialogues, as well a place where the sharing of food is the central element. The wording and gestures of each of the mealtime participants pave the way for an in-depth analysis of onomatopoeic verbs, names of food, and allocation of specific meals.

While this paper addresses the important interplay between cultural elements and food, we must remember that these only represent one approach to the complex topic of foodways. Nutritional deficiency has been recognized for specific foods that have high cultural importance. For example, maize may be a culturally significant food, but it also carries a lysine and tryptophan deficiency; both of which are essential amino acids in human nutrition. Yet, combining maize with beans provides a complete protein. Nonetheless, as discussed above, maize is vital to the K’iche’ social fabric since it enables the integration of cultural aspects of food that may in turn impact nutrition. The intent of this paper is to recognize the cultural and linguistic importance of food without overlooking its nutritional aspects. As a result, I hope to open the door for new approaches to study food as simultaneously nutritional and cultural.
Conclusion

Words from the past serve as social memory in the present. Understanding how language and food are entangled in K’iche’ foodways shines a light on the cultural and indentitarian practices forming the cultural legacy of Indigenous K’iche’ communities of Guatemala. Paying attention to the connections between food and Mayan languages preserves and promotes cultural and historical heritages. A focus on Mayan languages and food, with their culturally specific concepts and complexities, also pays respect to the speakers’ own knowledge systems and helps combat misconceptions that stem from centuries of colonialism and discrimination. Mayan languages influence how food is perceived and understood within Maya sociocultural contexts. Within the Guatemalan context, describing language and food is complicated by the distinct cultural logics of its 22 Mayan linguistic communities, whose definitions of food resources and languages vary considerably. However, these variations share common points for understanding food and language together, thus allowing the language of food to emerge.

Archaeological and ethnohistorical resources offer a wealth of data on the roots of food as contextualized in Mayan languages in the deep and recent past. Tracing these cultural, linguistic, and biological histories from the past to the present is key for promoting and respecting culturally specific understandings of food by Indigenous peoples in Guatemala, including K’iche’ communities. By documenting the interaction between food and language in the K’iche’ Maya context, this paper helps fill the significant knowledge gap in our holistic understanding and evaluation of cultural foodways, and can hopefully inform others’ understandings of the important link between Indigenous languages and foodways.

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