

# Central American cooks in Mexico: experiences of living through food

## Cocineras centroamericanas en México: experiencias de habitar a través de la comida

Hugo Saúl Rojas Pérez<sup>a\*</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4273-1640>

<sup>a</sup> Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Mexico, e-mail: [hugo.rojas@unicach.mx](mailto:hugo.rojas@unicach.mx)

### Abstract

This study examines what it has meant to prepare and sell food for Salvadoran and Honduran women in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, Mexico, who remain in Mexican border territory. The links between food and the experience of living are analyzed, focusing on how this commercial activity has allowed them to mitigate their memories of forced migration and experiences of territorial immobility by generating intercultural processes through the reciprocal relationships and the transformation of stigmas about their nationality and gender. Food has been a fundamental element for their autonomy, not only in economic terms but also in the possibility of thinking of a new life project. Through interviews conducted in 2020 with six Central American cooks and the participation in cooking with them, this paper explores these women's living processes and the factors that allow us to deduce that food has been a vehicle to facilitate that process.

Keywords: anthropology of food, reciprocity, forced migration, interculturality.

### Resumen

Este estudio examina lo que ha significado para mujeres salvadoreñas y hondureñas preparar y vender comida en Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, México, quienes permanecen en el territorio fronterizo mexicano. Se analizan los vínculos entre la comida y la experiencia de habitar enfocado en cómo este giro comercial les ha permitido mitigar sus recuerdos de migración forzada y experiencias de inmovilidad territorial al generar procesos interculturales a través de relaciones de reciprocidad y transformación de los estigmas sobre su nacionalidad y género. La comida ha sido un elemento fundamental para su autonomía, no solo en términos económicos, sino en la posibilidad de pensarse un nuevo proyecto de vida. Mediante entrevistas realizadas en 2020 a seis cocineras centroamericanas y la preparación

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\* Corresponding author: Hugo Saúl Rojas Pérez. E-mail: [hugo.rojas@unicach.mx](mailto:hugo.rojas@unicach.mx)

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de comida con ellas se describen los procesos de habitar de estas mujeres y los factores que permiten deducir que la comida ha sido un vehículo que facilitó dicho proceso.

Palabras clave: antropología de alimentos, reciprocidad, migración forzada, interculturalidad.

## Introduction

This study investigates what it has meant for Salvadoran and Honduran women to prepare and sell typical Central American food in the small border town of Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, Mexico. It explores the links between food and the experience of living in Mexico, focusing on how the preparation and sale of food have been essential to building their lives in this border town. How this practice helps to mitigate the memories of their forced migration and the experience of territorial immobility, as well as to transform stigmas and stereotypes about their nationality and gender that are shared locally (Arriola, 1995; Kuromiya, 2023; Rojas, 2017), will be addressed.

The Central American female cooks interviewed by the author are people in a condition of mobility but have been settled in Ciudad Hidalgo for a long time. Some still harbor the expectation of having a better life elsewhere. Their residence in Mexico has to do with a process of forced mobility-immobility, marked by marginalization and the uncertainty of not having a regularized migratory status but with the need to make a living on a daily basis.

In this context, the experience of Central American women and their domestic group in Mexico, particularly in Ciudad Hidalgo, is linked to their daily practice as cooks based on the social networks they have established and the positive acceptance of their trade, both by themselves and by Mexican consumers. This process has allowed them to “inhabit” the city. Inhabiting implies not only residing in a place but learning the spatial logic that facilitates their daily routine and, in turn, constructing their own spatial logic and feeling part of the environment through their routine (Giglia, 2012). In this case, their routine is linked to the preparation and sale of food, through which these women manage to consolidate their own living space due to the acceptance of their food in the local society.

Moreover, it is emphasized that their living in this city is not based on a process of adaptation planned within some institutional or political program through the norms and values of nation states, nor an absolute integration into Mexican society. Instead, it is based on their practices relating to the sale of food and its acceptance. The research findings show that practices such as cooking and selling food from their places of origin and being accepted in the local market have allowed female cooks to use this space with their own codes without being stigmatized for their nationality and without generating conflicts with the local population. In other words, knowing how to cook and sell food has fostered non-conflictual social and neighborhood interactions, without cultural impositions and with mutual learning about the *us* and the *others*. This process is referred to in this article as interculturality.

Studying food and the meanings that surround it, as well as the associated social practices, is a central axis of analysis in the anthropology of food (Aguilar Piña, 2013). Accordingly, some of the ideas of Sidney Mintz, who studied in depth why food transcends its nutritional function and is not limited to the relation between nutrition and

health, are availed of here. The meanings contained in food for those who produce, distribute and consume it make cultural practices visible in which different forms of power are manifested, as well as processes of subjugation and emancipation (Mintz, 2003, p. 32).

In the case of these Central American women in Ciudad Hidalgo, the aim is to describe how food helped them to reconstitute their lives in this Mexican city. Initially, they faced the “prison experience” of arriving in a territory where they did not expect to stay and from which they could not leave, that is, the immobility experienced because they could not move beyond the border strip between Mexico and Guatemala while they carried out their bureaucratic procedures with the *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (COMAR). In the words of one of the interviewees, this process implied: “clinging to preparing and selling food to survive, but also to not think about paperwork” (María, 2020).

Food has allowed them to establish friendly ties with neighbors while avoiding violent and forced subjugation to the hegemonic society. This aspect is especially meaningful for them since the horizontal relationships with the locals contrast with the context of gang violence in their places of origin (the main reason for their forced migration). Over time, the cooks adapted their typical dishes to Mexican palates, adding spicy sauces of dried chiles, habaneros and salads with lime, to mention the most common, to their *pupusas*. Through this experience, the daily life of selling food also became a routine that gave them autonomy.

To describe and analyze in detail the meaning of the sale and preparation of food in the process of living in Ciudad Hidalgo, this study delves into three aspects: 1) the processes of living through the preparation and sale of food; 2) the relationships of reciprocity created around this practice; and, 3) the experiences of autonomy of female cooks. These three aspects are described around the narratives—the discourse itself—and the practices of female cooks through participant observation. For all three aspects, the interculturality generated due to the preparation and sale of food in this border city appears as a common thread.

The aim is to present some of the main experiences of their living in this city through the practices of their trade, gathering their experiences of territorial immobility and analyzing how food has served as a vehicle for the transformation of both their lives and the local society. Before delving into the three aspects, the general context of the locality and the phenomenon of human mobility observed are presented, as well as the methodology used, the characterization of female cooks, and the ethnographic approach used with them. In addition, a review of previous studies that have analyzed the important role of food in migration processes is included.

## The small Ciudad Hidalgo and the Suchiate River

The city has approximately twenty thousand inhabitants and is located in the state of Chiapas, in the extreme South of Mexico. It is bordered by the Suchiate River, which serves as the national border with Guatemala (Figure 1). It is a city known for its bustling mercantile activity, both on a cross-border and transnational scale (Rojas Pérez, 2014, 2020). On a cross-border scale, there is a daily trade of groceries, fruits, vegetables and household goods with the twin city of Tecún Umán, Guatemala. The activity

revolves around the river through rafts of approximately four square meters made of wood and tractor tires, which are used for transport and landing in small improvised ports on the banks of both countries (Rojas Pérez & Fletes Ocón, 2017).

On a transnational scale, this border is home to the Mexican government's customs system, which services the flow of transnational goods between North and Central America. Hundreds of cargo trucks pass through the Suchiate 2 border bridge daily destined for Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, and in the opposite direction, from Central America to Mexico and the United States. In connection with this customs and cross-border trade activity, there are several complementary private services, such as customs agencies, freight yards, hotels, warehouses, bars, restaurants, bicycle cab services, wholesale groceries and bottled water, among others (Rojas Pérez & Fletes Ocón, 2017).

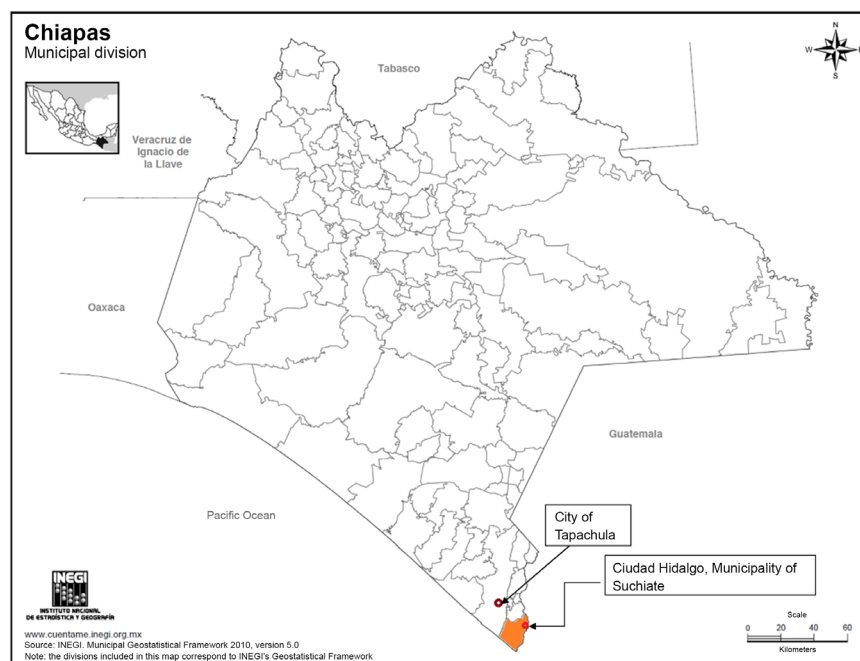
It is important to note that this Mexican city has been composed mainly of migrants from other parts of Mexico and Central America who have settled here. It is a relatively recent city whose creation is related to the border treaty between Mexico and Guatemala in 1882.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in addition to the aforementioned activities, the city hosts intense human mobility, both Guatemalan and Mexican workers with cross-border itineraries, as well as those international migrants, called "transients", who seek to travel North and sometimes settle here temporarily. Needless to say, living conditions in this Mexican border region do not differ much from the places of origin of these Central American family groups.

In this border context, one of the many activities that have flourished in the small town of Ciudad Hidalgo is the preparation and sale of typical food of different nationalities. It is not by chance that the inhabitants boast of being "cosmopolitan", referring to the presence of people of different origins and cultural backgrounds and the daily gatherings that take place spontaneously at small food stands and mobile food carts. This type of "cosmopolitanism" proclaimed by the local people themselves does not have the same symbolic charge as it has in large cities, where ethnocultural relationships develop between diners and ethnic food, as in the case of Mexican restaurants in Montreal, described by Vázquez Zúñiga (2023, p. 44).

In Ciudad Hidalgo especially, the dishes stayed along with the migrants: Salvadoran *pupusas*, Haitian fried chicken, Guatemalan *pollo campero* and Cuban *moros y cristianos*. These cuisines coexist independently but are also fused with *tacos*, *tortas*, *quesadillas* and, above all, with the local taste for incorporating spicy flavors.

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is to the Boundary Treaty concluded on September 27, 1882. Available at: <https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/63818/tratado1882mexguat.pdf>

**Figure 1. Location of Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, Mexico**

Source: taken from INEGI and modified by the author

## Female cooks and the ethnographic approach

The information for this article was collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation in Ciudad Hidalgo using an ethnographic approach. The study was conducted with six Central American cooks who assume economic and domestic responsibility for their family group and for the sale and preparation of food (see Table 1).

This study is in the field of food anthropology, where the social, cultural and symbolic processes that surround food and give meaning to people's lives in specific social contexts have been addressed (Aguilar Piña, 2013, p. 16). Specifically, previous studies in this area of knowledge have resorted to the ethnographic method because it captures both the meaning of the discourse and the practices surrounding food. To follow this approach, several visits were made to the locality to interact with female cooks and their families during November and December 2020 at the end of the COVID-19 health emergency. It should be pointed out that the author has carried out uninterrupted fieldwork in this location from 2009 until the publication of this article, so the interviews were conducted using the snowball method that began with two cooks known from previous field trips.

The interviews were conducted in fragments and were not completed in a single day as they were conducted while the participants worked in their kitchens or small restaurants or sold on the street. Furthermore, to capture the practices in their

particular contexts, participant observation was carried out with three of them while they were preparing food for sale, which several times caused them to move away from the topics to be discussed, allowing them to express themselves freely.

Apart from food anthropology, this research is situated more within the framework of border studies than that of migration studies. That is, although their migratory history is documented (mobility from their place of origin to the point of arrival, in this case, Ciudad Hidalgo), the research focuses on their life at the border, where they work and live.

**Table 1. Female cooks interviewed**

Name (fictitious name)	Age	Place of origin	Time living in Ciudad Hidalgo	Commercial activity	Main customers	Main reason for departure
Flor	44 years old	Namasigue, Honduras	14 years	Sale of pupusas, stews and beer	Migrants/local population	Family violence/gang violence
Claudia	42 years old	San Pedro Sula, Honduras	17 years	Baleadas, tacos and burritos	Local population	Economic but not poverty
María	52 years old	San Salvador, El Salvador	2 years	French fries, cabbage salad and pupusas	Local population	Gang violence
Xiomara	23 years old	Cabañas, El Salvador	4 years	Pupusas	Migrants	Gang violence
Rubenia	51 years old	Sonsonete, El Salvador	16 years	Pupusas	Local population	Gang violence
Norma	32 years old	Ocotepeque, Honduras	2 years	Pupusas	Local population	Gang violence

Source: created by the author with data from interviews

Table 1 shows the main data of the cooks interviewed. The information corresponds to 2020. As can be seen, these women left their country several years ago, and each has a particular migration history. Except for Claudia, all the women interviewed stated that the main reason for their departure was gang extortion, either by charging a protection money fee to the business establishment or by direct violence, such as murder or rape, inflicted by gang members from their family. In the case of Norma and Xiomara, both openly stated that it was not their economic situation that prompted them to leave their town and try to reach the North, as they lived as well or better than in Ciudad Hidalgo. Their objective was to find the peace of mind they lacked, where they could prosper in family terms and support themselves economically.

All of the interviewees, except for Xiomara, initially harbored the illusion of arriving in the United States since Ciudad Hidalgo, as will be discussed below, was a forced choice of immobility due to the time required to complete the procedures that grant them refugee status with Comar. While waiting for the result of their procedure, the applicants cannot move from where they initiated the bureaucratic process. None of the six women planned to live in this city for over a year. Nonetheless, this situation came about slowly, initially because of the wait for the paperwork and then because of the comfort they experienced when they perceived they were well accepted because

of the food they prepare (Field Notes, 2020). Furthermore, in the cases of Rubenia, Norma and Xiomara, they already had experience in cooking and in managing their own business establishment in their place of origin.

## An approach to interculturality through food

Seeing food as more than a basic need that nourishes and satisfies hunger requires an effort of interpretation on the researcher's part to understand the meanings attached to food and related practices (Mintz, 2003). In this case, food, as well as the practices of preparation and sale, is perceived as a vehicle of transformation in the lives of Central American women in Mexico. The aim is to find out what role food plays and how it has conditioned their experience of living in a place where they did not plan to stay. As described in the following sections, food and its related social interactions have allowed them to experience new ways of living in that place and to influence positive perceptions of them among the host population.

This way of achieving coexistence and establishing mutual relations, where power links are generated more or less horizontally between these women and the local population, is defined here as an intercultural process. Food becomes a key factor of interculturality because of its symbolic meanings and the labor it implies. According to Walsh (2005), interculturality is based on equitable relations between different cultural groups based on experiences, knowledge, politics and power. Walsh (2005, p. 45) states that it is not just a matter of recognizing, discovering and tolerating the other, nor of making identities essential as if they were immovable. Instead, it is a matter of actively promoting exchange processes that make it possible to build spaces of encounter between persons and knowledge, as well as between different meanings and practices.

In this case study, the interaction between different groups of people residing in Ciudad Hidalgo is achieved through food preparation, sale and consumption on a certain level of equality between Mexican diners and Central American migrant cooks. Thanks to the acceptance of typical Central American food, such as *pupusas*, there is also a positive valuation of the cooks as producers of these dishes, which facilitates horizontal coexistence and the deployment of social networks beyond the migrant circle.

This is the process of intercultural socialization "from below" that is not managed by government institutions with policies designed to incorporate them (Walsh, 2005, p. 44). Rather, little by little, their experience of living and becoming involved in society is modified by mutual rapprochement, making the place their own until they can "inhabit" it.

In studies on human mobility and migration, food-related activities have been a subject of research considered as a factor that facilitates integration into destination societies. Hayden (2023, p. 235) states that migration implies a process of moving food practices along with people, which creates new food spaces aimed at migrant populations that, in addition, "become part of the food landscape of the environments that receive them". Thus, several studies explore how food and its preparation facilitate networks between migrants and the local population.



For example, in Vázquez Zúñiga's (2023) article on Mexican food in Montreal, Canada, it is claimed that the preparation and sale of Mexican food is understood as a form of communication with Canadian society through gastronomic teaching to diners who are not familiar with Mexican cuisine. This interaction represents an implicit strategy of incorporating Mexicans into the cosmopolitan context of that city. The Mexican food restaurant in Montreal is described as a space where a network of migrants is built that shelters them and helps in the regularization of their migration status in addition to "guaranteeing a certain financial autonomy in the competitive labor market of ethnic food in Montreal" (Vázquez Zúñiga, 2023, p. 40). That is, the food and the practices of preparation and sale help newly arrived Mexican migrants to inhabit new spaces, not only for economic reasons but also because of the networks of compatriots who are already linked to the business.

In her study, the author takes up the work of Crowther (2018, cited by Vázquez Zúñiga, 2023, p. 40) and analyzes the popularity of Mexican food businesses as "ethnic food" (that is, food typical of a country or ethnic group), where meanings are produced through exchange relationships and dining practices. It is posited that culinary spaces, such as restaurants, are strategic places of socialization and ethnic encounters, where one can observe how owners propose cultural elements to the target society while developing their livelihoods.

These social and economic livelihood strategies of Mexicans at their destination are, in a sense, similar to those undertaken by Honduran and Salvadoran women for the food businesses in Ciudad Hidalgo. Nevertheless, the food from these Central American countries on the southern Mexican border is identified more as a kind of "fast food", and their diners, in general, are not looking for an ethnic or national gastronomic experience. On the contrary, Central American food is often valued for being easy to carry, cheap and tasty. The sale of *pupusas*, *baleadas* and *pollo campero* is part of the border gastronomic landscape, which loses its ethnic connotation as a central signification for Mexican diners.

A similar study is that of Imilan (2014) on Peruvian restaurants in Santiago, Chile. This author describes how Peruvian food has managed to integrate into the urban landscape of the Chilean capital, making visible the presence of the migrant population from Peru. Imilan defines the Peruvian food restaurant as "a type of ethnic economy that becomes a strategy of economic integration for migrants" (Imilan, 2014, p. 16). Its wide acceptance in Chilean society, being part of an urban neighborhood in Santiago, was fostered by the cosmopolitan practices of the city's inhabitants. Gradually, typical food ceased to be an "economy of nostalgia" related to ethnic culinary experiences to become "a strategy of mass integration and recognition as an *other* that expands the daily experience of the inhabitant of the city of Santiago" (Imilan, 2014, p. 26).

Although the processes narrated by Imilan can also be considered intercultural processes, there are differences concerning what was compiled on the Mexican border, at least in two aspects. First, no neighborhood in Ciudad Hidalgo identifies itself as a "Central American neighborhood". Their place of residence and housing conditions do not differ much from those of local people. Their businesses can be found on the street or in any neighborhood near the city center, so there is no territorial demarcation based on nationality. Nor is the visibility of the presence of Central Americans exclusively due to the sale of food. As mentioned above, Ciudad Hidalgo has been a point of congregation for people from different parts of Mexico and the rest of Latin America and, in recent years, from other continents. The presence of multiple *others*



is palpable when walking through the streets, and they are recognized as part of the local daily life.

Second, in the cases of Central American women, precisely because of the acceptance of their food and the appreciation of their business practices, it has become possible to eliminate the label of “others”. On the contrary, these women try to differentiate themselves from their fellow migrants passing through, who are considered locally as *others* and stigmatized as criminals or bar workers. These stigmas are precisely the ones that the women and their family groups seek to overcome in a way that allows them not to be *others* but to be one of the *locals* through their dedication to the preparation and sale of food.

Accordingly, the idea of interculturality explored in this paper does not refer to the coexistence of different cultures in a space where they “tolerate” each other but rather to the process of creating a new and emerging culture through interrelation and rapprochement. In this approach, food has been of mutual interest, based on the permanent construction of interpersonal relationships of a horizontal nature.

It is important to keep in mind that for these women, commercial activity is based on a daily need for survival. Over time, this necessity has transformed into a naturalized, and not exotic, acceptance of their meals by Mexican diners. Nonetheless, this acceptance goes beyond food: it also extends to them as economically autonomous subjects. Through their work practices in the kitchen, they have managed to break down the prejudices that commonly affect women of Honduran and Salvadoran nationality, who are often considered culturally determined to work in bars or brothels.

In his book *Tasting food, tasting freedom*, Mintz (1996) referred to the emancipatory capacity of food to transform power relations between dominant and oppressed groups. Recounting the historical experience of the sugarcane-enslaved people in the Caribbean, the author narrates how people of African origin created a gastronomy that differed from that of their masters. Due to the control that the masters exercised over their food, the enslaved people began to experiment with local American foods that were within their reach. The fusion food created out of necessity generated a group identity and a space of freedom.

For these Central American women, according to Mintz (1996), the preparation and sale of food is not only linked to the economic survival of their families but has also allowed them to generate a social space in which they are valued for their entrepreneurial skills. Being recognized as autonomous women is their most significant quality, as this has triggered horizontal relationships with the locals.

In the following sections, through the analysis of the narratives and practices of the female cooks, three aspects related to their inhabiting and the interculturality they experienced in Ciudad Hidalgo are analyzed, where food plays a critical role: 1) inhabiting processes; 2) reciprocal relationships; and, 3) women’s autonomy.

## The pupusas that are here to stay: processes of inhabiting

Undoubtedly, the most relevant factor that has allowed the Central American women interviewed and their families to live in Ciudad Hidalgo has been Mexican diners' acceptance of their dishes. Food has acquired meanings related to the female work ethic, which the locals value highly, and the cultural context of this city has thereby been transformed.

Food fosters mutual learning processes among diverse actors and at different scales. In some cases, such as with neighbors, horizontal reciprocity networks have been established, where cultural determinisms evident in stigmas and stereotypes related to nationality and gender have disappeared.

In particular, *pupusas* have been a gastronomic anchor, helping them to adapt to the locality because their social networks have emerged from them, and they have found their living space. All the interviewees stated that selling *pupusas* was initially their only strategy to obtain some financial income since it was difficult for them to get a temporary job and a room to rest. Although they already knew people or relatives of permanent residents in this city, the context of prejudices and stereotypes established long ago about Central American women, both by Mexicans and other migrants, marked their first face-to-face interactions, which were often disparaging, identifying them as gang members, women of easy virtue or bargirls.

Claudia's comments illustrate the above:

When I came to ask for a job in a kitchen downtown, they asked me: "Do you know how to cook? Yes? So what, if you don't learn, here most of the *Ca-trachas* (Hondurans) are canteen women, then they come to steal husbands and get drunk! Yes, we need a person to clean the dishes and serve! You can stay, but you are on probation. If we like your work, we will let you know". (Claudia, 2020)

In this context, three of the six interviewees indicated that knowing how to cook allowed them to "survive the wait" of the migration process (Field Notes, 2020). Upon arrival, these women faced numerous difficulties and expressed their experience as "prison-like", feeling trapped in a place where they did not want to be. Subsequently, they went through a stage of adaptation to the environment, not for the sake of it, but out of necessity. Gradually, over the months, they avoided talking about their journey North and focused on their daily lives. Finally, due to their culinary practices and subsequent accumulated social networks, self-recognition as part of that place was what made Ciudad Hidalgo their home.

This process is similar to that described by other studies of Mexican migrants who come to work in Mexican restaurants in Canada and the United States (see, for example, Vázquez, 2014; Vázquez Zúñiga, 2023). Nonetheless, a significant difference compared to the experiences of Central American women is that, despite the years that have elapsed, none of these women have regularized their stay, remaining in an irregular and therefore uncertain legal status as they hold on to the hope of arriving in the United States. Another substantial difference, except for one case, is that all of them were forced to migrate because of gang violence, that is, their main reason for leaving is not linked to economic needs but to the need to stay alive.

Despite living in Ciudad Hidalgo for over four years, Xiomara had not resolved her Comar paperwork at the time of the interview. She explained that her legs always tremble when she goes to a medical consultation for pregnancy control in Tapachula at a public clinic. Although she has a document indicating that her request for refugee status is being processed, she knows that this paper does not guarantee her the possibility of leaving Ciudad Hidalgo without a stern word from the immigration authorities.

Along the 40 kilometers between Ciudad Hidalgo and Tapachula, there are several checkpoints of the Instituto Nacional de Migración or the National Guard, and on two occasions, they have taken her off the bus to check her immigration status. As a result of these operations, she has missed her medical appointment. She believes that she is being pulled off when they see her body because she has a tattoo, and they identify her as Central American, more specifically as a *mara* (gang member). Nevertheless, this prejudice has not resonated with her friends in Ciudad Hidalgo. She says that she has Mexican and foreign friends who make her feel safe and take care of her as a pregnant woman because they already know her, and she almost always goes unnoticed on the city streets as if she has been living there for a long time. This feeling of going unnoticed gives her comfort.

From these narratives, it can be deduced that living in Ciudad Hidalgo entails a spatial sensation of ambivalence for these women: on the one hand, the feeling of confinement persists due to their migrant status, but on the other hand, they feel comfortable living there, due to the acceptance they have experienced regarding the ties forged with the locals. In addition, they have managed to transform prejudices, stigmas and stereotypes, turning them, through their person and their trade, into social markers of female autonomy, which avoid being labeled in a disparaging way as women of easy virtue, bargirls or husband-stealers, among others.

Rubenia, meanwhile, stated that, like other women, she initially found it difficult to settle in Ciudad Hidalgo. Notwithstanding, she never felt that she was in prison; on the contrary, her sensation was one of freedom, even though her arrival implied a lot of work due to lack of money. She says: “The simple fact of leaving El Salvador made me feel like a lucky woman” (Rubenia, 2020).

Rubenia started selling *pupusas* at a street stand mounted on a bicycle cart, which allowed her to gain the trust of many people in less than a year. This helped her to stop living with her husband’s uncle, who was already settled in Mexico. Then, she and her family rented a house and started operating their business in a fixed location. By 2020, her place was “formalized”, registered with the municipality of Suchiate as a food and non-alcoholic beverage store.

In the interviews with these cooks, the opportunities they found to establish their food stalls emerged as a *sui generis* aspect of Ciudad Hidalgo. There are opportunities to start up a small business with minimal paperwork at the municipal level. In general, only the payment of a weekly fee is required to have a commercial establishment, especially in the case of small stalls or street vendors. Of course, these local procedures contradict the federal position on immigration matters and the Tax Administration System since, according to the corresponding regulations, no person in an irregular migratory situation can open a commercial establishment.

As has been discussed, the intercultural process is the acceptance of food and, therefore, of its cooks in Ciudad Hidalgo. It is not a total adaptation (or, in their case, subordination) to the spatial process or submission to the cultural values of the dominant society but rather processes of mutual learning and modification in food

preparation. For example, the cooks have explained that they have changed some ingredients of the *pupusas* to adapt to the palate of Mexican people. This modification fostered the acceptance of this dish among their customers, which has contributed to the fact that they have become more popular little by little.

*Pupusas* are made with a thick corn tortilla stuffed with cheese, beans and other stews: they represent Mexico's most emblematic and successful Central American dish, besides facilitating the introduction of other dishes from this region. *Pupusas* have some similarities with the Mexican *gorditas* from central Mexico, as they are made with stuffed corn dough, with the difference being that *gorditas* are fried.

In order to analyze the wide acceptance of Central American dishes in this city, it is important to consider, first of all, the gastronomic similarities between the regions of origin of Salvadoran and Honduran cooks and the gastronomy of southern Mexico. A particular feature is the use of corn as the basic cereal and its complements: beans, squash, chili and various types of *quelites*.

Consequently, the acceptance of this Central American food is not because it is seen as exotic (Ayora, 2010; Vázquez, 2014; Vázquez Zúñiga, 2023). From a gastronomic perspective, the success of *pupusas* is due to the hybridization they have undergone on Mexican soil. For example, Rubenia commented that she has learned to make hot sauces with fresh and dried chiles and incorporate them into side dishes, especially habanero chiles in green lime juice instead of the traditional Central American pickling of carrot and onion in sugar cane vinegar that is used as a complement to *pupusas* or tomato sauce without spices.

*Pupusas* have also been an overwhelming success because they are easy to prepare and keep warm in thermal containers. They are easy to transport and inexpensive. They have become a recurrent and daily option for bus drivers, migrants sitting or walking on the streets, street workers and other merchants because they can be eaten without the need for cutlery or special supplies, satisfying hunger immediately.

Other Central American dishes have also been successful because of their street food nature. They are everyday, inexpensive and easy for local palates to enjoy. Honduran *baleadas*, made of wheat flour tortilla and stuffed with meat, are another example: their similarity with the *burrito* from northern Mexico is undeniable. On the other hand, *pollo campero*, a Central American version of Kentucky fried chicken, was a novelty as it had no Mexican equivalent and is now part of the popular, everyday food in this border region. All these are examples of the intercultural processes based on food, which energizes the daily life of this city.

## Reciprocity through food preparation and sales

It was noted in the previous section that the female cooks interviewed were able to construct their living space by introducing Central American food in Mexico. Among the characteristics supporting this reception is that their typical dish, *pupusas*, uses some ingredients of similar consumption in Mexico, such as corn dough and hot spices in their garnishes. They also value the practicality of transporting them and their low price. The convenience of setting up a small restaurant is also appreciated. Undoubtedly, the food as it is plays a key role in this process.

Another key dimension of inhabiting is the reciprocal relationships woven with different actors in this city relating to commercial practices, that is, preparing and selling food on the street or in a store. Regularly, between these cooks and their Mexican neighbors, with whom they share similar living conditions, there are acts of mutual aid such as the loan of food or childcare. With these acts of reciprocity, they seek to avoid conflicts or generate empathy to favor community protection through friendship, which could be a leading factor in their living in Mexico.

In classic studies of exchange, such as those of Marcel Mauss (2009) and Sahlins (1987), this type of neighborly relations is analyzed as a system of customary law and morality that prevents violence and conflict, where the refusal to give or receive can be seen as a declaration of war. The tendency to give, receive and give back is founded on conflict prevention (Sahlins, 1987, p. 328). More recently, Appadurai (1991) expanded on these ideas and added that, even in market economies, where “rational” profit supposedly dominates, economic relations are not always governed by economic benefit but may be motivated by other aspects such as prestige, conflict avoidance, endorsement of group membership, and so on.

The reciprocity networks established among female cooks are of various types and intensities. The following are two considered most relevant to their lives in Ciudad Hidalgo:

1) With neighbors of Mexican nationality: at the beginning, relationships were characterized by an asymmetry of power because they were established through the rental of lodging and business spaces. The impulse to help came from the migrant cooks to the Mexican neighbors, which meant that the maintenance of the relationship depended on them. Nevertheless, these relationships became more horizontal over the years, as income, type of housing, children’s schools, and places frequented became similar or the same. This shared experience of their mobility and daily life has made it possible to create solid and lasting social networks through reciprocal aid that avoids conflicts and friction, a key element for their sense of belonging to the place.

2) With recently arrived migrants, fellow nationals, or people of other nationalities: in this case, reciprocal relations are asymmetrical but favor the cooks and their families. These are exchanges where the labor exploitation of the families interviewed predominates over the newcomers passing through. This exchange takes the form of food in exchange for work.

Flor’s case is representative in explaining the two types of relationships. She was born in 1977 in Namasigue, Honduras. She left her country due to family and gang violence and defines her situation as “sad”. After living in Guatemala for several years working in bars, she arrived in Ciudad Hidalgo in 2007 to work as a domestic worker. Here, she met Javier, her current partner, who is from Guatemala. Javier was born in 1974 and left home as a child due to death threats from a gang and a lack of care from his mother and stepfather. When he arrived in Ciudad Hidalgo, he was “taken in as a son of a family” by his Mexican adoptive mother, Gabriela, who was a widow and had no children.

Flor and Javier got together and have two Mexican children: Katy, 15, and Javier, 12. The whole family lives in the house of “mom” Gabriela, whom they recognize as grandmother, mother-in-law and mom. In 2020, Flor’s “sister for life” recently arrived from Honduras also lived in the same house. She is a former co-worker at the bar.

Unlike Flor, who was a domestic and bar worker, Javier already had experience making and selling food at a food stand, where mom Gabriela recommended him. There

he learned to prepare Mexican stews, and in turn, he taught Flor in her early days. They now sell Mexican, Cuban and Honduran food, including, of course, *pupusas*. Currently, Flor assumes the administrative and economic leadership of the business because, according to her, Javier has been drinking heavily for years and has neglected his work duties.

They have a food store next to their house (mom Gabriela's house), located in a cargo truck yard that was "loaned" to them by a relative of Gabriela. "In exchange", Javier and Flor guard the place, where trucks with merchandise are sheltered during the day and night. This means that they do not pay rent for the business space.

During visits to their store, it was observed several times that a lady from a nearby house came out with a tray of pineapple pies, which Flor's children bought. When asked why they buy so many, Javier explained that it is not because "they are delicious" but to "keep in with the neighbors", who buy food from them when sales are low. In addition, these people do them the favor of watching the place when they are not there. Javier stated: "It is mostly to avoid conflicts and envy" (Javier, 2020).

On the other hand, Flor and Javier also have the support of a Mexican *comadre* who is the godmother of their two children. This neighboring *comadre* takes care of and picks up Flor's children from school when she cannot. The relationship with her is described as "very close" and it can be inferred that she also benefits from the business, as she and her son consume the food on the premises and serve themselves water without asking permission or paying. Flor commented that, on occasion, the *comadre* also cooks for her business during times of high demand due to the arrival of migrant caravans, although she is not paid for her work as an auxiliary cook.

In this way, it can be deduced that Flor's family's benefits are not only reflected in the money obtained from the business but also in a series of gestures of mutual support in their family and community environment. This bond reflects reciprocity as an unwritten contract that regulates conflicts and is established through food production, sale and consumption.

In addition, young migrants are often found on the premises sweeping and cleaning the yard where the trucks are parked. Flor commented that these people left their countries with nothing and no money to pay for food. She and her husband cannot refuse to support them because they were also migrants at some point; thus, they offer them "the opportunity". They regard the support they give to migrants as an "act of humanitarian solidarity". In contrast to this view, one of the male migrant sweepers pointed out that the three meals a day were equivalent to a full day's work at the shop, which he did not consider as help but as a labor agreement in the form of payment for food.

The business's most frequent clients are foreign banana and papaya agricultural workers. Most of them, men, are temporary employees and come from the neighboring country (Guatemala). Flor gives these workers credit, keeps a list of them, and then goes to the places where they are paid so that they can pay their debts.

In the same business space, backpacks and utensils of these migrant workers are also stored, a service for which they are not charged but are asked for "whatever amount they feel able to contribute" (Javier, 2020). Many prefer to leave their belongings on the premises rather than take them to the field for fear of being robbed.



The case of Flor demonstrates how food and related practices have been the vehicle for building social networks with different actors at different intensities and scales. There are exchanges ranging from labor and rent to food in exchange for labor to recurrent purchases among the traders themselves. In some cases, the line between reciprocal relationship and power structure is blurred: while some perceive it as an act of assistance, others may interpret it as exploitation. Nevertheless, these relationships have indeed facilitated their life in Ciudad Hidalgo. Accordingly, reciprocity is a key factor contributing to a positive experience of living there.

All the relationships developed around the preparation and sale of food show that female cooks and their families have managed to become one more actor in the locality, thus feeling that they belong and making their new life possible in an undesired place. As will be seen in the following section, this, in turn, allowed these cooks to recover their sense of living, overcome their experience of violence and achieve an autonomy that is not only economic but also in terms of future decisions and mobility plans.

## Autonomy and food

Despite having networks of reciprocity with locals and perceiving the border environment as their home, these cooks remain uncertain regarding their migrant status. Their narratives reflect an ambivalence between mobility and immobility in the Mexican border region. Notwithstanding, precisely because of these circumstances, it is interpreted that they are displaying capacities for economic autonomy and decision making, where their food business is a determining factor in this process. In personal terms, selling food has turned out to be a rewarding experience for them due to the positive recognition they receive from the locals for their work and the respect they have acquired as independent women.

In this regard, the preparation and sale of food modify the power relations they maintain *vis-à-vis* the dominant society by making their social interactions more horizontal, as mentioned in the previous section. Thus, their local meanings and food have been redefined, not through their discourse or political propaganda, but through their work activity. This phenomenon has reached a point where foods from their countries of origin are no longer perceived as exotic or ethnic products but are being accepted as everyday foods that are part of the border food landscape and, possibly, of local identity.

Mintz (1996) states that modifying the hegemonic meanings of food and creating new meanings from below, especially by oppressed groups such as enslaved people, provoked changes in social and economic structures. This is where Mintz demonstrates the emancipatory capacity of food. In this case, although on a smaller scale, the change in the meanings of the typical Central American dish did directly modify the power relationship between Mexican and non-Mexican populations. Additionally, the wide acceptance of *pupusas* and the success of these women's businesses result from the empowerment of the cooks, who add a Mexican "touch" to the typical Central American dish by adding chili peppers and hot sauce.

In studying the sense of “authenticity” of Mexican food in U.S. society, Abarca posits that “when people add their own *chiste* (twist) to the preparation of a recipe, they add their knowledge and creative expression to it. *Chistes* within *charlas culinarias* [culinary chats] represent moments of asserting acts of agency” (Abarca, 2004, p. 4). That is, in this case, the incorporation of hot sauce to the *pupusas* is a touch of the inventiveness of the cooks, perhaps as a commercial strategy to attract more Mexican diners, but it also manifests their agency, autonomy and history of living in Mexico, which allows them to achieve a greater horizontality.

This sense of horizontality concerning local society and owning their own business has given them autonomy. Although they already managed their own money and three of them had experience in the food business, they had not experienced running their own business in their country of origin. They are also heads of household. In the family structure of El Salvador and Honduras, according to Fauné (1996), women tend to be the main providers in the household since the role of the male partner differs substantially from the stereotype of provider and head of household created by modern society, which is based on the concept of the monogamous and patrilocal family.

Fauné points out that the domestic group in Central America is an organization that shares a roof and food and is close to the residence of the maternal relatives (Fauné, 1996). It is a domestic unit with a predominantly female administration in the economic and affective spheres, where, as is common practice, the male partner plays a peripheral role, acting as a complement to family expenses and as an auxiliary in the care of the children.

There are some similarities between the family organization described by Fauné and what is observed in the domestic organization of these women. The women interviewed assume the role of head of the family and economic control of the household and the food business. The male partner, whether the biological father or not of the children, occupies the role of caregiver or complementary worker in another activity or in the same food stand.

When these women refer to “family”, they include sisters and children, and even what Maria and Flor have called “siblings for life”, who are not related by blood ties: they could be co-workers or adopted siblings. Nevertheless, the cook’s romantic partner and sons-in-law are not necessarily considered part of the basic family nucleus. As Xiomara said, “They are complementary; they sometimes find a younger woman or a woman who supports them and leave”. Fauné (1996) describes a very recurrent male pattern in which infidelity and irresponsible paternity are normalized, which adds to the double workload of women, who must be caregivers and also financially responsible for the household.

As the author mentions, in this case the six women interviewed are responsible for their domestic group and assume the commitment of supporting the family. These extended families consist of grandmothers, daughters, sons, cousins and other members not blood-related. The male partner or husband does not always assume a complementary role. In three of the six cases, while the woman takes responsibility for the business, the partner or husband assumes active parenthood.

Family economic strategies related to staying in this border town have gradually built their autonomy in decision-making and in the economic sphere by controlling the management of both the food business and the household. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, they have not necessarily been able to meet their economic expectations. A generalized comment among them has been that the economic situation of their families is the same or worse than before their departure, although, unlike in the past, in this place they “feel calm”.

Additionally, the difficult immigration process that makes it impossible for them to move around perpetuates the feeling of confinement and fuels the desire to travel to the United States. In their conversations there is a latent longing to leave this city, but contradictorily, also the desire to stay. They are attentive to any need or real opportunity to leave in search of a better place to settle, but the opportunity never comes.

Paradoxically, an element that seems illogical given that they express their desire to leave at every moment is that there are many opportunities to return to their place of origin from Ciudad Hidalgo when they need to and thus “feel close to their loved ones”. They also appreciate the possibility of getting Guatemalan products to use in the preparation of their successful meals by being able to cross the border daily without any impediment.

The lack of documents has so far not been an obstacle to crossing this border by the informal routes through the Suchiate River to the South and returning by the same means. During the interviews, there was a recurring comment that if a family member in their country of origin becomes ill, they can easily go and return, despite being aware of the context of gang violence that persists in their place of origin.

This transnational mobility between Ciudad Hidalgo and their countries of origin again has much to do with the commercial supply channel for the ingredients they use in their meals. For example, the necessary utensils and some particular ingredients for their food are brought from Honduras and El Salvador, either on their own or through distributors. The griddles used to make *pupusas* are brought directly from El Salvador (Figure 2), and the *quesillo* or string cheese (in Mexico, it is known as Oaxaca cheese) comes from these countries because it has a special flavor that the cheese from Chiapas does not have, even though there is the same variety.

This ease of mobility of people and goods they experience because of the border location of Ciudad Hidalgo presents itself as another new ambivalence to the sense of confinement and fear of violence in their country of origin. Nonetheless, the possibility of going and returning despite the controls and fear of violence reflects another dimension of their autonomy in terms of decision-making related to their mobility, the mitigation of memories of violence, and resistance to the sense of confinement.

Figure 2. Griddle for *pupusas* transported from its place of origin



Source: photo taken by the author

## Conclusions

This paper examines food as a device that has facilitated the residence of Central American women and their families in Mexico through an intercultural process. As described in this study, in this specific case interculturality is produced around food: its preparation and sale to local diners. It does not necessarily arise from the common discourse that claims that all humans are equal despite their differences. As such, interculturality manifests itself from the bottom up. That is, it does not stem from a governmental idea based solely on awareness of the existence of the other as an equal but develops over time in daily practice as a process in which tensions, power struggles, and negotiations are experienced to establish a certain horizontality between different people.

One of these tensions originates in the imposition of the hegemonic group over foreigners, which generates vertical relationships. There are power struggles to gain living spaces within the local society, which recognize existing spatial orders and processes while simultaneously constructing a space of their own, the process defined as “inhabiting”. This characteristic of interculturality is evident in the shared experience of the cooks, who feel comfortable going unnoticed as if they were just one of the locals.

Both practical and symbolic negotiations are established through interactions of food sale and consumption. In this way, cultural determinisms about women from

Honduras and El Salvador are implicitly modified, and new meanings are constructed that portray them as independent and enterprising women without exoticism.

The process of “inhabiting” of Central American women in this article is synthesized in three dimensions. The first is the ambivalence of mobility/immobility reflected in contradictory discourses and practices, such as the need to move to the North but not finding a real opportunity while feeling comfortable in this city. A prison experience persists because of the impossibility of moving to the North while they can move freely to the South.

The second is their attachment to this place not as an experience of acculturation—in terms of incorporation or assimilation to the national society—but as a successful integration precisely from their difference through their culinary activity. This integration is not based on the ethnic or the exotic, but on the functional, given the importance of the food they sell, which is integrated into the dynamics of this city as a crossing point for merchandise and migrants.

The third is the perception of living in a place where they can go unnoticed. Despite being aware of their differences, at the same time they feel integrated by the positive local appreciation, both at the individual level and about their food, resulting from the reciprocity networks they have established through commercial practices.

In this regard, establishing social networks has been facilitated because living conditions in Ciudad Hidalgo do not differ significantly from these women’s places of origin. This circumstance contrasts substantially with the cases reported in studies on Mexican migrants in the United States and Canada in that these Central American women do not perceive themselves as being conditioned to form networks only with people in similar migration conditions.

This study distinguishes between two types of reciprocity relationships: one with neighbors, mainly Mexicans, which began with the commercial practice of food but has expanded to the domestic sphere, giving rise to favors such as childcare and money lending, among others. As for the other form of reciprocity related to migrants, one of the cooks defines the link with “migrant siblings” as an altruistic and disinterested help of a reciprocal nature because they share the same migration experiences. Nevertheless, a passing migrant who was interviewed confessed that the relationship of this cook with them is not so much altruistic but rather contractual, in which food is exchanged for work, which establishes a vertical type of relationship.

Another relevant aspect evidenced through the food was the local perception and self-perception of these women as independent, which was called *autonomy*. First, for their ability to undertake and achieve the economic survival of their family group, assuming the role of heads of household and being recognized locally for it. And second, for their ability to make decisions related to the creation of a new life project that allows them to feel “comfortable” in this place despite the hope of being able to move to another place. This occurred because they have modified power relations, transforming the meanings traditionally embedded in them through their kitchen work, from being seen as bargirls to being recognized for their entrepreneurial capacity. This change does not necessarily translate into economic benefit but rather into social recognition as equals in relation to the locals.

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Hugo Saul Rojas Pérez

Mexican. Doctorate in social anthropology by the Universidad Iberoamericana. He is currently a full-time professor-researcher at the Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales of the Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas. Research lines: cross-border processes Chiapas-Guatemala. Recent publication: Rojas Pérez, H. S. (2024, May-June). Comercio transfronterizo Chiapas-Guatemala y las paradojas de sus desigualdades. *Gaceta Movilidades Humanas. Territorios, flujos y personas migrantes*, 1(4), 10-12. [https://secihti.mx/wp-content/uploads/publicaciones\\_conacyt/Movilidades/Movilidades\\_Humanas\\_4.pdf](https://secihti.mx/wp-content/uploads/publicaciones_conacyt/Movilidades/Movilidades_Humanas_4.pdf)



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