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# 'Open' for Collective Business: The Governance of Contemporary Economic Cooperatives in a Corporate Q'EQCHI' Maya Town

Michael Frederic Young

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‘OPEN’ FOR COLLECTIVE BUSINESS: THE GOVERNANCE OF CONTEMPORARY  
ECONOMIC COOPERATIVES IN A CORPORATE Q'EQCHI' MAYA TOWN

by

Michael Young

Bachelor of Arts  
California State University Long Beach, 2009

Bachelor of Science  
California State University Long Beach, 2009

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Accepted by:

Jennifer F. Reynolds, Co-Chair

Erica B. Gibson, Co-Chair

David S. Simmons, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to all the community members of Plan Grande Quehueche for inviting me into their homes to share their lives, meals, and special moments. I hope my ability to describe their community within this article will do them justice. I arrived in their community as a stranger and left as a friend. My initial field research and this article are only the beginning of my commitment to working with their community and Guatemala as a whole. A special thank you goes to my best friend and wife- Faith, for sharing the same spirit of adventure. Without the support of her, her family, and my own family I would have not been able to accomplish the goals I set for myself. I would also like to thank my friend, William Lucas, for accompanying me during the last stretch of my time in Guatemala; his additional perspectives and insights greatly enriched my study. Research for this article would not have been possible without the financial support of the Walker Institute of International Studies and the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina. I would like to especially thank my committee co-chair Jennifer Reynolds for her ability to challenge and inspire me to make this article of the highest caliber possible. The training and advising she provided amplified my passion and dedication to this project. Thank you to Erica Gibson for her invaluable mentorship and guidance. An additional thank you goes to David Simmons along with the USC Anthropology Department faculty and staff.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the governance of a Q'eqchi' Maya community located on multiple margins who are cooperatively managing several businesses. I do so by first situating this study within the context of Guatemalan history wherein cooperatives were first promoted in various economic and environmental zones only to be subsequently viewed as subversive and targeted by the military. The community within this study is located in the Izabal Department, a region far less affected by Guatemala's genocidal past. I argue that the cooperative businesses created by this community have allowed for a selective incorporation of market-based relations that mitigate the commonly experienced alienation of labor and social relations brought on by the capitalist mode of production. The projects created by the community rely upon consensus-based decision-making and reciprocal labor exchanges which mirror their established structures for interpersonal relationships and principles for communal land management. The rotational role system utilized has allowed for the distribution of the economic risks and gains inherent to business ventures creating opportunities for income generation strategies to be flexible and diversified. A lack of specialization has allowed for appropriate time management to fulfill social obligations while maintaining a subsistence-based mode of livelihood. The community being situated within a plurality of peripheries has led to the reinforcement of communal ties, values, and self-sufficiency by collectively navigating limitations. The resultant increases in autonomy and self-

determination have therefore strengthened the community's ability to resist relying on external actors.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This article is a comparative study focusing on collectivist forms of production by examining different ‘cooperative’ enterprises in a Q’eqchi’ Maya town, in the middle of a region often historically and culturally associated with the Caribbean and Garifuna peoples,<sup>1</sup> to elucidate the nexus of regional, historical, and contemporary political economic contexts. Specifically my analysis of community based-corporate forms of governance will speak to longstanding trends within economic anthropology which address the impact of uneven development in a global economy while attending to “real people doing real things at the *intersection* of local interactions and relationships with the larger processes of state and empire making” (Roseberry 1988:163). I will also be incorporating Ortner’s (2006) practice-based approach to track the dialectic between structure and agency.

The research question I use to guide this analysis asks how the management of the many cooperative businesses, designed by members of the Plan Grande Quehueche (PGQ) community, influences and is influenced by the structures of daily life within this vibrant community. The PGQ community is situated within a region that was not directly affected by Guatemala’s civil war. It is also located at the geographic and economic

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<sup>1</sup> Within Guatemala’s social imaginary there is a unique ethno-racial system of classification where people identify themselves and others based on indigeneity and language. There are 22 recognized indigenous Maya groups in addition to the Afro-Carib Garifuna culture. ‘Ladinos’ are people who identify themselves as not being connected to an indigenous cultural heritage (Romero 2012).



margins of major Q'eqchi' cities and Caribbean coastal towns. I aim to demonstrate that the 'development' projects that town members undertake to serve their community, in many way benefit from the community's positioning within these multiple margins. These projects rely upon consensus-based decision-making and reciprocal exchanges of labor. Members are able utilize the social relations of production even when not all economic ventures guarantee control over the means of production. My work also seeks to begin tackling the theoretical question raised in Graeber (2006), to explore what non-alienated forms of labor exchange look like in a time of prevailing neoliberal political economic policies by providing examples of actors engaging in horizontal social structures that have been translated into business models. I argue that the cooperative efforts employed by the PGQ community allow for the selective incorporation of market-based relations regulated by their community-wide consensus-based decision making process.

In thinking about how to approach an analysis of the PGQ community's partial incorporation into market-based forms of exchange I have found it instructive to revisit early, Marxist inspired, approaches to economic anthropological theorizing. There are many different forms of social organization and economic decision-making. This article will address the limiting effects of functionalist analytical frameworks created in discussions surrounding social organization. Functionalist explanations produce essentialized interpretations of typologies for social processes and places in attempts to predict or assert cultural universals.

Eric Wolf's (1955, 1986) work on so-called 'open' and 'corporate/closed' peasant communities within Mesoamerica engendered this tension. For example, Wolf typified

corporate or “closed” communities as residing on marginal land and managed through communal ownership which utilized traditional agricultural technologies in the production of crops for subsistence (Wolf 1955:457). Yet, Wolf viewed these “types” of communities as encompassed within their regional political economies as well as being the products of historical processes, and sought to avoid the functionalist traps of decontextualizing types of communities.

The corporate structure was said to remain closed and intact due to the “symbol” of collective unity- where the political religious system symbolized the collective (Wolf 1955:458). This particular system was assumed to resist threatening influences by having high levels of social organization and unity based on community decision-making processes. Conversely, the “open” system emphasized continuous interactions outside the community, with the regular sale of cash crops, and some reliance on outside investment (Wolf 1955:462).

Some Guatemalan scholars have found Wolf’s provisional classifications to be limiting (Smith 1988), and others have found it to be useful (see Handy 1988, Lutz and Lovell 1988). The debates over the validity of these models must be understood in light of the recent violent histories along with the formation of economic commodity/service based cooperatives, which coincided with the state’s refusal to engage in meaningful land reform. The creation of these new kinds of ‘collectivities’ might be seen as mirroring in some ways the structural properties of ‘closed’ peasant communities. Wolf’s identifiers were only intended to be broad descriptions paving the way for detailed case studies, such as my work with the community of Plan Grande Quehueche, to highlight specific examples that interrogate his notions while also demonstrating the innovativeness of

communities. Throughout this article I will be providing my personal accounts within the region along with a brief historical background for context as to what led some communities like PGQ to establish cooperatives and form a hybrid “semi-open” community.

I was first introduced to the Plan Grande Quehueche community in December of 2010 when my wife and I stumbled across a poorly publicized advertisement for a guided jungle hike which included lunch at a Q’eqchi’ Maya village in the rainforest near the city of Livingston, Guatemala. By summer 2012 I was conducting field research and living alongside PGQ community members. One day while taking a walk one of my informants noticed my interest in a row of leaf cutter ants that were diligently carrying cargo in a nicely formed line. “They work in groups, just like us,” he commented as we continued along our path. This article will unpack the multiple implications of these observations and how my chance experience as a tourist informs the complex dynamics surrounding cooperative and reciprocal labor exchange taking place within this community.

The main data collected for this article were carried out during the summer of 2012 within the community of PGQ. While living within the community, I was welcomed into homes where I spent time listening and documenting the life experiences families shared with me. I conducted 20 surveys that included semi-structured interview questions, eliciting both qualitative and quantitative data concerning work histories, main sources of income, savings and wages, along with hopes and aspirations for the future. As a participant observer, working alongside men as they planted their fields and beside

women as they hand sculpted tortillas for each meal, I gained a holistic understanding of how the cooperative businesses within the community are structured and managed.

During my stay in the community I interviewed families who were involved with the cooperative businesses and others who were not. Informed consent was attained verbally in accordance with the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I also interviewed local business owners within the city of Livingston, the nearest city where most market exchanges take place. During the course of my field study I encountered non-governmental organization (NGO) workers/volunteers working within the area whose perspectives also enabled me to develop a regional perspective.

This article is divided into several sections which provide comparative cases and contexts for understanding where and how PGQ fits in Guatemala's social, geographical and regional economic landscapes. I begin with a general presentation of the environmental and economic zones across Guatemala's landscapes focusing on the historical factors that have given rise to differentiated regional political economies. Then, I describe the shifting patterns of domestic migration which seem to directly correlate to changes in Guatemala's regional, social, political, and economic climates. Next, I narrow the scope and provide a historical background for the economic development for the coastal department of Izabal within which the community of PGQ is located. In the analytic sections, I describe the role of the cooperatives and the ways in which the community comes together to make decisions. My analysis is then set against the backdrop of the available literature while highlighting the specific factors affecting PGQ which includes a local non-governmental organization working within the region. In the concluding section, I emphasize the particularities of PGQ's cooperative models by

elaborating on how their successes can be attributed to the business designs matching the tempo of community life.

## CHAPTER II

### GUATEMALAN ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC REGIONAL HISTORIES

Guatemala is regionally divided by zones described by Smith (1988) as: the lowland area of the North, the highlands, and the Pacific lowlands. The lowland area of the North begins at the base of the mountain range found in the central Alta Verapaz area and extends to the northernmost department of Petén in addition to including Guatemala's small Caribbean coast within the Izabal Department (6). This region is characterized by a low population density of diverse ethno-racial groups, including Ladinos, Garifuna, and Maya peoples, and is historically known for rural indigenous communities that are spread across the largely forested areas (6). Communities within this zone have been documented as typically utilizing swidden agricultural practices, but trends as of the 1980s demonstrate a shift toward cattle ranching (6). I would also like to emphasize the sheer size of this region; it constitutes about a third of the entire country which has many subclimates throughout the lowland areas. Although this area has been incorporated into the Ruta Maya tourism corridor, there is disproportionately less attention placed on the region by development projects and scholars.

The highlands are located in the center of Guatemala and make up about another third of the country containing more than half of its rural and largely indigenous population (6). Tiered rows of agricultural plots line the sides of mountains. This is a distinct form of farming utilized by peasant communities who have devised systems that cultivate the cloud forest ecosystem altitudes full of rugged terrain for crop production.

Lastly, the Pacific lowlands are located in the southern portion of Guatemala and are known for productive soils that have been enriched by volcanic ash (7). These lowland areas contain large Ladino owned plantations whose labor force has historically been indigenous migrants from the other zones. While each zone can be viewed as a separate region, they have always been linked and integrated through economic exchanges and migration patterns. These zones are marked not only by geography, but by their ethnically driven imaginaries as well.

Complicating this regional portrait of economic zones is a recent history of civil war turned genocidal project. Contemporary political economic anthropological work has sought to address how struggles over places ensued before, during and after the war (Copeland 2011; Nelson 2009). In addition, the internationally brokered peace process, influxes of non-governmental organizations (Kockelman 2006), the neoliberalization of the economy favoring “non-traditional” agricultural production for export (Goldín 2009; Fischer and Benson 2006), tourism (Little 2005), and the growth of the maquila corridor (Goldín 1992; Goldín et al. 1993; 1997) along with privatized systems of security and violence (Metz, Mariano and López García 2010; O’Neill and Thomas 2011) have all contributed to the deepening poverty and pervasive forms of structural violence that continue to condition many people’s lives which is unevenly experienced across the country. As will be discussed in the next section, in response to the structural violence before, during and after the state violence many families have opted to relocate to areas and colonize land that enabled them to maintain control over their livelihoods and modes of production.

## *2.1 Migration*

As Guatemala experienced political struggle from colonial to postcolonial rule- communities within each economic zone suffered from uneven land access resulting in the adoption of an array of livelihood strategies. Wolf (1957) noted that in Mesoamerica peasant populations were commonly forced to work in colonial enterprises and often did not become converted into a permanent labor force (9). Colonial enslavement of Guatemala's peasant population was later replaced by migratory cycles of exploitive plantation wage laboring (Smith 1988; McCreery 1988). Ladinos, who have historically enjoyed higher socio-economic positioning when compared to their indigenous neighbors, exploited the labor power of indigenous populations for their seasonal plantation work and business enterprises.

The western region of Guatemala experienced out-migration which began in the nineteenth century from communities seeking alternatives to fractured land tenure and exploitative plantation work (Carmack 1988). During this time similar out-migration from communities of poor indigenous families took place from the department of Alta Verapaz. Wealthy Ladino coffee growers had been abusing peasant farmers to the extent that farmers were unable to subsist on the scarce land left to them (Kahn 2006). Searching for adequate land for subsistence farming lead many eastward toward the coastal department of Izabal (Kahn 2006). By the mid-1990s, communities in the western highlands looking to escape the life of seasonal labor migration to plantations in the south<sup>2</sup> relocated near the Pan-American Highway where factories were built in towns along the road that connected tourist destinations (Fischer and Benson 2006). Factory

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<sup>2</sup> Davis (1988) documented that an average of 300,000 individuals migrated to coastal plantations two to six months out of every year.



labor, such as textile production within the maquila export processing zone, also became notorious for unrelenting workloads where brutal harassment was commonplace.

In the central highland region well established pre-colonial centers of power, such as Tecpán, having populations composed of mostly indigenous peasants asserted their autonomy through community renucleation during the agrarian land reforms of the 1950s (Fischer and Benson 2006). The hegemonic allure of Western affluence influenced Tecpanecos to adopt nontraditional agriculture (NTA) such as growing broccoli for global markets (Fischer and Benson 2006). The frequency of this alternative strategy being employed increased during the 1980s and boomed in the 1990s (Fischer and Benson 2006). Tecpán farmers willing to take on the inherent risks began to supplement their subsistence agriculture with NTAs for export. For some, the existing systems of resource management, such as familial labor allocation and pooling, allowed for the adoption of crops for market exchange while still maintaining control over their primary mode of production. Cooperatives involved in the marketing of NTAs later developed, providing protection for farmers in the form of collective bargaining power as well as the reduction of exploitation along the commodity chain (Fischer and Benson 2006:62).

During the 1960s and 1970s within the Ixcán region of El Quiché agricultural cooperatives were promoted by USAID, governmental agencies, and the Catholic Church (Stølen 2007). Motivated by the hopes and promises of having sufficient land to sustain their families, many left their natal communities and relocated to the Ixcán. This contributed to the creation of the cooperative communities- enjoying relative autonomy until the violence of the civil war reached them (Stølen 2007).

Guatemala's civil war, with its inhumane "scorched earth" campaign which began in the 1970s, continues to affect communities to this day. During the decades of state sponsored violence many communities who feared for their lives, including the Ixcán cooperative communities, sought refuge on the other side of the Mexican border (Stølen 2007). Catholic parishes in Chiapas, Mexico who housed priests in line with liberation theology provided aid for Guatemalan refugees affected by the war. The first wave of Guatemalan refugees to enter Mexico began in 1980 (Stølen 2007: 114). In 1994, once the threat of violence had been reduced, Guatemalan refugees began organizing negotiations for their return (Stølen 2007).

Attempting to form a sense of control over place families from the Mexican refugee camps received initial governmental and non-governmental assistance to colonize a region within the northern department of Petén (Manz 2004, Stølen 2007). This region was a dense jungle that required an exorbitant amount of physical effort to transform and enable agricultural livelihoods. The result was the creation of La Quetzal, a multiethnic and multilingual community near the Usumacinta River along the Guatemalan border with Mexico. I will revisit these communities in a discussion that follows.

## *2.2 Izabal*

The Guatemalan department of Izabal is located west of the Central Highlands, borders Belize and Honduras, and contains the country's only access to the Atlantic Ocean. The Guatemalan economy has largely been dependent on the exportation of cash-crops, which is very clearly the case in the Izabal region. In the 1870s President Justo Rufino Barrios (1873-1885) sought to emulate Costa Rica's model of coffee production and exportation. He initiated a railroad construction project to link German coffee

growers in the Alta Verapaz region to the new coastal port of Puerto Barrios in the Izabal department, that was to be constructed as well (Opie 2008). Financing construction of the railroad was shouldered by the state's budget which was dependent upon revenues derived from export. To build the proposed railroad President Barrios forced local and military civilians into purchasing 100 peso public works bonds while attracting foreign laborers, especially Americans (Opie 2008). After this development the railroad suffered from internal governmental extortion and decreased profits from coffee sales (Opie 2008). It also failed to extend banana production within Guatemala which had been a secondary rationale for its construction.

Railroad construction stopped and banana plantations were never realized due to Brazil's entrance into the world coffee market in 1878, which simultaneously drove down prices and produced a supply that outstripped demand. The railroad eventually was financed by Minor Keith, the entrepreneur responsible for establishing the Costa Rican railroad. In 1904 Minor Keith signed a contract with President Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) negotiating extremely lax taxation policies in addition to accessing large areas of land for production (Chapman 2007). Keith later merged with the United Fruit Company (UFCO) shifting the railroad from a governmental enterprise to a private corporation (Opie 2008). By the 1920s Guatemala dominated Costa Rica in banana production and exports (Opie 2008).

Although Guatemala gained independence in 1821 and slavery had been abolished in 1824 (Rodriguez 1997), new forms of indentured servitude were devised. President Jorge Ubico (1931-1944), descendent of the Barrios family line, instituted a policy of an annual two weeks of mandatory labor from all indigenous males ages 18-65

(Grandia 2012). The indigenous laborers were required to provide for their own food and transportation. President Ubico used low cost materials, such as wood for bridges as opposed to cement; since labor was expendable the durability of construction was not of high priority (Grandia 2012).

In 1944, military and academic dissidents overthrew the Ubico regime in what has been called the October Revolution and the beginning of the “ten years of Spring.” Two consecutive presidents were democratically elected resulting in the development of open medias, unions, and municipal freedom (Grandia 2012). The latter of the two, President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán (1951-1954), understood the hardships being experienced by the peasant populations within Guatemala and began purchasing unused land from landowners at a higher value than was being claimed to be redistributed to landless peasants initiating the agrarian land reforms. It was recorded that 1,700 acres of President Árbenz’s own land was included in this redistribution (Grandia 2012, Oliver 2004).

Past political alliances and corruption resulted in a disproportionate amount of Guatemala’s land to become acquired by external entities such as the United Fruit Company. Árbenz attempted to rectify this historical wrongdoing by offering the growing multinational corporation government bonds totaling \$1.2 million, the declared value of their unused land (Grandia 2012). United Fruit Company demanded a price of \$16.5 million, which was understandably denied (Grandia 2012:47, Brockett 1998:103). This prompted UFCO to exploit their relationship with the United States’ Eisenhower Administration, resulting in CIA action to overthrow the Árbenz administration based on adulterated claims of Soviet influence (Grandia 2012). Árbenz stepped down and a series

of puppet leaders took his place initiating one of the bloodiest civil wars in Latin American history.

Guatemala's civil war lasted over 30 years beginning in the 1960s and ending in the 1990s. During this period of time, socio-economic conditions worsened. In 1973, Guatemala endured a severe decrease in export production resulting in economic stagnation and societal polarization (Grandin 1997). The war made a lasting impact that continues to influence people today. The centers of conflict during the war tended to be near areas where people were struggling over land. The Izabal Department, not being at the center of conflict, was impacted relatively less than areas such as the highlands. When interviewing PGQ informants about the war I was told "it didn't really affect us."

## CHAPTER III

### Q'EQCHI' MAYA AND THE COMMUNITY OF PLAN GRANDE QUEHUECHE

Q'eqchi' peoples are one of the largest language communities in Guatemala- although it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many self-identify as Q'eqchi' given conflicting information.<sup>3</sup> They have historically been linked to locations within Guatemala's northern and central regions such as the Petén and the city of Coban in the department of Alta Verapaz (Kahn 2006). Within the last century, many Q'eqchi' people have migrated to the Lake Izabal region and the Caribbean coast in search of land, wage labor, and education (Kahn 2006). Experiencing labor exploitation with little ability for socio-economic mobility, Plan Grande Quehueche's founding families left the Coban area and went toward the Caribbean coast in search of unclaimed land in the 1930s. They settled in a forested area east of Livingston. This area is still largely uninhabited due to the inhospitable nature of rainforest environments.

There are currently around 23,000 Q'eqchi' Maya who reside in the Izabal region which features Lake Izabal (Kahn 2006). Lake Izabal is Guatemala's largest lake, from which the Rio Dulce flows into a delta on the small portion of Guatemala's Caribbean coastline between Belize and Honduras. The Izabal region as a whole has a weak

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<sup>3</sup> According to Macario (1988) and Kockelman (2007) Q'eqchi' peoples number around 400,000. Romero (2012) and Grandia (2012) state the population is much higher- near one million. These conflicting totals may reflect differences between Q'eqchi' speakers and people who identify as being culturally Q'eqchi' but don't speak the language.

infrastructure; many areas lack roads and are only accessible via boat ride down the Rio Dulce. To date 117 families now call PGQ their home, making up a population of around 750 people. Plan Grande Quehueche and the people who live there have structured the community based on their own principles for shared communal land management while also being actively involved in the creation of the nature preserve that encompasses the surrounding areas.

The community of Plan Grande Quehueche is situated along the Rio Dulce within the Sarstun Nature Preserve which contains lush rainforests that became a protected area in the 1990s. Conservation efforts by state and local entities such as Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP), Amantes de la Tierra, and the Foundation for Ecodevelopment and Conservation (FUNDAECO) had a hand in the creation of several different types of protected zones within the nature preserve.<sup>4</sup>

Communities now enveloped within the Sarstun Nature Preserve have worked in concert with these organizations to manage an organized system of topographic zones where the community is the epicenter in a series of concentric rings. Areas surrounding each community center are designated for agricultural use which includes clear cutting some forest to be left fallow for the rotational plot system utilized in swidden agriculture. Zones beyond the agricultural parcels are left relatively untouched, but the hunting of animals and wild plant gathering is permitted. Lastly, the furthest reaching zones are to be left completely untouched. Only trails are used to ensure biodiversity and forest regeneration. The community of Plan Grande Quehueche, located 10 kilometers east of

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<sup>4</sup> Despite conservation and land protection efforts, multinational petroleum companies have recently begun exploring for oil throughout the reserve.

Livingston, has 36 caballerias and 32 manzanas<sup>5</sup> much of which is unused to ensure future generations have sufficient land to tend if they choose to do so. The land allocated to Plan Grande Quehueche although distributed among the community's families- is not privately owned. It is managed communally.

Plan Grande Quehueche is relatively Q'eqchi' mono-ethnic, but it welcomes members of other cultural groups who intermarry with PGQ families. All who live within the village participate in the communal land management. Outsiders are not permitted to purchase or tend to any portions of PGQs land. This aspect of PGQ is just one of the many examples I will be providing for how it can be seen as both an "open" and "closed" town.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Caballeria = 111 acres = 45 hectares = 64 manzanas (Grandia 2012)



## CHAPTER IV

### A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF COOPERATIVES IN SOUTHERN MEXICO AND GUATEMALA

“By studying cooperative forms of organization we learn more about an important type of organization; we also place our studies thoroughly within the path of development that the real societies we study may take.”

(Nash and Hopkins 1976:4)

Sol Tax described the creation of cooperatives within communities as “new institutions to cope with their changing world” (Tax 1976:v). Nash and Hopkins (1976:4) further specified cooperatives to engender an “organizational structure in which all are equally workers and managers, and so exploitation is absent.”<sup>6</sup> The attraction for some individuals to participate in cooperatives may be linked to hopes of collective prosperity that potentially converge with culturally specific systems of resource pooling. To demonstrate what I mean by resources I will provide examples of peasant communities whose structural properties in context give insight to their particular economic decision making, such as the formation of cooperatives.

June Nash’s 1966 article featuring the field site of Tzo’ontahal, situated in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico demonstrated how cooperatives within this corporate community “perceive alternatives and re-work innovation to fit a local set of givens” (Nash 1966:354). Cooperatives in Tzo’ontahal were said to accomplish this through the assessment of “perceived advantages” and the “selective adoption of new items” with the goal of “socializing gains” as well as the distribution of risks (Nash 1966:358).

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<sup>6</sup> In context it must be noted that cooperatives compete with other enterprises.

Communally managed items were said to generate enthusiasm, motivation, and solidarity leading to innovations within the community illustrating “the ability of closed corporate communities to participate in commercial undertakings without undermining the internal cohesion of the group” (Nash 1966:367). Nash’s work provides an interesting example of how collectivist social relations can potentially create self-reliance granting relative autonomy as opposed to being dependent upon other businesses to provide for individual livelihoods.

But just how is the value of labor accessed in systems of reciprocal exchange that are not dictated by the market? Kockelman (2007) used a semiotic approach to analyze how labor was valued and quantified within a particular Mayan community. Labor he said was measured based on time allocation while taking into consideration the physical capability of the laborer. Labor intensive activities reduce the possibility of capital accumulation; one method for accomplishing laborious tasks is to distribute the workload among many and to form reciprocal relationships. Individuals were able to utilize substitutes to fulfill reciprocal obligations, but the substitute must have been of equal physical ability to complete the task (Kockelman 2007). Within some communal land management models, labor is valued differently than within the capitalist mode of production where one’s labor is valued like any other commodity exchanged within regional labor markets.

Cooperative models have also been described as “householding” where arrangements can incorporate capitalist and non-capitalist goals (Goldín 2009). Stølen (2007) documented cooperatives that switched to cash-cropping once sufficient agriculture for subsistence had been produced. Utilizing a Wolfian analysis for economic

decisions I will be making a distinction between communities who “opened” to embrace market-based relations and those which opted to mitigate the extent to which unbalanced forms of exchange have eroded collectivist forms of social organization. Communities that Wolf would have labeled “closed” are those that heavily relied on social networks and subsistence farming. Cooperative work is a form of collectivist social relation of production which has historically been employed throughout much of Guatemala’s history and I will be arguing that it reflects certain characteristics of Wolf’s “closed” corporate community model. I would also like to emphasize how the history of cooperatives within Guatemala illustrates living conditions experienced before, during, and after the war.

Communal forms of land management in Guatemala have long been under attack by different state leaders and other external entities. For example, the Guatemalan legislature in the 1820’s required the sale of all communal lands (Goldín 2009:101). More recently Catholic Action, a missionary organization, began working in Guatemala in 1948 with concentrated efforts to thwart conversion of rural populations to fundamentalist Protestant sects. It also sought to hamper interest in popular participation in radical forms of peasant organizing. Later incorporating ideologies to ‘modernize,’ Catholic Action’s agricultural approaches began to mirror the models promoted by USAID projects (Davis 1988). Catholic Action thus supported particular models for cooperative social organization nevertheless, contributing to the cooperative movement throughout Guatemala. A USAID study from March 1976 stated that there were 510 rural cooperatives in operation with 132,000 members at this time (Davis 1988:21).

Areas within Guatemala where landholding was in the hands of Ladinos, cooperative models were seen as subversive and subject to suspicion (MacAndrew, Springbett, and Cockburn 2004). During those times of heightened political tension, it became common for cooperatives to become marked as communist sympathizers while the true underlying motive was to disrupt their unity and reinforce social stratifications to create proletarian communities of exploitable labor (Manz 1988, 2004; Carmack 1988; Davis 1988). For example, sixty-eight cooperative members from the Ixil Triangle of El Quiché were murdered by the state based on suspicion of being affiliated with the guerrilla movement (Davis 1988:21).

One of the most notable cooperative communities in Guatemala was La Esperanza which was formed in the 1960s by families struggling with landlessness originally from the Santa Cruz Quiché area. Supported by missionaries, they searched for unclaimed land. The Institute of Agrarian Transformation (INTA) aided in finding available land in Ixcán—the northern part of El Quiché (Manz 1988). La Esperanza grew and eventually was made up of 116 villages with 35,000 inhabitants who spoke four different languages (Manz 1988).

Organized efforts by communities became synonymous with insurgency and La Esperanza was destroyed by the military who made no effort to verify allegations that the community was involved with the guerillas (Manz 1988). The parcels of land left behind by families who fled La Esperanza were given away by the military (Manz 1988:82). La Esperanza's history clearly demonstrates the effects of military imposition, decimation, and the difficulties surrounding community restructuring (Manz 1988).

La Quetzal, the previously mentioned multiethnic and multilingual community, is an example of a postwar cooperative formed by returned refugees who originally fled from the Ixcán region into Mexico during the violence (Stølen 2007:142). La Quetzal was founded in 1995 after two years of preparation and negotiations between several refugee organizations and the Guatemalan agencies National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP) and the National Institute for Agrarian Transformation (INTA) (Stølen 2007:125). To secure a location for the community the refugee organizations worked in conjunction with the Union Maya Itza (UMI) cooperative which was formed by refugees during their exile. Union Maya Itza represented the refugees during the negotiations and proposed a model for a cooperative agrarian community (Stølen 2007:127). After the two years of negotiations a portion within Petén's jungle was allocated to the 1,200 refugees (Stølen 2007:129).

Much of the initial support for the refugees that came from external organizations ended once the land was acquired. The lack of continued support resulted in La Quetzal's founders' being unable to clear enough land to plant and harvest crops for the entire first year (136). Eighty percent of the land allocated to La Quetzal was within the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) which had strict stipulations concerning how land could be managed (129). For instance, traditional swidden agricultural practices were prohibited within the MBR which some feared may result in an eventual dependence on external inputs for cultivation (145). It was noted that the economic development in La Quetzal was being directed towards the exploitation of the forest for income generation as opposed to the production of basic grains and perennial crops for subsistence (146).

Although La Quetzal is 90% indigenous, multi-ethnic, religiously plural, and multi-lingual- their shared experiences of violence and struggle has had a unifying effect. The Union Maya Itza cooperative owns and manages all of the land that makes up the La Quetzal community and is involved with all the decision making processes of the smaller cooperative ventures that develop (140). There is no private property within La Quetzal and the decisions concerning land use are decided by UMI (140). Land scarcity has also become a problem and has resulted in many community members resorting to seasonal wage labor migration to generate enough income to provide for their families since they are unable to subsist on the allocated plots.

The Union Maya Itza cooperative is composed of adult men, a high percentage are married (138). Not all La Quetzal community members belong to UMI. Uninvolved community members are exempt from the heavy labor obligations required of members, yet are also exempt from receiving any of the additional land that is reserved for members (139). Stølen reports that non-involvement was either attributed to the desire to secure ownership of land elsewhere in the future or sentiments that time allocated to the cooperative took away from private activities (148). Cross-cultural social networks formed for the mutual benefit of those who contributed to communal tasks where the division of labor was divided according to gender, age, and ability.

La Quetzal community members were divided into several distinctly segmented sectors. For example, there are sectors of education promoters, health promoters/midwives, parents of families, youth, and catechists (141). La Quetzal women, influenced by NGOs while in exile to be more independent, became a separate sector within the community responsible for managing an all-female cooperative which

received attention and support in creating projects. Nevertheless, male participation in the cooperatives was given greater credence; women either held minor representative positions, their involvement was trivialized, or their labor contributions were devalued. To become involved with a cooperative women needed a male partner to be considered.

Another complicating factor was that several of the women's projects sponsored by NGOs, i.e. poultry and sheep raising projects, failed due to women's dependence on men for laborious tasks in addition to the lack of markets for the products/services (183). The project failures also reflect a lack of understanding by the external organizations regarding local practices and values (183). The failed ventures lead to reduced motivation and participation from female community members while at the same time further cementing them as individuals set apart from the group. Based on Stølen's work it is clear that cooperative ventures can bridge cultural boundaries and strengthen communal ties; yet, it is imperative to pay close attention to the internal dynamics of the households involved.

#### *4.1 PGQ's Cooperative Business Models*

While Plan Grande Quehueche is like La Quetzal in many ways, such as being situated within a nature preserve, there are other factors that make each quite distinct. Namely, the differential impact of Guatemala's violent past, cultural/religious makeup of each community, the availability of land, and the impact NGOs. It is to these factors that I now turn.

The community of Plan Grande Quehueche grows the majority of its own food. Members employ swidden agricultural techniques, a set of labor-intensive practices requiring constant care and careful time management. The PGQ community has

historically relied on social networks for reciprocal exchanges of labor to plant cornfields. During planting seasons groups of around 20 families join together and rotate planting each other's fields. A calendar is created where each family has a day set for their cornfield to be planted by the group. The family whose cornfield will be planted is obligated to provide three meals to the laboring group - a dinner the night before the planting, breakfast the day of, and lunch after the planting.

The men within these groups tend to the planting while the women prepare meals. About a month is required to complete planting all cornfields. The only cost per family is three communal meals and their labor time for cooking and planting. Most PGQ community members engage in animal husbandry of several types of livestock for household consumption and the occasional sale. It is common for families to have several turkeys, chickens, and pigs which require additional time management.

An example from my field research that highlights the delicate balance community members must always be cognizant of occurred when discussing pig livestock with one of my informants. After learning that pigs carry high market value I inquired as to why each family only tends to a small number of these animals. "Bastante coches Miguel! (Enough pigs Miguel!)" was the response. His reply made me realize that each animal is not simply viewed as an investment, they are additional mouths to feed from the home-grown food supply; more pigs means less food for the family. Below I will discuss how household economics, community governance, and the reciprocal labor model employed by Plan Grande Quehueche have transformed business models that minimize the pursuit of capital accumulation so as to not hinder their ability to provide food for their families.



Plan Grande Quehueche's community governance is based on democratic decision-making that does not divide along national or regional party political lines. Male and female members of the community may hold positions similar to political offices and each position has a two-year term limit. During community meetings individuals provide input and decisions are made based on a consensus reached by 75% or more of attending community members. If there are dissenting perspectives, alternatives are presented and the general assembly casts votes for its preferred choice. This approach to decision making is also applied to the creation and management of cooperative businesses within the community.



**Figure 4.1 Community meeting (photo by author).**

Once at my field site I learned that there have been several collective enterprises in operation since 1996.<sup>7</sup> There are handicraft and bakery groups comprised of just

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<sup>7</sup> This date coincides with the finalization of the Peace Process and the unfolding of neoliberal economic plans- these changes also led to sentiments of cautious optimism and motivation concerning future aspirations.

women, as well as groups involved in cattle ranching, a group that operates an electric corn grinder, an eco-tourism group, and a transportation group. The only requirement to join each group appears to be one's ability to allocate enough time to the shared venture. The collective efforts made on behalf of the greater PGQ community members do not only apply to the creation of businesses, they also serve to lobby local authorities to address community needs.

In fact Plan Grande Quehueche is part of an organized network composed of over 130 communities throughout the Rio Dulce area who work together to accomplish common goals. When the communities decide to petition the municipal government at Livingston for assistance each will send representatives to speak on behalf of their respective community. Collective action has led to major developments in the region. For example, in the year 2000 several communities requested assistance and were integrated into the electric power grid. Additionally, in 2004 a potable water project was envisioned and received government funding which now provides running water to many households across several communities.

In 2009, after four years of petitioning, PGQ and a few neighboring communities benefitted from governmental assistance in the form of a dirt road that now connects them to Livingston. The dirt road extended regional infrastructure motivating many within the community to start new group ventures. For example, within the same year that the road was built, 64 PGQ families contributed \$80 each to purchase a truck to be used as a second means to transport people and items to be sold in Livingston. This effort led to the establishment of the aforementioned transportation cooperative. Within nine months the transportation group was able to purchase a second truck. Before 2009

Plan Grande Quehueche could only be reached from Livingston along jungle trails that took two hours to walk. The construction of the dirt road reduced travel time to 30 minutes.

Currently 48 families share the responsibility of managing this transportation enterprise which requires tasks such as fare collecting, purchasing parts, routine maintenance, and coordinating repairs. Unlike the other group projects within the community, the transportation group receives no dividends at the end of the year. The income generated is reinvested into the group venture to ensure that it continues. The adoption of the “many hands make for light work” principle can be seen applied to time allocation where each family is only required to allocate one day of labor to this business per month.

Group members within the cooperative transportation business attribute their involvement to a sense of social obligation and responsibility. The transportation group demonstrates the willingness of community members to contribute their efforts for the greater benefit of the community, especially when considering the lack of ‘returns’ for their expended labor time. When discussing the number of families involved with each group business, my informants expressed their optimism for growth. One informant stated that as the groups increase in number, the time required by each member for business maintenance is reduced, providing each participant with additional time for crop cultivation in addition to the income generated by the business.

A typical PGQ monthly income ranges from \$100 - \$300 USD per household<sup>8</sup> of anywhere from four to eight individuals. The community's approach to income generation is diversified as opposed to specialized. Of the people I interviewed, any income earned and services provided to each group was seen as supplemental to their predominantly subsistence-based agricultural economy.

One of PGQ's strategies to generate income is to invite tourists to visit their community via the cooperative eco-tourism business. The eco-tourism business requires participating group members<sup>9</sup> to set aside enough time to complete the following tasks: maintain the project site by keeping back jungle growth, inspect the amenities, cook meals for tourists, clean the cabanas, lead tours, and participate in the welcoming ceremony and group meetings. The eco-tourism group collectively decide the desired and appropriate amounts of interaction with international and local visitors by regulating how many they are willing to house at any given time.

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<sup>8</sup> I have chosen to use the term 'household' when discussing families as a unit with quantifiable data [i.e. income generation, number of family members, etc]. 'Family' is used as a qualitative demarcator for actions being taken by community members who make up households of related kin.

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 50 individuals are currently involved.



**Figure 4.2 The eco-tourism group inaugurating new board members (photo by author).**

The eco-tourism business lacks competitive advantage when compared to hotels and attractions situated within the city of Livingston. Inconsistent tourism to the Izabal region as a whole has also resulted in extremely competitive, niche markets. Attracting tourists to visit the community has been the most difficult obstacle for the eco-tourism business to overcome. In discussing ways to increase tourist visitation my informants expressed the need for advertisements to reach beyond the Livingston streets. As part of my reciprocal gift I collaboratively constructed a website with a promotional video for the eco-tourism business. By having a web presence the community hopes to transcend local markets reaching beyond Livingston.

I spoke with community members who were involved with all the projects, some who were involved with a few of the projects, some only one, and some who were not involved with any. The most frequent response I received for why some were not involved was lack of time. Individual circumstances such as family sizes/makeup, ages,

and abilities tended to be the factors affecting time availability. Since income generated from the cooperative businesses is seen as supplemental, agricultural activities take priority for time allocation. Even though not all of the families in the community are involved with the cooperative businesses there is a widely held favorable opinion of them. My informants spoke of how the eco-tourism business, in particular, has provided cultural exchange with others which has in turn strengthened a sense of cultural pride while preserving and appreciating the natural world.

Another interesting feature to PGQ's businesses is the manner in which the income generated by each business is distributed. Plan Grande Quehueche's cooperative businesses serve multiple purposes: 1) they provide additional income for the involved community members and/or 2) they provide a service needed by the community as a whole. Table 4.1 highlights the different group ventures the community of Plan Grande Quehueche is currently engaged in. Note that the businesses with the highest number of families involved are the ones that serve major daily consumption needs such as food processing and transportation. The group projects that do not directly serve the community, such as the eco-tourism and cattle ranchers, indirectly contribute to the community's welfare by distributing fifty percent of the funds accrued by each business between the families involved; the other fifty percent is allocated to community infrastructural needs such as the village's elementary school, road, medicine, and church.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The PGQ community identifies as being Catholic and only has one church within the village.

**Table 4.1 Plan Grande Quehueche’s cooperative businesses**

| <b>Project Type</b> | <b>Year Created</b> | <b>Number of Families Currently Involved</b> | <b>Average Yearly Dividend</b> |
|---------------------|---------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Corn Grinder        | 1996                | 42   | \$62.50                        |
| Handicraft          | 1998                | 13   | Unknown                        |
| Tourism             | 2001                | 25   | \$87.50-\$100                  |
| Bakery              | 2006                | 15   | \$37.50-\$87.50                |
| Transportation      | 2009                | 48   | \$0                            |
| Cattle Ranchers     | 2009                | 15   | \$100-\$125                    |

Many community members of PGQ informed me of their distrust and aversion to loans and borrowing outside the community. “Loans from the bank are risky” and “I am poor and always will be, but I have no problems” were just two of the responses I received when discussing these issues with community members. Reliance on external sources for individual support was seen to weaken communal defenses.

Modern entrepreneurial and ‘development’ ideologies view collective strategies as not taking enough risks. Negative conceptions concerning peasant economic strategies stem from modernist ideas that champion individual risk-taking. The different forms of accumulation clash: one form is used as reinvestment for production and profit, the other a reinvestment for reproduction (Wolf 1982). Plan Grande Quehueche distributes internal loans that are derived from the profits accumulated by each of the community’s cooperative businesses for individuals and families who experience emergencies and cannot afford the immediate costs. These loans bear no interest and are expected to be repaid within a reasonable amount of time, no exact dates or payment schedules are implemented.

Table 4.2 summarizes data I collected concerning individual household incomes along with their primary source for income generation. These charts help to illustrate the economic strategies and statuses employed by community members.

**Table 4.2 Household monthly incomes and primary sources of income**

| PGQ Household | Average Monthly Income | Primary Source of Income |
|---------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1             | \$150                  | Agriculture              |
| 2             | Unknown <sup>11</sup>  | Agriculture              |
| 3             | \$125-\$250            | Handicrafts              |
| 4             | Unknown                | Agriculture/Construction |
| 5             | \$150                  | Agriculture              |
| 6             | \$112.50               | Agriculture              |
| 7             | \$250                  | Agriculture              |
| 8             | \$112.50               | Unknown                  |
| 9             | \$100                  | Agriculture              |
| 10            | \$187.50-\$250         | Curandero                |
| 11            | \$287                  | Security Guard           |
| 12            | \$125                  | Agriculture              |
| 13            | Unknown                | Agriculture              |

In sum, participation in group projects helps to diversify the local economy, but in no way supplants the primary mode of production which is subsistence-based agriculture. Since none of the families rely solely on one of the cooperative businesses for their income, a flexible diversified approach maintains a lack of specialization. By not concentrating on one form of income generation, PGQ families are less susceptible to

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<sup>11</sup> Incomes were discussed freely, but in some instances the informants were unable to quantify an exact amount because income is generated as needed.



market fluctuations because responsibility is flexibly distributed to ensure enough time can be allocated to other activities- such as maintaining agricultural fields for subsistence.

Kockelman (2006) documented a similar situation within a highland Q'eqchi' community who operate an NGO created eco-tourism business, but a major difference between the community he worked with and PGQ is that the NGO's model itself forced the community to commoditize the actual "performance" of service provided.

Kockelman documented how the NGO standardized everything from mattresses and nightstands within the rooms to designating specific points along guided tours for interactions with the tourists through the repetition of pre-determined questions. Indeed, members of the PGQ business venture were exposed to a similar model from a different NGO in the region, however, as I document in the following section the PGQ cooperatives only partially incorporated this NGO's vision of how to run the eco-tourism business.

#### *4.2 PGQ's Interactions with a Translocal Actor within Guatemala's Izabal region*

As governments now prefer to outsource their social programs to cut expenditures, NGOs are often favored organizations under neoliberalization. In contemporary times, NGOs and communities interact to form interesting hybrids of previously typified models for social organizing. As 'development' and 'modernizing' initiatives now commonly come in the form of neoliberal projects sponsored by NGOs, cooperatives can be seen as dovetailing with these actors through selective incorporation of these initiatives.

In 1992, a Florida-based NGO named Ak' Tenamit began working with Q'eqchi' Maya communities within the Izabal region. This organization provides education,

health care, and job skill training at local industries pertaining to tourism and hospitality. In 2001, Ak' Tenamit aided PGQ in creating Hotel Flor de la Montaña- the ecotourism business referenced in the previous section that consists of six cabanas within the village to accommodate tourists. The Ak' Tenamit business model utilizes a relatively hands-off approach for the businesses they help to create. Yet the organization does expect future returns in the form of reservation fees to the hotel and the recruitment of youth to attend its school.

The Ak' Tenamit school, located in a remote portion of the jungle along the banks of the Rio Dulce, can only be reached by boat or a very rugged hike. The organization offers an 80% scholarship for Q'eqchi', and other indigenous youth from all over Guatemala, to attain one of two vocational degrees: sustainable tourism or rural community development. While attending the Ak' Tenamit school students receive “on-the-job skills training” when they provide unpaid labor at businesses like Buga Mama's, a restaurant in Livingston owned by the organization along with other businesses classified as “strategic alliances” by the organization's founder. Each month students receive two weeks of classroom education followed by two weeks of training. A recurring theme I encountered when speaking to local business owners in Livingston is that the students rarely acquire the ability to excel at the position they are required to occupy due to the short two-week periods, and it is uncommon for these youth to receive employment from these locations once they are finished with the program. Nevertheless, Ak' Tenamit boasts that their students receive over five thousand hours of this type of service training.

Amenities and housing at each of these “strategic alliances” vary. Some of the worker youth I spoke with stated that they often slept on cots set up in the dining room

floors in some of the restaurants. For each year of education received from the Ak' Tenamit organization every student accrues a debt of service that requires repayment. Ak' Tenamit offers three methods of payment for the remaining 20% of educational cost from their alumni: monetary, food, or additional unremunerated labor. Thus, for every year attended each student is obligated to provide either three weeks of unpaid labor, \$166 USD,<sup>12</sup> or 200 pounds of corn. Since the course of study typically takes three years to complete these debts increase to an average of nine weeks of unpaid labor, \$500 USD, or 600 pounds of corn. There have only been around 500 individuals to complete the program to date.

The ages of students range from teenagers to those in their mid-twenties. After interviewing PGQ community members who were involved with the Ak' Tenamit program I found that many who completed the program have been unable to repay the debt accrued.<sup>13</sup> Ak' Tenamit withholds certificates from its alumni until the debt has been paid in full. Many local businesses require proof of graduation and demand to see the original version of the graduation certificate before offering employment. The inability to pay off the 20% remainder of the scholarship offered has crippled many Q'eqchi' youth during a highly formative life stage. The model employed by the Ak' Tenamit organization seems to conflict with Q'eqchi' familial structuring by not taking into account culturally specific traits of communities and community life. A prior Ak' Tenamit volunteer expressed that young women in particular find it very difficult adjusting to being away from their families and communities. From a different vantage

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<sup>12</sup> 2000 Quetzales a year; 1 USD = 8 Quetzales in 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Those who did not finish the program had difficulties reentering into the state-run schooling system and expressed opinions that the Ak' Tenamit curriculum was not on par with the state-run educational system.

point one quickly realizes that the organizational model is based on the commodification of natural and cultural resources (see also Kockelman 2006). The indebting of local communities is masked by a rhetoric of sustainability and community development.

The construction of the road to Livingston will undoubtedly bring change. It is difficult to speculate what kind of changes will come about, but it can be seen that families are seizing some of the opportunities available to them in ways that seem to ensure that they maintain interdependent relations in town while securing community autonomy. PGQ members spoke to me about how the increased ease of access to the local marketplace has provided greater opportunities for the sale of surplus agricultural goods. Additionally, the road provides greater choice concerning educational opportunities for PGQ's children.

PGQ is situated equidistant from the Ak' Tenamit school and the city of Livingston- which offers state funded public schooling. Families who opt to send their children to Livingston are required to provide supplies, transportation, uniforms and the other essentials, but these costs mirror the fluctuating income strategy employed by community members. By comparison, the social and economic costs of sending children to Ak' Tenamit are higher. The Ak' Tenamit two-weeks-per-month "job skills training" is eerily reminiscent of earlier state policies mandating unremunerated labor. Thus, not only are Livingston schools now more accessible, the greater accessibility to Livingston's markets enables the sale of surplus crops and products to cover these occasional costs. Indeed, many families told me that they prefer to send their children to Livingston's school.

PGQ community members have always had to contend with geographical constraints that have until recently limited their level of activity within Livingston's marketplace. But this has not been the only barrier. Neoliberal policies have allowed for cheap foreign food products to flood local markets. For those communities who lack land or have insufficient land to subsist, labor is commonly devalued to be able to compete with market prices for items being produced. This practice can lead to cash-cropping for global markets or the heavy reliance on wage labor. To date not many PGQ members have sought out opportunities as wage-laborers, though this might change given the easier access to Livingston. Currently very few PGQ community members have wage earning jobs. Those who work regularly as security guards, for example, tend to have difficulties maintaining agricultural fields due to the lack of available time required to participate in the group planting system resulting in most of their food being purchased. Communities such as PGQ that do not currently experience limitations regarding their subsistence practices thus can be seen as having the options and abilities to regulate their involvement and dependency on market-based relations.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Cooperatives were early civil society organizations which offered corporate forms of self-sufficiency and flexibility. Nash and Hopkins describe the cooperative movement as “social mobilization for change directed toward a fundamental transformation of society” (1976:16). Cooperatives in Latin America have also been said to “reinforce existing power structures” (Fals-Borda 1972:136) because they were largely adopted in lieu of meaningful agrarian reforms or other means of redistributing wealth.

The strength of communal unity has been said to provide communities the ability to oscillate back and forth between capitalist and non-capitalist structures successfully (Grandia 2012; Wilk 1981, 1987). Roseberry warns that articulations between capitalist and non-capitalist modes may result in a slower takeover (1988:168), yet decision-making processes on a community-wide level can also reinforce communal values producing higher levels of retention and perseverance. What is clear then is that pre-existing societal divisions can therefore either become exaggerated or mitigated depending on how cooperatives reconstruct and maintain social relations. To make this point I will provide examples from PGQ that have guided my analysis while noting the differences within similar cooperative communities.

I will revisit the example of PGQ’s eco-tourism business to put these concepts in context. The eco-tourism business provides unique experiences for each visiting guest/group. This may be inadvertently accomplished due to the lack of importance

placed on standardization for the service; which conflicts with the training provided by the Ak' Tenamit organization concerning professionalization and tourism. One informant who received training from Ak' Tenamit presented the eco-tourism group with ideas to introduce higher levels of service-oriented professionalism. This particular informant, who still shoulders debt from the school and has yet to acquire the degree, had internalized some of the values instilled by Ak' Tenamit's business training, but his proposal for standardized experiences, constant preparedness for visitors, and fine dining etiquette was ultimately rejected by the group. It was also apparent that this particular individual later experienced a certain level of social relations alienation related to his adoption and desire to implement external ideologies. This example provides evidence of how PGQ's consensus-based decision-making functions to prevent unwanted changes. The Ak' Tenamit trained individual presented alternative ideas, but the group collectively decided to not incorporate them.

The adoption of specialized and/or intensive systems of production must be weighed against the balance of resources (Wolf 1957). One characteristic of Wolf's "open" model of societal structuring is the efforts made by community members to attribute their continued livelihood based on outside demands (Wolf 1955:452). This has commonly led to outside capitalization and investment where loans are taken to reduce momentary risks. PGQ community members maintain control over their modes of production through reciprocal labor exchange and consensus-based decision making which has provided opportunities for the collective adoption of new systems of production such as cooperative businesses. Labor intensive activities have additionally been described as keeping peasants "captive" (Wolf 1957:9), to which I argue may also

provide the opportunity for a community to “open” to the level of their discretion for market-based relations through collective decision making.

The concept of “shared poverty” (Wolf 1957) is also said to limit privileges and outsiders, having an equalizing effect. This can be seen when considering conspicuous consumption, a phenomenon regulated and defined by cultural norms in addition to being a system of power decided on the community level (Wolf 1955). During a return visit to the PGQ community one of my informants<sup>14</sup> had completed the construction of a new house for his family. A wood plank wall structure placed on a foundation of cement with an aluminum sheet roof. An improvement to the leaky palm-thatched dirt floor house I was welcomed into the prior summer. When I complimented the new house I received a humble “no es bonito, es normal (it’s not nice, it’s normal)” response. Architectural design can signify socioeconomic status (see also Colloredo-Mansfeld 1994) and prestige, yet my informant insisted that his new house was not extravagant and within the range of normalcy for the PGQ community.<sup>15</sup>

Early on during my stay, I inquired about the disparities between economic statuses within the community and received a “somos todo iguales (we are all the same)” answer. Whether this is an actuality or not, it was clear that everyone expressed a desire to be seen as equal in conversations with someone from the outside like me. Liza Grandia, having worked with Q’eqchi communities for over ten years, noted this outlook

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<sup>14</sup> This particular informant is employed as a security guard within the city of Livingston, does not currently participate in any of the cooperative ventures, and enjoys a comparatively higher household income.

<sup>15</sup> There are several houses within the community that have cement floors with aluminum roofing, many families mentioned the desire to have cement floors, but roofing style preferences varied- some prefer thatch to aluminum.



when describing how it is uncommon for community members to become rich, but it is equally rare for any to starve (Grandia 2012).

As the earlier chart concerning household incomes demonstrates- income generating strategies are diversified creating a range for household earnings. Yet instead of reproducing their own versions of the status quo PGQ community members perpetuate their own versions of “shared poverty” (Wolf 1957) ideologies. These community-wide held beliefs influence consumption patterns while informing how the changing socio-cultural landscape is embraced.

When factoring in high levels of community autonomy and unity, as was exemplified within Nash’s (1966) study, consensus-based decision-making processes have the ability to both strengthen social cohesion as well as increase economic success. Plan Grande Quehueche’s cooperative business models can thus be seen as successfully navigating their plurality of peripheries by playing to their strengths of communal unity through the incorporation of selective aspects of market-based forms of exchange.

Wolf’s characteristics for what constitutes “open” types of communities also implies a reduced reliance on social networks and kinship relations. The community of Plan Grande Quehueche; therefore, presents an illuminating case study that demonstrates how cooperative business forms can be successful by having the power structures within the enterprise reflect the communal values already present within their community. The foundation of strong communal unity is built upon the interpersonal relationships within a community. I will be discussing evidence for what seems to be high levels of egalitarianism among PGQ members which correlates to their ability to resist and navigate the broader regional power structures of control.

In regards to gender equality within the community of Plan Grande Quehueche, women play important roles and their involvement within the cooperatives is highly valued. When compared to the La Quetzal community, the multiple divisions within the community along gender, religious, and levels of involvement within the cooperatives seemed to have ruptured social cohesion, which has not been the case within PGQ. As was discussed earlier, PGQ women are involved with community politics, hold leadership positions within cooperative businesses, and their labor is invaluable to the reproduction of their reciprocal labor exchange system.

In addition to internal tensions, La Quetzal has also contended with land scarcity resulting in men from the community commonly leaving for seasonal wage labor (Stølen 2007). The instability experienced by La Quetzal may be one explanation for how external ideologies brought by NGO workers may have led to further societal fracturing instead of the higher levels of equality intended, which was the case for women being segmented into a separate sector. It can be seen that girls' involvement with Ak' Tenamit is equally problematic due to the organization's lack of understanding for local values and practices concerning household gender roles. I would like to emphasize that although the goals of the NGOs working with La Quetzal's female population and Ak' Tenamit's tourism training are different, the damaging outcomes are similar.

The similarities between La Quetzal and PGQ are many, but also greatly differ in the sense that the La Quetzal community was formed during the post-violence era whereas PGQ became established prior to the conflict. La Quetzal constructed a community in the aftermath of a war by piecing together fragments of displaced communities. La Quetzal's patchwork-like composition of families who experienced

violence to varying degrees and levels had to contend with their individual histories while constructing a community within the margins available to them. On the other hand, Plan Grande Quehueche, along with many of the other communities within the Izabal region, being somewhat removed from the brunt of the war, had the ability to participate in the formation and regulation of the nature preserve they reside within. Engagement in this process may have been one of the major factors as to why PGQ, and their neighboring communities, have adequate expanses of protected land for subsistence mitigating the need to seek out wage labor to provide food for their families. The strength within the localized cooperative efforts in addition to the expanded network available to PGQ have all contributed to their ability to be self-determining.

To demonstrate what Ortner (2006) describes as the “larger forces, formations, and transformations of social life” I will reiterate how PGQ’s collective agency has strengthened the community’s ability to resist external control and dominance (130). Through the act of consensus-based decision-making PGQ decided to incorporate certain aspects of external forces [i.e. Ak Tenamit’s support to create the eco-tourism business] while still retaining the ability to tailor how the business will be structured. Ak’ Tenamit’s hands-off approach when it comes to daily management of the businesses they help create is another factor that has allowed PGQ to transform the enterprise to match community practices.

Constraints are said to shape human behavior (Ortner 2006) that in turn affects how communities are formed in their respective “fields of power” (Ribiero and Escobar 2006). This can be seen when comparing the dynamics surrounding the formation and internal workings of the cooperative communities I have discussed. Each community is

situated within their particular regions, have unique histories, and experience localized power structures particular to their current situations. The ability to resist and/or incorporate external influence therefore varies dependent upon the makeup of a society, their internal social relations, in addition to their individual and complex histories.

The prior examples provided of NGOs working with Q'eqchi' and other cooperative communities demonstrates how pervasive the ideologies infused within external actors are when considering the resultant social structure transformations, as was clearly seen within the gender disparities experienced by the La Quetzal community. Yet, I also argue that the negative effects and influences of capitalism and western notions of modernity are not determinative (Roseberry 1988). The Plan Grande Quehueche community provides a case study of how elements of these external influences may be adopted and reconfigured to successfully match existing systems-creating initiatives that actually serve the community.

Plan Grande Quehueche's history clearly shows the innovativeness of a community that has thrived within a multitude of margins. Having to contend with historical, regional, cultural, and political factors, the community members of Plan Grande Quehueche have emphasized self-reliance and community organization producing a heightened sense of communal unification. The success of their cooperative business ventures can be attributed to this unification. In this way PGQ can be viewed as a hybridized "semi-open" type of community where the community members decide to what degree their involvement with market-based exchanges is appropriate. In other words, the collective efforts on behalf of PGQ have provided alternative strategies for integrating themselves into their regional political economy. The historical

marginalization that has fractured societies and created inequalities along gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines is being challenged through the strengths found within the principles of collective unity.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Plan Grande Quehueche's business models appear to be an embodiment of the social relations and networks between community members. The distribution of risks as well as the successes are in line with their cultural values concerning communal work, capital accumulation, and conspicuous consumption (Nash 1966, 1994). This may change, however, given that profits from each business have been minimal so far. Nevertheless, the community has been able to incorporate these businesses into their livelihoods by distributing the responsibility of maintenance required. Plan Grande Quehueche has thus been able to construct business models that complement their subsistence farming by distributing the responsibility among the many families involved.

As a semi-open hybrid form of community structure, PGQ has been able to benefit from aspects of some global processes that are said to often completely engulf small communities. The neoliberalization taking place within Guatemala creates barriers of entry for the products produced by PGQ community members, but their reliance on market-based relations has been mitigated by their collective social structure. It can thus be seen that that the community of Plan Grande Quehueche's functioning model of collective agency has the potential for self-determination through their implementation of business strategies that work in concert with their subsistence based mode of livelihood.

My findings concerning standardization and specialization for the business models may change, especially in regards to the eco-tourism business if visitation to the

community increases. Other factors such as the recently constructed road will certainly bring about changes that will impact the community, yet I have come to realize that the diversified approach to income generation that has allowed for reduced vulnerability to market fluctuations is based on the notion of not solely relying on one source for income. The lack of importance placed on standardization reflects the non-specialization inherent to the rotational role strategy they employ as a community. By not solely relying on one source of income generation the diversified approach allows higher levels of ease for the cooperative ventures to be integrated into the livelihoods of those involved. Utilizing consensus-based decision making in turn has allowed the community as a whole to determine what strategies are appropriate while being able to regulate what level of “open-ness” they feel is ideal.

Through collective agency and cooperative work PGQ has constructed their community to be resilient to unwanted change. The desirability of changes is thus measured and decided upon via consensus. The horizontal distribution of power within a consensus-based decision-making social structure allows for the community as a whole to participate in the regulation of actions that affect each of them.

Further research concerning the tensions surrounding competing entities, including cooperatives, would greatly contribute to our understanding of how market-based exchanges affect the livelihoods of those within an array of social structures. My research seeks to highlight the many limitations that have been placed on communities throughout Guatemala while demonstrating how communal societies and cooperatives

have not only been targeted and seen as subversive, but have also translated into successful collective enterprises that have the potential to combat institutionalized hegemonic subordination in whatever forms it may be made manifest.



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