The Journal of Inquiry
Student Cross-Cultural Field Research

Volume 2 • Fall 2006

Contents

Sheila Bibb, Anthropology
Tuberculosis in the Mampong-Ashanti area of Ghana:
A Study of the Beliefs and Issues Associated with the Disease

Jay A. Bostwick, Anthropology
“You Can’t Live in a Place With No God”:
Sacred Space and Caste in Chavadipudur

Eric Bybee, Humanities
A Day in the Life of El Mozote

David Kay, Urban, Rural, and Environmental Planning
Development Planning and Public Participation in Slum Settlements:
Improving Participatory Planning in Duncan Village, South Africa

Adriana Matos, Anthropology
Maternal Grief and the Vulnerable Infant in Asante, Ghana

Liann N. Seiter, Marriage, Family, and Human Development
Arranged Marriages in India: A Conversation with Rural Women
about their Beliefs, Perceptions, and Feelings

Rolf Straubhaar, Anthropology
Associação Sete de Setembro:
A Case Study of the Flaws in Personalistic Government

Melarie Wheat, Anthropology
“They are all my Children”:
Grandparenting and Globalization in Rural Guatemala

Kristine Whipple, Anthropology
Cultural Construction of Communication: Language, Space,
and Kinship among the Maya-K’iche’
The Journal of Inquiry
Student Cross-Cultural Field Research

Volume 2 • Fall 2006

Contents

Sheila Bibb, anthropology
Tuberculosis in the Mampong-Ashanti area of Ghana: A Study of the Beliefs and Issues Associated with the Disease ................................................................. 3

Jay A. Bostwick, anthropology
“You Can’t Live in a Place With No God”: Sacred Space and Caste in Chavadi pudur ................................................................. 31

Eric Bybee, humanities
A Day in the Life of El Mozote .................................................................. 45

David Kay, urban, rural, and environmental planning
Development Planning and Public Participation in Slum Settlements: Improving Participatory Planning in Duncan Village, South Africa ............................................ 55

Adriana Matos, anthropology
Maternal Grief and the Vulnerable Infant in Asante, Ghana .................. 75

Liann N. Seiter, marriage, family, and human development
Arranged Marriages in India: A Conversation with Rural Women about their Beliefs, Perceptions, and Feelings ................................................................. 91

Rolf Straubhaar, anthropology
Associação Sete de Setembro: A Case Study of the Flaws in Personalistic Government .................................................................................. 113

Melarie Wheat, anthropology
“They are all my Children”: Grandparenting and Globalization in Rural Guatemala ........................................................................ 125

Kristine Whipple, anthropology
Cultural Construction of Communication: Language, Space, and Kinship among the Maya-K’iche’ ................................................................. 139

ISSN 1939-313X (Print)
ISSN 1939-3148 (Online)
Tuberculosis in the Mampong-Ashanti area of Ghana: A Study of the Beliefs and Issues Associated with the Disease

by Sheila Bibb

Introduction
Throughout history, tuberculosis (TB) has been a major scourge of the world, but in the 1950s, medical advances produced a drug combination that not only brought the disease under control but also gave hope that it would be possible to eliminate it by the turn of the century. However, during the 1990s and into the new millennium, TB rates have shown that, far from being eliminated, there is actually a worldwide resurgence and, additionally, the development of many forms of multi-drug resistant strains. It has also been noted that this resurgence is frequently found in areas with a high rate of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and its associated condition, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and, indeed, many patients are co-infected with both TB and either HIV or AIDS. And of the twenty-two countries with the highest rates of TB worldwide, all but one of them are in sub-Saharan Africa.¹

It is against this background, and following on from my previous research into the co-infections of TB and HIV/AIDS throughout the world, that I now concentrate on a specific location, Mampong-Ashanti, in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Although the World Health Organization (WHO) figures for Ghana compare favorably with others in the immediate vicinity, there is still an unexplained resurgence of TB, and Mampong appears to be a typical example of this. The local Health Authority in Mampong is fully informed regarding current guidelines issued by the Ghana Health Department for the treatment of TB and appears to have all the recommended elements functioning to some degree. All administrative personnel confirm their commitment to ongoing publicity about the disease, its symptoms, and treatment, but the figures reported indicate that the situation is deteriorating. It is also true that the figures available for local rates of HIV/AIDS indicate a deteriorating situation as well.²

Locally, the population is aware that there is a resurgence of TB, a disease greatly feared in the past, and known locally as osanman waa, the “ghost cough.” It is partly this nomenclature that caused me to reconsider the established approach to treating this condition, particularly when I became aware of the semantics applied to words such as “sickness,” “illness,” and “disease.” The ghost cough epithet, which signifies that the sufferer is soon going to become a ghost or ancestor, also provided a clue that the local belief systems were possibly affecting both attitudes and therapies.

In this paper, I therefore argue that, in order to institute an effective treatment program for tuberculosis in Mampong, the Health Authority must not only expand its commitment to providing medical care, educating and informing the community, and acknowledging the HIV/AIDS co-infection potential, but it must also take cognizance of the cosmology of the people and the negative impact that a belief in the supernatural has upon therapy outcomes.
Rather than rely on the simple consideration of statistical evidence, I investigate the local history of TB in this area and then relate the incidence of the disease to the lifestyle and belief systems predominant in the area. This requires a deeper consideration of the understanding held by these people regarding the physical, spiritual, and soul components of the body, and the roles each plays in both mortality and the afterlife. This knowledge in turn gives a greater understanding of the interdependence of each family member, the financial and emotional obligations and expectations that are placed upon them, and shows how this is reflected within society through their marriage, political, and work opportunities, and the implications of this for treatment programs. To do this, I use case studies, interviews, and observations, and throughout I discuss theories of contagion, pollution, and danger, all of which are an integral part of Akan life and extremely influential in this context.

Literature/Theoretical Review

Today, at a time when it was thought the world would be tuberculosis free, the disease is cited as one of the leading causes of mortality and morbidity, with an estimated one-third to one-half the world’s population being infected by Mycobacterium tuberculosis and causing between two to three million deaths each year.4

I have reviewed Nichter’s work in the Philippines, and also that carried out by Chee and Wang in Singapore, to establish the problems faced in other countries as they came to terms with the resurgence in TB, the co-infection with HIV/AIDS, and the need to not only classify the diseases correctly, but to implement strong, government-backed plans of action. These have included the necessity of understanding the problems that semantics can cause, as witnessed by Nichter, who found that the practice of referring to TB as “weak-lungs,” to avoid the associated stigma, resulted in a misrepresentation of the actual number of cases and therefore incorrect planning policies.

Both Nichter and Chee and Wang identify the need for a government to be committed to the fight against these diseases. Their findings indicate that where this is the case, the outlook is more positive for patients, with a better system of providing and administering medications, recordkeeping, and follow-up of contacts, as well as a commitment to WHO guidelines, and the task of making treatments affordable to all. Their findings are corroborated by the extensive review carried out into both TB and HIV and the co-infections, by researchers such as Hopewell and Chaisson, Selwyn, et al., and De Cock, et al.

In addition to these works, and the many guidelines, statements, and statistical bulletins issued by WHO, UNAIDS, and the World Bank, the historical background of TB in Africa, as recorded by both Addae and Packard, provides a great insight into the hypotheses concerning the initial spread of the disease during the twentieth century, the underlying causes of the epidemic, and the role that traditional beliefs played in these. Not only do these works trace the course of the infection, but they also reveal the social and economic factors at work, together with the reactions of both the natives and the colonial powers involved. Green examines these aspects in greater detail and relates them to many countries within southern Africa and to a variety of diseases including TB.5 All indicate that in order to overcome the actual biological condition, it is necessary to take account of the traditional beliefs and practices influencing the lives of the indigenous peoples.
The works of Mary Douglas, specifically *Purity and Danger*, give much useful guidance on the topic of pollution, danger, and liminality. To understand these concepts with relation to Akan traditions, the importance of social order to them, and the symbols and systems used to construct this order, the works of Sarpong and Bannerman-Richter are also most instructive as they give essential information regarding the Ashanti as well as detailing their beliefs, their customs, and their aspirations. To place these within accepted anthropological theory I also referred to Evans-Pritchard, Durkheim, Turner, and Geertz.

When analyzing the data, I draw extensively upon the theories put forward by Douglas concerning pollution and danger. She talks of dirt being, “matter out of place,” and of the necessity of removing anomalies so that they do not upset the natural order of things. She also talks of the problems that arise when society fails to respond appropriately to such pollution. There are two such instances that I found particularly relevant. First, she refers to transition or marginal states such as those found in initiation rites, in pregnancy, and in menstruation. Long noted and discussed by such people as Levy-Bruhl and Turner, Douglas now comments:

“It seems that if a person has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being, all precaution against danger must come from others . . . this is roughly how we ourselves regard marginal people in a secular, not a ritual context.”

She continues by citing the difficulty found in resettling ex-prisoners in steady jobs, the difficulty stemming largely from society, not from the ex-prisoners, and concludes, “A man who has spent any time ‘inside’ is put permanently ‘outside’ the ordinary social system.” This concept of others having to take precautions against the danger presented by the sufferer of TB, coupled with the stigma attached more or less indefinitely to the person, and by association, to their family, is something that needs further consideration when applied to such a disease. An additional aspect is that of the moral values (or loss of them) associated with disease, defilement, and marginality. This is also dealt with in detail in *Purity and Danger* and provided much to reflect on with regard to my own work.

**Methodology**

My research required the acquisition of a variety of information detailed and considered under three headings:

1. The statistical information relating to both diseases in that area.
2. Personal observations in the hospital, clinics, village, and home situations.
3. Interviews with patients, families, health care personnel, and members of the public.

**Statistical Information**

This initially involved a search of both the National Archives of Ghana, situated in Kumasi, and also the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), for unpublished research papers and other data. I then sought help from the Ghana Health Authority, both nationally and locally, the guidelines given to medical practitioners, current statistics for both TB and HIV/AIDS, compliance with Direct Observation Therapy Short-course (DOTS) recommendations, and other relevant material held by the local and regional
TB co-coordinators. I also spent time at the Mampong District Hospital and had access to monthly testing figures as well as comments from doctors, technicians, and administrators.

Observations

These account for the greater part of the background information that proved so vital to my understanding and were largely the result of participant observation as I spent time as a volunteer in the hospital accompanying the doctors and attending clinics. This enabled me to form an independent judgment on the incidence rate, the diagnostic and therapy methods, the support available for patients, as well as the recording and tracking methods in operation. Additionally, I spent time with some of the patients and learned how they function within their community and family settings. I also visited traditional healers in Mampong and nearby Penteng where I had the opportunity to assess their impact on therapy programs, and the support they can give to patients.

Interviews

I selected those to be interviewed according to the following criteria; they were:

EITHER

1) Involved with the diagnosis and treatment of TB, and to a lesser extent HIV/AIDS, on a professional or personal level or were a patient;

2) Involved with the education of the people at all ages in both general knowledge and specific medical issues.

OR

3) Members of the general public, selected at random, who may or may not have previous knowledge of or connection to TB or HIV/AIDS.

Based on these criteria, and with a conscious effort to seek a balance with regard to age, gender, and marital status, I spoke to the following groups:

- medical practitioners at both the hospital and the clinics
- pharmacists
- TB patients
- immediate families of these patients
- traditional healers
- administrative officials at government health departments

The basic aim of these interviews was to determine the extent of the knowledge and the understanding of all interviewed concerning TB, its causes and symptoms, the diagnosis, and therapies available. I was particularly interested in the possibility of spiritual causes and the existence (or otherwise) of medical pluralism. The second focus of my interest was in the stigma/sensitivity allegedly attached to the disease. Here I was seeking to understand the stigma, its origin, the extent to which it existed in today’s environment, and the influence it would have on either promoting or blocking successful outcomes and ultimately the health of the population in general.
Tuberculosis: History and Causation

Described by Hippocrates over two thousand years ago, TB was originally known as *phthisis* and, because of its wasting nature, became more commonly referred to as “consumption” or “white plague.” It has long been a cause for concern and has shown itself to be no respecter of persons, having infected people from all walks of life and age groups. Despite the wide range of potential sufferers, it has been possible to identify certain conditions that encourage the development of bacteria and, hence, the disease.

These conditions can be classified as either environmental or biological. Those classed as environmental include the living and working conditions of sufferers, their level of income, and ability to obtain medical treatment. Biological factors include the overall physical health of the body, the functioning of the immune system, and hygiene habits of both the potential sufferer and those actively carrying the disease. TB relies on airborne transmission, usually by the sufferer coughing and dispersing bacilli into the air. It thrives in moist or humid conditions, and if the new host is in anyway weakened, the bacilli establish a new site of infection.

Given this scenario, it is possible to identify those most at risk of contracting the disease as being people who live or work in overcrowded conditions, have a low level of income, and/or a degree of malnourishment. Any of these conditions may have already caused a weakening of the body’s defenses increasing the susceptibility to new infection. It is not surprising, therefore, that TB was rife in the overcrowded conditions found in most urban areas, especially during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries as most of the western world underwent an industrial revolution. Poverty, malnourishment, and the generally compromised health of the people all contributed to the spread of the disease and accounted for its long and decimating history. Colonialism assisted in spreading the disease to areas previously untouched and accounts for the worldwide effects.

Tuberculosis: Background Information

As was previously noted, this disease was once brought under control and appeared to be heading for elimination. Drugs have been shown to be most effective when used correctly and it is known that, as a result, today most cases of TB are curable. It has therefore come as a surprise to medical authorities that there has been a resurgence of the disease and an apparent failure on the part of the existing drug regimens to control the problem. An overview of the transmission and course of infection by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* indicates some of the potential hazards and conditions where problems such as the emerging multi-drug resistant strains.

HIV/AIDS: Background Information

Since the early 1980s, the world has been alerted not only to the presence of HIV and its associated condition, AIDS, but also to the rapidity with which the HIV/AIDS complex has devastated whole sections of societies, particularly within underdeveloped countries and specifically sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia.

The Deadly Duo: Tuberculosis, its prevalence and links with HIV/AIDS

Given that TB is a known opportunistic disease, it is not surprising that its recent resurgence has coincided in many areas with the HIV epidemic. Any infection which compromises the immune system will be an open invitation for TB, but it is only since the 1990s that any
correlation has been marked and investigated. The WHO Tuberculosis Summary, estimates that some 13 percent of all AIDS deaths worldwide are attributable to TB. A strong statement concerning the link between the two diseases is that made by Hopewell and Chaisson:

Throughout the industrialized and developing world, TB and HIV disease are closely linked in mutually disadvantageous synergy: HIV infection promotes progression of TB infection to disease, and TB accelerates the course of HIV disease. In fact, HIV infection may be the most potent risk factor for TB yet identified. Conversely, TB is the most common cause of death in persons with HIV infection throughout the world.

Many other researchers such as Selwyn, Sudre, and DeCock, report similar findings, indicating that there has been a very real awareness of this deadly combination for some years now. In view of this knowledge, it may have been expected that health care systems would have responded by combining their approaches to the two diseases. Hopewell and Chaisson also point out,

TB tends to occur relatively early in the course of HIV infection . . . [where] HIV-seropositive patients with TB tend to have higher CD4+ lymphocyte counts than patients with other “opportunistic” infections . . . in a group of seventeen patients, reported by Theur and associates (1990), TB was the initial manifestation of HIV infection in all but two patients.

This being the case, it can be argued that it would be prudent to start testing all TB-positive patients for HIV. However, many governments, while acknowledging the existence of a co-infection, interpret joint management only as the diagnosis of HIV followed by screening for TB.

Tuberculosis in Ghana

Although TB has been noted in the Ghana area for many years, the information given by Addae in his review of the disease indicates that the history here is similar to that reported by Packard in South Africa, where the spread of TB increased dramatically as mining became a major commercial concern. In Ghana, during the period 1898–1910 only ten TB cases were reported. The increase began in 1911; by 1928 there were one thousand cases, and by the 1930s, the rate had doubled. This coincided with a period that saw a large influx of migrant labor from the northern territories to work in the mining areas in the south. These migrants had little resistance to infection and, living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, were ideal targets for such an opportunistic disease. Although the spread was reversed in the 1950s, the disease was never eliminated, and today, figures show that it is again increasing. Figures 1–3 (Appendix 2) show the fluctuating rates recorded for Mampong during the period 2000 to the present. The nationwide resurgence coincides with an increasing rate of HIV/AIDS infection but no figures exist to show the level of co-infections. Doctors in Mampong are convinced the co-infection rate is high, but no statistical evidence exists to support this.

The Akan People of Mampong

Those living in the Mampong area are, for the most part, Ashanti and members of the Akan peoples. As such, they adhere to Akan beliefs and traditions, and it is these that provide vital information as an understanding is sought of the local culture, its attitude toward life and the
family, toward responsibility and obligations, toward sickness and death, and toward religion and tradition. Fundamental to all of these is their concept of both the individual body and the family unit, particularly the responsibilities and obligations entailed in each.

**The Human Body: Life**

Most societies accept that a human is composed of a physical body and also a spirit, and for many the spirit comes from a remote creator, while the physical body is formed by the human parents. However, Sarpong and Bannerman-Richter give differing opinions on the composition of the Ashanti body. According to Sarpong, the Ashanti receive their physical body and blood from the mother; a spirit (sunsum) from their father; a soul (okra) from God, along with the breath of life (also from God).¹⁶

Bannerman-Richter also identifies four parts to the human composition—a formless soul which is encased in a causal body representing the intellect. This in turn is enclosed by an astral, or ethereal, body and all three are covered by the physical body.¹⁷ Whichever formula is believed, it is accepted that at birth, all of these elements are united to form the new human, a complex individual who by his very makeup is vulnerable on many levels. The malfunctioning of any of these parts will upset the balance and smooth running of the whole.

**The Human Body: Death**

When death occurs, both Sarpong and Bannerman-Richter agree that the soul returns to God. However, according to Sarpong, the spirit which came from the father turns into a ghost and joins the world of the ancestors—a parallel plane to earth so that the ancestors are living a normal life adjacent to their posterity and aware of all that transpires. Bannerman-Richter, in contrast, maintains that although the physical body dies, and both the causal and astral bodies are subject to death, in reality, when the soul is freed from the physical body to return to God, it is unable to do so because it remains entrapped by the causal and astral bodies and so most have to continue living a life in an astral world until they are able to free themselves and return to God. While in this astral world, they become ghosts or ancestors. My own investigations into current beliefs indicate that there is a general belief that the soul and the spirit may be two different entities and that one of them remains close to this earth after death, becoming an ancestor and having associated powers and responsibilities, all of which are undefined. The most common thought is that everyone dying certainly has the potential to become an ancestor, and this, in turn, gives them powers to affect the lives of the living.

**The Family Unit**

As in many societies, the primary focus of life for the Ashanti is to marry and reproduce. This is important because not only does it perpetuate the family, the name, the social status, and respect afforded to both the individual involved and his/her family, but it also ensures that there are descendants to continue working the family land and members to assist with the physical labor involved in cultivation and the support of the family, as well as an assurance that traditions are kept and obligations met. A birth is therefore a great blessing in each family unit. By the age of three or four years, some children are given machetes and taken to work in the
fields. Others spend their time close to their mother and assist her in her occupation, whether at home or in the marketplace. Within a few years, each child will be playing a full role in the fortunes and success of the family. As adulthood approaches, the obligations intensify, for now the child is actively expected to contribute towards the welfare of the family or group. It is important to realize at this juncture that the society functions on a matrilocal basis, with the immediate and extended families living together in a large compound. Therefore, an obligation to the family involves not just the immediate family but encompasses the group as a whole.

This can be illustrated by an incident shared by Kwasi, a young man in his mid-twenties, who very much wanted to buy a bicycle. This would cost him about five hundred thousand cedis (fifty dollars), and he insisted that he could not make the purchase until he had sufficient money available to either buy a bicycle for the other males in the household or to spend an equivalent amount of money on the other nuclear families residing at his mother’s compound.

**Death, Ancestors, and the Supernatural**

Death, burial, and funerals have differing significance in Ghana. Death itself is a transitional stage, the burial may be quite insignificant, but the funeral will normally be a major celebration and affect the standing of the family in the community for generations to come. In order to appreciate this more fully, I outline here, very briefly, the process followed when a person dies.

The body is taken to the mortuary where any postmortem needed is performed. Normally, once at the mortuary, the body is bathed, embalmed, and then put in a freezer. The family, meanwhile, start a period of mourning. One week after the death, they hold the “one-week celebration,” where everyone pays their respects to the deceased and gives sympathy to the family. They also discuss and plan the funeral. It is very important for the memory of the deceased and for the prestige of the family that the funeral is a big, public affair. Consequently it can take a while to prepare, especially if the family is wealthy or important, or if many family members are living away from the vicinity. In some instances, it may be months before they decide to go ahead with the burial and then the funeral. On the day of the funeral, the body lies in state at the family home; people attending, and the funeral celebration later on, are expected to wear funeral clothing of red or black and to make donations that are shared among the immediate survivors. All donations are announced publicly, a practice that goes a long way toward explaining the need for a large gathering and, since no one wants to be thought badly of, the tendency is to give generously. When the viewing is over, the body is laid in the coffin, and everyone walks with it to the cemetery where it is buried.

At this point all disperse, and the family will often have a large meal together. Later that day, the funeral begins. This involves all the family sitting in a block under a tent or canopy, in the middle of an open space. To either side of them are further chairs and, usually, a large amplifying system for nonstop dance music. All are invited to attend, and the protocol is to greet all family members, make a donation, dance a little, sit awhile, and go through this whole procedure again before moving on to the next funeral.

Funerals are a major part of the social calendar and are normally held on Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday, with Saturday being the favorite day because most people are not at work and may, therefore, attend. Because so much emphasis is placed on the size of the funeral, the
arrangements made by the family, and the amount of donations collected, the economics of
death take on great significance. The whole status of the bereaved family is affected by the
events surrounding a death, but so too is the status of all community members whose presence
and participation, or absence, at a funeral is noted.

While the burial and funeral are essentially concerned with the correct disposal of the
physical body, it is necessary to be certain that this is carried out in such a way as to ensure
that the soul or spirit, which constitutes the new ancestor, is pleased with the arrangements.
A failure to provide a satisfactory burial and funeral is thought to have the potential to lead to
repercussions of a supernatural nature that can adversely affect the family. Similarly, failure
to perform all that duty requires in the way of support for the patient during their illness may
also mean that after their death, the new ancestor will bear a grudge against the family.

Data Collected

Ghana and the Health System Structure

Ghana has a total land mass of 238,537 square kilometers and a population of 20.5 million,
with a projected population growth rate of 2.7 percent. Of this total population, 30 percent
live in urban areas, with 70 percent being scattered throughout the rural areas. Public health
expenditure runs at 1.7 percent of the GDP (per capita expenditure of $85 U.S.) and supports
a three-tier system of tertiary, secondary, and primary health care. This translates into the
following amenities:

- 2 teaching hospitals
- 10 regional hospitals
- 91 district hospitals
- 320 maternity homes
- 558 health centers
- 800 pharmacies
- 1,085 clinics

Most of these facilities are located in or near the urban areas and, therefore, serve a minority
of the population. For many, access to healthcare becomes a major challenge.

Mampong District Hospital is government run and stands on the outskirts of town. It
consists of five linked, single-story buildings in spacious grounds. It has an administration
department (one small office), a records office, a pharmacy, an x-ray department, a casualty
unit, an operating theatre, and four wards—a children’s ward, a general female ward, and two
men’s wards—medical and surgical. It has 164 beds and four doctors (three from Cuba), two
medical assistants, and two anesthetists (one from Cuba). There is also a mortuary standing
within the hospital grounds. The District Health Office is housed in a separate building a half
mile from the hospital.

Tuberculosis Rates in Mampong

The TB rates recorded at Mampong Hospital by the biostatistics assistant, do indicate a rise
in cases even though testing methods are limited, and under-diagnosing and under-reporting
are acknowledged to be a major problem. Indeed, the current diagnosis rate is believed to be
approximately 15 percent, with a goal to increase this to 55 percent. Full details of incidence
rates, including graphs, and comparisons with national figures can be found in Appendix 2.
Comments on the Statistics

The statistics for both TB and HIV, while far from complete, do give a good indication of the situation pertaining to Mampong itself and show the fluctuations recorded. They also, in the case of TB, indicate the gender split.

Nowhere does the Sentinel report indicate the number of TB and HIV co-infections, nor does it give the breakdown of HIV sufferers by gender. The Mampong figures for both diseases raise the question of what happened around 2000, when the rate apparently dropped. This may be linked to the drop in TB cases in 2001. Although all concerned were asked about this, no one had previously noticed this fact, and the only explanation forthcoming was that it must tie in to the respective incubation periods. Although there are definite government guidelines regarding the reporting of statistics on a quarterly basis, the reality was that copies of these figures were not readily available from the hospital or from the local TB coordinator.

Pharmacies

There were a variety of places from which drugs could be bought, although only two of them were licensed pharmacists, who could dispense the TB drugs. All the others were known as “licensed chemical dealers,” which allowed them to dispense cough and cold medicines and other similar remedies. All of them indicated that cough medicine formed a major part of their sales, and there was a general feeling that many of those purchasing such medicine should probably attend the hospital to receive a TB diagnosis. All the pharmacists said that they advised such people to go to the hospital. About half of them stated that they would not continue to supply a patient if he/she did not seek expert help.

Case Studies

These were collected as a result of both structured and semi-structured interviews with informants selected in accordance with the criteria set out in Appendix 1.

Case A

One of the first cases of TB I heard about was recounted to me by Kwasi, who was a respected healer in Mampong. He referred to an incident that had taken place within his family some twenty years beforehand. His mother’s brother had abandoned traditional Ashanti religious beliefs and had become a Christian, leaving the family home to enter a seminary with the aim of becoming a Catholic priest. This action had caused some problems for the family, but all admitted that, until the time of his departure, he had been a model family member, always caring for the others, sharing all he had, and meeting all of his obligations. Since leaving, his own circumstances had changed considerably, but he was still considered a good family member. With just one year of his training left to complete, he was diagnosed with TB. At first he continued on at the seminary, but eventually he had to return to the family home, where a room was set aside for his exclusive use. Kwasi, only a small boy at the time, recalled that he and his brothers had been told to stay away from their uncle, although they were allowed to carry food in to him. He had been given his own bowl and cup, and the food prepared for him was taken to his room. Kwasi related:

Yes, we didn’t do anything for him because the church did everything for him. He was the first one in the family who tried to become a Roman Catholic priest. So when he was ill,
we weren’t spending any money on him. It was the Catholics who were buying everything but they still weren’t able to save his life. They bought him the food and the medicines and spent all kinds of money on him. They kept him alive much longer but in the end he died. If they had not done that my mum might have taken him to a fetish priest, and he might have said what sort of sickness it was and he might have cured him, but my uncle, he was a Catholic priest and he wouldn’t allow himself to go to a fetish priest. If he had, maybe the priest could have saved his life, but he didn’t go so he died.  

This narrative raises a variety of issues best dealt with in the context of the overall attitude of the community towards TB.

First of all, Kwasi himself is a healer and comes from a family that, while professing to be Christian, is more closely allied with the African traditional churches than with the orthodox Christian denominations. Given this, it is not difficult to imagine the reaction of the family, when the uncle opted to become a Catholic priest. Not only was this breaking with the traditions of their fathers, but it also meant that he was no longer available to work on the family farm, to contribute to the welfare of the family, and, most importantly, he was not going to marry and reproduce. Therefore, they were being deprived not only of his services but also any posterity which he might have had.

Secondly, despite this break with the family, and the trouble that his decision had undoubtedly caused them, he nonetheless had fulfilled his obligations in an exemplary manner up until the time of his conversion, and this was remembered and acknowledged. When he ultimately became so ill that he could no longer stay at the seminary, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind but that he would have to come back home and be provided for as best they could. That he was given his own room, and his own bowl and cup is significant because, although nearly everyone will say that this is what should happen under these circumstances, the reality is that few are able to actually provide such individual service. At the same time, this course of action caused a potential threat to the health and well being of the family, and they were at pains to protect themselves from this dangerous influence.

The third point is that, in this case, the Catholic Church apparently provided the food and medicines, so that the family did not have to deal with this burden. Although medications are free today, they were not at the time in question, and the cost would have been more than the family could cope with. It seems that the uncle’s life was indeed prolonged by these actions, but despite the attention, and the influence of the Christian beliefs in his life, he eventually died. This then raises further considerations.

Kwasi speculates that had the uncle been willing, Kwasi’s mother would have taken him to the fetish priest (okomfo), who might have been able to determine the cause of the illness, and maybe could have saved his uncle’s life. This tells us not only of the belief that a fetish priest has the power to heal something as deadly as TB, but also indicates that the family suspected some supernatural intervention as the original cause of the disease.

I then questioned Kwasi’s older sister, Yaa, as well as his mother and an aunt, to determine their feelings concerning this case. All of them confirmed the details as outlined by Kwasi, and both Yaa and the aunt were more specific on the cause of the disease. The aunt insisted that because the uncle, her brother, had entered the seminary, some of the ancestors had been upset with him and so had cursed him to have the disease. They felt that had he seen an
okomfo, this would have been discovered, the ancestor could have been appeased and then recovery would have followed. Yaa was of the opinion that the real culprit was not an ancestor but one of the other aunts who lived at the compound, but she was sure that, whatever the source, witchcraft was involved. She told me:

Because it is osanman waa (ghost cough), you are going to your ancestors, so if someone is jealous or afraid, they will ask the witch to give it to you and then somebody has contracted the disease, but if you discover this it can be put back on the person.

She went on to explain that, “If he has been good and we help him then he will be pleased and not put anything on us.” I understood this to mean that by helping to look after the uncle, when he became ill, they were showing respect for him and all he had done while he still lived at home. That way there was a hope that he would be pleased with the way in which the family treated him and so, when he became an ancestor, he would not use his new position to jeopardize their health or reputation.

The overall impression given by this example, together with the concerns expressed, is that the family saw themselves as being endangered by the actions of the uncle. This pertained to not just the possibility of contagion from the disease, but also the uncertainty as to whether, as an ancestor, the uncle would use supernatural powers to put the disease on other family members. There was also the feeling that his condition may itself have been the result of witchcraft. Given these various permutations, it is easy to see the dilemmas faced and to understand why the family saw the uncle as polluting and felt themselves to be endangered. As Douglas has pointed out, the family was forced to take protective action against the danger posed by the uncle.

Case B

A second case that again illustrates a family’s reaction to being faced with a member suffering from TB was told by Kofi, the administrator at one of the clinics, and a local TB coordinator. I had asked whether most of the patients they dealt with received support from their family.

Kofi: Yes, most of them but a few do not. Sometimes we have to take action to commit the family to join in and take care of the patient. We had one patient, and we had to take a contract with a taxi driver to go and pick him up and bring him in every day for treatment because the family wouldn’t do it.

Sheila: And is there a reason why they wouldn’t?

Kofi: What happened was that when he came and was diagnosed his appearance was such that they thought he was going to die within the next three days and so nobody cared to do anything. They did not want to spend the money on someone who was going to die. So we had to . . . bring him in and make sure he was fed—every day. Within one and half months he was such a lot better, and the family was thrilled with the sight of him and decided they would take over. So they started to bring him every day. And after eight months, he was a very huge man and they were so pleased for him that they bought him a store in Accra.
I asked how the patient had felt about the family’s reaction, and Kofi informed me that the man had felt rejected and hurt, but now that the family had bought him a store and set him up in business in a new location, he was happy and had forgiven them.

Further conversations with Kofi led me to believe that, although one reason for buying him a store in Accra was to compensate for the suffering they had caused, another determining factor was the need to appease him so that if he became ill again, or died, he would not curse the family. That the store was in Accra was also no accident, for this location ensured that he was away from the village setting and therefore much less likely to damage his, and the family’s, reputation. In this case, apparently no attempt was made to discern the origin of his illness, but the very fact that the family was concerned about being cursed does indicate that they were more than ready to accept the supernatural.

Again we see the family taking action to appease and protect themselves. We also see concern for the family reputation, even though the patient in this case recovered. Both aspects again confirm Douglas’s statements. It is also worth noting that the original reaction of the family—to withdraw all support—is very common. Dr. Gustavo at Mampong Hospital commented with regard to terminally ill patients, “While they are alive, you do not see the family who just say they don’t have money to spend on them, but as soon as they die, the family all appear and spend lots of money on the funeral.”

Case C

My informant in this case was Omama, the owner of a local liquor store in Mampong. He related the following:

I have a brother who has the disease, and he goes to the hospital every week to have injections and get his other medication. At the hospital, they have a form with his name on it, and they mark all his attendances. If he misses, then he must start again. Our family cannot penalize him, because he has TB, but we have a duty to look after him and to protect ourselves. It is not necessary for us to treat him badly, because we don’t know how he got the disease. He probably got it when he was traveling so that doesn’t reflect badly on the family, because it might be through many causes. If we were to treat him badly it might make him sad, and then he might die. He might not die for five years or even ten years, but because he is sad at the way we treat him, he will die in the end.

This raises two interesting issues, first of all, the concept that it might be “necessary to treat him badly” if the origin of the disease were known, and secondly, the fact that treating him badly would make him sad, with the implication that this sadness would ultimately lead to his death. At least four other informants told me that it is vital that the reaction of the family towards the patient is such that it does not make the patient sad, or they will die as a result—maybe years later.

Omama added the following comments regarding the origin of a disease:

Sometimes these diseases exist only in the spiritual world. So if you don’t like someone, or they make you cross, you can go into the spirit world and take that person with you spiritually, and barter and get the disease and put it on that person. Then when they become ill, they go to the hospital and the doctor sees they are very sick and they have the TB or
the AIDS, but when he does all the tests, they are negative. This is because it is a spiritual disease. Then the doctor will say he can’t help them, so they will go to the fetish priest. The priest will determine who caused this illness to come on the person and will take the disease and put it back on the person who started it all. If the AIDS is from a spiritual source, then both the fetish priest and the pastor will be able to cure it, but the doctor wouldn’t, because he can’t find the disease.

Again there is an unqualified willingness to accept a supernatural cause of disease, certainly in any case which does not respond, or appear to respond, to biomedical treatment. This, together with the comments regarding both the origins of the disease and the effect on the family reputation, again indicate that the actual physical contagion is not the main concern although it does exist.

Case D

In this case, my informant, Mrs. M. first explained to me the origin of the local term for TB, osanman waa:

That means ghost cough because when you used to get it in those days there were no drugs to cure it and so it will definitely kill you and so they called it osanman waa because now you have the cough and it means you are going to die and become a ghost.

She continued by listing those things she considered to be the main cause of TB—overcrowding, lack of fresh air, and lack of sanitation. In today’s society, she felt that all these still applied, as well as the possibility of infection from someone already suffering from the disease. She then went on to say:

Some people still have it in mind that there are witches—witchcraft would cause that sort of disease into the family. They don’t believe it’s infectious. Somebody in the family gets it, then another person, then another . . . Somebody from the family has stolen another person’s goods, his money or something, so somebody has cursed them that they should always have that disease and die.

Finally, when asked if she knew anyone who had TB, she replied:

Yes, my husband’s brother. He died of TB in November just last year. In his case, he was too dirty. He was very, very dirty, and so he had it, and we sent him to the hospital. He stayed there for, I think, nine months, and when he recovered, he came to the house and he had diabetes too and eventually he died. The doctor at the hospital sent for everyone at the house to go to the hospital to be tested to see if anyone had been infected but no one had.

Although there was not a great deal of information about the patient, his actual source of the disease, or the treatment he underwent, this case is interesting because it raises two points—first, the fact that all of the family were tested for TB, and secondly, while others may have suspected a supernatural cause, Mrs. M. did not.

Cases E, F, and G

In these cases, and others I monitored at the Mampong District Hospital, certain basic themes became very recognizable. First, from a medical point of view, all of these people were suffering, to one degree or another, from malnutrition, and the doctors gave the opinion that
this was one of the major causes of their illness. Once diagnosed, the patients were willing
to start on therapy, even though this meant a closely supervised drug schedule, considerable
traveling to receive the medication and the expense incurred, compounded by their inability to
work. However, they could not rely on family to support them. In just over half of the cases,
there was a very real concern that witchcraft may have been the cause of the disease. In these
cases, it was felt that the okomfo would be more helpful than the doctors. Additionally, I noted
the need for those dealing with the disease to be the ones responsible for protecting themselves
from infection, rather than relying on the patient to take precautions.22

Each of these case studies indicate that, while the physical manifestation of TB itself is a
concern, the most pressing dilemmas facing those involved are the origin of the disease, the
effect it may have on the family, and the need for protection from contamination of either a
physical or supernatural nature.

Interviews

Conducted in accordance with the objectives outlined earlier the interviews served to
indicate the following:

• The understanding and attitudes of those medical personnel involved in the diagnosis,
treatment, and care of TB patients.
• Common perceptions held by the community regarding the disease.
• The experiences of TB sufferers, their own knowledge of the disease and its prognosis,
as well as the therapies used.
• The feelings of family members, and the limitations or restrictions imposed upon them
  by the presence of TB within the family, as well as the perceived stigmas connected with
  the disease and other associated areas of sensitivity.
• The degree to which the supernatural is thought to be a factor in the origin, diagnosis and
treatment of TB.

Summary

The findings of the interviews may be summarized as follows:

First, the level of understanding amongst medical personnel varied. Doctors were fully
aware of the disease, symptoms, recommended procedures, and DOTS, as well as the
socioeconomic conditions which tend to traditionally foster outbreaks. They were also aware
of the HIV connection and tended to order tests for HIV when a positive TB result was found.
This was of limited value as they could not treat HIV/AIDS, or recommend anything other
than counseling.

Nursing staff generally were not knowledgeable about TB, knowing little more than
symptoms such as coughing and becoming thin. Of those interviewed, 30 percent thought that
the chief cause of TB was smoking, and nearly 25 percent thought it was hereditary. Others
expressed an opinion that lifestyle was the chief cause, but were unclear exactly what areas
this encompassed.

Administrative staff were well informed, but those involved with the actual testing
of patients and the collection of statistics seemed only to know their own particular job,
but little about the disease with which they were dealing. As a result they did not identify
patterns, knew little about TB and HIV/AIDS co-infection, had no figures readily available, and were unable to account for trends that became apparent when such figures as did exist were analyzed.23

Secondly, pharmacists claimed the TB incidence rate was high, and that many of their customers needed to attend the hospital for a TB diagnosis. They also recognized the danger of Multi-Drug Resistant strains, but nearly half said they would continue to supply over-the-counter medication.

Next, the community generally were familiar with TB and saw the basic symptoms as a cough and becoming very lean. Most knew that there were drugs available, but few realized that these were free. Without exception, all interviewed felt that there could be a supernatural cause to the disease, either witchcraft or an irate ancestor, particularly when the patient failed to respond to conventional therapies. Few informants were aware of any possible connection between TB and HIV/AIDS.

Additionally, TB patients knew little more about the disease and its treatment than did the public in general. They were aware that it was necessary to complete the full course of treatment and all except one indicated a willingness to do this.

Family members were concerned that they had a duty to support the patient but in so doing were likely to expose themselves to infection. They therefore went to great lengths to protect themselves, not only from catching the disease, but also from alerting the community as to the nature of the disease. In this way they hoped to additionally protect themselves and their reputation, which would have been severely tarnished if the truth were known. They feared that the stigma they perceived to be attached to TB would compromise the marriage opportunities of all family members, and would adversely affect employment and civic/public opportunities.

Finally, the role of the supernatural is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a supernatural origin removes the element of blame that attaches if the disease is known to have been acquired through lifestyle choices. In this respect, a curse is beyond the control of the family and so is less likely to bring them into disrepute. However, because it is beyond their control, it is a great danger to them.

The traditional healers interviewed all recognized that clients coming to consult them may have TB and generally seemed to have a good idea of the symptoms. All claimed that it was possible to treat the disease with herbal remedies, but said it would take about nine months, and the patient would have to come in every week to receive a new supply of medication. None of them indicated that they would refer the patient to the hospital, and all saw the source of the TB they treated as being supernatural.

Analysis

The available statistics show that Mampong has a variable rate of TB and AIDS, yet no attempts have been made to identify the factors contributing to these irregularities. Between 2000 and 2004, the TB rate (along with the HIV rate) has shown a considerable amount of fluctuation.24 To date, 2005 figures look set to continue the overall upward trend and no obvious reasons have been given to explain it. This lack of knowledge as to what is happening and why seems to highlight the problems faced in Mampong, as the community learns to live with two potentially destructive diseases.
As I reviewed the data, I observed first a general lack of comprehension by those administering the TB programs of the necessity to seek funding and all other necessary means to enable them to provide a full service of diagnosis, reporting, follow-up, and observed therapy. The result is that in Ghana there is a national program that is theoretically in total compliance with directives from the WHO, but which in reality does not encompass all areas equally. In Mampong, we see only a passive approach to detection, limited testing, an observed therapy regimen that is subject to default because of transportation and financial constraints and no connection is made administratively between TB and HIV/AIDS. Secondly, while the hospital policies seem to reflect an awareness of the sensitivities and issues attached to TB, (for example, not wearing protective masks as this alerts other patients to the presence of an infectious disease) they take little cognizance of such issues when structuring the therapy program. To illustrate this, I will deal with the medical observations, and then consider the social dilemmas and the effect of such issues upon both patients and their families.

Medical Observations

1) Sufferers are only identified when they present themselves at the Mampong District Hospital—often as a result of some other problem.
2) TB drugs are free but many people are not aware of this.
3) There is no automatic screening of someone found to be TB positive to determine whether they are also HIV positive.
4) There is no follow up of contacts other than immediate family.
5) If the person is HIV positive no antiretroviral drugs are offered.
6) There is a great underdiagnosing and underreporting of both diseases, and no figures are collected for rates of co-infection.
7) DOTS is operated but is not well managed.
8) Affording transportation can be a major deterrent to participating in DOTS.
9) Malnutrition is a major problem, and a basic cause of the disease, which derives from the unbalanced diet rather than from a lack of food.
10) Often there is little family support for the patient.
11) Government and local Health Authority radio and billboard advertisement have not solved the problem of education people regarding the diseases and the many misconceptions about causes, transmission, treatments, and costs.

Although all the points are legitimate medical concerns, numbers eight through eleven involve problems of a social nature as well and need to be considered alongside the social issues.

Social and Stigma Observations

1. TB (osanman waa, the “ghost cough”) is thought of as a killer disease.
2. HIV/AIDS is recognized as a sexually transmitted disease and so the assumption is made that anyone suffering from this has led an unchaste lifestyle.
3. TB and HIV/AIDS are labeled as the same class of disease and, if untreated, they are both an automatic death sentence.

4. Of the two, TB is the most feared since it is transmitted through the air and can therefore affect totally innocent people. HIV/AIDS is believed to be only caught through sexual contact and can therefore be controlled by behavior.

5. Families are reluctant to reveal when a member is suffering from either disease. To do so would mean a loss of respect within society.

6. It was felt that few would be willing to marry into such a family, thus affecting their ability to reproduce, which would in turn mean a shortage of members to work on the family farm, thereby affecting the ability of the family to provide for themselves adequately.

7. A sick member is usually unable to work, thereby putting an additional load on the family. This is of great importance since all family members are under an obligation to work for the common good and to share all that they produce.

8. In many cases, if the family feels the person is not going to live, they will withdraw all support.

9. Many think the cause of the disease can be spiritual rather than physical, and then the chances of recovery are low if a medical doctor is consulted.

10. The spiritual cause is directly linked to the belief that at death the soul moves into a parallel world and becomes an ancestor, still having power to influence the world in which mortals live. If that person dies from TB and the family fails to give him/her the respect he feels was his due then he may curse the family so that others contract the disease.

11. Anyone who has been offended may use witchcraft to place a curse on the person concerned and his/her family.

12. Many therefore seek help from a fetish priest or a minister, as well as the hospital.

**Conclusion**

Previous studies of the incidence and treatment of TB have centered almost exclusively on the medical considerations, focusing on ways to improve health facilities and care, to train more health practitioners, and to devise ways of supplying drugs in an acceptable ongoing manner, so that government programs can be reported as compliant with WHO recommendations. However, my study in Mampong has indicated that while a considerable amount of time and effort does need to be devoted to the adequate provision of effective and affordable biomedical therapy for all who suffer from TB, a failure to address the social and cultural beliefs, which impact both the understanding of the original cause of the disease as well as the long-term implications, will seriously undermine all attempts to control and then reverse the incidence rate.

The perceived contagion hinges not just on the likelihood of the disease being transmitted to others but on the danger to the family from malevolent spirits or ancestors exerting a supernatural effect. Additionally if the family name is tarnished by a public realization that
a family member has either disease, this has the potential to affect all aspects of life including the ability to provide for the family, to contribute as custom demands, to marry and reproduce, to hold office, or take a full and active part in local affairs. It affects not just the sufferer but all members of his/her family. This is a classic example of the type of pollution described by Douglas and illustrates the notion that those who are involved with the patient have to actively seek ways to protect themselves. It follows that both they and the patient may find themselves permanently outside society because of the stigma, or anomaly factor.

In terms of general welfare, there are many areas where improvement is needed. For instance, current practices of announcements and advertisements about the causes, therapies, and costs of treating either TB or HIV seem ineffective in rural areas. Local leaders, both secular and religious, would seem to be a much more positive tool in helping to promulgate this message. Teachers, too, have a role to play in ensuring that children are given the basic facts concerning both diseases while still in school.

 Practically, malnutrition needs to be tackled by showing people how to eat healthily with what is available, and how to supplement their diet if needed. This is essential for all people, not just those suffering from TB or some other disease. In conjunction with this, those suffering should be encouraged to work for as long as possible—not laid off as often happens now. The most important focus though must be on helping the community to step beyond their traditional beliefs regarding duty and obligations as well as their perceptions of supernatural involvement in either disease. To facilitate this a more sustainable treatment program for TB should be introduced in Mampong, and the Health Authority should be encouraged to expand its commitment to provide medical care, and must take more comprehensive steps to educate and inform the community by involving local leaders and opinion formers. An acknowledgment by the Health Authority of the HIV/AIDS co-infection potential, and the ascertainment of the statistics relating to this problem would help them to actively seek methods to redress it. An overriding priority must be to take cognizance of the cosmology of the people, and the negative impact that a belief in the supernatural has upon therapy outcomes.
Appendices

Appendix 1
Chemotherapy Regimens, Risks, and Resistance

TB Therapy Regimen

The WHO recommends either a short course (six to nine months) using isoniazid, rifampicin or pyrazinamide, or a long-term course of twelve or more months using streptomycin and isoniazid. Past experience has shown that such regimens, correctly followed, will be most effective. Additionally, the application of control measures such as screening for TB among high risk populations, the vaccination of those at risk and the improvement of socioeconomic conditions are all essential if active cases are to be prevented from infecting others.

Risks

As with all diseases, the therapy can have an adverse effect on some patients if they have a bad reaction to one of the drugs prescribed. In the case of a TB/HIV coinfection, it is essential that Thiacetazone, commonly used in the TB drug cocktail, be replaced with Ethambutol, since Thiacetazone is contraindicated when the patient is HIV positive. Giving the patient this drug can lead to Steven Johnson Syndrome and reduce even further the quality and life expectancy of the patient. For this reason, all government publications issue warnings about this risk and suggest that HIV testing be offered to TB patients.25

Multi-Drug Resistant TB (MDR-TB)

This phenomenon has been recognized by all researchers and gives grave cause for concern. One of the commonest causes of MDR-TB is the incorrect application of chemotherapy. This may occur for any one of a number of reasons:

- Failure to complete a course of treatment.
- Incorrect labeling of the disease (as in the ‘weak lungs syndrome’) leading to delayed and incomplete therapy.
- The practice of self-diagnosis and self-medication.
- The sharing of drugs with family members.
- Inadequate advice regarding medication from both health care workers and pharmacists.

No matter which combination of causes is experienced, the result can be devastating for the MDR-TB strains are usually found to be resistant to both isoniazid and rifampicin. In studies conducted by Frieden et. al. and Moss et. al., a strain was identified in New York City which proved to be resistant to all four of the accepted ‘front-line’ drugs and in some instances up to seven drugs.26

Two members of the WHOs “Stop TB” department commented:

“We worry about multi-drug resistance because untreated it’s a death sentence.”27

“It is in the interest of every country to support rapid scale-up of TB control if we are to overcome MDR-TB.”28
Kent and Frieden, both report that MDR-TB has a high prevalence in HIV infected patients and also in those most likely to be HIV infected. This introduces another perspective, for account has to be taken both of the effect of HIV on the host’s ability to respond to TB, and also the possibility of adverse interactions between drug regimens. Since one of the most effective regimens for HIV infected patients who also have TB is a six month course of isoniazid and rifampicin supplemented by pyrazinamide and ethambutol, any strain which resists at least isoniazid and rifampicin is going to put many sufferers at increased risk. It will also increase the chances of infection among those having contact with them, especially health care workers.

No less worrying is the cost of treating MDR-TB, both in terms of time and monetary investment. When an effective combination of drugs can be found, treatment is invariably much longer (up to two years) and the cost of the drugs much higher. Additionally, multiple studies have shown that where the patient is HIV infected, the presence of TB can accelerate the course of HIV disease.

**Coinfection Problems**

These can be summarized by the comments made in a UNAIDS pamphlet, which states:

Microscopy is not effective in diagnosing smear negative and extra-pulmonary TB because bacilli will not be present in the sputum. Such cases are more common in HIV positive people than in those who are HIV negative. The chances of an infected person developing the active disease is 5–10 percent normally. This rises to 30–50 percent when coinfected with HIV.

The patients are also at risk from incorrect chemotherapy (see paragraph on **Risks** above).

Both Dr. Nunn and Dr. Raviglione are quoted in a BBC News article entitled “Drug-resistant TB ‘threatens EU.’” This article highlights many areas throughout the world having high rates of MRD-TB, but focuses specifically on the problem in Eastern Europe—Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania particularly—and the threat this could pose to members of the European Union once these countries are admitted and borders are opened. This article can be accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/health/3513268.stm
Appendix 2
Statistics

Tuberculosis Rates in Mampong

These were provided by the biostatistics assistant at Mampong District Hospital and represent those cases which tested smear positive. It should be noted that the hospital only has the facility to carry out a sputum test, and, therefore, these figures do not include cases that may be found using clinical or x-ray techniques.

HIV Prevalence in Mampong

Statistics extracted from the HIV Sentinel Survey—2004 Report, issued by the Ghana Health Service.

HIV screening in Mampong, Jan–Jun 2005

A total of 580 people were tested, of whom eighty (13.79 percent), proved to be positive.
Glossary of Terms

AIDS  Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
The advanced stage of disease when a body suffering from HIV reaches the final stages of deterioration prior to death. It is diagnosed clinically by the presence of one or more AIDS indicators such as being bedridden for more than 50 percent of the time during the day, plus wasting and chronic diarrhea or fever for more than a month.

HIV  Human Immunodeficiency Virus
A simple retrovirus, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus operates by attacking the CD4+ white blood cells, entering a target cell and copying its own genetic material into the host cell’s DNA. HIV is present in bodily fluids such as blood, sexual fluids, and breast milk and contact with any of these can be a source of infection.

TB  Tuberculosis
The *tubercle bacilli* are transmitted from one person to another in small airborne droplets. If they are inhaled by a new host, they may be either eliminated from the body by the immune system or they may lodge in the apices of the lung where an immune response will develop. If the host is in good health with a strong, functioning immune system, then slow fibrosis and calcification will occur over a prolonged period—often twelve to eighteen months, thereby rendering the infection dormant.

MDR-TB  Multi-Drug Resistant Tuberculosis
Occurs when the bacilli mutate and cease to be affected by one or more of the drugs normally used to combat the disease. This is a serious threat to the whole program and frequently happens when the full course of treatment is not completed.

DOTS  Direct Observation Therapy Short-course
Direct Observation Therapy Short-Course (DOTS) is the therapy regimen recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and consists of an intensive period (often up to one month) of medication in a hospital setting, followed by a further eight to eleven months of medication when the patient has to report to the clinic either daily or a few times a week to receive their drugs. A failure to report should lead to an instant follow-up by the health personnel. If there is any break in treatment, the patient has to start the whole course again. Not only does this approach give positive therapy outcomes, it also is crucial in the battle against the formation of new multi-drug resistant strains of TB.

*okomfo*  Fetish priest or diviner

*okra*  The soul

*osanman waa*  Ghost cough—the Twi name for tuberculosis

*sunsum*  The spirit
NOTES


2. See Appendix 3, Figures 1, 2.

3. In this area, sickness means literally to be sick, to have a headache, stomachache, or other similar malady which can easily be totally cured. Illness refers to such problems as malaria and typhoid, both of which can be controlled but will linger in a chronic form and almost certainly recur at a later time. Disease is reserved for conditions such as TB which, under normal circumstances, are not curable and will kill the patient. Other maladies considered to be diseases are diabetes, chicken pox, HIV, and gangrene.


7. Ibid.

8. DOTS is the therapy regimen recommended by WHO and consists of an intensive period (often up to one month) of medication in a hospital setting, followed by a further eight to eleven months of medication, when the patient has to report to the clinic either daily or a few times a week to receive their drugs. A failure to report should lead to an instant follow-up by the health personnel. If there is any break in treatment, the patient has to start the whole course again. Not only does this approach give positive therapy outcomes, it is also crucial in the battle against the formation of new multi-drug resistant strains of TB (see Appendix 2).

9. The tubercle bacilli are transmitted from one person to another in small airborne droplets. If they are inhaled by a new host they may be either eliminated from the body by the immune system or they may lodge in the apices of the lung where an immune response will develop. If the host is in good health with a strong, functioning immune system, then slow fibrosis and calcification will occur over a prolonged period—often twelve to eighteen months, thereby rendering the infection dormant. It should be noted that the state of the host’s immune system is not the only factor to consider when calculating any specific individual’s risk of infection. Other vital factors include the concentration of the airborne particles carrying the organism, the ventilation available at that time and the duration of exposure of the host to the particles. These environmental factors are crucial in any consideration of exposure and causation, (Nichter). In this dormant state, the patient is asymptomatic and few such infected persons will develop active tuberculosis until something happens to depress their immune system. Here again environmental factors are the key since working conditions, overcrowding, and poor nutrition may all affect the immune system and lead to reactivation. Once the disease has been reactivated it affects lung function and, if left untreated, will prove fatal. Drugs are available to combat the effects of tuberculosis and may be administered in one of two regimens (see Appendix 1).

10. A simple retrovirus, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) operates by attacking the CD4+ white blood cells, entering a target cell and copying its own genetic material into the host cell’s DNA. HIV is present in bodily fluids such as blood, sexual fluids, and breast milk, and contact with any of these can be a source of infection. Once diagnosed, HIV can be treated with antiretroviral (ARV) drugs such as entry inhibitors (Fuzeon), nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (AZT, abacavir, ddI, 3TC), non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (nevirapine, efavirenz) and protease inhibitors (amprenavir, ritonavir, nelfinavir, or lopinavir). These four classes of drugs are used in combination and operate at different points within the HIV cycle. Control methods include advocating abstinence from sexual intercourse, the use of latex condoms if abstinence is not an option, not re-using needles, protecting all broken skin wounds, following the ARV drug regimen, and screening for HIV.


13. Ibid., p. 531.


15. See Appendix 2.


18. HIV Sentinel Survey—2004, is a report issued by the Ghana Health Service, giving the most recent statistical information relating to HIV.

19. Ibid.

20. Kwasi, interview by author.

21. At the Jamasi clinic, I interviewed three other patients, who had come in for treatment. They told almost identical stories—they lived alone and provided for themselves from the crops they grew on their land: cocoa yams, plantains, cassava, and maize. They had developed a cough, and when it did not go away, they had consulted a doctor and been diagnosed with TB. They did not know how or when they had contracted the disease, although one of them said he knew a boy who had the disease. All were unable to work on their farms and so could no longer provide for themselves. They were now dependent on relatives or friends to bring them food and give any help they could, but in none of the cases was this working particularly well. One man dismissed his family with the words, “My family is not connected.”

22. In the hospitals, although the patient was kept in a side ward, the air circulated freely to all patients, and no one, including medical personnel wore protective masks, because it was felt this would alert other patients and visitors to the infectious nature of the disease, and so embarrass the patient and cause a degree of ostracism which would reflect on them and their family.

23. See Appendix 2.

24. Ibid.


27. Dr. Paul Nunn.

28. Dr. Mario Raviglione.


32. UNAIDS, 1996.

**REFERENCES**


Introduction: Encountering Sacred Space in Chavadipudur

A traveler visiting the southern India village of Chavadipudur for the first time would face the challenge of orienting herself or himself in an unfamiliar territory. To such a person the village represents what historian Mircea Eliade has variously called “homogenous,” “neutral,” “amorphous,” and “geometric” space; it is essentially a collection of places without significance. To a person who lives in the village, however—one familiar with the subtleties of the landscape, with the sunlit streets, and shadowed corners—to this person there are lodged in the grid of geometric space pockets of what Eliade calls “qualitatively different space” or sacred space.

This paper is an attempt to make these scattered pockets of sacred space more readily apparent to a Western mindset, to clarify and define their composition. From an academic perspective sacred space has typically been understood in terms of its separation from profane space; for the purposes of this discussion, I offer the writing of foundational sociologist Emile Durkheim as an important example of this view. Eliade, however, has characterized sacred space beyond simple separation, asserting that it is a revelation of truth or reality that defines these places. These two concepts of sacred space—its separateness and the revelation of truth that occurs there—are what I intended to examine in Chavadipudur’s temples during a two month field study over the summer of 2005. It is my argument that these theoretical concepts of sacred space accurately describe how Chavadipudur’s temples function within village society.

Beyond laying a foundation for future research on the connection between caste in rural India and Hindu temples, the purpose of this discussion is to make the operations of Chavadipudur’s temples evident as a meaningful, valid aspect of people’s lives. I share the belief expressed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “Imagining difference (which of course does not mean making it up, but making it evident) remains a science of which we all have need.” It is my hope, therefore, both for readers who will one day visit a rural Hindu community in India and those who will never have that opportunity, that at least at a basic level what I write here may help to orient them in a community that initially may seem very different from their own.

Accomplishing this goal will require consideration of a number of issues. First, I will describe my field experience and research methods. I will then introduce the village of Chavadipudur and its major temples. From there, I will provide a more detailed discussion of Durkheim and Eliade’s ideas. I will then analyze Chavadipudur’s temples as places set apart from the profane world. Finally, I will attempt to show, as Eliade hypothesizes, that reality is manifested through sacred space in Chavadipudur by considering demonstrations of caste in village temples.

Methodology

I begin with a brief description of the methods with which I approached my research in Chavadipudur. Because Hinduism is a religious philosophy that tends to defy generalization,
it seemed best to confine my research to one village where I was likely to find a fairly united worldview. As has already been indicated, the community I chose to work in was Chavadipudur, a rural village in the southern India state of Tamil Nadu. This 2005 project was actually my second opportunity to research in Chavadipudur as a university undergraduate.

During summer 2003, I had conducted a research project on the social impact of the village’s developing transport systems. Although I was approaching a very different topic in my second project, there was much that I had gained during my first experience that contributed greatly to the development of this paper. It was during that first visit that I developed an interest in the variety of temples and shrines in the village. My familiarity with these sites and with Chavadipudur in general helped me to have realistic expectations as to what could feasibly be accomplished during so short a field experience. It was also during that first visit that I received my first lessons on the caste system operating in Chavadipudur, a topic which will become important later in this paper.

Of all the assets gained from my original fieldwork, by far the most valuable were the relationships I had built with a number of individuals in the village. Notable among these associating was, first of all, a young man named Jegedesh, who served as a translator and cultural informant throughout both projects. A second contact was Matthew Daniel, his wife Jeeva, and their two children, who hosted me in their home and who, in many ways, helped refine my cultural ineptitudes somewhat before I dragged them out into public.

Most of the information I have brought from the field was collected through informal and semiformal interviews with approximately thirty-five individuals from a variety of castes and ages, both women and men. In many cases these interviews were captured with a digital audio recorder and all interviews were recorded in my field journal shortly after their completion.

The vast majority of these interviews were conducted through a translator in Tamil, the state language of Tamil Nadu, and the mother tongue of the people of Chavadi. I worked with three translators in the field. Jegedesh was the first. In 2005, Jegedesh was seventeen years old and was studying electrical engineering in a nearby technical college. His English proficiency is well above average for a native of Chavadipudur. After Jegedesh started the new school year and was no longer available to work with me on weekdays, I began working with a man named John Bosco, who lived in the nearby city of Coimbatore and was doing translation work for another student researching in the village. Being a forty-year-old urbanite with experience interviewing on television, he approached our work from an entirely different perspective than Jegedesh had. My third translator, for one afternoon during the transition between Jegedesh and Bosco, was a young woman named Priscilla, who was also translating for one of the other students.

My inability to speak Tamil was by far the greatest limitation I faced in the field. While I was fortunate to have worked with three translators who were very accommodating with their schedules and truly did their best to facilitate my work, arranging to have one of them with me when I needed them was a constant burden. Especially once I began working with other translators besides Jegedesh, I noticed how much their individual personalities, biases, language skills, and experience affected the information I was receiving from my interviewees. If I were to conduct an ethnographic project of this kind in the future, pursuing language training and strategizing ways in which to deal with communication challenges would be a high priority among my preparations.
Due to the challenges of developing questions that translate effectively into Tamil, I was unable to conduct the survey I had originally proposed. I did not obtain much information that can be subjected to statistical analysis. While my research lacks a quantifiable aspect, I was continually working to refine a set of survey questions, and asked the same kinds of questions of most of my interviewees. Even without a tightly controlled survey or survey sample, I believe the data does give a fairly accurate picture of the common views toward sacred space in Chavapidur.

**Chavapidur and its Koyil**

Now that I have discussed my approach to my field study in Chavapidur, I will now introduce the village itself along with its major temples, which were the subject of my research.

Chavapidur is about a forty-five minute bus ride south of Coimbatore in India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu. The village was founded approximately two hundred years ago when the Gounden family somehow gained the favor of the local British government and was granted stewardship over some seven thousand acres of land. One of the Gounden sons, named Chinnaiya Gounden, founded the village of Chinnaiya Gounden Chavadi, known commonly as Chavapidur or simply Pudur.

Like most communities in India, Chavapidur hosts a variety of deities. These gods are housed in sacred spaces known in colloquial Tamil as *koyil* (temples and shrines). As a Tamil proverb states, “you can’t live in a place with no God”—a sentiment that is confirmed by the sheer number of koyil in even a small village like Chavapidur. While certainly not the site of mass pilgrimages, the role that such smaller, local temples and shrines as these play within greater Hinduism should not be underestimated. It is typically among these places—rather than Banares or Madurai or Ayodhya—that most Hindus live their daily lives, perform frequent religious devotions, and deal with the stresses of everyday life. So it is that while temples and shrines abound in the Hindu landscape, scattered throughout cities and villages alike, the koyil of Chavapidur are truly, as Jegedesh once explained to me, places that the people of the village “keep for themselves.”

The word koyil refers to a wider variety of sacred locations than the English word “temple” does. Also included by the Tamil term are the family shrines, tree shrines, and sacred snake and termite mounds that can be found throughout the village (see Photographs 1 and 2). Almost every Hindu home has some space dedicated to the offering of prayers or other religious devotions. Whether this is a small shelf in a quiet corner of the house or an entire room, such domestic sacred spaces are also considered koyil. While all of these locations certainly vary in the quality of their sacredness, it is important to realize that distinguishing between them is often difficult and, when trying to truly capture an insider or emic perspective,
not altogether desirable. However, the majority of my observations were done in Chavadi-pudur’s larger public temples. This was not done with the intention of discounting or dismissing the role of smaller shrines. As I mentioned above, the sacred spaces that are intimately tied to daily lives are tremendously significant. As a matter of practicality, though, I had much more reliable and unobtrusive access to public worship ceremonies than I did to the private devotions performed in people’s homes.

There are five public koyil in Chavadi-pudur to which I directed most of my attention. All five temples are located within the village proper and together represent Chavadi-pudur’s largest sacred spaces. They are also the sites where most temple-going villagers observe the most frequent and regular holy days.

The first of these public koyil is the Ganapati tree shrine on the eastern end of the village [see Photograph 3], dedicated to Shiva’s elephant-headed son (known also in Tamil as Vinayagar). The black stone image of Ganapati stands on the east side of a giant peepal tree on a square cement terrace surrounding the tree’s base. This is purportedly Chavadi-pudur’s oldest koyil, making Ganapati the “first god” of the village.

Just to the west, overlooking the square where the peepal tree grows, is the temple dedicated to Shiva’s second son, known in Tamil Nadu as Murugan. This temple was described to me as a “high caste” temple since the dominant caste in the village has maintained this temple, along with the Ganapati tree shrine for approximately 150 years. Despite this, the Murugan temple is seen as being the main temple in Chavadi-pudur and Murugan as the village’s main god. While the restrictions on caste have become more lenient in recent decades, the Murugan temple is still the least accessible of the public temple for the lower castes.
Down the road from the Ganapati/Murugan complex, in the northeast corner of the village, stand the Mari Amman temple, a Goddess temple (see Photograph 4). Of the five temples, this one is used most frequently by the greatest number of people, and, therefore, this was the location where I did most of my observations of worship ceremonies, particularly the weekly *puja* (worship), held every Friday night. This temple was described to me as a “middle caste” temple.

The other two temples stand in the southern portion of the village, surrounded by a number of smaller shrines. This section of the village is populated by the lower castes, those who traditionally would not have been allowed even limited access to the Murugan or Mari Amman temples. The first of these “lower caste” temples is the Apuchimar temple, which belongs specifically to the musician caste. The other is the Patal Talachi Amman temple, which, like the Mari Amman temple, is dedicated to the Goddess (albeit a different form of the Goddess). This is the temple for the lowest castes in the village.

From these brief descriptions, it is already apparent that there are important connections between these temples and the caste system in Chavadipudur. However, for the time being we will forego further consideration of the subject of caste in village sacred spaces, as a later section is dedicated to an examination of these issues.

When asked why they worship at these particular locations, most of my interviewees explained that these are the places where their fathers and their father’s fathers venerated. They pay devotions to the gods of these temples because this is the tradition that was passed down to them by former generations.

C.J. Fuller has described at length the kind of worship that typically occurs in Hindu temples such as these and has identified sixteen offerings or services that may be included as part of a single worship ceremony. Not all sixteen are essential, and all of the worship rituals I witnessed in the Chavadipudur temples omitted the majority of these offerings. The most essential, which is always included in the ceremony, is the offering of light, presented to the deity by waving a camphor flame before the divine image. Other offerings may consist of a variety of other items, many of which are used in the ongoing operation of the temple: bananas, coconuts, incense sticks, pieces of camphor, and money. After the offerings have been presented, the worshipper then receives grace or blessings from the deity through the priest. This grace often includes a portion of the goods offered to the deity, such as a fragment of banana or coconut that has been offered by worshippers. Also given to worshippers as grace from the deity are red, yellow, and white powders with which worshippers mark their foreheads, and a small portion of sacred water which is rubbed over the head or sipped from the hand in which the priest places it. After receiving these blessings, worshippers may circumambulate the temple clockwise, and will more than likely sit in quiet contemplation for a few minutes before leaving the premises.

Fuller writes that “puja, at its heart, is the worshippers’ reception and entertainment of a distinguished and adored guest. It is a ritual to honor powerful gods and goddesses, and often to express personal affection for them as well.”

**A Definition of Sacred Space**

Having established the context of my field experience, I will now consider in some further detail the definition of sacred space offered in the introduction, a definition derived
from the writings of Durkheim and Eliade. Once these ideas have been clarified, we will be ready to consider whether they accurately describe what is actually taking place in Chavadi-pudur’s temples.

Durkheim wrote a great deal about the idea of the sacred as a social phenomenon. It was his understanding that the sacred is that which is consecrated or set apart from the profane, the profane being that which corrupts the sacred. He believed that these two concepts, the sacred and the profane, “have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common,” and held that the division of the world between the two “is the distinctive trait of religious thought.” While these ideas have been debated and articulated since Durkheim published them nearly a century ago, it is important at this point to make note of this basic concept of the sacred being set apart from the profane.

In a moment, we will be considering a number of ways in which Chavadipudur’s sacred spaces are indeed places set apart. However, even without taking the specific details into account, we should already see that Durkheim’s definition of sacred space in terms of its separation and opposition to the profane is incomplete. It explains what the sacred is not rather than what it is, describing the universe as “divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not” without approaching the issue of why these divisions and these restrictions exist in the first place. We might hope instead for a definition that clarifies why the concepts of sacred and profane are opposed to each other, what kind of corrupting influence the profane has on the sacred, or why this influence ought to be protected against in cultural practice. Why is it that there must be places set apart in the village of Chavadipudur, and how do they function in Chavadipudur’s culture and society?

It is in the face of such questions that Eliade’s characterization of sacred space beyond its relative difference to profane space proves especially valuable. “When the sacred manifests itself,” Eliade writes, “there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also a revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse.” The defining aspect of sacred spaces, then, is that in these places is made apparent a transcendent reality that supersedes the experiences of day-to-day living. The profane makes this kind of revelation impossible and is, therefore, corrupting to the sacred experience. The two must be kept separate in order to preserve the revelation of absolute truth.

**Koyil as Places Set Apart**

Up to this point, I have discussed the methodology with which I approached the subject of Chavadi-pudur’s temples, I have briefly described both the village and these sacred spaces, and I have reviewed the qualities of separation and the revelation of truth identified in Durkheim and Eliade’s writings on the subject of the sacred. Now we are ready to see whether these theoretical conceptualizations of the sacred reflect the actual operations of Chavadi-pudur’s temples. In this section, I will discuss how these temples show themselves to be places set apart from the spaces of neutral, everyday experience. Identifying this separateness is a fairly straightforward task compared to finding manifestations of absolute reality that will be attempted in the next section.

Chavadi-pudur’s sacred spaces are marked from their origins, when either a deity is ritually installed in a place (a process called pratishta) or a supernatural event reveals a
place to already be chosen by the gods (a process called swayambo). Temple structures are architecturally distinct from other buildings, designed to fit the proper specifications for the deity housed within. While the exact significance of the various design details may be lost on the general public, the importance of having a trained temple architect attend to these matters is well understood. There is also a difference in behavior within a temple; as one of my interviewees explained it, one must “move with the fear of God” inside a temple. Shoes, therefore, are removed within temple compounds, and the prescribed motions of the worship rituals are performed. In preparation for worship in the temple, people will bathe themselves and eat only vegetarian foods. Those who are otherwise ritually impure, such as menstruating women, will not enter the temple.

The features most often discussed by my interviewees as distinguishing sacred space from profane space were the unique feelings and emotions they felt in sacred spaces. Almost every person I interviewed reported feelings of calm, peace, and “no disturbance” inside temple compounds. At these places they are able to forget about their worries and trust that life will get better soon. They find it easier to focus on God, on the needs of their families, and their village. Others mentioned feeling “comfortable” as they spent time with other people in the compound; seeing friends was often named as a reason for visiting temples and worship ceremonies in the first place.

The separation of sacred from profane space implies a division or boundary, or, as it is termed by Eliade, a threshold. The threshold, Eliade explains, not only separates sacred and profane space it is also “the paradoxical place where these worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.” Passage over the threshold is often represented physically by stairways, bridges, or doors that carry a person into the presence of the sacred. They “show the solution of continuity in space immediately and concretely; hence their great religious importance, for they are symbols and at the same time vehicles of passage from the one space to the other.” In the practices of many religions and cultures, passage over a threshold is often marked by certain ritual actions. For example, it is not uncommon in larger Hindu temples for devotees to bow or prostrate themselves at the threshold. Even in the smallest of temples, like those in Chavadipudur, it is expected that people will remove their shoes before entering. Often worshippers will reach down to touch the stairs that carry them up into the temple or the temple compound, showing, as a village woman explained to me, gratitude for a means of entering the temple. We see, then, that even in village temples, small and insignificant though they may be among the sacred sites of India, there is a recognition that one is stepping out of the world of common experience and into a different kind of space entirely.

In short, Chavadipudur’s temples are indeed perceived as places set apart, as evidenced in their unique origins and construction, the distinctive emotions felt at these sacred locations, and the rituals pertaining to the temple threshold.

Koyil and the Reality of Caste

One of my purposes in studying Chavadipudur’s sacred spaces was to find out if an encounter of absolute truth lay at the heart of the sacred experience as Eliade proposed and, more specifically, what kinds of truths might be communicated through the experience of sacred space in the
village. This was a fairly general and unfocused objective, particularly for a field experience of only a few months. Anthropologist Raymond Firth has observed that symbolic meanings “are often complex and of different layers,” and this certainly is the case with the symbolism of sacred spaces in Chavadipudur. At this point, it is impossible for me to even pretend to have explored and comprehended a significant portion of these layers of complexity.

However, while I was in the field the subject of caste came up a number of times and in a number of ways in relation to sacred spaces. I offer just one example. I spoke one morning with a group of men who were doing some preparatory work for the construction of the new Patal Talachi Amman temple that was to be built later that year. I mentioned that I had some questions I wanted to ask them about temples and about the Patal Talachi Amman temple in particular. The man who had been doing most of the speaking for the group told me they would be happy to discuss these matters with me while they worked. I started the interview, rather tactlessly, by asking why they believe there are so many temples in the village. The spokesman’s reaction was quite sudden; he dropped his tools and rushed towards us, gesturing with his hands for us to speak more quietly. Bosco translated his soft-spoken response. They are men of a lower caste, he explained, and are not as free to worship in temples that the higher castes use. Nor can they worship as richly and would therefore be embarrassed to present their humble offerings in front of those more wealthy than they. For these reasons, it is better that they have their own temple in which to worship.

From experiences like these, it is clear that Chavadipudur’s temples and the way these temples are used are connected in some way with the caste system in the village. For one, it appears that the multiplicity of temples implies that a corresponding multiplicity of castes relate hierarchically. The simultaneous implications of unity within a caste and distinction from other castes are not lost on those that worship in Chavadipudur’s many temples. During an interview with the priest for the Apuchimar temple, he stated that he would be happy if there were one temple where all the people in the village could worship together. “That would mean that all the people were equal,” he explained. For this man, and others with whom I spoke, experiences within the village’s temples demonstrate and make visible the caste organization of village society as well as where individuals fit within that organization. I believe this constitutes the kind of revelation of reality identified by Eliade as being central to the experience of sacred space. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that this is the case by identifying further ways that caste is made apparent in Chavadipudur’s temples. Before commencing this discussion, however, it is perhaps appropriate to pause in order to clarify a few points concerning India’s so-called “caste system” in order to recognize representations beyond those of the most apparent caste realities.

Caste continues to be an aspect of Hindu culture that is, for the most part, misunderstood by the outside world. Much of the confusion can be traced to descriptions of the caste system by European Sanskrit scholars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These studies were primarily motivated by a desire to uncover “the rich religious and philosophical heritage of South Asia” rather than increase understanding of India’s living culture. In their perusals of texts such as the Vedas, the Laws of Manu, and the Mahabharata, these scholars came across elucidations of what is often termed the varna system. The most well known and oft-quoted passage, called the Purusha Sukta, is found in the Rig Veda.
describes how the cosmic Man Purusha was sacrificed by the gods, and how a different group of people, or varna, sprung from each carved portion:

When they divided Purusha how many portions did they make? The Brahman [Brahmin] was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya [Kshatriya] made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra [Shudra] was produced.\(^\text{14}\)

In the hymn the four varnas are identified: the priests (Brahmin), the warriors and nobles (Kshatriya), the merchants (Vaisya), and the peasants (Shudra). Often appended to this list is a fifth caste, the untouchables, who technically stand outside of the varna system and therefore below people of caste. While the oppression and exploitation of the untouchables has long drawn the attention of humanists inside and outside of India, it must also be noted that inequality exists between the varnas as well. This hierarchical arrangement is implied in the Purusha Sukta, in fact, as it draws associations between the different varnas and parts of the body that vary in purity and function.

In any case, it was apparent to even the first generation of indologists to actually visit South Asia in the 1800s that the varna system presented in passages of ancient text like the Purusha Sukta describe a system entirely different from the one actually operating in modern India.\(^\text{15}\) Despite this realization, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the focus of researchers began to shift from the study the caste theory encapsulated in ancient Hindu texts to the study of the actual practice of caste in Indian society. Even today, when it is clear that the realities of caste are far more complicated than the varna model might lead us to believe, the West typically understands India’s caste system in terms of the varna system’s fivefold division of society. It is important not to overlook the fact that the varna system has a role in present-day discourse among Indians about caste, representing a simplified caste model that all of Hindu culture can draw upon in order to discuss and apprehend the general principles underlying specific and local caste systems.\(^\text{16}\) However, if we are to examine caste reality as it is manifested through Chavadipudur’s sacred spaces, we ought to have a more specific understanding of the village’s caste reality than the varna model can offer us.

For an outsider coming into village society, particularly an outsider who does not speak the local language, arriving at this kind of understanding is no small task. After several futile attempts to pursue the subject with my closest friends and informants, I had to abandon my initial visions of drafting a sort of organizational chart for village castes.\(^\text{17}\) To date the most thorough description I have received of Chavadipudur’s caste system came from Mr. C. Ramachandra in 2003. Ramu (as he prefers to be called) is the acting head of the village’s dominant family, having married a descendant of Chavadipudur’s founder, Chinnaiya Gounden. The purpose of our interview had initially been to talk about the history of the village. Among other things, Ramu mentioned how each caste in the village is associated with a particular occupation. At Chavadipudur’s inception it had been important to have certain castes represented to perform those services vital to the survival of the village. These same castes are still found in Chavadupudur today: masons, musicians, carpenters, traders, barbers, clothes-washers, and priests, among others.

The kind of system Ramu describes is what is typically called the *jati* system. Pauline Kolenda has drawn upon a number of studies in rural India to create a list of significant
components of the jati system. While based on principles encapsulated in the varna system, the jati system more completely describes caste as it is found in India’s villages today. Therefore, if the reality of caste is manifest in Chavadipudur’s temples, we would expect to see in the typical rituals and behaviors associated with these sacred spaces demonstrations of at least some caste system components identified by Kolenda. For the remainder of this section, I would like to describe some of these demonstrations that I observed in Chavadipudur’s temples. Rather than enumerate all of Kolenda’s points here, I will only consider those aspects that seem pertinent to Chavadipudur’s temples.

1. “Caste as a system operates within a limited locality, a single village or a few linked villages.” The fact that a caste system operates at a highly local level probably does not warrant much discussion here. It is an important point to recognize, however, since most of the world has imagined “the caste system” in India to be a universal system, a misunderstanding which is perpetuated by emphasis on the varna system in caste studies. Further, the locality of caste underscores the need to focus on local temples in order to identify demonstrations of a local caste system within Hindu sacred space. We cannot expect that Chavadipudur’s caste system will necessarily be apparent in the temples of other communities.

2. “A village or local population is composed of a series of mutually exclusive castes, usually numbering anywhere from a handful to a score or more.” This point has already been discussed above in relation to Chavadipur’s sacred spaces. To restate briefly, it has shown how the presence of many temples in the village essentially demonstrates the existence of “a series of mutually exclusive castes” there.

3. “Castes within a local caste system tend to be mutually ranked according to their respective degrees of pollution.” The outright exclusion of lower castes from Hindu temples has become uncommon since Gandhi’s fast unto death on behalf of untouchables in 1934. A person of low caste would not likely be turned out of even the most sacred of Chavadipur’s temple, the Murugan temple, provided they had performed important purification practices such as bathing or abstaining from non-vegetarian foods for a time. It is interesting to see, however, how practice has adapted to keep the more polluted or profane castes from direct contact with the sacred, as it is also interesting to see how these adaptations make even more apparent the gradations of pollution in the spectrum of Chavadipur’s castes.

While the design of each temple will vary slightly, the standard arrangement in Chavadipur (see Figure 1) is to have a wall around the temple compound, marking the outermost threshold of the temple’s sacred space; formerly this would have been the line that the lower

![Figure 1. Chavadipur’s larger temples tend to be divided into concentric regions of increasingly sacred space. A person’s caste determines how closely he or she may approach the sacred inner chamber where the divine image is housed.](image)
castes would have been unable to cross. Inside the temple compound is the temple structure itself, consisting of a broad, covered terrace, and the relatively small inner chamber of the temple where the image of the deity is housed. While the lower castes are permitted within the temple compound, they do not mount the temple’s terrace. Of the higher castes that are permitted on the terrace, none save the priest (or, on occasion, a male from the village’s dominant family) is able to enter the inner chamber. Within the temple compound, then—inside the threshold marked by the wall surrounding the compound—we can identify several other thresholds, with each indicating a region of increasingly more sacred space.

It is an arrangement that seems to add a level of complexity to the binary opposition between sacred and profane discussed by Durkheim, Eliade, and others. It also makes apparent a gradation of pollution in Chavadipudur’s castes, from those who must be content to worship from the base of the temple terrace, to the priest who ascends into the presence of the temple’s god or goddess.

4. “Each caste has an occupational specialty and offers this to other castes in exchange for food, products, or services.” The system of exchange between occupationally specialized castes is called the jajmani system, and it is in this system that Hindu communities are said to experience “organic solidarity.” Like parts of a living organism, the different castes function within their respective spheres so that the village as a whole can survive. This interdependency is something Ramu emphasized quite heavily during our conversation on the founding of Chavadipudur, citing several examples of rituals performed in temples that demonstrate the need for the different castes in the village to rely on each other. For example, members of the barber caste are responsible for holding ceremonial torches during village rituals. Clothes washers provide a piece of cloth to lie in front of the temple steps at festivals—and in the case of a wedding lays cloth all the way from the bride’s home to the steps of the temple. It is true that the priests perform rituals in behalf of the village, but they cannot do so without the help of the other castes in the village.

A scene I observed in the Mari Amman temple further demonstrated this principle of organic solidarity. I was seated on the temple terrace with Jegedesh observing a Friday night puja. Due to some family matters, the priest had to leave the temple for about a half an hour. By the time he returned there were dozens of people waiting for him to perform puja for them. In the rush to catch up in his work, the priest failed to offer the tray of colored powders to a group of low caste worshippers at the base of the stairs so that they could mark their foreheads before leaving. He had already started helping another family, and would not be free for several minutes. Seeing the dilemma, Jegedesh leapt to his feet, took the tray from the stairs leading into the temple’s inner chamber, and carried it to the people waiting at the end of the terrace. He came back to me after completing this service, smiling in embarrassment. As he rubbed colored powder from his hands and settled back down beside me he commented that he had never done that before, and had been scolded by an older woman for the manner in which he had presented the tray to them.

What this scene demonstrated was that the castes are meant to rely on one another. The priest is the one with the power to enter into the presence of the temple’s divine image in behalf of the whole village; it is his role to operate within that specified space for the benefit of all. Similarly Jegedesh’s caste determines that he can operate within the space of the temple
terrace, and is permitted, when necessary, to act as a mediator between the terrace steps, and the steps that climb into the presence of the god.

5. “A dominant caste or a dominant family, [. . .] typically has preponderant political and economic power over everyone in the locality.” Chinnaiya Gounden’s community was the Naidu Gounden, and to this day his descendants are the dominant family in the village; Ramu, as has been said, currently acts as head of the family with his wife’s brother living in the city. The political and economic power of the Gounden’s is expressed in a number of ways in relation to the village’s temples. For one, the Goundens are allowed to enter the inner chamber of these temples, presuming they have observed the same purification rites required of the officiating priests.

Traditionally the Goundens were the ones to own land and coordinate agriculture in Chavadipudur. They ordered the construction of public buildings, like the Murugan temple that stands on the eastern side of the village. While this role has changed to some degree, they still bear primary financial responsibility for the ongoing operation of the village’s temples, they pay the salary of the priest, and as owners of the land the temples stand on, pay property taxes for the temple lots. While they no longer pay outright for the construction of new temples, they continue to organize fundraising to that end; even in the case that the lower castes decide to build a temple for themselves, the Goundens make the principal contribution, usually covering at least half the cost of the project. Since he came to the village following his marriage in the early 1980s, Ramu has overseen the renovation of the Murugan temple, the Mari Amman temple, and now the Patal Talachi Amman temple. “You can’t live in a place with no God,” he explains.

Summary and Conclusion

Before concluding I will briefly summarize the topics covered in this paper. I began by describing my research methods, then introduced the village of Chavadipudur and its temples. After discussing principles of sacred space set forth by Durkheim and Eliade, namely separateness and the revelation of absolute truth, I have identified expressions of these principles in Chavadipudur’s larger public temples. These temples were shown to be places set apart from profane space in the way that they become sacred, in the feelings people experience there, and in the special ritual observances observed there. While the full scope of truths and realities manifested in Chavadipudur’s sacred spaces could not be explored in my research, I have considered some important elements of the village’s caste system that are expressed in the public temples, including the ranking of castes according to their degrees of pollution, the interdependence of castes within the village, and the eminent authority of the dominant family.

This field project and this paper have certainly not exhausted the research and discussion that could be pursued on any of these subjects—in Chavadipudur, let alone other communities throughout India and the world. What has been discussed seems to indicate that despite differences of opinion among the peoples of the world on what constitutes reality, sacred space in Chavadipudur is indeed what its participants believe it to be: a physical and spiritual center through which their specific reality is made manifest.
NOTES


8. Shiva, interview with the author.


10. *Ibid*.


17. I later came to recognize, as Dumont (Dumont, Louis. *Homo Hierarchicus*, Trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1970, p. 34) has noted, that even were it ultimately feasible to complete such a chart, it would not represent the local understanding of the castes and their relationships with each other.


REFERENCES

A Day in the Life of El Mozote

by Eric Bybee

Introduction

When the novel One Day of Life was published in 1980, it gave the world an intimate look into the poverty, violence, and repression that was a fact of life for rural Salvadorans at the end of the 1970s. Beginning at 5:30 A.M. and ending at 5:00 P.M. on the same day, the novel is set on the eve of El Salvador’s brutal civil war and tells its story through the eyes of the resilient women of the Guardado family. Through the book’s main character, Guadalupe, author Manlio Argueta describes the complex relationship of the peasantry to both church and state, as well as the personal struggle of living in a society where human life was cheap and the disappearance of loved ones was not uncommon and often permanent.

One year after the publication of One Day of Life in December of 1981, members of the government’s elite, American-trained Atlacatl Battalion massacred nearly one thousand people in El Mozote, a village located in El Salvador’s eastern highlands. The mass killing, much of which consisted of women and children, gained international attention after reports and pictures surfaced in the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the New Yorker. However, the reports were subsequently denied by the Reagan Administration, which continued to fund the Salvadoran government’s military offensive. Eleven years and six billion U.S. dollars later, the war was over, and the truth about El Salvador’s largest wartime civilian massacre was confirmed in later investigations.

Since the war ended in 1992, a great deal has transpired to rebuild the country and right the wrongs that caused the nation to go to war. While the current situation is better than before, evidence exists that the critical economic and social changes the conflict was supposed to facilitate are not being enjoyed by one of the groups the war most affected: the poor women of El Salvador’s villages. In the twenty-five years since its publication, One Day of Life has become internationally recognized as the definitive account of what prewar life was like for women in the campo. Through a series of personal interviews with twenty women from El Mozote, the author of the novel, and the woman whose story inspired him, I will do a comparative study of the prewar life and perspectives of the novel’s main character with the postwar reality of the women in the village most affected by the conflict. My findings will show that, although there have been some positive changes in the social freedoms the women enjoy, their situation has remained the same or even deteriorated in other areas like economic freedom and overall quality of life.

Part One: Un Dia En la Vida

In order to properly compare the main character in Argueta’s novel and the women of El Mozote, it was necessary to do a careful reading of the book and interview the author to make sure that my perceptions regarding it were correct. Argueta currently works as the director of the National Library located in downtown San Salvador, across from the National Cathedral.
On the day we spoke, I found him to be warm, intelligent, and eager to talk about his most well known work. According to Argueta, the idea for the novel came from stories he had collected in the late seventies while exiled in Costa Rica. The inspiration for the main character, Lupe Guardado, came from a woman he met there named Guadalupe Mejia, who came through with a group of war survivors touring Central America. Other important elements in the novel, from the description of a bus burning, to the student takeover of the National Cathedral, to the training procedures for the Salvadoran military, were taken respectively from news reports, from personal correspondence with those involved, or from the actual audio tapes used in training. All of these reflect Argueta’s desire to create a fictional novel that detailed multiple aspects of the prewar situation in a way that one story alone could not do. Indeed, when asked whether he preferred his novel to be read as a historical, socio-political, or literary text, Argueta responded, “My novel is based in the reality of the country. So, necessarily I have to deal with things that are real. . . . All I am is a secretary for my society, and I take notes on what happens.” Although his work is based on the truth of what occurred, he admitted that he would like people to regard his novel as a work of literature because it was written to reflect El Salvador’s “harsh realities in a poetic way.”

In order to base his characters and story on reality, Argueta needed real people who were willing to share their experiences with him. One of those people was the woman who inspired the character Lupe Guardado: Guadalupe Mejia. As mentioned earlier, the two first met in Costa Rica at a conference where Mejia, then part of a woman’s group touring Central America, shared her story. Many of the details of her account are identical to those presented in the novel, with some minor variations. Like the main character, Mejia was a peasant laborer living in the small community of Chalatenango. Yet unlike the character, who had five children, she has nine. Her husband Justo, like Jose in the story, works for a few dollars a day at the nearby milpa, or corn plantation. Just as the novel illustrates, Mejia remembers the seventies as a time of increasing turmoil as the new Jesuit priests preached a liberation theology that helped the poor farmers realize that they were being exploited.

Around 1977, her husband, Justo, helped found the Federation of Christian Farm Workers, a union dedicated toward improving the wages and working conditions of an impoverished labor class. It was a dangerous time to be politically involved, meetings had to be held in secret, and there were times when Justo and others would have to hide in the mountains for days or weeks at a time. Eventually, he was apprehended by the secret police—a death squad known as “La Mano Blanca”—and was not seen again until his body was found weeks later near a mountain stream. This is the only place where the novel differs slightly from the real story, the part where Lupe learns the fate of her husband. During our interview, she said that after her husband was found, she sent some friends up with a coffin to retrieve the body and indicated that she would follow later with another group to clean the body and prepare it for transport. When her group got off the bus near the site of the discovery, she found her friends blindfolded, beaten, and kneeling before machine-gun toting national guardsmen. They knew who Justo was, what he stood for, and were eager to catch others involved with the movement. The group was made to stand in a line and Justo’s body was placed before them. The guards then proceeded to interrogate each of them at gunpoint and, seeing no other option, Mejia had to do the unthinkable: deny that she ever knew her own husband. On the day I interviewed
BYBEE

her, she described the experience with tears in her eyes and said, “A mi me tocó lo de Pedro que tuvo que negar.” I suffered what Peter did who had to deny, referring to the chief apostle’s denial of Jesus Christ.

Mejía survived the experience, but the following years were filled with unbelievable hardship. She became the sole provider for a family of nine that had previously scraped to make ends meet with Justo working full-time. After a while, she obtained assistance from organizations that not only helped her provide for her family but gave her opportunities to relate her story to people like Manlio Argueta. The interview that I conducted with her proved that One Day of Life is an accurate representation of both the situation and worldview that she possessed during that period of her life. The only difference besides name and a few minor story changes was that Mejía was more vocal about her faith in God than Lupe, who seems to focus more on the church as an institution. Presently, Mejía resides in San Salvador and is the president of CODEFAM, a nonprofit organization dedicated toward helping the family members of those who’ve disappeared or suffered other human rights violations. When interviewed, she was very warm, articulate, and indicated that her nine children were grown, educated, and employed.

The meetings with Argueta and Mejía provided an excellent basis for an examination of the character they both contributed: Lupe Guardado. There are four main components that the protagonist discusses and interacts with in the text—Lupe’s relation to her family, religion, oppressors, and the effect that each have on her situation.

Her family life is similar to what one would expect from a Latin woman living in a Third World country: simple love strained by circumstance. As a result of being denied the opportunity to receive an education, both she and Jose want their children to attend school so that “no one can swindle them.” Unfortunately, money is tight and the parents are forced to accept that the children will have to leave school when they are old enough to work. Both lead a humble existence; Lupe’s revolves around her children and, for Jose, “only his machete and his friends. That’s his life.” However, Lupe’s self-awareness and understanding that there must be something better is reflected in a comment she makes at the end of chapter one: “This is our life; we don’t know any other. That’s why they say we’re happy.”

Although initially fearful and generally suspicious of selfish priests, Lupe begins to notice a significant change in the clergy that also changes the people:

We had never gotten anything from the church. Only given. Little things, it’s true. It simply taught us resignation. But we never came to think that the priests were responsible for our situation . . . and when they changed we began to change. . . . If it hadn’t been for the priests we would have never found out those things that are in our interest. They opened our eyes.

The peasants aren’t the only ones who notice the changes taking place in the both the priests and the people. The National Guardsmen notice a new self-awareness and respond by becoming more brutal. Lupe explains, “Their hatred of the priests they’d take out on us. They wouldn’t dare touch a priest because deep down they were afraid of them. Like us, the guardsmen have been Catholics, and almost all of them are peasant.” Sadly, the death of Lupe’s husband, her son, Justino, and her son-in-law, Helio, prove that no one is safe when the hegemons will stop at nothing to preserve the status quo.
Part Two: The Women of El Mozote

Directly six hours northeast of San Salvador lie the mountainous region of Morazan—famous both for its lush terrain and for being the guerilla stronghold during the civil war. The former capital of the resistance is Perquin, a small town at the northern end of the region whose winter festivals and war history museum attract thousands of visitors every year. A small number of more ambitious travelers will pay fifteen cents to be taken twenty minutes south to the turnoff at Arambala, where they will pay another dollar for a forty-five minute journey on a dirt road to the small village of El Mozote. The tiny hamlet consists of nothing more than a few grey houses, a dirt plaza, and a small church that looks new and out of place. They come to see the large memorial that displays the nine hundred names of the peasants killed in the massacre, to walk the dirt streets, and to get an idea of what it would have been like to be there on that day in December.

An informal census revealed that there are currently forty-three families living in El Mozote, made up of fifty-four men, seventy-four women, and 131 children. There are a total of fifty-six dwellings, three small stores, a Pentecostal church, a school, and a sign advertising a pupusería that serves food to visitors. The majority of the men support their families working at a nearby milpa or by laboring in agricultural areas nearby. The women who work outside of the home, which is a minority, typically have domestic jobs that involve cooking and cleaning for others.

In order to discover the ways that the situation changed for women relative to the novel, it was necessary to create questions that would communicate more than the statistics of their community. Formulating specific questions that would reveal pertinent information involved first creating long lists of questions that reflected themes in the novel and then narrowing them down to those that were most relevant through informal interviews. As in all ethnographic research, participant observation was also used to determine both the types of questions asked and the conclusions drawn from them. However, full immersion in the daily activities of the community was difficult because we visited three times for a total of about ten days. After the questions were narrowed down, formal interviews and focus groups were conducted with the women of El Mozote, and conclusions were drawn from their responses. The questions asked are included below in list form along with the majority response in parenthesis as well as quotes that typify the sentiments of the women interviewed. Below the questions is a table with the names of the women and their answers to each of the numbered questions.

1. Do you feel like your economic situation has improved or gotten worse since the war? (Worse.)
   “There isn’t any work around here that we can do. And the work that we do find pays the minimum amount. Before everything was different, because even though you made little money, things weren’t as expensive. Today everything is expensive and we still make very little money.”

2. How many women out of every ten are abandoned or neglected? (8/10)
   “The majority of women here are single mothers and have to fight to sustain their families without help from anyone. Most are very young and have to stay in the houses of their parents without the help of their husbands or anyone.”
3. If you could change one thing about the way that Salvadoran men act, what would it be? (That they would be more responsible with their families.)
“I would say that men need to be more responsible with their kids because many men just hit their kids and then they’re gone. The mothers and the kids suffer as well, because of the irresponsibility of the men.”

4. Who was more violent during the war, the guerillas or the government? (Both were the same.)

5. Do women have more or less freedom now than they did before the war? In what ways? (More. They are able to leave the home and work.)
“Before the women couldn’t rule in her own home, only the husband ruled. Today women have almost the same rights to rule. They have more freedoms.”

6. Are people happier now than they were before the war? Why or why not? (They are less happy because they are poorer and have fragmented families.)
“Before [the war] people lived happier because everything was easier and today everything has changed. Before a person could work in only one job but now, a lot of those jobs don’t exist anymore. Many jobs were done by the natives but now it’s different. Because of this there was more happiness before than there is now. Today you can live, but always with the worry that you won’t have what you need and (because of this) there isn’t any happiness now.”

7. Why did the war happen? Did you know that the US government supported the army during the war? Do you know why? (Almost all didn’t know.)
“Someone got mad at someone else or something like that. I know that there must have been some reason, I don’t think they did it just because.”
“They said that we wanted some sort of freedom, but who knows what kind of liberty they wanted or what liberation they were looking for.”

8. If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be? (More opportunities to work and a nicer place to live.)
“Maybe a permit to leave the country to go work, live better, and be able to help my family have a better home. To have everything that one would need to be able to raise our kids.”
“What would change about your life Enriqueta, what would it be? Would you be a movie-star?” (Laughs) “No, just that there was more work.”

9. Are you satisfied with the current government? If you could change one thing about them, what would it be? (No, they need to keep promises and help the poor.)

10. How often (times per week/month) do you go to church? Does your pastor or priest have a lot of influence over the way that you think? (The majority goes once a week and pastor doesn’t have influence.)

11. How many people died from your family in the massacre and in the war? (Varies. The first number next to each name is age, the second is the number of family members killed in the massacre.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria de la Paz Chica (34) (27)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>Gov’t was bad</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No and no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalena Chica Claros (81) (27)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Didn’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td>More opport.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Maria Rodriguez (25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Didn’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td>More work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enma de Jesus (17?) (15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>More Now</td>
<td>No op</td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>Econ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petronila Guevanni Romero (62) (50)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>More Now</td>
<td>No op</td>
<td>Econ</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta Bartola Lemos (34) (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>More Now</td>
<td>No op</td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>House work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramona Argueta (35) (25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Before (family)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisca Chicas (52) (34)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Work (work)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enriqueta Diaz (29) (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>No op</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcisa Diaz Marquez (26) (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>No opinion</td>
<td>No op</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Guadalupe Diaz (50) (?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Responsible with kids</td>
<td></td>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomas Clara (71) (?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Before (work)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Work home</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Miriam Nunez de Marquez (45)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse, Business was better</td>
<td>5/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>5/10</td>
<td>Treat their women better,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Better home for the family</td>
<td>3-4x week Yes, helps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maura Luna (55)</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>More Responsible</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>More now</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>More opport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Dolores Amaya (23)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>More now</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>More work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta Lilian Claros (28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>More Helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td>More work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isable Amaya Claros (60)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>More Responsible</td>
<td>No opinion</td>
<td>More work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isidra Claros (65)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>Work Harder</td>
<td></td>
<td>More work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonifacia Rodriguez (25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>6/10</td>
<td>More Responsible</td>
<td></td>
<td>Nicer home</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasia Argeuta (56)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>More Responsible</td>
<td></td>
<td>More work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

A comparison between the prewar situation of the main character of *One Day of Life* and the postwar status of the women of El Mozote reveals a number of similarities and differences. The living conditions and family life of both appear to be largely the same, with men and women occupying similar roles in the family and similar jobs in the community. One of the striking similarities is the high degree of self-sufficiency required of the women who have husbands who abandoned them or left for long periods of time to find work elsewhere. The women in the novel were often alone as well, but the primary reason was government repression, not poverty or negative attitudes toward women. One of the main improvements is the shift of the government from oppressor to apathetic leader. Additionally, the consensus is that women have more political and social autonomy now than they did before the war.

As important as the similarities and improvements are in El Mozote, they aren’t nearly as significant as the way in which the community has declined. The majority of women indicated they have less economic power than before, and their overall level of happiness is less than it was prior to the war. They feel less influenced by their respective churches and many were ideologically gray regarding the war, wondering whether or not it was worth it and who the real perpetrators were.

Although the answers to the questions asked might not seem remarkable to some, they mean much more when examined with the right perspective. An understanding of the context in which they were given allows us to identify six themes that can be internalized and applied elsewhere. The first is that political and social freedoms don’t always equate to personal happiness. Although *One Day of Life* asserts that the lack of freedom is the main obstacle to fulfillment, the interviews suggest that finding true happiness is more complicated. The women of El Mozote almost unanimously indicated that they had much more social autonomy now than they did before the war. However, they also stated that they were less happy because of difficult economic circumstances and because their families were fractured by the conflict. A common reaction for those raised in western democratic societies is to automatically associate political freedom with fulfillment and joy. The truth is that the price of freedom is sometimes too high and many would rather not pay it.

The second theme is that in the fog of war, the liberators can become the perpetrators. In the novel, the National Guardsmen were clearly the only group responsible for the oppression and cruelty. However, when asked which side was more violent during the war, the majority of those interviewed indicated that both were equally brutal—a comment that would have been unexpected from a regular citizen, but totally shocking coming from the women of El Mozote. Here were people who had lost anywhere from two to eighty family members in a massacre committed by government soldiers in their own community. However, they still asserted that they felt the guerillas were equally as violent—indicating that, like so many other things, moral boundaries are sometimes blurred in battle.

The third conclusion is that many indigenous women are still alone, not because of war but because of economics and machismo. At the very end of the book, the disappearances and murders of men in the Guardado family leave all of the women alone to fend for themselves. Within the community of El Mozote, there were also a number of single mothers, but more
interesting was the gap between the perceived number of women abandoned (80 percent) and the actual number (38 percent). One possible explanation for the discrepancy between the two figures is that many women seem to fear abandonment or feel abandoned because of the time their husbands have to spend out of the home (in-country or abroad in the U.S.) to provide for their families.

The fourth theme is that people who live close to the level of subsistence dream there as well. In the novel the peasants are perceived to be happy “because they don’t know any better.” The interviews revealed the reason they didn’t know: because they were too preoccupied with basic survival. When asked what they would most like to change about their lives, none of the women said they wanted to be rich or famous. In fact, one young mother laughed when it was suggested that she could wish to be a movie star. Each of them made their wishes, not based on a whim, but rather because of what they didn’t have and desperately needed: more opportunities to work and a better place to live.

The fifth conclusion is that economics is a form of oppression for which there is no liberation theology. In the prewar reality presented in the novel, peasant laborers turned to their clergy for religious, moral, and social support, because the face of oppression was easy to identify. Now, the majority of women interviewed in El Mozote generally felt like their religious leaders didn’t have much influence over their secular opinions or views. While this difference might be due to the large evangelical population, there are other more important contributing factors like economics as well. Before and during the war, oppression came in the form of National Guardsmen and guns from the U.S. Now, the “dollarization” of the Salvadoran economy is having an effect on the lives of the poor that, in many ways, is just as oppressive. Simply put, it is much easier to identify repression when its face isn’t printed on a dollar bill, and there isn’t any specific doctrine for overcoming the negative effects of economics. If one exists, it hasn’t been discovered by the clergy or laypeople of El Mozote, because there are many who have little happiness in their lives and even less hope for the future.

The sixth and perhaps most important theme is that the uproar of war catches many in the middle and traps them in silence. Whatever the conflict, there is always a certain percentage of the populace that was perfectly happy with the way things were before. The only thing that ever changes about that particular group is their size relative to the rest of the population that wants to fight. What is tragic is that, much of the time, it doesn’t matter if the peace-loving status quo group makes up 8 or 80 percent of the population, they will always be either forced to choose or completely drown out by those with the guns. The wonderful women of El Mozote who lost most everything that was important in December 1981 don’t even know why they lost it. When asked about why the war happened, they respond, “I don’t know, someone must’ve gotten mad at someone else” or “there must have been a reason, I don’t think they did it just because.” Whatever reasons that seemed so apparent to Manlio Argueta, Guadalupe Mejía, or any of the others who advocated resistance through novels like One Day of Life, are completely lost on the very women who gave the most in that struggle. Rather than giving precedence to the true claims of the women over the novel or vice versa, we should look at both as important parts of an incomplete picture of the causes and effects of civil war—a picture that is still hazy at best. It is profoundly significant that fog has been used as a metaphor for war because we’ve never conceived of a
thing that could so thoroughly obscure the allies from the enemies, the free from the captive, or what is right from what is wrong.

NOTES

REFERENCES
Argüeta, Manlio. Interview by author, July 2005.
Chica, Maria de la Paz. Interview by author, August 2005.
Claros, Magdalena Chica. Interview by author, August 2005.
Rodríguez, Maria. Interview by author, August 2005.
de Jesus, Emma. Interview by author, August 2005.
Marquez, Narcisa Diaz. Interview by author, August 2005.
Claros, Tomasa. Interview by author, August 2005.
Nunez de Marquez, Miriam. Interview by author, August 2005.
Amaya, Maria Dolores. Interview by author, August 2005.
Claros, Marta Lilian. Interview by author, August 2005.
Claros, Isabel Amaya. Interview by author, August 2005.
Claros, Isidra. Interview by author, August 2005.
Rodríguez, Bonifacia. Interview by author, August 2005.
Argüeta, Anastacia. Interview by author, August 2005.
Introduction

Over the last ten years, government programs have facilitated the development of many South African communities; however, for many the promise of development has been elusive. In 2002, there were an estimated eight million people living in shack settlements in South Africa.¹ From 1994 to 2004, the government had built over a million houses in order to provide adequate shelter for its citizens, but there are many more still in need of assistance.²

Duncan Village is a shack settlement located near downtown East London, South Africa. There are an estimated eighty thousand people living in shacks in Duncan Village.³ The Buffalo City Municipality is currently involved in a planning initiative aimed at housing the residents of Duncan Village. Much debate exists over the appropriate methods to use in redeveloping this densely populated shack town. Planners are striving to meet the challenges associated with this kind of community redevelopment, such as adequate housing, limited land availability, appropriate urban forms, and government requirements for housing subsidies.

During the summers of 2004 and 2005, I conducted a research project in East London, South Africa, which explored the various viewpoints of those involved in the redevelopment of Duncan Village. Over the course of six months, I gathered the insights of planners, city officials, professors, and residents of Duncan Village. From these insights some main principles emerge as necessary for the successfully redevelopment of shanty towns in South Africa. Some of these principles include an enabling planning framework that seeks to meet the needs of the underdeveloped community, effective participation of local residents and community based organizations, participatory urban design, appropriate scales of redevelopment, and a flexible housing subsidy policy.

Despite the thoughtfulness of development policies and an increased awareness of local circumstances in Duncan Village, Buffalo City Municipality still has not implemented an effective system of participatory planning. As a result, housing and development strategies are not reaching community-based organizations, families, and individuals, and local residents are not being empowered to affect substantial change in their community. This is largely due to three factors: a strong desire by the local government to maintain a coherent master plan, a culture of civil resistance within Duncan Village, and an untested local political system.

In response to the challenges planners have encountered when trying to implement redevelopment plans for the shantytowns of South Africa, anthropologist Steven Robins asserts that “although there are no clear and obvious answers to these questions, it is only through further fine-grained ethnographic research in specific sites that planners will get closer to understanding the micro-politics and improvisational strategies” of those who live in these shantytowns.⁴
Thus, this work is an attempt to further “fine-grained ethnographic research in [a] specific [site]” from an urban planning perspective in order to produce a model of participatory planning that will help improve the effectiveness of development policies in meeting the needs of residents of South African slum settlements. 

**Interviewing in Duncan Village**

During my stay in Duncan Village, I had the opportunity to interview twenty-eight residents of the area in an effort to understand their perceptions about the quality of life in the settlement, the effectiveness of government programs, and the effectiveness of public participation between residents and local government.

These interviews were conducted by the teachers of the Zamani preschool in the Bebelele section of Duncan Village. The interview questions and responses were given in Xhosa and then translated into English. Volunteers for interviews were found through a sign up process conducted at a Zamani parent-teacher meeting in July 2004. Many of the interviewees were parents or relatives of children attending the Zamani preschool and, as a result, they tended to live within walking distance of the school. The majority of participants resided in the C-section, Bebelele, or Ford and Msimango sections of Duncan Village and a few participants resided in Duncan Village Proper or D-hostel.

---

**Eastern Cape Political Geography**

These interviews were conducted by the teachers of the Zamani preschool in the Bebelele section of Duncan Village. The interview questions and responses were given in Xhosa and then translated into English. Volunteers for interviews were found through a sign up process conducted at a Zamani parent-teacher meeting in July 2004. Many of the interviewees were parents or relatives of children attending the Zamani preschool and, as a result, they tended to live within walking distance of the school. The majority of participants resided in the C-section, Bebelele, or Ford and Msimango sections of Duncan Village and a few participants resided in Duncan Village Proper or D-hostel.
History of Duncan Village

East London, an urban area located on the coast of the Indian Ocean in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, was originally established as a military town in the early nineteenth century. From the beginning, racial segregation had a strong influence in the formation of the city. Between 1921 and 1936, the African population in East London doubled from twelve thousand to twenty-four thousand. According to E.L. Nel, this population “was forced into overcrowded African locations resulting in a dramatic deterioration in living conditions and standards: some twenty thousand people resided on four hundred acres of land in the East Bank [Duncan Village] location.”

In 1941, the municipality initiated the Duncan Village housing scheme. However, because of World War II and the postwar depression in South Africa, development came to a halt in Duncan Village. As a result, an enormous housing backlog was created and living conditions continued to deteriorate.

In the 1950s, Duncan Village experienced another population explosion similar to that of the 1920s when the shack areas began to grow denser. By the time the municipality began to consider building municipal housing for the overcrowded residents of Duncan Village, the National Party had come to power in South Africa and was vigorously implementing the policies of apartheid segregation. As a result of the 1950 Group Areas Act, Duncan Village was divided into residential space for Indians and Coloureds (people of mixed racial decent), and the national government began the messy process of forcibly removing the African population to the planned township of Mdantsane.

Because the forced removals of Duncan Village were planned at the same time as the construction of the Mdantsane township, the government was unable to remove the entire population of Duncan Village at once because sufficient housing had not been constructed in the new township. In the mean time, African resistance to forced removals grew in intensity throughout the 1960s and 1970s and eventually disrupted the government’s attempt to relocate residents to Mdantsane.

In the 1980s, because of organized resistance to apartheid policies, the national government was effectively forced to begin a process of reform that restored more freedoms and basic human rights to the African, Coloured, and Indian residents of South Africa. In East London, apartheid reforms led to the establishment of the Gombo Community Council (GCC) in Duncan Village. This council was the government’s attempt to create an African town council that would restore local governance to the residents of Duncan Village.

Nonetheless, many Africans viewed this council as just a puppet organization of the apartheid state and did not accept its authority because forced removals of one form or another continued to plague the area. As a result, the Duncan Village Residential Association (DVRA) was formed by local resistance leaders and residents in the 1980s in order to oppose the GCC. One of the major policy issues implemented by the DVRA in an effort to resist forced removals was the opening of the location to settlement by any African who wanted to come and build a shack in Duncan Village.

Because of Duncan Village’s close proximity to the East London Central Business District, poor farming conditions in rural African homelands, and massive resistance to the apartheid policies of forced removals, literally thousands of rural migrants flocked to Duncan Village.
from the Ciskei and Transkei homelands to put up shacks in the area. In 1984, the population of Duncan Village was estimated at seventeen thousand; in 1986, it stood at fifty thousand; and in 1990, the population was estimated to be at eighty thousand. Today, Duncan Village is the densest human settlement in the Buffalo City Municipality.14

After 1994, the Reconstruction and Development Program brought the political promise of universal housing to Duncan Village. However, because of the complexity of building housing in a high-density squatter camp, the massive realignment of geo-political boundaries, mismanagement of government funding, and uneasiness with new political leadership, very little housing construction was ever completed in Duncan Village during the first ten years of ANC democracy. As a result, the residents of Duncan Village have become very impatient with the government’s sluggish pace of service and housing delivery.

Today, Duncan Village is a place of thriving informal economic activity, identity and pride, victory against the oppressor, complex social networks and systems of reciprocity, and an affordable residential place (which is close to town) for those of low income. On the other hand, it is also a place of crime, impatience, political instability, fires, floods, disease and deterioration, high unemployment, and over-crowdedness.

**Development Planning in Duncan Village**

In 2003, the Buffalo City Municipality (BCM) identified Duncan Village as an “inner-city urban renewal node” where further local planning and redevelopment efforts were required in order to alleviate the extreme poverty and slum housing which is characteristic of the area.15 As a result of this identified need, the BCM is currently undertaking the formulation of the Duncan Village Redevelopment Initiative.
The aim of this initiative is to help transform the slum settlement of Duncan Village into a “sound, fully functional part of the city.”\textsuperscript{16} The initiative is based on the assumption that “it is desirable that Duncan Village be retained as an area that meets the specific needs of the residents living there by affording them opportunities to enhance their life chances and their livelihoods.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus, the redevelopment initiative is a comprehensive program for the economic, social, spatial, and infrastructural redevelopment of the community. It is an effort to gradually shift the built environment from one of informality, danger, and isolation, to one of formality, safety, and integration. At its heart, the redevelopment initiative is focused on providing adequate housing to the residents of Duncan Village.

The Duncan Village Redevelopment Initiative is the first time that the BCM has embarked on a process of redevelopment in the shantytown that seeks first to recognize the role that Duncan Village plays in the city; second, to identify the current situation of those who live in the area; and third, to formulate viable, targeted housing solutions through a process of research and public participation.\textsuperscript{18}

According to Raymond Foster, head of the municipality’s forward planning branch, this effort is a back and forth, give and take process between the city, residents, and other actors in an effort to discover what is affordable, sustainable, and beneficial for those who live in Duncan Village.\textsuperscript{19}

To accomplish this, a system of public participation has been arranged to involve ward (neighborhood) councilors and residents in the planning and implementation of the redevelopment initiative. This system of public participation involves a three-tiered process.\textsuperscript{20}

The top tier of public participation involves a Project Steering Committee composed of ward councilors, city administrators, project consultants, and Provincial government representatives. This committee is where the bulk of the initiative’s planning takes place. The second tier of public participation involves the ward committees of the various wards in Duncan Village. This level of public participation is aimed at allowing representatives from the wards to participate in the formulation of ward-specific redevelopment proposals. The lowest tier of public participation involves meeting with the general public in Duncan Village in an effort to collect comments and suggestions from local residents.\textsuperscript{21}

The idea behind this system of public participation is that local planners have the opportunity to engage the public in meaningful ways that allow residents to produce suggestions and ideas that will guide the planning staff in the formulation of the Duncan Village Local Spatial Development Framework (LSDF).\textsuperscript{22}

**Challenges to Participatory Planning in Duncan Village**

A good start has been made, but challenges such as public pressure for service delivery, an unstable political environment, ineffective government systems, inadequate planning approaches, and lack of adequate funding threaten the effectiveness of participatory planning.\textsuperscript{23} As a result, community-wide approval for the implementation of the redevelopment initiative remains low. In order to better understand why this is, the following discussion will detail some of the factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of participatory planning in Duncan Village.

**Structural Limitations**

As the local political structures of South Africa have been rebuilt and realigned over

---

\textsuperscript{16} The aim of this initiative is to help transform the slum settlement of Duncan Village into a “sound, fully functional part of the city.”

\textsuperscript{17} The initiative is based on the assumption that “it is desirable that Duncan Village be retained as an area that meets the specific needs of the residents living there by affording them opportunities to enhance their life chances and their livelihoods.”

\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the redevelopment initiative is a comprehensive program for the economic, social, spatial, and infrastructural redevelopment of the community. It is an effort to gradually shift the built environment from one of informality, danger, and isolation, to one of formality, safety, and integration. At its heart, the redevelopment initiative is focused on providing adequate housing to the residents of Duncan Village.

\textsuperscript{19} The Duncan Village Redevelopment Initiative is the first time that the BCM has embarked on a process of redevelopment in the shantytown that seeks first to recognize the role that Duncan Village plays in the city; second, to identify the current situation of those who live in the area; and third, to formulate viable, targeted housing solutions through a process of research and public participation.

\textsuperscript{20} According to Raymond Foster, head of the municipality’s forward planning branch, this effort is a back and forth, give and take process between the city, residents, and other actors in an effort to discover what is affordable, sustainable, and beneficial for those who live in Duncan Village.

\textsuperscript{21} To accomplish this, a system of public participation has been arranged to involve ward (neighborhood) councilors and residents in the planning and implementation of the redevelopment initiative. This system of public participation involves a three-tiered process.

\textsuperscript{22} The top tier of public participation involves a Project Steering Committee composed of ward councilors, city administrators, project consultants, and Provincial government representatives. This committee is where the bulk of the initiative’s planning takes place.

\textsuperscript{23} The second tier of public participation involves the ward committees of the various wards in Duncan Village. This level of public participation is aimed at allowing representatives from the wards to participate in the formulation of ward-specific redevelopment proposals.

\textsuperscript{24} The lowest tier of public participation involves meeting with the general public in Duncan Village in an effort to collect comments and suggestions from local residents.

\textsuperscript{25} The idea behind this system of public participation is that local planners have the opportunity to engage the public in meaningful ways that allow residents to produce suggestions and ideas that will guide the planning staff in the formulation of the Duncan Village Local Spatial Development Framework (LSDF).
the last few years, the ANC government has created large, top-down, control-oriented local governments that are ineffective in responding to local needs. Although Duncan Village has a history of local governance structures that developed in response to the apartheid government, over the last few years, the ANC (in an attempt to become the gatekeeper of development in South Africa) has sought to capture and control these community-based organizations (CBOs) by creating large bureaucratic local governments that are not directly accountable to individual residents [citing withheld at the request of the informant].

For example, in the local political system of South Africa, only half of the ward councilors are elected directly by voters. Currently, local governments in South Africa consist of a council that is composed of directly elected ward councilors and proportionately appointed party councilors. Ward councilors represent a specific geographic ward within the municipality and are elected directly by voters. Proportionately appointed councilors are chosen by a political party according to the proportion of votes the party receives in local elections. Thus, nearly half of the municipal councilors, including the mayor, are appointed to position by the political party that receives the majority party-line vote in local elections.

Since the mayor and half of the local politicians are not directly elected by the voters, a government structure is created where loyalty to the party and political expediency can take precedence over community needs. As a result, residents and CBOs are often marginalized from participating in development planning processes and many times long-term development needs are stifled by the ineffectiveness of overly politicized bureaucracies.
Legal Limitations

According to South Africa’s current laws, “participation by the local community in the affairs of the municipality must take place through current local political structures and councilors.”

In other words, when engaged in dialogue with residents, city planners must approach the community through the local political councilors. For example, if planners need to meet with local residents or CBOs in Duncan Village, they must plan the meeting through the ward councilor and normally the ward councilor presides over and conducts the meeting.

Because planners cannot approach CBOs or residents directly, the local political councilor often becomes the gate keeper of information about the community. This results in a system of public participation that is highly politicized. Consequently, a situation emerges where political agendas and pressures can often undermine effective public dialogue and threaten long-term development goals. Again, the result is that residents and CBOs are often marginalized from the process of development planning that will affect their neighborhoods.

One resident of Duncan Village gave the following response about public meetings and participation: “I’ve been to a couple of public meetings in the past, but I stopped going because it was not about redevelopment, but about people being represented on the ward committees. It was about political ego and not redevelopment.”

This example clearly illustrates the danger political interference poses to the effectiveness of public participation and redevelopment efforts because residents, civic institutions, and city staff may only communicate with each other through the ward councilor.

Planning Limitations

Many local politicians and bureaucrats are determined to treat Duncan Village as a single community entity instead of a complex whole made up of many organizations and individuals. There seems to be an attitude among many city employees that Duncan Village is a homogenous community and, as such, redevelopment solutions should be seen as one-size-fits-all. However, with a population of over eighty thousand, it is more likely that hundreds of communities and CBOs exist within Duncan Village and that human development needs are as diverse as the population. In this situation, a one-size-fits-all, master plan development approach strips away local participation from the development process. Such a planning approach in Duncan Village is likely to meet few needs and create more problems than it solves.
As a result of this master plan development approach, the municipality is struggling to deal with the many people who live in Duncan Village who don’t fit the criteria of approved housing and redevelopment solutions. Although a master planning approach may be required for bulk services such as engineering and infrastructure, a more effective, grounds up, localized, pilot-project approach could be developed to implement housing projects that truly meet the needs of the people who live in the various neighborhoods of Duncan Village. A likely explanation for this master plan approach to the redevelopment initiative is that the local politicians and bureaucrats do not understand the spatiality of the various communities which exist in Duncan Village.

Although much time and effort has been spent over the last few years to gather data about the residents of Duncan Village, no research project to date has attempted to identify the spatial extent or social hierarchy of the many collective organizations and networks that exist in Duncan Village. As a result, little is known about the natural neighborhood boundaries or community leadership structures in the shantytown. Without this knowledge, it is unlikely that any redevelopment initiative, no matter how holistic or well thought out, will have a net positive impact on the lives of residents and families living in Duncan Village.

**Cultural Limitations**

During the apartheid years, Duncan Village became an extremely violent place as the community resisted the policies of forced removals. Today, that culture of civil resistance still exists to a lesser degree, and, as a result, whenever public meetings become heated, rational conversation is often replaced by a collective ritual called Toyi Toyi. This ritual consists of angry residents participating in traditional dances that signify the community’s frustration with the government. Although Toyi Toyiing is a unique cultural trait, it often prevents meaningful dialogue, exchange, and compromise between community residents and their local government.

**Improving Participatory Planning in Duncan Village**

According to anthropologists Nici Nelson and Susan Wright, in order for development to be transformative, participation must shift from being a means (e.g., mobilizing local labor in capital investment projects) to an end (e.g., local people establishing power structures in order to participate in political decision-making). Development professor Robert Chambers also acknowledges that for participation to be transformative there must be a fundamental change in power relations between the empowered (the uppers) and the marginalized (the lowers) where “the dominant uppers ‘hand over the stick,’ sit down, listen, and themselves learn.”

During my interviews in the shantytown, when residents were asked how their ideal vision of Duncan Village should be realized, an overwhelming majority of interviewees responded that their vision should be accomplished through cooperation, participation, and partnership with the residents of Duncan Village and the municipality. One resident said, “I think it would be achieved with the help of Duncan Village residents and the city council. With the help of both, that is how it can be achieved. There needs to be participation.”

This desire for participation in the process of development planning is logical considering the long history of civic activism in Duncan Village, and the fact that the residents of Duncan Village are the ones closest to the day to day reality of life in Duncan Village. The kind of on
the ground knowledge possessed by residents of Duncan Village means that they will know better than others what kind of development policies will meet their needs. In this respect, participatory planning methods that seek to give ownership of the planning process to the residents and CBOs of Duncan Village have the potential to yield truly meaningful and effective development plans.

These interview responses also coincide with findings by UN-Habitat concerning housing development and participation. According to the *Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*, the current “accepted best practice for housing interventions in developing countries is now participatory slum improvement.” As a general rule, UN-Habitat suggests that “the more marginalized or culturally separate the group being assisted, the more participation and partnership necessary.” In the case of Duncan Village, which has a long history of oppressive marginalization and community activism, the municipality should be careful to engage often and consistently with local residents and not let the process of community development become stifled in the politics of local election campaigns.

Although the municipality has begun a process of participatory research and planning in Duncan Village, much can be done to allow local residents and CBOs to take ownership of planning processes in order to ensure that planning solutions benefit them in the long term. Thus, the remainder of this paper will suggest a number of ways to improve participatory planning in Duncan Village.

**Modifying Local Political Structures to Improve Public Participation**

As mentioned earlier, over the last few years the ANC government has sought to control the methods of public participation between local government and residents. However, as the government has pushed aside civil society structures in favor of centralized bureaucracies, the effectiveness of public participation has waned. In the interview process, when residents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of public participation between the municipality and residents, several interviewees expressed frustration with the lack of democratic participation demonstrated by the new local bureaucracy.

In order to stem this sense of disillusionment with local government and encourage an active civil society in Duncan Village, the national government of South Africa should consider reforming the control-oriented, top heavy, highly politicized local governments that have been created in recent years.

One idea that comes to mind is to increase the proportion of local politicians that are directly elected by voters and decrease the proportion of local politicians that are appointed by political parties. Perhaps a more effective culture of public participation and civil society could be created in Duncan Village if residents could directly vote for a greater percentage of their local political leaders, such as their...
mayor. This in turn would create a local political system where politicians are more directly accountable to community needs as opposed to party loyalties.

Although reforms to local political structures would require legislative reform at the national level, the government should consider creating space for more direct elections in local government so that the residents of Duncan Village can participate more directly in the political processes that affect the development of their neighborhoods.

**Enabling Non-Political Participation**

Another important suggestion to improving public participation in Duncan Village is to free the redevelopment initiative from political interference by enabling planners to bypass political structures altogether in the process of public participation. This would give planners direct access to the residents, businesses, and civic institutions that need to be consulted in order to develop targeted, sustainable solutions that meet the needs of those who live and work in Duncan Village [citing withheld at the request of the informant].

During my interviews in Duncan Village, when participants were asked about what could be done to improve the effectiveness of public participation in their communities, one main idea that seemed to evolve from the responses was that the city needed to have direct, consistent, accessible channels of communication with the residents of Duncan Village.

From conversations with the municipal planning staff, it is also apparent that local planners realize this, but at the current time they are constrained by law to engage the public through the ward councilor. This means that the effectiveness of public participation will often be determined by the effectiveness of the ward councilor and that community development will always be entangled in the short-term aspirations of political agendas.

Although allowing planners to directly approach the community, outside political channels, will require legal reform at the national level, such an effort would go a long way in creating a system of communication between city planners and the people of Duncan Village that would allow residents to own the process of community planning and development. This in turn could enable the neighborhoods of Duncan Village to finally integrate themselves back into the social and economic fabric of the city.36

Current local political structures are needed and important, but in order for effective planning and development to succeed in a community such as Duncan Village, it is essential for city planners to communicate directly with local residents in the process of development planning. The history of Duncan Village is one marked by the struggle to maintain a local community, identity, and culture, and currently, it seems that local residents still have a great desire to guide the future development of their community.

**Working with Community-Based Organizations**

As part of the process of allowing non-political participation in Duncan Village, the city government should also begin working in partnership with Duncan Village CBOs in development planning and implementation. Because development issues are so politicized in South Africa, and because of the immense scope of work to be done, it becomes difficult for local government to take on all of the responsibilities of being the sole manager of development. One advantage of directly involving CBOs in the planning and development of Duncan Village is that community groups can begin to take responsibility for some of the
workload of community development. For example, local CBOs could help source credit for small businesses or teach fire safety and housing maintenance techniques. CBOs could also form savings groups to invest in local business development or help oversee processes of public participation. Hopefully, as local CBOs participate more extensively in processes of planning and development, these community groups will share context knowledge that will allow planners to formulate targeted development policies.

One group of people in Duncan Village that would seem to have obvious and vested interest in working directly with planners and housing officials in formulating rental housing policies, and who could be mobilized through a CBO in order to assist the city in the redevelopment of Duncan Village, are the local landlords who rent shacks. A community organization of local landlords could help the city learn about the informal rental markets of transient communities or help identify local landlords who would like to be a part of a rental cooperative. Such an organization could also help the city train local landlords and residents on the proper rights of landlords and tenants in rental agreements, which in turn, could help to formalize land tenure in Duncan Village.

In summary, there is a great need to bring more politically independent CBOs into the process of public participation in Duncan Village in order to help balance the political agendas of local politicians. In addition, increased involvement of CBOs in development planning could also help the community and city form more effective partnerships that enable residents and local business owners to more fully participate in and benefit from the process of planning and development in Duncan Village.

Scaling Down Development Planning

Another suggestion that will be crucial to improving the process of participatory planning is to scale down development planning from a master plan approach extending over the entire area of Duncan Village to a smaller, more localized neighborhood level. As mentioned before, because the power hierarchies and spatial networks of communities in Duncan Village are poorly understood by local planners and government officials, it seems that the master plan approach to development planning in Duncan Village won’t meet the needs of individual residents in Duncan Village and could possibly create more problems than it solves.

There is a need to scale down development planning from a master plan of the entire geographic area of Duncan Village, which includes eighty thousand residents, to a more localized, neighborhood level so that urban designers and planners may effectively
communicate with residents, reduce the intrusive side effects that redevelopment and relocations will have on the survival strategies of local communities, and ensure that social networks of people are kept together in newly developed neighborhoods.

Jaap Geldof, a housing redevelopment consultant commenting on the implementation of appropriate neighborhood designs in Duncan Village, mentioned that when large areas are redeveloped for large number of people, it is difficult to engage in a process of meaningful public participation that will ensure that well targeted solutions are provided to local communities that will not disrupt local social structures within the different neighborhoods. Geldof suggests that instead of redeveloping super blocks, which would require the relocation of thousands of people, the city should redevelop Duncan Village at a more local, neighborhood level.

By redeveloping Duncan Village at the neighborhood level, the city can work with a smaller group of residents and actually have a chance to engage with these residents in meaningful dialogue about the design of their neighborhoods. In this way, the redevelopment of Duncan Village neighborhoods will be less intrusive, require smaller numbers of relocations, and will preserve the important mixture of residential tenure options and retail uses that currently make the local neighborhoods in Duncan Village viable for many of the poorer residents.

**Identifying Local Community Structures**

The previous suggestions about enabling nonpolitical participation, working with local CBOs, and scaling down development planning to a neighborhood level sound good in theory, but how will planners locate these neighborhood groups in a densely populated squatter camp where local power hierarchies and spatial networks are poorly understood?

Professor Minkley of the University of Fort Hare has suggested that in order to effectively scale down redevelopment in Duncan Village planners need to understand the spatiality of community networks in Duncan Village. In order to do this, planners need to find ways to identify all of the individuals associated with a particular community and then engage in dialogue with members of that community about what housing and redevelopment solutions will be most beneficial to them within the parameters of government housing subsidy criteria.

Minkley has suggested that these neighborhoods of social networks could be identified by asking everyone on a particular block who they know in the area. As people are identified and associated with their friends, families, and neighbors in the area, planners will come to a sense of what these community networks look like on the ground and could use these networks as neighborhood redevelopment unit.

In other words, redevelopment could occur using blocks of associations that are based on relationships and networks instead of physical boundaries such as streets and fences. As these blocks of association are identified and mapped within Duncan Village, the municipality could then use the skills of local planners to consult the residents of these blocks about effective housing policies for their neighborhoods. In this way, the social fabric of the communities in Duncan Village would be preserved throughout the redevelopment process. In attempting to identify community boundaries and structures in Duncan Village, two ideas come to mind.

The first idea is to consult with the ward (neighborhood) committees that already exist within Duncan Village. Ward committees represent the second tier of public participation in
the redevelopment initiative. These committees are made up of residents and representatives of CBOs who have vested interest in local community interests such as business, sports, finance, agriculture, arts, etc. Although ward committees have not been consulted much in the process of development planning, it seems that consulting a group of residents who represent various interests in the community might be a feasible way to identify the local leaders, CBOs, and neighborhoods of Duncan Village. This information could then be used by planners to effectively scale down redevelopment to the neighborhood level.

Secondly, a door-to-door survey could be conducted in Duncan Village to ask each resident to identify all of the people that they are connected to in the immediate vicinity. By asking people to identify their local social networks and then mapping these connections, planners would come to an understanding of where natural social boundaries exist in Duncan Village.

Although communities rarely have strict spatial boundaries, this survey data would be used to determine rough or approximate boundaries of social networks in Duncan Village. The rough spatiality of community networks in would then be used to determine boundaries lines that could be used to divide Duncan Village into smaller neighborhood units, which then could be used as the basic unit of public participation and development.

By having local residents identify their local social networks and then using these networks as the basis for neighborhood boundary formation, it would allow planners to locate and communicate more effectively with the CBOs and other neighborhood structures that exist in Duncan Village. As a result, planners would scale down the redevelopment initiative from a one-size-fits-all, master plan approach to a smaller neighborhood approach that allows for plans to be tailored to the specific needs that exist in various communities.

It should be noted that as local neighborhood boundaries and social hierarchies are discovered in Duncan Village, the current system of ward councilors and committees should be modified to accommodate the additional smaller neighborhood political divisions.

Although this process of community identification and data collection may be laborious, it is an important step to understanding the residents of Duncan Village and subsequently building meaningful structures of public participation. Only as the local government understands the location of the communities are they trying to help will they reach out and help them take ownership of the processes of community development in Duncan Village. Also, because such a process of data collection will be expensive and time consuming, there needs to be a strong financial commitment to public participation in Duncan Village by international aid organizations, the national government, and the local government, before participatory planning can begin to truly benefit the residents of Duncan Village.

Participating with Residents in Neighborhood Urban Design

Once local neighborhood boundaries and community organizations have been identified, planners will then enter these neighborhoods, gather information, and participate with CBOs and residents in the formation of neighborhood specific plans.

According to Minkley, one of the major needs of South African planning over the last ten years has been for planners to stop relying on modernist, European ideals and assumptions of communities when planning for the redevelopment of shack settlements. In order to understand the importance of the structure of the built environment in shanty-
towns, planners need to “get out of their offices,” go into neighborhoods, and discover the realities of informal settlements through a process of meaningful, participatory dialogue. To demonstrate the importance of existing urban forms and land use patterns when considering the redevelopment of Duncan Village, I would like to digress for a few paragraphs in order to describe some of the major characteristics of the built environment of the squatter camp.

Duncan Village is a place that has been created and molded by its heritage and by the communities which live in the settlement. Currently, Duncan Village is a space outside of the Western/European system of legal subdivision and lot standards. The urban form of the settlement has been formed around the local socio/economic principles and networks endorsed by the community. As a result, Duncan Village has become a place of flexibility and informality that has allowed the urban poor to form social networks in order to support one another through oppression and poverty.

At first glance, a shack neighborhood in Duncan Village may seem to have been constructed in a haphazard, random manner, but a closer inspection reveals that many of the shack communities in Duncan Village have a highly structured, urban form that increases the functionality of family and social networks.

Many of the shacks in Duncan Village are set up in a semicircular fashion surrounding a small open space of dirt or trees. These open spaces are where the women hang their laundry and cook meals, where men talk about employment and business opportunities, and where many local spaza shops are located. These spaces are interwoven throughout the dense settlement pattern of Duncan Village and provide the necessary public spaces for people to carry on daily activities and communications with each other.

Thus, this particular type of urban form represents the living spaces and social networks that people use on a daily basis. Because of the usefulness of this type of urban form in the daily routines of many residents, it is important to preserve it within each of the neighborhoods of Duncan Village so that social networks and a sense of community are preserved.

In addition to preserving urban form, as plans are made to redevelop Duncan Village it will also be important to preserve the mixture of land uses and income levels that are the consequence of the lack of formal regulations. These land use patterns support local survival strategies, daily activities, and business interactions and are a major reason why the communities of Duncan Village are economically viable for the urban poor.
The city has already planned for the Douglas Smit highway to be turned into a main road that is oriented to pedestrian use and will be developed as a high-intensity, mixed-use, high-density area. This is a good start. This kind of compact, mixed-use, pedestrian oriented development is a huge step forward in integrating appropriate forms of transportation and land use within walking distance of the majority of the residents in Duncan Village.

However, the characteristics of the built environment of Duncan Village can only effectively be preserved through a process of community participation in the design of redeveloped neighborhoods. As local neighborhoods are identified in Duncan Village, there is a more detailed level of data gathering and participatory urban design that needs to be addressed in order to ensure that the redeveloped neighborhoods in Duncan Village continue to preserve social networks and meet the needs of residents.

First, it has been suggested by several local city officials and professors that a comprehensive social survey be carried out among all the residents of Duncan Village so that the municipality has a good sense of the different types of households and survival strategies that exist in Duncan Village. Therefore, after the process of discovering local neighborhood boundaries, international development agencies, local government, and academia could go into these newly discovered neighborhoods and collect data about the needs and wants of residents. Information about relocation strategies, development needs, neighborhood priorities, income levels, household sizes, etc., could be gathered and used as the basis on which to build well targeted development policies that are specifically geared towards the various communities that exist in Duncan Village.

Second, a system of effective neighborhood meetings needs to be instituted where local residents and CBOs can interactively participate in the development planning of their neighborhood. Currently, public meetings are organized by a ward councilor for a ward consisting of several thousand people. However, because public meetings in Duncan Village have a tendency to regress to political rhetoric and Toyi Toyi rituals and often consist of non-interactive, boring presentations, not many people come out to these meetings. As a result, these meetings tend to be more instructive than participatory and residents do not have the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to the development planning occurring in their neighborhoods.

Figure 8: Many women from Duncan Village run street vending shops in downtown East London during the day.
As mentioned earlier, in order for development to be meaningful and effective for those who live in Duncan Village, neighborhood communities need to be included in the design, redevelopment, and relocation of their neighborhoods so that the appropriate land uses, housing types, tenure option, relocation strategies and urban forms can be formulated for the individuals, families and CBOs residing in these particular neighborhoods. In order to do this, public meetings need to become more participatory in nature.

Therefore, once planners have effectively scaled down the geographic scope of planning by identifying neighborhood communities, they should conduct effective, interactive, small neighborhood meetings directly with local communities. At these meetings, residents, CBO representatives, business owners, planners, urban designers, and architects can interface directly with each other in order for city planners to get a feel for which communal spaces, business premises, housing types, and tenure options are important to each community. Perhaps these neighborhood meetings would also be appropriate forums from which to organize and implement the social surveys mentioned previously.

In these meetings, participatory planning tools such as GIS maps, sticky dots, and priority planning exercises can be used to allow residents to interact with each other and debate housing polices, appropriate urban forms, local economic development needs, social service needs, land uses, and relocation strategies.

These meetings could also be effective forums for residents and community leaders to build consensus, identify goals and priorities, and begin to own the process of development planning in their neighborhoods. Ideas generated from these neighborhood meetings could then form the basis of redevelopment plans in Duncan Village. It is likely that this form of participatory community planning and urban design could produce targeted development solutions that benefit residents and help preserve the urban forms and collective survival strategies that exist in Duncan Village.

Hopefully small, interactive, and effective neighborhood meetings would also decrease Toyi Toyi rituals and political tensions between community members and local government officials because such meetings would enable residents and city officials to work directly together, communicate with each other effectively, and actually begin to make progress in the planning and development of the neighborhoods in Duncan Village.

In summary, it becomes evident that only after interactively participating with residents and CBOs will city planners have the context knowledge to be able to create spaces and plans that will fit the needs of residents living in these neighborhoods. Small neighborhood meetings can dramatically increase the participatory nature of development planning in Duncan Village and help ensure that city development policies are actually effective at uplifting impoverished neighborhoods because these policies would, in part, be created by the residents who lived in these neighborhoods.

However, public meetings, like the ones described above, will only be possible in Duncan Village if the scale of planning is reduced to the neighborhood level, the spatial component of community networks and boundaries are identified, and planners are allowed to interface directly with community structures—outside of the arena of local government politics. Consequently, it seems likely that the political will to implement such public participation reforms in Duncan Village will only exist if there is more direct accountability between the local political councilors of the municipality and the individual voters of Duncan Village.
Conclusion

National government policies and local government plans have done much in recent years to reduce poverty and promote human development in South Africa. However, it seems that a lack of effective systems of public participation in Duncan Village and other shantytowns throughout South Africa have prevented the residents of these informal settlements from being able to take ownership of their own development and improve their living conditions. On the other hand, the picture is not bleak; there is still much that can be done to improve systems of public participation in the shantytowns of South Africa.

Ideas about more direct elections and public accountability at the local level, enabling planners to talk directly to residents and CBOs of shantytowns, scaling down the geographic scope of planning by identifying neighborhood boundaries and community structures, and engaging in participatory methods of urban design all hold the potential to improve public participation, deepen the culture of local democracy, and transform power relations in local governments to enable “local people to do their own analysis, to take command, to gain confidence, and to make their own decisions” about the development of their communities and lives.46

As residents of South African shantytowns have the opportunity to own the process of development planning in their neighborhoods several processes will be accomplished. First, it will help local residents utilize their knowledge to solve local problems. Second, as this happens, pride and confidence will be restored in the viability of neighborhood communities and a healthy civil society will develop. Finally, as a healthy civil society develops in the shantytowns, the effectiveness of local democracy will increase in South Africa.

Thus, it becomes evident that in order to promote democratic processes in the local government, effective participation by neighborhood groups becomes an essential element. However, the question remains as to whether the political will exists to improve systems of public participation in Duncan Village and other shantytowns throughout South Africa that these transformations in planning, development, and local democracy can take place.

In the end, it seems that planning is the complex, delicate task of creating synthesis out of a variety of voices, interests, and ideas. However, in order to create meaningful plans, those people affected by the planning process must be allowed to participate in ways that allow them to “do their own analysis and make their own decisions.”47 It is hoped that the suggestions in this paper about ways to improve public participation in Duncan Village may offer a few insights and spark a few debates that will help improve the ability of politicians and planners to imbed a culture of effective local democracy in South Africa and deliver on development obligations to the residents of shantytowns throughout the country.

Acknowledgements

I would like to recognize and thank Joshua Meek, Christopher Meek, Ncumisa Yoyo, Lindile Magewu, Richard Jackson, Togie Thetho, Gary Minkley, Leslie Banks, Anne King, Julie Johnson, Ashley Tolman, David Shuler, Caren Burns, Raymond Foster, Stephen Swart, Louis Roodt, Albie Kotzee, Zodwa Sibelekwana, Deon Poortman, Annemarie Botha, Hans Schluter, Antony Meuleman, Jenny Bezuidenhout, Jaap Geldof, and Matthew Maddox for the time, effort, mentoring, assistance, dedication, teamwork, and friendship that was generously given to help me complete this research project.
NOTES
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid.


35. Ibid.


39. Ibid.


41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Foster.

46. Chambers.

47. Ibid.

REFERENCES


On a morning visit to the district maternity hospital in Asante Mampong, Ghana, during June 2005, I discover from one of the nurses, Ellen, that a newborn child died during the night. The diagnosis: detachment of the placenta prior to her cesarean birth. The mother does not know and to prevent her from crying, two nurses explain, she will not be informed. When we go on rounds I see that although she is not crying her face seems to hold a worried but apathetic look, making me wonder if she suspects that her child is gone. While we are there, a few members of the woman’s family come by to pick up the corpse. After a pleasant exchange with the nurse, one man pays a few coins for a plastic bag and follows Ellen down the hall. Minutes later they walk out past us, cheerfully carrying the plastic bag that is no longer empty. While this goes on, I nervously consult the other nurse, Anita.

“Anita, please,” I ask her, “When will they tell the woman about her child?”
To which she replies, “Oh, they will not tell her. There may be a change in condition.”
“When,” I repeat, “When will they tell her?”

Anita answers, “She will not find out until she is going to be discharged.” It only takes a second for me to realize that because of her c-section, she will not be discharged for another six days.

“Will she not ask for her child?” I ask. “She will ask,” Anita replies. “But we will just tell her that we sent the child to Okomfo Anokye (a larger city hospital). We will tell her that the child is in the incubator.” To this I cannot even reply; I just nod, stunned.

Less than a week later, I return to the maternity hospital to find the woman nearly ready for discharge. By this time, she has been informed of her infant’s death and seems to be taking it well. In fact, she smiles pleasantly when she sees me in the hall. I relate this specific encounter because it illustrates the vast differences between the handling of infant death in Mampong as opposed to in western countries such as the United States. The lack of communication, the unceremonious removal of the child’s corpse, and the apparently rapid emotional recovery of the mother all struck me as distinctly different from my own expectations of how a child’s death would be treated and added questions to my mind regarding the ways that Asante people understand infant death and maternal grief.

Mothers express grief for their lost children differently according to the cultural values of their society. Cultural beliefs and attitudes towards babies, healing, death, and the afterlife effect how infant fatalities are conceptualized. The purpose of this paper is to examine how infant deaths are understood and coped with among the Asante people of central Ghana.

According to UNICEF 2005 statistics, Ghana’s infant (under one year) mortality rate is fifty-nine deaths per one thousand live births, and the under-five mortality rate is ninety-five deaths per one thousand live births. This is compared to rates of seven and eight, respectively, for the United States. With rates this high, infant mortality is a common occurrence in Ghana, especially among poorer segments of the population. The pervasiveness of infant death
requires society to explain death and provide a mechanism for grief for the many women whose children pass away.

As I traveled to Ghana to learn how the people understand and cope with infant mortality, I felt a bit scared at the potentially emotional nature of the conversations I would have. However, as I began my field work, I was surprised at the stoic manner in which mothers related their stories. During the three months of my stay, I never once saw a woman cry during an interview about her child’s death. Upon further inquiry, I discovered that mourning practices for children are minimal and the community specifically discourages women from publicly crying over their infants’ deaths. Women are expected to cope by forgetting about their child’s death as soon as possible and focusing instead on living children. Because children die so easily and frequently, it is better to move on quickly than to prolong grief.

Grief patterns may vary depending on the views of infants in that specific culture. In some West African societies, the religious understanding of the afterlife underscores the way that people conceptualize infant death. For instance, Alma Gottlieb argues that the Beng of Côte D’Ivoire see infants as spiritual beings recently brought to earth from the spiritual realm and still retaining ties to their previous life. With little provocation the infants may decide to return to their previous spiritual home or, in other words, die. The special spiritual status of infants that Gottlieb describes was characterized through the examination of their child care practices in detail.1

Through my examination of everyday practices associated with infants, I found that perceptions of infant deaths indeed differed significantly from those of adults. Today, the Asante people seem less likely than in the past to explicitly adhere to traditional beliefs regarding the spiritual world, perhaps due in part to the influence of Christianity and Islam; however, the way that they care for infants and handle their deaths appear to have largely been retained. These common practices point to an underlying ideological stance on infants as more transient and spiritual in nature. In fact, in this paper I argue that Asante characterizations of newborns as vulnerable spiritual beings provide an explanation of frequent infant death and contribute to social expectations of short grieving periods for bereaved mothers.

Throughout the remainder of this paper, I will outline some of the reincarnation beliefs surrounding infants that indicate the spiritual nature of infants and show how these beliefs tie into understandings of early deaths. I will show how spiritual causes of disease point to a special vulnerability in infants. In terms of deaths, I will show how the funeral practices for children illustrate the differences between perceptions of adult and child deaths and make the minimization of public grief clear. I will also describe the rituals performed to discourage women from crying over dead children, demonstrating how conceptualizations of children are ultimately applied in the lives of the women.

Methodology

As I approached the task of field work, my rationale coincided with many of the symbolic anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, who argue that cultural meaning is “stored,” in a sense, in symbols found in religion and everyday life. In order to understand how people conceptualize their lives one must identify the symbols and symbolic practices that they use to describe their world and then discover through observation and interview
what these symbols really mean. Symbols have many layers of meaning and perform many functions in the society. Interpreting symbolic cultural meaning involves putting yourself as close as possible to the context of the people that you study; it requires a thorough analysis of every situation and meaning associated with a certain practice.

In an attempt to understand and interpret meanings within culture, Geertz espoused an approach that he termed “thick description.” Geertz viewed cultural meaning as public: although the symbolic meaning of actions may be subtle and complex, actions convey a message that can be understood by a group at large. In doing ethnography, thick description requires rooting out underlying meaning; it entails, for example, understanding the significant difference of message between a conspiratorial wink and an involuntary eye twitch. As a cultural outsider, an ethnographer can never have full access to the entire body of cultural knowledge and must instead gain understanding through the small glimpses that informants impart. Geertz argues then, that “cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusion from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.”

It may not be possible to understand every part of the culture, yet meaning can be derived through a process of thick and contextual description.

According to Turner, objects, events, relationships, actions, and other activities can all act as symbols, or units of ritual meaning. In this vein, the cultural practices and actions surrounding child health care can be viewed as symbols that offer insight into cultural thought. I chose to look at burial practices, everyday child care, and religious rituals involved with healing or child death as holding symbolic meaning pertaining to conceptions of infant disease and death for the Asante.

Turner also argues that symbols can be understood by three main means: observation of external characteristics, interpretation offered by members of the culture, and contexts largely observed by the anthropologists. In other words, an anthropologist must be keen to observe cultural events, receive explanation and analysis of those events from the very members of the culture who participate in them, and all the while seek out the other meanings and contexts that might underlie the events but have not been explicitly mentioned otherwise. Through a combination of these three forms of data collection, it is possible to sort out some of the complexities of cultural meaning.

In my own field work, I attempted to apply some of these ideas about ethnographic methodology. In order to best understand Asante perceptions of infant disease it was necessary to observe practices and behaviors as symbols of cultural meaning, discuss the specific actions and practices regarding infant death and illness in as many contexts as possible, and synthesize this information to the best of my ability. As a nineteen-year-old American student, my information has certainly been filtered through my own cultural biases, despite my best efforts to put them aside. My frequent use of male translators with imperfect English is also significant and almost certainly contributed to my experience in understanding the culture. In light of these complications, my attempt to represent Asante cultural meaning relies mainly on local stories and interviews as they were translated to me as well as on my observations and understandings of Asante healing and medicine.

I determined the basic scope of my research through interviews with women who had suffered the death of a child. With the help of a translator, usually my friend Jones, I visited...
households in the community and interviewed mothers in their homes. In addition to these interviews, I observed both traditional and medical treatment in practice by watching herbalists at work and by watching rounds and surgeries performed at the district hospital. However, much of my understanding regarding the health situation in Ghana came from living in the community, observing the daily life, and conversations with friends and translators outside of the interview setting. As I became more familiar with life in the area, my picture of the Asante worldview became increasingly clear.

Literature Review

In the arena of infant death, there have been several works relating high incidences of mortality rates with attitudes about death. One of the most notable, *Death Without Weeping* by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, concerns infant mortality in a Brazilian shantytown. Scheper-Hughes makes a connection between high infant mortality rates and maternal grief. Among the Alto people who are the focus of her field work, many infants are seen as born “wanting to die.” These children are characterized as weak and disadvantaged from birth, lacking even the strength or desire to eat. Additionally, child death occurs so frequently that people give it little thought or ceremony. Scheper-Hughes argues that the high incidence of death, poverty, and the constrained conditions in which the Alto live contribute to a characterization of infants as only partially human and lacking personhood at birth. Mothers are conditioned not to grieve and to accept the common fact of a child death stoically.

In a similar study among the Papel people of Guinea-Bissau, Jónina Einarsdóttir argues that unlike Alto mothers, Papel mothers see their children as fully human at birth and become distressed by each death that occurs. Indeed, mothers are expected to cry and grieve over the deaths of their children despite the fact that nearly one-third of all children die before the age of five in this area. Additionally, Einarsdóttir touches on the nature of infants in Papel culture. Babies are seen as reincarnations of previous human beings that instill them with their own personality. She also shows the ways in which beliefs about spiritual causes for disease influence the way that infant death is understood.

Spiritual afflictions are also central to understandings of child death in Fulani and Humbebe communities in Mali. Sarah Castle discusses how local categories of diseases are diagnosed in order to explain infant mortalities and to ultimately absolve the mother from guilt. Two local diseases in particular are considered to be spiritual in nature, and thus are fatal and untreatable by Western medication. These diseases are diagnosed in about half of all deaths, and often are used to rationalize the death of a child in retrospect.

Further research on the nature of infants has been conducted by Alma Gottlieb among the Beng of the Ivory Coast. Gottlieb argues that the Beng conceptualize infants as spiritual beings that retain some connection to the afterlife. As with the Papel, Beng infants are considered reincarnated beings that have recently arrived from the spiritual world. Gottlieb claims that the Beng see young infants as still tied to the spiritual world, affecting their behavior and their vulnerability to diseases and death. Newborns are seen as liminal beings: transitioning from one realm to another and fully a part of neither. Due to unhappiness or discontent with this earth, an infant may die in order to return to their previous spiritual life. Mothers go to great lengths to protect their children from spiritually harmful agents and to try to make their earth
life enticing in order to encourage them to stay.\(^{14}\) Gottlieb only briefly addresses the effect that Beng characterizations of newborns have on grieving practices. She does describe one ritual by which parents cope with their first infant death. She mentions that once the burial is performed, crying about the death is taboo.\(^{15}\) However, Gottlieb does convincingly show through an analysis of everyday child care that death and disease are distinctly tied to views of infants as part of the afterlife.

The ties between local characterizations of the nature of infants and understanding of death are very subtle and vary amongst different cultures. In Brazil, and also in Ivory Coast, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau, cultural knowledge differs from Asante view. However, many of the specific beliefs, especially regarding spirituality and reincarnation in both West African societies, seem to have similarities with traditional Asante beliefs and provide a basis for comparison and contrast.

**Ethnographic Background**

The Asante are a self proclaimed “proud people.” Located in the central region of Ghana, the Asante (or Ashanti) kingdom was the pre-Colonial seat of power for the region; bestowing them with a rich cultural history and a loud, outgoing, and sometimes aggressively friendly manner. The capital of the Asante region is Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana. My research focuses on the town of Mampong, located one hour north of Kumasi by mini-bus, with a population of approximately thirty-five thousand.

The Asante traditional religion and cosmology is similar to many other West African societies. They believe in the existence of a single creator God, whom they call Onyame. Initially, Onyame had contact with human beings; however, a woman once was preparing a meal of *fufu* and accidentally struck Onyame with her pounding stick because she did not notice his presence. Offended, Onyame withdrew from the earth, and now is inaccessible to humans.\(^{16}\) Even so, the Asante believe in the existence of ancestral spirits, called abasom, who deal directly in human affairs and yet also have access to Onyame’s presence.

This cosmology has special significance in relation to healing. Health is holistic; every illness is a product of physical, spiritual, emotional, and cosmological forces. Illness manifests itself in the body, but unlike in the biomedical view of health, bodily affliction is not the root of the problem. In order to cure a disease, the true cause must be discovered and resolved.

Potential causes for disease vary widely.\(^{17}\) For example, illness may be caused by the abasom as punishment for the breaking of a taboo. Another extremely common source of disease in Asante culture is witchcraft. Witches are thought to kill their victims, almost always maternal kin members, because of their own jealousy, greed, and cruelty. Witches kill or cause disease in secret and through the spiritual realm. For example, a witch is thought to have the power to astrally project herself in the spiritual plane, and through her witchcraft can consume her victims spiritually in the night.\(^{18}\) If this happens, the victim will physically die as a result. Witches, of course, keep their identity a secret, so normal people cannot know from whom they are in danger.\(^{19}\) Only other individuals with an ability to see the spiritual realm can recognize witches for what they are.

Spiritual afflictions, including punishments and acts of jealousy such as witchcraft, are a common part of Asante medicine. Spiritual diseases appear as physical illnesses but are actually
caused by problems in the spiritual plane. Initially, people may try to treat these diseases in the hospital or with western pharmaceuticals. However, because the problems are spiritually based, western medicine cannot beget a full recovery, even if it does prolong the life of the afflicted person. Indeed, failure to respond to western medical treatment is one of the most common ways that people recognize spiritual diseases.

Since spiritual diseases are based in traditional cosmologies, they can only be treated with the help of spiritual medicine. The okomfo, also called fetish priests or diviners, are both medical and spiritual practitioners who consult with the abasom in order to determine the causes of human problems. These practitioners recognize witchcraft or spiritual disease and address these problems, often through the use of sacrifices and libation to the gods. Okomfo also use herbal remedies, taught to them by the gods, which they use to treat illness. Besides the okomfo, several different types of traditional healers, such as herbalists, bonesetters, and midwives, use herbal remedies to treat physical manifestations of disease while acknowledging spiritual components of illness.

However, the healing situation in Ghana is in the process of change. In the southern half of the country, of which Asante is included, the vast majority of the people are Christian, about 80 percent, and almost all of the rest are Muslim. Both of these religions are long-standing and influential communities that certainly affect the attitudes and practices towards health and healing. Christian faith healers and Muslim healers called maalams are frequently called upon to treat the spiritual aspects of disease that were formerly tackled by okomfo.

Modern hospitals have also become more common, and both the government and communities view them as the most desirable form of health care. In the town of Mampong, Christianization and Westernization have greatly decreased the utilization of traditional medicine, with more emphasis being placed on Christian faith healing, hospitals, and Western pharmaceuticals. Even so, many people still choose to adhere to the much cheaper traditional remedies instead of (or in conjunction with) modern medical care.

Infant Spirituality

Despite the changing views regarding health and infant mortality, aspects of older beliefs still play a role in perceptions of infants and infant death. Traditionally, infants have been regarded as predominantly spiritual beings in contact with both the earthly and spiritual realms. Outside religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, have long since become the rule, slowly pushing out many of these beliefs. However, the older generation and traditional healers still use some concepts such as reincarnation to explain certain aspects of infant nature. For instance, infants may be seen as spiritual beings with recent ties to the spiritual world that make them special and more apt to leave this earth.

The transitional status ascribed to infants might be described by Turner as liminal. Liminality refers to the marginal period of ritual where humans are transitioning between two stable states. The transitional-being, or “liminal persona,” is classified as belonging to neither its previous nor future state, and thus plays an ambiguous role. Turner argues “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social
and cultural traditions.” Asante infants, “betwixt and between” the spiritual world and this earth, could thus be viewed as liminal entities. Cultural practices and beliefs symbolically express this classification, showing that infants have retained aspects of their spiritual nature, particularly in the earliest portion of infancy.

The Asante concept of reincarnation, for example, demonstrates that infants have ties to the spiritual world. In some cases, infants may be the reincarnation of a dead ancestor. The child’s identity may be recognized through a resemblance to the relative. Some traits, often facial features, help to identify the child’s previous identity. Similarly, some people claim that infants may recurrently die and be reincarnated to the same mother. If a child is suspected to have died more than once, a mark may be put on his or her body, either by cutting a part of the body such as the ear or applying paint, which allows the parents to recognize the baby should it be born again.

One old community healer named NanaYa described the problem, “Some people give birth, but they are unstable, the kids do not stay on this earth. Not every child [receives this mark], just if you have a child that dies and then keeps dying. Then they would intentionally set the mark.” NanaYa herself admitted to having the same child two times; one of her children died while she was pregnant, and when the new child was born it had an abscess on its head identical to that of her recently deceased daughter. Because of this abscess, she recognized the new baby as a reincarnation of the daughter, and gave the newborn the same name.

When a mother has had multiple infants die and suspects them to be the same child, the body of the dead infant is marked. Not only does this allow her to recognize the baby should it return again, but it also deters the child from continuing its pattern of births and deaths. When describing actions that parents may take to prevent children from repeatedly dying, NanaYa explained, “It is only the mark that they set on the child. In ancient times, the fetish priest could tell some of the reasons of the child coming back [to the spirit world]. But since Christianity, a lot of people don’t believe this. But the people will still put the mark on the child, and there is no reason [for the child] to go back. The child will stay alive.” As NanaYa mentioned, the use of reincarnation an explanation for death are dwindling; none of the younger or middle aged mothers seemed to believe that they had a reincarnated child. Several knew and talked about the act of marking dead children, although they had no personal experience with it. The belief is declining yet still has some influence over how dead infants are handled.

Kaakyire, a young traditional bonesetter and herbalist, offered the most succinct overview of reincarnation, infant spirituality, and disease in an interview on the subject. He explained that children who continually die and are reborn do so because they have a mother in the spiritual realm that sends them to earth and then takes them back. He says:

The baby has a spirit mom who has sent the baby to earth to pay her spiritual debts. Whenever the child gets sick, the money spent on the child goes to the mom in the spiritual plane. When the mom pays off her debts, she may decide to just take the baby back. When the mark is put on the baby though, the mom will send the baby back. She will think that the baby is not hers because it now has the mark, so the child will be returned.

The mark makes the child unrecognizable in the spiritual world, and thus decreases the chance that it will be taken back through death. Every person has a mother in the spiritual realm, but sometimes the mothers will give up the baby forever and it will remain on earth.
When a child becomes ill, it may signify an attempt for the child to be taken back into the spiritual world. Kaakyire comments, “Most children get sick during childhood, and so the earthly mom has to fight for her baby. When the child is sick, the spirit mom is fighting for the baby. When you fight for it, the spirit mom will see that you love the child and that you really want it. If the child dies, the spirit mom wins.” Placing the mark on the child’s cheek is one way to fight for the child. For convulsions, the mark would usually be three small lines at the side of the person’s mouth. A few other types of marks may also be used, including an X on the cheek, or three marks near the ear. Kaakyire explained that a person who has a mark put on them is called donko, related to the wordodonkoni, meaning slave. Those children who die and come back to earth are donko. Children who receive this slave-mark for sickness are essentially bound to the earth through the acquisition of these medicinal marks.

Most beliefs regarding reincarnation and the liminal spiritual nature of infants are held by traditional healers who have a greater knowledge of spiritual medicine. Among the majority of women in Mampong, this does not appear to be an explicit part of their conceptualization of infants. However, it is clear that infant spirituality has indeed been a part of Asante culture, and continues to be used as a part of healing infant disease.

**Infant Vulnerability**

The liminal state of young infants contributes to an overriding sense of vulnerability. Because newborns have retained spiritual ties, they are both physically and spiritually more susceptible to disease. Common perceptions of infant disease, particularly the spiritual aspects, demonstrate this fact. I would often ask mothers and healers to list the most common diseases that kill children. Among the physical diseases such as malaria, measles, and typhoid, another disease called asram was also a standard answer. Unlike measles or typhoid, asram is a spiritual disease, meaning that it is caused by spiritual forces and manifests itself through physical illness. Belief in asram is extremely common; even those who were strong advocates of western medicine over traditional healing still knew a great deal about the disease. For example, one mother named Lucy attributed her own son’s death to yellow fever. However, she later explained that asram and measles were the two diseases that killed the most children and described the symptoms of asram in detail. Asram is thought by many to be the most common disease affecting young children. In fact, it is a spiritual affliction that is unique to infancy.

Beliefs regarding asram strongly indicate the special vulnerability of newborn children, especially in the spiritual sense. A child is given the disease through the spiritual plane by a malicious person with ill intentions towards the baby. For example, Kaakyire once voiced a common opinion of how asram is spread:

I know of a man in a certain village. When a child is being born . . . he passes the back of the building and looks in the window and sees the child sleeping in the room, he can even just send the sickness to the child so that the mother has to come to him for a cure and give him money. . . . The man is a man, but I could say that he is a wizard. Or, he has medicine to cure the asram. So he sold it to the people and would buy it back. So when he sells it to you he just gives the disease, but then you sell it back and he will collect money to heal the baby.

It is extremely unlikely that a person will ever know who it was that gave asram to a child, but the individuals most often accused are traditional healers looking to make money by creating people
who will have to come to them for cures. In order to spread asram, you have to possess the asram medicine. This means that diviners, herbalists, and traditional midwives are seen as capable of spreading the disease, usually with money as the motive for doing so. Some people also claim that witches or other jealous individuals may want to cause the child to contract asram.

Similarly, visitors to the baby or the mother can pose a serious threat. Someone may pass the disease by looking at the child, hearing its voice, or even through a piece of laundry, food, or gift given to the mother that the child will touch. Asram can even be given to a child that is still in the womb. Auntie Mansah, a local herbalist, explained:

If a pregnant lady eats outside, people can give her asram while she is eating. Some people have developed this disease, so if they see you eating at a chop bar or somewhere they can easily give you the disease. There are so many ways that the pregnant lady can get asram. Some people develop the medicine on the back part of their hand. If they are sharing an eating bowl with you or something, if the hand touches you, you will get it. If you touch the hand at all. Or maybe if a pregnant lady is by the pipe getting water, someone could offer to carry her water and easily give it to her.

In the womb, children seem to be almost more vulnerable than they are after birth and are wide open to the negative machinations of those who give asram. The dangerous and unseen nature of asram necessitates that women take action to shield themselves from malevolent intentions of others. Pregnant women are encouraged to eat in the house, and newborn babies are kept inside as much as possible. In one instance, I was visiting with my friend Kaakyire, a bonesetter and herbalist, while he treated a newborn child suffering from asram. Generally Kaakyire’s patients start to come at seven or eight o’clock in the morning. However, he specifically asks asram patients to be brought at around six o’clock so that they can be treated when fewer people will be around to see them. When this particular woman came, baby strapped to her back, she had placed an additional cloth over the baby that covered it completely to deter people from looking at the child while she walked through the streets. On another occasion, she had the child covered with a large umbrella. Kaakyire explained to me that “it is not good, but people have evil ideas [about] the child.” Covering the baby makes it harder for someone to send the child asram.

Additionally, there are herbal remedies designed to shield from asram. Pregnant women often cook or bathe with herbs meant to protect their babies. Similarly, children are given herbal concoctions to drink and are regularly bathed with herbal washes. Talismans are also common protection against the disease. Pregnant women may place sachets of herbs in their room to ward off the disease, and occasionally, children will wear protective bracelets, such as a strip of rag containing the dried body of a small chameleon. These and other aspects of the disease indicate that infants are particularly spiritually vulnerable, requiring special protective measures.

Significantly, asram only affects very young infants and becomes less of a danger to the child as it ages. I was unable to get a conclusive age limit for the disease, but the general consensus was that the first three months or so were the most vulnerable. The child can contract the disease in the womb and may be susceptible for the first few years, but it is the first few months that are the most critical. During the period, many mothers keep their babies
secluded in the household as much as possible in order to keep the child from harm. From this information, it appears that newborns are the most spiritually and physically vulnerable to disease and death, and that this vulnerability decreases as children move away from the moment of birth.

**Death Practices and Maternal Grief**

The special status of infants in Asante culture crosses over into death practices. Burial practices for children differ significantly from those of adults. For an adult, a funeral is a large and important celebration given in order to support the deceased on their way to becoming an ancestor. Embalmers will freeze or preserve the body for a long period, usually several weeks, while the funeral plans are put in place. The money spent and the people that attend the funeral are all important in honoring the deceased with a large, grand funeral.

However, when a child dies, they are buried as soon as possible, preferably the same day, without any sort of funeral. The father and possibly other men of the family will take the child out and bury it without ceremony. The mother is not allowed to follow the child to the grave site, and will not even know the location of the grave. Every person that I interviewed insisted that this was true in every case. The differences in burial practice act as further evidence that child death is considered different than adult death and requires special actions to be taken.

For example, one woman named Lucy tells me the story of her child dying in the hospital in the city of Kumasi, where they quickly buried him. I asked her if they had performed a funeral. She replied that they had not. “He was a kid, and they had already spent a lot of money on the hospital,” she said. I then asked her if they would have done a funeral if they had money. She responded that “even if they had not spent so much, they still would not have had a funeral, because he was a kid.”

Interestingly enough, these special burial practices apply to more than just infants; older children or even teenagers would not be given a funeral in Asante culture. Only adults are given a full-fledged funeral, and even then not every adult would qualify. The first child of a mother to die, for example, would never be given a funeral regardless of his or her age. Even if every child of a mother lives to old age, the first death among them would not be celebrated. The rationale given for this practice was that having a funeral for the first child to die would encourage the other children to die as well. As one woman asserted, “If one dies and they have a funeral for that person, the rest of the siblings will follow that same trend.” A similar logic is applied to the deaths of children; any celebration of these deaths may only serve as a way to encourage even more children to die.

The lack of a ceremonious burial is only one part of the infant funerary experience. When an infant dies, not only is the mother not allowed to follow the body to the grave, she is strongly discouraged from crying. Many people explained to me that if a woman cries excessively over her child, she will become unable to have children in the future. Since fertility is highly valued in Asante culture, this is a fate to be strictly avoided.

In order to discourage newly bereaved mothers from crying, the neighbors and friends of the woman would most likely perform a ritual almost immediately after the child’s death, perhaps even the same day or the day after. This ritual is referred to as Ye kannano, which roughly translates as “we give her something to eat.” Indeed, one of the main features of the
rituals is the food that is made for the woman and (sometimes) the father to distract them from their grief, allowing them to return to normal life.

I never observed this ritual being performed but heard many different descriptions of the event, which is apparently quite common. From this, I constructed some of the important details. This ritual may take place while the child is being buried by the father, though not necessarily, as he may sometimes be included in the ritual. The neighbors and friends will bring over food, either fufu and palm nut soup or eto, a dish made of mashed plantain and egg that is one of the ritual foods of the Asante. They will also “hoot” at the woman, saying something to her such as “you have lost your child and now you are eating.” They may also bathe the woman in a nearby stream and dress her in ritual white cloth, signifying happiness. Although the woman may cry right after the baby’s death, she is strongly dissuaded from crying publicly after this ritual is performed. People will also give her advice and comfort during this time. In addition to being advised not to cry, most women said that people assured them that they would have other children and encouraged them to return to work or to whatever their normal life entailed.

The specific practices of the ritual may change if the mother is a Christian or Muslim, but the practical application stays the same. For example, members of a Christian woman’s church may come and pray for both her and her family. Similarly, Muslims will perform prayers for the child and family, and may also prepare some food to eat. In both cases, crying is discouraged, especially after the prayers have been given. In these cases, religious prayers act in place of the traditional kannano ritual. Every woman I asked about funeral practices mentioned some form of this ritual being performed for them.

The significance of this ritual can be seen by contrasting it to normal grieving practices, showing the implicit special nature of infant death. When a normal person dies, the bereaved person will likely not be concerned with food or bathing as a result of their grief. People at funerals are also often encouraged to display their grief dramatically through crying, dancing, and ostentatious dress. Adult funerals are essentially celebrations, honoring the person’s life, thanking them for their time on earth, and encouraging their passage on the road to the afterlife. With infants, however, none of the celebration is allowed. Because refusal of food and baths are a part of the grieving process, feeding or bathing grieving mothers forces the woman to move past grief rapidly. The phrase “you have lost your child and now you are eating” is a statement of this fact; the woman has lost a baby, but since she has eaten she must no longer be grieving.

In addition to helping mothers to overcome their grief, Kaakyire suggested that the kannano ritual is also meant to discourage other children from dying: essentially fooling death by pretending not to be emotionally impacted.

At first I think they will make her bathe and they will tell her not to cry. So they will tell the person not to cry . . . no matter how painful it is. Even though she will cry, she will cry inside her. And they say that when you cry a lot, if you don’t take care you won’t give birth again. And it happens too when your baby dies and you cry a lot, it is not easy for you to have a baby back again. So that is why they don’t want the people to cry. So they just want you to forget about it and just live your normal life. That’s why they do all those things to you: make you bathe, put a white cloth on you . . . like you are happy. But when a person dies,
you normally put on red or black: that means that you are sad. But we normally allow the
woman to wear white cloth and . . . the woman will take a bath. And after bathing, she will
put on nice clothes and eat good food, just to make the dead, the dead who came to take the
child away, unhappy. That’s what we think. Because even if you, like, come to someone’s
room to steal their things, and you see the person even having a party the next day . . . what
would you do?! (laughs) That means that what you have done wasn’t enough . . . it didn’t
even pain them at all!44

Kaakyire insisted that children are not meant to die, and so people should try to discourage the
deaths by feigning their detachment. In contrast to adult funerals, where sadness can be openly
expressed, it is not suitable or wise to visibly grieve for infants.

In addition to preventing barrenness and further mortalities, the application of the kannano
ritual is meant to help the woman move past the grief and on to other aspects of her life. Women
are encouraged to move on to their work or other children as soon as possible. Additionally,
other living children often act as a comfort and solace for the grief of a lost child. Indeed, on
occasions where I would ask women about sadness over the death of their child, almost every
woman admitted that they were sad over the death, but that they were still happy because of
their other children.

This relates to the value that children are generally given within Asante society. Asante insist
that children are extremely important in their culture. Specifically, being able to have children
is critical to gaining respect. Women who are barren, and even women who have lost all their
children, often face ridicule or worse because of their inability to become a mother. A loss of
a child in many cases may represent a loss of social status that the woman may need. If crying
leads to barrenness, women must refrain. I heard several stories about women, usually relatives
of informants, who had succumbed to grief for their lost children and are now unable to have
children. My friend Mary related the story of her own mother dealing with her sister’s death:

When my sister died, a whole lot of women from our church and neighborhood came
gathering around my mom, and they would not force you, but they will pamper you to stop.
They will beg you, they will pamper you, and give you advice that that’s how the world is.
It’s God who gives it, and takes it. So even if she cries, no matter the cry that she cries the
baby will not come back. So she should just take heart . . . God will give her another baby.
Like advise her, and console her to keep quiet. Because the more she cries, she can even
get sick. And we Asantes believe that when one of your babies dies and you cry so much,
then it will be very hard for you to give birth. And I got to know that this was true. When
my sister died, my mom wanted to have another baby, but she couldn’t have it. And my
grandmom was telling her that it was because she cried so much . . . we believe.45

The advice and consolation of neighbors, as in this story, is meant to keep the mother quiet in
order to ensure that the woman will be able to have children again.

Even so, a lack of public grief does not preclude women from sadness over their children’s
deaths. Most of the women expressed the sentiment that they were still sad over what had
happened. Grace, a local food-seller, had suffered a stillbirth and then later lost a six-month-
old child. The ritual was performed for her, and when I asked if she was sad afterwards, she
laughed at my question. She said that she was “SO sad . . . she was so bitter and sad. The
second one nearly got me.” I asked her if she wished she could cry, but she just explained that the elderly people advised her about barrenness, and so she does not cry anymore.46 Another woman, Aisha, replied to my question about her sadness that “... it bothers [me] a lot. Sometimes [I] will cry when alone in [my] room.”47 The stoic acceptance of death portrayed by Asante women is not an indicator of neglect or indifference toward their children’s death, but rather is employed as a socially sanctioned way of coping with emotional trauma. Women’s tears, then, are unshed for the protection of the children that they have and will have in the future. Although the event is one of sadness, children die easily and frequently, and the mother must move on and get back to her life, her living children, and the tasks of her motherhood.

Conclusion

The Asante grieving behaviors, funeral practices, kannano rituals, and healing practices related to reincarnation and asram can all be seen as having symbolic meaning that offers clues into the underlying ideas regarding infants and infant death. These and other related practices point to a special status for infants as liminal beings transitioning between the spiritual and earthly realms. Admittedly, not every person interviewed explicitly stated that infants were reincarnated or that they had spiritual ties at all. However, the way that infants are treated, and the way that people discuss and explain their deaths seems to belie the special nature of young children. The common use of the spiritual disease asram as an explanation for sickness and death shows that infants are indeed considered to be more vulnerable while still young. Additionally, minimal grieving and ceremony of child deaths seems to reinforce the fact that children die easily and frequently. The discouragement of grief not only helps women to cope with the emotional stress of frequent deaths, but also places infant mortalities within the larger Asante cosmology. If infants are indeed liminal, women must necessarily be emotionally prepared to handle their subsequent passing.

Based on the practical treatment and discussion of child death, I maintain that the Asante understanding of infant mortality is rooted in larger cosmological beliefs about the spiritual world. Attributing a transitional nature to infants helps to explain infant deaths and offers a way to cope. The discouragement of maternal grief and the informal funerary practices likewise rely on the basic characterization of infants as distinctly liminal and special beings.

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 20.
5. Ibid., p. 20.
6. Most often, I would simply ask the women to tell me the story of how their children died and then ask questions for clarification, often regarding their understanding of diseases that affect children, religious beliefs, or burial practices. I then conducted many interviews with traditional midwives, diviners, and herbalists to determine more specific information about the practices and diseases that had already been mentioned by the mothers.


17. Twumasi, P.A. *Medical Systems in Ghana: A Study of Medical Sociology*, Accra-Tema, Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1975. Most disease is thought to signify some breach in social relations. This may be a breach between humans, or even between the humans and divine. Curses by the abasom the machinations of witches are ultimately social problems, even though they are also spiritual in nature. Healing requires the re-establishment of the correct social order, often through the intermediation of a traditional healer.


20. Interestingly, these healers often use methods similar to the traditional healers, such as spiritual possession, only with a Christian or Muslim emphasis. For example, while *okomfo* view the spiritual world through possession by the abasom, Christian healers gain special insight and healing power through possession by the Holy Spirit.

21. There is little communication between doctors and patients in Ghana. In the Mampong District Hospital most of the doctors are Cubans practicing in Ghana for a period of around a year. These doctors speak Spanish with only a small amount of English. Most of the patients speak only Twi. The nurses, who also speak Twi, are left to interpret between the doctors and patients with whatever English they can. In addition to this complicated language barrier, there seems to be a prevailing attitude that it is not the patients’ place to ask questions, only to obey the doctor’s orders. Related to the issue of poor communication from the medical community, there are still many misconceptions about diseases held by the local community. Clinics, nurses, and other practitioners have been working to promote local awareness of the disease, and are making improvements, yet there are still gaps. In many cases, people understand some of the basic biomedical principles, yet are not correct on the specifics. Local understandings of the biomedical model of disease are often incomplete, which contributes to the view that western medicine alone is inadequate to fully explain ailments. Biomedicine is now a critical part of how health care is thought of by the general public, yet traditional explanations of disease are still used to fill in the gaps left by the western medical model. Folk diseases and supernatural forces have traditionally provided an understanding for physical afflictions. Today, traditional explanations of disease are used in conjunction with western health care methods to provide a more holistic understanding of illness.


24. (Fieldnotes 13)
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 9 June 2005; Sarpong, p. 39. Sarpong describes that when infants are thought to recurrently die, they may be “enslaved” with a mark on the cheek and may also be given an ugly or funny name to make them ashamed to reenter the spirit world. These children are also not given a funeral, and the mothers are made to wear white to pretend to be carefree and happy about their deaths.
29. Asram is a fairly general term for infant spiritual disease and describes a wide range of symptoms. Different categories of afflictions are often referred to as different types of asram with their own distinct names, symptoms, and treatments. In my interviews with herbalists and diviners, I was never able to compile an exhaustive list of all the different types of asram, as the list varied from healer to healer. One healer, who listed about ten different types of asram, admitted that there were many more types that she did not know about. Even with the wide variety, there were three types of asram that were listed by nearly every single healer that I interviewed, and seem to be considered fairly common. These were identified by their symptoms: thinness or wasting, abscesses or boils, a large head or abnormal fontanels. Other types of asram included convulsions, stiffness, insatiable appetite, fit, and many others.
32. Even though asram is considered to be the workings of an evil person, not a single person that I interviewed said that they could know who had caused the disease, even though herbalists and healers are widely blamed. Kaakyire and his mother explained that they rarely visited babies for this reason. Kaakyire’s mother had even been accused of giving asram and beaten up years before.
33. (Fieldnotes 16)
35. (Fieldnotes 87)
36. (Fieldnotes 76)
37. (Fieldnotes 73)
40. Ibid.
41. De Witte.
42. Although nearly everyone explained that crying was believed to lead to barrenness, the reason for this effect was unclear. Mary recognized that American culture did not have such a belief, and did not expect crying to affect women the same way. She explained that elderly people had traditionally told women that crying caused barrenness, instilling the cultural belief. The mere fact that it was a part of the culture seemed to make it true for the Asante people, not unlike a curse. However, Mary’s was the only explicit explanation I received.
43. (Fieldnotes 105)
44. Kaakyire, conversation with author, 18 July 2005.
45. Mary, conversation with author, 5 June 2005.
46. Grace, conversation with author, 8 July 2005.
47. Aisha, conversation with author, 8 July 2005.
Abstract

This interpretive study of the feelings, beliefs, and attitudes toward arranged marriage was conducted in the rural village of Chavadi in Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India. The data was collected through conversations and interviews with three generations of women from three families. The feelings concerning arranged marriages differed slightly from one generation to the next. The women interviewed placed a high value on strong family bonds, and the safety and good reputation accorded an arranged marriage. The three families differed in socioeconomic status and in their approach to arranging marriages. Western influences and media were present, but change appears to be cautious. The findings closely paralleled the literature review, which was extensive but lacking in interpretive inquiry.

Three broad questions guided the review of the literature: 1) What are the marriage trends in India? 2) Are the marriage trends in India changing? 3) How are ideas about mate selection changing in India?

Collectivism in India

There is a continuum between the concepts of collectivism and individualism in most cultures. Collectivism is a conservative and compliant orientation that leads individuals to make decisions based on the benefits to the whole rather than the needs of the individual. Historically, Western societies have been more individualistic and Eastern societies more collectivistic. Niluper P. Medora, Jeffry H. Larson, and Parul B. Dave show that in Indian families collectivism is manifest.

There is a connection between a collectivist society and the importance placed on love in marriage. In a collectivist society, “love, a premarital manifestation, is . . . thought to be a disruptive element in upsetting the firmly established close ties in the family.” Since India is largely a collectivist society, close ties between family are most important, and, therefore, love is not seen as a necessary element for the establishment of a marriage.

C. Harry Hui and Harry C. Triandis explain that collectivist value in group membership. They state, “As harmony is highly valued by collectivists, conforming so as to preserve interpersonal relationships occurs even if it is very costly.” The decision about marriage affects the acceptance or rejection of the family by the neighborhood and community. Therefore, even if young Indian adults today desire to choose their own spouse, they recognize that such a choice would severely impact their acceptance in their family, neighborhood, and the community at large.

As early as 1995, William J. Goode suggested that, among more traditional societies, love is irrelevant to marriage because it will interfere with the social structure of the entire family. Three years earlier Susan Sprecher and Rachita Chandak took a small sample of Indians living...
in India as well as a sample of individuals living in London and America who were of Indian
descent. Seventy percent of the participants agreed that “in an arranged marriage, you are not
only marrying an individual but also a family.” Bron B. Ingoldsby and Suzanna D. Smith
explain that a newly married couple in India moves into the home of the husband’s family. The
couple becomes heavily involved in the extended family.\(^6\)

One study found a “high correlation between individualism and the necessity of love for
the establishment of marriage” in eleven cultures surveyed.\(^7\) Conversely, among collectivistic
cultures, love is not a prerequisite for establishing a marriage. Instead, the dominant value is
family cohesiveness.

Individuals in India, compared to those in other cultures, are most likely to marry without
love.\(^8\) Leela Mullatti studied behaviors of Indian families living in India to contrast their
beliefs and the realities. She described the widespread influence of collectivism on marriage
in India: “In villages and even in urban India, marriage is not only an affair of two families,
but of the neighborhood and the entire community.”\(^9\) Since marriage impacts multiple
people, the view is that it is important to control the strong individual emotions associated
with marriage.\(^10\)

**Socialization of Children**

As in most cultures, the way in which Indian families raise and socialize their children
has a significant impact on choices children make as adults. In Indian families infancy is
characterized by indulgence, but childhood is a time of authoritarian parenting. There is high
value placed on conformity, obedience, and interdependency of children in the family of
origin.\(^11\) “The individual [is] socialized [from childhood] to become a subordinate rather than
an independent being.”\(^12\)

This subordination and complete emotional, social, and financial dependence continues into the
college career of children and through the entire lives of the parents. This continued dependence is
thought to be a factor in causing children to shy away from selecting their own spouses.\(^13\)

Not only are Indian children socialized to be interdependent, they are discouraged from
interacting with members of the opposite sex. Segregating members of the opposite sex is
a longstanding tradition in India that continues today. Goode considered this a method to
control decisions about marriage, and he described it as “socially isolating young people from
potential mates, whether eligible or ineligible as spouses.”\(^14\) One result of such control could
be a limited number of free-choice marriages.\(^15\)

**Longstanding Tradition of Arranged Marriages**

Like those of most cultures, India’s traditions tend to be constant and lasting. Such is
the case with arranged marriages. In one study, participants, who were selected because they
were less favorable toward dating and more likely to agree that their marriage was or will be
arranged, had families who had practiced arranged marriages for generations.\(^16\)

Medora et al. stated having an arranged marriage is “a familial and societal expectation.”\(^17\)
In the qualitative section of the study, Sprecher and Chandak reported a theme of the
importance of family: “The most frequently mentioned advantage of an arranged marriage
system was support from family, and the second most frequently mentioned disadvantage of
dating was disapproval by parents.”\(^18\)
The importance of the tradition of arranged marriages is key to Indian life. Robert Levine, Suguru Sato, Tsukasa Hashimoto, and Jyoti Verma claimed that in cultures like India “romantic love relationships . . . disrupt the tradition of family approved . . . arranged marriage choices.” While some in the upcoming generation may desire change, most recognize the need for continuity. It would seem logical that such traditions in the Indian family are likely to continue and resist the influence of Western ideas and culture about love and marriage, even though there is much access to Western ideas through the media and other sources.

Change in India

India has experienced some significant changes in the recent past. Two that are notable are an increase in urbanization and a shift in government toward a democracy. Changes have impacted, among others, the culture of today’s youth. “The spread of modern education, mass media, and technology have made the younger generation conscious of their individual rights in decision-making, even in rural areas.”

After surveying fifteen hundred rural youth, A.T. Uplaonkar indicated that the values, attitudes, and outlook of Indian youth are changing due to the large societal changes. It is important to note that in traditional India, the youth never constitute or act as a distinct group with its own culture, but today’s youth have ideas that are different and unique. In other words, some of today’s Indian youth have a desire for more autonomy in the family system. Their ideals about marriage are changing, and some youth are more accepting of free-choice marriages.

Autonomy

Autonomy has been identified as an issue among the young adults today. Autonomy involves more individual and less collective decision-making. Related to this increased desire for more autonomy is the increased respect for the independent decision-making of others.

In Medora’s study of college students, the participants were asked what kind of changes they would like to see in their families. Two of the three most common answers were related to personal decision making: “A desire to have more freedom and fewer restrictions, and a desire for greater independence and preference for parents to be more consultative.”

Medora’s survey indicated the upcoming generation might be looking for more independence in making decisions. Singh pointed out that the major decision typically being made by parents for the youth is the choice of their future spouse.

Acceptance of Free-Choice Marriages

In traditional India, free-choice or “love” marriages are considered deviant behavior. There is some indication that the youth today are more open to the idea of free-choice marriages. Sprecher and Chandak conducted an exploratory study on attitudes of arranged marriages in India. They found that some of today’s youth have considered refusing a traditional arranged marriage in the hope of having a love marriage. Nearly all of the participants “strongly believed that young couples should have some say in the decision process within the arranged marriage system.” These findings have been supported by other research.

J.P. Singh maintained that younger people are beginning to assert their own wishes in marriage choices, and, as a result, parents are losing control. This decline in parental control
in mate selection was discovered in a study of undergraduate and graduate students. According to this 1993 study, 41.8 percent of the respondents preferred to choose their own spouse.\textsuperscript{32} S.K. Gupta stated, “The number of youth who would prefer to select their own spouse is increasing[;] the majority of them [however] would like to have the approval of their parents before finalization.”\textsuperscript{33} These youth may prefer to have a love marriage but that may or may not happen.

**Secularization of Marriage**

According to M.M. Krishna Reddy, marriage was sought after to fulfill one’s religious duties. Since the majority of the population in India is Hindu, Indian marriage traditions are deeply affected by Hindu beliefs. In the past, the Hindu religion considered marriage a sacrament rather than a contract. The principle of deep-rooted religious traditions dictating behavior for centuries is applicable in all Indian marriage practices.

Due to the sacred nature of marriage, the virginity of unmarried women was a symbol of respectability and a sign of the elite. This led to a demand for early marriage to protect the chastity of girls. People sought to marry their daughters before they reached puberty in order to avoid any suspicions about their virginity.\textsuperscript{34}

Over time, laws about marriage have sometimes gone against Hindu tradition. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed. It raised the legal age of marriage to eighteen for males and fifteen for females. After India gained independence from Great Britain, the amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1978 was incorporated into Indian law. This amendment raised the age of marriage for males to twenty-one and for females to eighteen.\textsuperscript{35}

This overtaking of religious laws by secular laws leads to a change in a society’s values. Upplankaor indicates that with modernization people value marriage less as a sacrament. Patricia Uberoi also describes this process of secularization, where civil law has taken the place of religious law. Singh explains that while marriage was once viewed as a sacrament there have been changes in the attitudes of the people. These changes include a decrease in the acceptance of child marriages and a decrease in the approval of consanguineous marriages.

**Feelings toward Consanguineous Marriages**

Consanguineous marriages were banned many years ago by the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, but few people enforced the law at the time.\textsuperscript{36} Even though this law was passed decades ago, India has seen only a small decline in consanguineous marriages. Today, however, there is some evidence that fewer and fewer families prefer marriage among close blood relatives.\textsuperscript{37}

The system of cross-cousin and cross-uncle/niece marriages has been, historically and traditionally, preferred.\textsuperscript{38} In recent decades, consanguineous marriages are becoming less popular and this may be due to the Western influence in India.\textsuperscript{39} There is a “growing belief that such marriages might produce sickly children, an idea which is clearly a cultural import.”\textsuperscript{40}

According to the National Family Health Surveys, consanguineous marriages have declined.\textsuperscript{41} Of the marriages performed before 1968, 31.2 percent of them were among close blood relatives, while from 1988–92 only 23.5 percent of marriages were among close relatives. Highly correlated with the decline in consanguineous marriages is the rise in age of those getting married.\textsuperscript{42}
Rise in Age at Marriage

There is evidence that the ideal age of brides and grooms is rising. Uplaonkar surveyed rural youth in India about what they thought was the ideal age for marriage. The average ideal age for marriage among the participants was twenty-one to twenty-two for males and seventeen to eighteen for females. The average ideal marriage age for women has remained the same for some time, even below the legal age for women. However, the ideal marriage age for men has continued to rise significantly.

It seems that while the age of brides is increasing, the majority of the rural population still prefers to marry women at a young age. The mean age of women at the time of marriage has increased over time from fourteen in 1960 to eighteen in 1992. The marriage trends in rural India have not changed as much as in urban areas. For example in 1998, Reddy stated, “Nearly 80 percent of the marriages are taking place before eighteen years of age for the woman, [and this is especially true] among a majority of rural and tribal communities.”

While the age of brides and grooms is increasing and consanguineous marriages decreasing, marriage is still seen as a social duty for family and community. After reviewing the literature, Gupta concluded that “dating” is not yet a common practice in India.

Summary of the Literature Review

From 1992 to 2002, marriage traditions in India have not significantly changed from the tradition of arranged marriages. Much of the literature shows arranged marriages are, by far, the most common type of marriage. Despite the introduction of Western ideas and limited change in the values and ideas of Indian youth, arranged marriages continue to be the preferred method of mate selection in India.

India essentially remains a collectivist society that values the subordination of the individual to the whole. Indian children are socialized in such a way as to make arranged marriage the most logical choice. In addition, the traditions in India related to marriage are so strong and long lasting that few youth choose to oppose them. There is, however, some evidence that the present generation is beginning to shift to a desire for more autonomy, more openness towards free-choice marriages, and a change in ideals about Hindu marriage.

Methodology

Problem

Most research on marriage in India has been survey research using the empirical analytic mode of inquiry. Although many studies employed some open-ended questions, they did not utilize the in-depth interpretive methodology that pursues individual insights, feelings, and thoughts. There is a need for naturalistic studies that pursue such understandings.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of my research was to investigate the feelings of three generation of Indian women about arranged marriages, rather than the trends of arranged marriages. I chose to conduct this study in the rural village of Chavadi—located in Tamil Nadu, India.

Portrait of the Researcher

The bias of a researcher in an interpretive study is revealed by a “portrait.” Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I set forth my formal and informal experiences, and my interests in the topic of this study.
Close, Large Family

I am the ninth child in a family of ten children. In my youth, I learned that it was better to conform to the wishes and desires of the family as a whole rather than rebel. I also learned family ties are important, and, at times, it is necessary to subject personal desires for the good of the family. This is not unlike the Indian idea of collectivism.

Religious Background

I also understand the important role religion can play in major life decisions. I come from a highly religious family. I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In Latter-day Saint (LDS) doctrine, marriage and family relationships are believed to be eternal in nature. Due to this eternal view of marriage, I believe that the decision to marry should be based not only on love but also on other factors such as family background, values, and doctrine. With such importance placed on families, I have felt a pressure from other Church members to marry and start a family. I am also familiar with decisions about family that are steeped in religious traditions, in family and societal values, and in the law.

Experience with Engagement

I have not been married, but I have been engaged. My engagement period was characterized by intensified hopes and dreams for and worries about the future. During this time, I was stressed about planning a wedding celebration that would please everyone involved.

While I did not marry, this experience caused me to reflect more and more on mate selection traditions. Before my engagement, marriage was just a romantic fantasy. After my engagement, marriage became more real to me. When I canceled my wedding, I kept wondering how two people ever feel comfortable enough to marry?

Woman

As a female, I recognize a certain bond among women. Women play universal roles across cultures; they share similar experiences of child bearing, having unique mother-daughter relationships, and serve as mother and wife in the home. All of these universalities make conversing with and relating to each other easier.

I hope that someday my place will be in the home raising children. I do respect and appreciate the role of mothers, especially as I see my older sister and sisters-in-law become mothers. They are happy and providing a great service to the world by raising bright and capable children. While this is my ultimate goal, I am grateful to be a woman with the freedom to choose to be a mother at home in a community where motherhood is valued.

Indian Friends

Throughout middle school and high school, I had two friends whose respective parents emigrated from India. I spent time watching Bollywood films—movies made in India. I also ate Indian food and went to an Indian celebration with my friends.

The three of us had long conversations about the frustrations Indian youth have with trying to fit in with American life while pleasing strict Indian parents. We talked together about plans and dreams for our own marriages.
I became fascinated with Indian culture and the differences between their traditional values and my own. When I found an opportunity to go on a field study to India I was very excited. I was able to spend time in the culture I had previously seen only in the movies and experienced through conversations with two close friends.

Classes

During my undergraduate experience I have taken classes to prepare me for conducting a study in India. I took a research methods class where I was introduced to the methodology for qualitative studies. I also took a field study preparation course in which I received an overview of Indian history and religion, as well as an opportunity to discuss the logistics of conducting the study in Chavadi.

At the same time, I was taking a class that focused on marriage and family across cultures. I was exposed to different ways of organizing family life across cultures. I tried to approach family life in India with an open mind about how India fits into a global community.

I also took a Hindi course. The participants in this study did not speak Hindi; however, the class connected me with students from India, who became resources about Indian culture.

Portrayal of the Translator

The language spoken in the village is Tamil, although many people speak English. The ability of the people to speak English varied from repeating only basic greetings to being nearly fluent, but it was necessary to use a translator. I hired a young woman from the city of Coimbatore to assist me in interviewing the people in the village.

I chose to have a female translator because of my expectation for gender segregation in India. Priscilla was twenty-one years old and spoke both Tamil and English. She proved to be a useful cultural informant.

Being from the city, Priscilla was more privileged than the villagers. At times she found surroundings dirty and unacceptable. She was of a higher caste than the villagers, and I worried at times that her body and verbal language use was not appropriate, but, since I did not know Tamil, I could not accurately decipher her nonverbal cues. However, for the most part, she easily carried on a conversation with people.

Working through a translator was helpful but sometimes challenging. She would screen questions I posed that might seem impertinent and inappropriate to the interviewee. I also became frustrated with her editing during translating. Translating made it impossible to catch everything. It is in the very nature of languages that what is said in one language is often difficult to express in another language.

Over time, working with Priscilla became easier. We developed a great friendship. I soon became accustomed to carrying on a conversation with pauses for translation. Conversation flowed more easily as I, my translator, and the interviewee became more comfortable with the process. After a day of interviews, I would often sit with her and ask her specific meanings of terms the subjects used. I would also clarify with her some of the themes I found. I constantly found myself dialoguing with my translator after transcribing an interview to clarify different cultural concepts and terms used by participants. I found that there were often terms or concepts that would be discussed in interviews that I did not fully understand.
Data Collection

Research Questions

Upon completion of the literature review, I developed the following research questions:

1) How different are the feelings about arranged marriages from one generation of Indian women to another?

2) How different are the feelings about arranged marriages in Chavadi from one family to another?

3) What do the three different generations of women in the rural village of Chavadi value about arranged marriages?

Operational Definitions

In this study, I operationally defined the following terms:

Arranged Marriage—A traditional marriage arranged by people other than the couple, typically close family members, most likely the parents of the child.

Backward Caste—The lowest caste members. Also known in the past as the “untouchables.”

Caste—A person’s caste is defined by the family in which he or she lives. A person’s caste dictates what job he or she performs, and the social position a person holds in society. People tend to associate with and marry those within their own caste.

Caste System—A class system in India originating with the Hindu scripture. There are four major castes and several subcastes. Individuals cannot easily move from caste to caste.

Happiness—Financial security, good social standing, and family approval.

Ill-Speaking—Negative conversations and name calling of people in the village. A woman or family who has a love marriage is often gossiped about in the village.

Love Marriage—A marriage in which the couple falls in love, and, to avoid parental interference, the couple runs away from home and elopes.

Love-Arranged Marriage—A marriage in which the couple falls in love, then asks their parents to follow tradition and arrange the marriage for them.

Tradition—A way of life or event that one generation passed down to the next generation.

Tools and Instruments

I collected data in the village through observations, interviews, and descriptions; I lived with a family in the village to further my understanding of village life while collecting the data; and I spent time in homes in the village.

During interviews I would use a tape recorder to save dialogue. At night and early the next morning I typed my observations and transcribed interviews conducted. Data was gathered with a pen, notebook, and tape recorder while among the people. I then returned to my room and used my laptop to type up the information. I used these tools in addition to my background knowledge to collect and analyze the data.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations and delimitations were imposed on the study. The study was limited to Chavadi, a village in Tamil Nadu, India. I only choose to interview adult women who were eighteen
years of age or older. I also limited my subjects to three families with three generations of women: a grandmother as well as her daughter and granddaughter.

The delimitations of the study included the short two months I had in the village to conduct the study. Since I had never been to India and did not speak the language, the majority of the interviews had to be conducted with the aide of a translator. I was rarely able to talk with the participants alone. Interviews were often conducted with other family members present.

The Near Environment

HOMES

The term village in India was used for any town or area that is not a large city. Homes in Chavadi Pudur were built on land given to them by the government or the landowners in the community. There are approximately one thousand people living in the village.

The homes were all concentrated in a small area in the village. Unlike the beautiful fields and small homes I pictured, I found myself in a crowded place where homes were so close to each other that if neighbors talked loudly I could hear them. Most homes were small with only two or three rooms. All had a covered, cement veranda, which was the social place in the home.

EMPLOYMENT

Some men were wealthier and worked in higher positions, such as in banks or as landowners, but the majority of the men worked outside the home as farm hands and in other labor-related jobs. Employment in India is often determined by caste. The men in the village who were of the musical caste played in a band for a living. Other men in the village were field workers and drivers, a position determined for them by their birth.

The men would usually be gone all day at work. They would return in the evening, around six or seven o’clock. I found the women were often busy in the evenings preparing dinner for the family, which was generally eaten around eight or nine o’clock.

CLOSE FAMILY TIES

Grandfathers and grandmothers who were too old to work lived in their children’s homes. Typically one nuclear family would live in a home, but extended family tended to be physically and emotionally close to each other. In some circumstances, cousins will use the term “brother” or “sister,” not distinguishing between their cousins and siblings. In Chavadi, there were several large extended families that lived in the village, so during the day the women and children would often spend time in one home or in a common area, while completing the day’s chores.

WOMEN

Women in the village typically stayed home busily working throughout the afternoon doing a variety of things: preparing dinner, washing the family’s laundry by hand, hanging laundry, feeding animals, and carrying water from the tap.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Every home in the village had a television. I never walked into a home where the television was off, unless there was no power. Most of the time the villagers would watch one of two channels showing music videos nonstop. The music videos came from scenes in the latest cinema movies.
Bombay, India, is known for its Bollywood movies. As the name suggests, the movies tended to be Indian knockoffs of Hollywood style films. Most of the stories revolve around a girl whose parents are arranging a marriage for her. The girl, however, always falls in love with a different boy. The conflict was presented in different ways, but the usual ending was love winning out in the end. The films were similar to U.S. musicals in that there were many scenes where reality was suspended and the actors burst into spontaneous song and dance. People in the village watched these movies, even though the movies are in Hindi, which the villagers did not speak.

There were also a few television stations and movies made in southern India where the actors speak Tamil. When available, those in Tamil were more popular in the village than Bollywood films. The village women told me a lot about the family series they liked to watch. To me these were similar to soap operas, the only difference being the family series always revolved around one or two families.

**STRICT GENDER ROLES**

I saw strict gender roles in Chavadi. At a young age, girls and boys were separated from each other and taught to refrain from interacting. The practice continued into adulthood. For example, buses were segregated by gender, women in the front, men in the back.

**ARRANGED MARRIAGES**

The majority of marriages in Chavadi were arranged by parents. Older siblings and close uncles also tended to get involved when arranging a marriage. The family usually found another family in the same caste with a suitable mate for their son or daughter. The family then sent someone in the family to inquire after the prospective family. They talked to neighbors and other people in the village that were of the same caste about the family, and the potential spouse. If the report was good, they checked the astrology of the couple to see if it matched. If the astrology matched, the families visited each other’s homes to finalize the marriage.

**LOVE MARRIAGES**

I was surprised at the reactions when I asked about love marriages. To get a love marriage meant that the couple had to have spent time alone with each other, a deviant behavior because men and women were not supposed to fraternize. The couple would fall in love; the man would then propose his love. If the women accepted the man, they would run away together and elope. The love marriage would be seen as a shame for the couple, the parents, and the siblings. A family’s reputation was the important consideration in marriage. If one daughter ran off scandalously, no respectable family would want its children to marry into her family.

**WEDDING CEREMONY**

I went to two weddings in the village. The wedding parties traveled to the wedding hall the evening before the day of the actual wedding ceremony. The bride made her way to a separate room where she spent most of the night. The bride remained in her room surrounded by her sisters and other women who were close relatives and friends. Family members sat together and ate a rice meal, which had been cooked and served by the wedding hall employees.
That night a band would play while they performed different mini-ceremonies. For example, there was a ceremony in which the guests put rice in the bride’s sari and yellow and red paste on her forehead. Later that night they had the bangle ceremony, where the bride put two or more glass bangles on each female guest. They also had a ceremony where the groom’s family presented the bride’s family with the wedding sari, the sari she would wear for the next day’s ceremony. The men spent the evening sitting on a large blanket. There was much banter between the men in each family. They negotiated the engagement and wedding, but mostly, it was done for fun and show.

All guests were close friends and family. They spent the night in the wedding hall. The next morning the wedding party made preparations for the wedding. The women all changed in one room into their silk saris. More guests arrived that morning for the ceremony that began in the wedding hall; then the wedding party traveled to the nearest Hindu temple, where the priest performed the ceremony. The moment the bride and groom became married they put a flower wreath around each other’s neck. He tied the tali on her neck. Both the bride and the groom remained somber faced throughout the whole event. I never saw a smile in any of the wedding or puberty pictures.

After the ceremony, all of the guests were invited for a very nice breakfast. Again, it was provided by the employees of the hall. The bride went to visit the groom’s home and then returned that afternoon. The wedding party ate another nice meal for lunch. Family members then gave the couple money as they left for the husband’s home, where they would live.

MARRIED LIFE

When a couple marries they typically move to the husband’s village. They said, “When you marry a man you marry his family.” This is true because the couple lived in the same household, compound, or neighborhood as the husband’s family. The wife stayed there with his extended family.

When the wife becomes pregnant, she returns to her parents’ home to have the baby. Her parents pay all of the expenses of the first baby—including visits to the doctor, the delivery, and immunizations. She stays with her family until the baby reaches the age of five months. When a baby is young, it is expected that the mother will not bring the child out into public until he is “old enough,” which is about one year.

Population

The population for this study included those women over eighteen years of age, living in Chavadi Pudur, a village outside of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, a state located in southern India. The village was located a few kilometers from the main road, which ran between Coimbatore and Kerala’s border.

Sample

A convenience sample of four different families in Chavadi was chosen. The families had at least three generations of women living in the village. After making initial contacts, I learned that women typically move to their husband’s village. This justified including one family with the third generation being the daughter-in-law.
The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity. When choosing a name for the participants I carefully selected names based on meanings that would reflect my impression of the woman’s personality.

**Portrayals of Participants in Sample**

**FAMILY 1**

Family 1 had lived in Chavadi for many generations. The family used to own land, but, during a long drought, they were forced to sell. The family was of a musical caste, so each man in the family played an instrument for a living. The musical caste is a lower caste, but not the lowest, backward caste.

Family 1 was a very close family. Many of the extended family members lived within a stone’s throw of each other. I found that the family had strong social networks inside and outside of the community. The large family, and the close proximity of members to each other, made it easier to find and arrange a marriage with acceptable spouses.

Overall, I found this family to be very traditional. They followed the normal order of things in the village. The women did not talk much about love marriages, except with a negative connotation. They did not have the money or position to risk losing their family reputation.

*Grandmother:* The name Vanita means lady. This name seemed appropriate because she was older, but had lived her life as a lady should. She was gentle, gracious, and yet had a power about her. Vanita grew up in Chavadi. When Vanita’s husband died early she struggled to get her last daughter married off, because as a widow, she was at a disadvantage.

*Daughter:* Lavanya was the mother of the household. She had a real grace about her and was often in the background serving her family, not in a shy submissive sort of way, but in a way that was hospitable and graceful. She had been married at age seventeen. She spent much of her days with the extended family that lived in the village.

*Granddaughter:* Priya, Lavanya’s daughter, was twenty years old. The name Priya is one that is near and dear to me for several reasons; one is because it means “loved one.” Priya was one of the first women in the study to whom I felt close. I respected her and felt that if I were Indian I would want to be like her. Even though she had an arranged marriage there was a lot of affection between she and her husband.

Priya had studied the equivalent of a junior in American high schools, but stopped her education for financial reasons. Priya had married at seventeen years old; her parents had arranged the marriage. She was born in Chavadi, but when she was married she moved to the village of her husband, in a house near her in-laws’ home. She had returned to Chavadi to have her first baby.

**FAMILY 2**

Family 2 had also lived in Chavadi for many generations. Like Family 1, Family 2 had much land and wealth, and they were forced to sell it during a time of drought. Husbands in this family had worked as drivers, a somewhat lucrative profession. This family was of the Gounder caste, the highest caste in the village.

*Grandmother:* Bala was the grandmother and elder of the home. The name Bala means “ever a nine year old girl.” I felt this name appropriate because while interviewing Bala, I found she kept repeating herself, sometimes not even answering the questions. She was born
in another village, but her family moved to Chavadi soon after her birth. She had had a very lavish arranged marriage with a long wedding ceremony and large dowry.

When I visited Bala, her family had set out a cot with a nice mat on it for her to take an afternoon nap. She was placed in an outside corner away from the family. Another time, the family ignored her even though she was speaking very loudly. The rest of the family just seemed to go about their day-to-day work. The same seemed true for the grandmother in Family 3.

**Daughter.** Lona married Bala’s son. The name Lona means “beauty.” As I spent an afternoon with her tending to her new grandbaby, I could see that she once was a beauty, like her daughter. As a daughter-in-law she moved from her village into her husband’s household. Lona welcomed us into her home but declined an interview.

**Granddaughter.** Kriti was twenty years old. I first met Kriti among a group of women I was interviewing one lazy afternoon. She had walked in and sat down right in front of me on the veranda looking directly in my eyes. She was about nine months pregnant at the time, but the burden of pregnancy was not noticeable. She was beautiful and did not look encumbered with child. What did strike me that day was what I saw in her hazel eyes: a spark of rebelliousness. The name Kriti means “fame,” and while Kriti lived in a small village she walked and talked with a bit of a lazy “too good for you” sort of strut typical of a model.

Kriti had worked in a textile mill. Her husband would come and visit her everyday after she completed work there. He tried to elope with her, but she refused, wanting to keep her good reputation. Kriti then asked her parents to arrange the marriage. Since he was of the same caste and had a good reputation as a driver, they consented and arranged the marriage.

**FAMILY 3**

Family 3 was quite different from the other two families. Family 3 had often been called “the landowners” by other villagers. They owned much of the surrounding land and for generations their family had been a governing family. However, at the time of the study their role as landowners was less practical and more ornamental.

Family 3 and Family 2 were of the same high caste; however, Family 3 had more wealth than Family 2. When Akuti talked about marrying within the same caste, she would often refer to it as marrying a family of the same status. Status meant both caste and wealth.

The one son in Family 3 attended college in the nearby city, and the husband worked in another state. Having this constant connection to the outside world made the family more liberal in their views about the traditions of the village. Family 3 seemed to have a little more leeway with following the traditions of the village because they had a lot more social power.

**Grandmother.** Vinodini was the grandmother of the home. The name Vinodini means “happy girl.” Vinodini did not speak English, because she was not educated, nor was English widely spoken when she was a child. When I would visit this family, we would sit and chat in English; even though she did not understand, Vinodini would sit contented in the corner listening. Her daughter and grandson never translated our conversations for her to understand. It seemed unnecessary to fill her in on the present.

Vinodini seemed to take pleasure in simple things. She was quick to smile and speak to me in Tamil as she and her daughter prepared a simple meal for me. She just reminded me of a
Happy girl. Vinodini was the only practicing Hindu in the household. She had pictures of the deity in her room, where she worshiped.

**Daughter.** Akiuti was Bala’s daughter and the mother of the household. I use the name Akiuti because it means “princess.” Akiuti would sleep away the afternoon and found great pleasure in talking with visitors. When I spoke with her, I could sense the power she inherited in her family. Her manners, the way she spoke, and her education reminded me of a well-bred, but spoiled princess. She spoke English fluently and had attended a British school for girls.

Akiuti was the only participant who had not married someone within a two-hour radius of the village. She had married a man whose family lived in Madras, a large city about eight hours from Coimbatore by train. Her marriage was arranged with a large dowry and long ceremony.

Akiuti and her husband moved to Madras; however, when Akiuti’s father died the couple moved back to Chavadi rather than follow the rules of patrilocal tradition. Akiuti’s husband worked as an advocate (attorney) in another state, so he only spent the weekends at home. While at home he managed the land. Akiuti spent most of her day reading, since she is wealthy enough to hire someone to clean. She did not believe in the Hindu gods but did subscribe to astrology.

**Granddaughter.** There was no granddaughter in this family. Instead, I interviewed their grandson, Balamani. The results are not included in this article.

**Portrayals of Grandmothers**

Grandmothers in Chavadi played an interesting role. They tended to have no responsibilities in the day-to-day chores of family life. Yet, they were highly respected and treated well by their families. At the same time, I did not perceive that they were included in a lot of the important family decisions.

When it came to interviewing, I did have a hard time getting the grandmothers to really speak with me. I think to them I represented some of that radical living, being a white American girl traveling to India without any family escort. It would never be allowed in India for girls to travel without such an escort. To counter this bias, I would always perform the interview with the grandmother last, so that she had more time to get used to me. I would mention my conservative and religious background trying to find more common ground. Still these grandmothers tended to over exaggerate the riotous living of today’s youth and overly praise the days of the past.

**Portrayals of Daughters**

I found it hard to find a convenient time to interview the daughters. Being the generation to care for their aging parents and still run a household, these daughters were often busy doing chores. Akiuti, the daughter in Family 3, was the exception because her family was wealthy enough to hire servants to clean.

**Portrayals of Granddaughters**

I found the granddaughters the easiest to interview. Since I was close in age to the granddaughters, I found it easy to build close friendships. After spending time in their homes, I felt that they opened up more to my translator and me.
The grandmothers tended to spend a large part of the interview discussing the rules of traditional India. They talked about marrying in the same caste, even marrying within close relations. They indicated that at the time of their generation’s weddings it was acceptable, if not preferred, to marry within one’s own family. Marriages between cousins or uncles and nieces were not unusual.

The grandmothers also emphasized that love marriages bring shame to the family. Vanita, the grandmother in Family 1, explained that if a child was brought up well he or she would be respectful and never have a love marriage. She discussed how her parents had disciplined her as a child and how she passed that on to her children.

Bala offered a bitter diatribe about how children now do not respect their elders, traditions, and their family. She claimed that they did whatever they wanted. Bala was interesting to interview because she would start getting even louder at points. She yelled and yelled about children running off and getting married. She was frustrated that the youth of today wanted to change tradition.

The grandmothers also discussed the importance of family reputation and the closeness of a joint family system. I felt that their family relationships were close to the hearts of these women. They had spent their lives raising their children and helping out with grandchildren. Keeping their family name clean from tarnish was important to them because their family was all they had. The women valued the close family relationships they had strived to build. Now the grandmothers were reaping the benefits of raising a family, and the family was caring for them.

The daughters never talked about accepting or rejecting a couple that entered into a love marriage. They tended to avoid issues with such tension between modern television and traditions in the village. Lona, as the daughter-in-law in her family, accepted the love-arranged marriage of the granddaughter even though the grandmother held very traditional ideas.

The daughters did talk about astrology. Like their grandmothers, they depended on astrology to help guide them in selecting a suitable spouse for their child. It is an important confirmation and comfort to these women that the arranged marriage would work out.

These women also spent a significant time defining bad habits of people, mostly men. I sensed that, having just arranged marriages that were yet to be determined a success or failure, the women fretted over the decisions they had made. They remembered with clarity how important it was to find a man of good character and with good habits, both to please the generation of grandmothers and ensure the safety and happiness of the granddaughters.
GRANDDAUGHTERS

The granddaughters tended to be much more comfortable talking about love. Because they were raised on media that is obsessed with the theme of love, it made sense that these women were more comfortable talking about love with me. However, I was surprised at how they talked about love.

In the middle of my second interview with Priya, I asked several questions about love marriages. I kept thinking to myself, “Why wouldn’t everyone want a love marriage?” Priya then turned to me and said, “Actually, when we say ‘love,’ what it means to you, it means affection. Whereas, in India, when you say ‘love’ it is a bad word. When a girl says it to a guy, it is a bad word, but when a girl says it to a girl it is OK.”

Kriti also referred to love in a more negative light. When Kriti’s soon-to-be husband began visiting her everyday after she got off work, they both knew that they had feelings for each other. She said that it took a long time for them to “let it out,” meaning tell each other how they felt about each other. Kriti stated, “We both liked each other, but we did not open it out. We didn’t want to let it out. So, we just used to meet and we would talk, but nobody opened that we were in love. We understand each other when we talk. So, we didn’t let it out. We didn’t let the tiger out.” My understanding became that “love” in India has serious consequences in the family; like a tiger it rips reputations, families, and homes apart.

Priya and Kriti emphasized certain negative consequences of love marriages. They both mentioned that if they were to have a love marriage, the villagers would gossip about them. I felt that these women understood ill-speaking very well because it is the youth that were often talked about. As a woman grew older, her bad reputation might stay, but through time it would fade. However, this generation was a prime target for ill-speaking.

Many of the women agreed that love marriages were fraught with certain problems not part of arranged marriages. However, granddaughters seemed to be able to verbalize their feelings more readily. This generation of women was presented with information about different marriage options. Previously, the only thing possible was an arranged marriage, and women never really considered anything else. While the older generations could not readily think about why they had an arranged marriage, these women appeared to have thought it over and made a conscious decision based on reasoning. One of the more prominent reasons was that love marriages had problems.

Priya said that when she looked at people with love marriages she saw suffering and financial problems. Kriti said that in love marriages the man will get his wife pregnant and then leave, or he will cheat on his wife. There was never this kind of brash discussion when the women talked about the outcome of arranged marriages.

Since Priya and Kriti had just had their weddings, they did not talk about arranging a marriage for their children. Instead, they discussed parental consent for marriage and how key it is to any marriage, love or arranged. The other generations did not talk about this as the youngest generation did. The older generations were farther removed from the situation of asking for permission.

Analysis of Families

FAMILY 1

Unlike Family 2 and Family 3, Family 1 did not emphasize the importance of caste as much in the casual interviews, but one afternoon I interviewed Priya, the daughter, without her
family around. Priya talked about the few who marry outside of the caste. I had been at Priya’s home previously, and our conversation had been easy and comfortable. I had asked about caste before, but, on this day, as I asked, “How important is caste when it comes to arranging a marriage?”

She began speaking in Tamil and the tone of her voice changed. I knew this was significant, even as I waited for the translation. The feelings about this topic ran very deep:

Actually you have to . . . arrange in a caste. There is one caste that is a very, very low caste; that is the people who clean the toilets and all that. They are not very bad people, but they will irritate us. They will disturb us. . . . So only if you get married to that group, that caste, then it is like the people around you will not respect you.

I understood her final opinion to be that, as long as one did not marry women from the lowest caste, the marriage would be accepted. The family’s reputation was especially important when Vanita’s husband passed away. Only with the help of extended family and with the family’s good name was she able to arrange a marriage for her last daughter. For this reason this family mentioned culturally deviant marriage statuses (widowhood, divorce, remarriage). The other families did not mention other statuses of marriage in the same manner as Family 1. A significant proportion of my interviews with members of Family 1 were about the importance of being a respected family in the community. Due to Vanita’s experience, the family saw the direct benefits from maintaining a good family name.

FAMILY 2

Family 2 was a unique family to study. The granddaughter, Kriti, had had a love-arranged marriage. Bala, the grandmother freely talked about her disgust for love marriages and how disrespectful children seemed to have become. Lona, the daughter-in-law refused to be interviewed by me. I wrote the following in my field journal about asking Lona for an interview:

We asked her if she’d have time to talk. She waved us off with her hand and said something like, “I don’t have time. Come back later.” We walked out of the compound, and Priscilla indicated that her mother [Lona] talked with us in a way that you would talk to a lender or a beggar. That’s what people do when people come up and beg for money. Priscilla commented that the mother made it seem that we wanted something from her that she didn’t want to give.

When I interviewed Bala, the grandmother in Family 2, she repeated over and over again the story of the loss of her family’s wealth. The family’s loss in wealth did not change their status as being born in a high caste. As a result each family member emphasized the importance of marrying in the same caste, high caste, during our interviews. Kriti simply said that her parents would not have accepted the marriage between her and her husband if they had not been of the same caste. Bala talked about it in a more general way, but instilled deeply in the family was the importance of caste.

Bala and Kriti were very careful to define a love marriage as a couple falling recklessly in love and, without the consent of their parents, running off and getting married. This contrasted with Kriti’s marriage. Kriti had fallen in love with a boy of the same caste. She then approached her parents demanding that they arrange a marriage with him.
When Kriti refused to run away and elope with her husband, she said that getting a love marriage would bring a bad name on her parents. She told him that she had behaved well, kept from talking with boys, and built up a good reputation in the village. She did not want to spoil everything by running off and getting married. To her a reputation was a burden to maintain, something the family felt was difficult to do in the light of Kriti’s love-arranged marriage.

While Bala, the grandmother, did not talk directly about this somewhat scandalous marriage, she did express her disgust for disrespectful children who turned away from tradition and did their own thing. She talked about love marriages as the couple running off together, but I sensed she was not proud of her granddaughter’s love-arranged marriage.

Like Family 1, Family 2 did talk about maintaining reputation in the village, but the discussion was very different. Family 1 took pride in maintaining their reputation through disciplining the children. Bala talked only about parents having no control over children. She did not even discuss reputation.

FAMILY 3

Because of their high status in society, Family 3 felt free to talk about love in a less critical way. Akuti even talked about encouraging only the sensible kind of love, the love between two people who would suit each other. Akuti’s son had very liberal views about love compared to the villagers.

As they talked about love marriages, they never discussed the shame it would bring to the family. The grandmother admitted she did not like love marriages. Akuti told me that she would prefer to arrange the marriage of her son if he allows it. However, their language was not as strongly opposed to love marriages as the rest of the villagers.

Akuti’s son is working to have a love marriage. The reason they did not talk about the shame it would bring to the family is because for them, in their high status, the shame would never impact them greatly. Their educated associates would not think of love marriages as shameful, and the opinion of the traditional villagers would not impact them.

I was amazed at how much Family 3 talked about astrology. I did not have a long enough chance to talk with the grandmother. I suppose she, like the rest of her family, would be an avid believer in astrology. Yet her belief would be more like the villagers’ belief and less like the belief of her daughter.

When I would ask about astrology with Family 1 and 2 they would describe the process briefly and explain that it is a necessary step for arranging a marriage. I would ask “Why, why look to the stars?” They would never really respond. They would just say that it is so. In contrast, Akuti and her son talked about their belief in astrology being based on science. Akuti claimed that astrology has been proven by blood samples, meaning the astrology is just an earlier insight to genetics.

Akuti was not a practicing Hindu. She felt that religion was not correct and felt no need to worship. Yet she had a strong belief in astrology. Akuti explained that things like feng shui and astrology were all based on science. However, to get an ignorant villager to follow what science has prescribed, Akuti claimed you would have to make up something religious about evil spirits. So, like the other families Family 3 believes in astrology, but unlike Family 1 and 2
their rationale for believing is science. Since Akuti’s belief is founded on such solid principles as science, they seemed to have more faith in it than some of the members of other families.

**Analysis of Topics**

There were some topics addressed by only one or two participants. Other topics were addressed by many of the participants but not emphasized by any single generation or family

**Flower ceremony**

The grandmother in Family 2, Bala, brought up a very interesting tradition her family followed. The family would find a member of the same caste and have the astrology checked. If the astrology matched, the family would go to the temple, bringing two flowers, one red, one white. They would give the priest the flowers and after a Hindu religious ceremony, *pooja*, the priest would give a flower back to the family. If the flower was red it would mean no, if the flower was white they would go ahead with the wedding.

I had never heard about the flower ceremony from any of the other participants in the village. After hearing Bala’s story, I was open to the possibility that there were other ways of deciding about marriage. These other methods could possibly stem from family beliefs, traditions from certain temples, or personal ideologies. While the majority talked of astrology, there may exist many other ways Indians determine their fate.

**Feelings About Arranging a Marriage**

Lavanya, the daughter in Family 1, was the only woman to mention a hesitation about arranging her daughter’s marriage. She admitted that while in the marriage tent she worried that her in-laws were only behaving for show, and once her daughter went to their home, the family’s bad habits would be let out. In contrast, Akuti, the daughter in Family 3, did comment that she felt no fears about arranging a marriage, only that it was a part of fulfilling her parental duty. The other women did not discuss in detail their feelings about arranging marriages.

**Marriage: A Leap in Development**

Lavanya was also the only woman to admit that she was not prepared for marriage. The women in her family did mention that they married because their mothers had come to them and told them they were going to marry. Vanita, her mother, and Lavanya all married at the age of seventeen. Lavanya said that she did not know what to do as a wife. She explained that her sister-in-law had returned home to have her first baby and during that time she helped Lavanya learn.

**Happiness**

Each woman talked a little about happiness. Happiness meant security to the women. To have a husband who took care of her needs, a family that was close, and neighbors who respected her was what it meant to be happy; no big promotion at work, no losing ten pounds, nothing like the American version of happiness. True happiness was just a simple life with the most important things.

**Social Consequences of Love Marriages**

Since love marriages were perceived as a shame on the family, the family tended not to accept the couple of a love marriage back into their home. Vanita, Lavanya, Priya, and Kriti all said that a person with a love marriage would be gossiped about for the rest of their lives. Most
of them called this gossip “ill-speaking.” Often times the women would mimic the ill-speaking saying, “Look, there goes the girl who ran off.” Their voice and inflection would change as they mimicked the regular gossip of town.

After living in the village for two months, I realized how significant this complete social cutoff would be. The homes were so close together there is no escaping your neighbors. Whenever I would walk into one woman’s home, I would find three or four women sitting on the veranda with her. During the day, women worked together as they chatted. Being cut off from this social support would be devastating for any woman.

Emerging Patterns

The following three patterns emerged from the data: 1) Arranged marriages within the same caste were preferred and supported by the families; 2) Love marriages were seen as shameful and full of problems and were not sustained or supported by the family; and 3) A family’s reputation was important and dependent upon the actions of all the members of that family.

Findings

Tradition

Arranged marriages are such a long-standing tradition in their village and in their families of origin that other options never really occurred to these women. Arranged marriage was something they expected and planned for from their childhoods. Once women reach a marriageable age, there is a procedure for arranging a marriage within the village. It does not happen by happenstance.

Negative Perception of Love Marriages

Most of the participants indicated that a love marriage had a very negative connotation. Each participant told me that love marriages become a shame on the entire family. A reputation of a love marriage affects not only the couple, their siblings, and their parents, but also their children.

Family Support in Marriage

The family has an obligation to assist a couple in an arranged marriage when they have problems. The family’s responsibility is to guarantee the couple’s marriage succeeds. In contrast, in a love marriage, the villagers believe that the couple has made that choice, and they are the one’s who should deal with the consequences of their actions. The family and the villagers do not accept those with love marriages.

Family Reputation

The families with love marriages receive a bad reputation. In a village as poor as Chavadi, sometimes the only real asset a family would have is a good reputation. The reputation of the family is tied to all of its members and vice versa.

Tension between Traditional and Modern

While the behaviors of villagers have not changed drastically, there exists a tension between the traditional view of life and the liberalism of television and education. The daughters are in a distinctive position of compromising between the demands of the grandmothers and the modernity of granddaughters.

Change in Feelings toward Consanguineous Marriages

As the literature review indicated, now the people fear genetic problems that come with marrying close relatives. In my sample, I found the two youngest generations discussed how
inappropriate it was to marry a close relative, while the very traditional grandmothers felt that marriage among close relatives would be ideal.

**Conclusion**

After completing the study, I came to the following three conclusions: 1) The feelings concerning arranged marriages differed slightly from one generation to the next; 2) These three families in Chavadi differed slightly from one another in their feelings towards arranged marriages; and 3) The participants in the study valued the good reputation, strong family bonds, and safety that come with having an arranged marriage.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

I set forth two suggestions for further research. First, I suggest that in-depth case studies be done that build on the interpretive mode of inquiry used in this study. Second, I propose that future research should focus on the unique population of rural families in India who have children, of either gender, who are receiving higher education.

**NOTES**

3. Hui and Triandis, p. 231.
10. Ingoldsby and Smith.
13. Medora, Larson, and Dave; Segal.
16. Sprecher and Chandak, p. 64.
22. Uploanker.
24. Uploanker, p. 419.
25. Sprecher and Chandak.
30. Sprecher and Chandak, p. 63.
33. Gupta, S.K., p. 45.
42. Audinarayana and Krishnamoorthy, p. 194, 196.
43. Uploanker, p. 418.
45. Audinarayana and Krishnamoorthy, p. 196.
46. Krishna Reddy.

REFERENCES
It is about midday when the tropical sun is at its hottest. Around this hour, people in this part of northeastern Brazil tend to come home to enjoy lunch, the shade of a roof, and the comfort of an electric fan. I had just finished spending the morning interviewing, writing up field notes, and running a few errands when Edite, my landlady and president of the local Sete de Setembro neighborhood association, came home looking frustrated. While she was out that morning, she had been stopped on the street by a man who had demanded to know why the current local urbanization project hadn’t included his house in its proposed reforms. The project in question was a combined effort of several local organizations (including Sete de Setembro) to support urbanization throughout São José, the working-class neighborhood where I was performing my fieldwork. The man had complained that money from the project, meant to benefit the entire neighborhood, was only being used to fix up houses belonging to the organizers (like Edite) and a few of their friends.

As she told me the story, Edite’s frustration was obvious. “It makes me want to give up, to leave here, to punch him in the face,” she snapped. She had tried telling the man that no work had been done on her house through this program, and she hadn’t been paid for her volunteer work in the neighborhood association, but he had refused to believe her. She curled her lip to try to imitate the man’s response, growling, “Ah, you are paid, and paid very well—no one works for free.” Seeing that he was not really listening, she had turned to walk away, hearing the man call after her to come back and listen, jeering, “Ah, when we speak the truth, you don’t want to hear it.” Now at home, her story finished, she exhaled strongly and said she hoped that at least God knew the service she was giving and the little she was getting for it.

Confrontations like this were not uncommon during the time I spent in São José. Edite had been active in community affairs for nearly fifteen years, working full-time as the volunteer president of Sete de Setembro, and she had established herself as a powerful community figure. However, despite her extensive and well documented unpaid efforts, she remained the constant target of public and private attacks on her character and on her administration of association affairs. Private and government social programs often offer assistance to the community through neighborhood organizations like Sete de Setembro, and in nearly every instance Edite is accused of embezzlement, favoritism, or unfairly dominating the decision-making process in distributing aid. Nearly all community members complain that she uses the association for personal gain. In my research, I sought to discover the root causes of Edite’s controversial reputation in São José.

After two months of data collection and analysis, I concluded that the main cause of negative public opinion regarding Edite is the fluid boundary between her private and professional lives. In the time I lived with Edite and her family, her days would be equally filled with private activities involving her family and friends and public activities involving those she knew and
worked with as president of the association. Often her duties within one of these spheres would be performed while channeling the persona of the other. In this paper, I will argue that it is this blurring of private and public space between Edite’s personal life and the affairs of the Sete de Setembro neighborhood association that caused the community’s negative view of Edite, and that this blurring of space is primarily a result of two factors: namely, Edite’s solitary status as association leader and her personal contribution to and maintenance of the material and emotional resources of the association. I will also explain that this blurring is understandable and perhaps inevitable, given the circumstances in which Edite is forced to operate.

To defend this argument, I will first provide its theoretical context, discussing the role of the individual in political organizations and how that role is influenced by one’s view of human nature. I will then provide a historical and geographical introduction to the location and social organization of the area I studied, describing specifically the manner in which Edite has risen to her current position of community leadership. I will then discuss the blurring that occurs between her private and public lives by providing ethnographic evidence for the two primary causes of that blurring as stated in my thesis: Edite’s solitary role in association leadership and her personal use and administration of the association’s resources.

**Theoretical Framework**

Much of the controversy surrounding Edite and her work with the neighborhood association is a current incarnation of a question that has plagued political philosophy since its beginnings: namely, the role of the individual within political institutions. When comparing different schools of philosophy, it becomes clear that this role is heavily influenced by one’s beliefs regarding human nature.

Beginning chronologically with the ancient Greeks, Plato gives the individual a central role in his ideal state, as described in the *Republic*. Despite the ancient Athenian reverence for democratic institutions, Plato’s ideal state is not democratic but rather autocratic, ruled absolutely by a philosopher-king. However, to insure justice within such a system, this philosopher-king must be wise and just, possessing a sharp understanding of rational truth. Plato upholds that such an understanding naturally leads its possessor to work toward the achievement of the common good.¹

As mentioned previously, this political stance is deeply rooted in Plato’s positive view of human nature, in which humans are inherently rational and thus will do what is good and right as long as they are taught to know the difference between good and evil. In the Platonic paradigm, ignorance is the only impediment to upright living, and thus autocratic rule is the simplest and most sensible, so long as a ruler is educated.²

However, countless historical examples of the flaws of such autocratic rule, even when those in power have been highly educated, led to the development of alternative perspectives. With the advent of Augustinian philosophy, Plato’s idealistic view of human nature became replaced with the belief in man’s inherent self-interest. Basing himself in the Christian doctrine of man’s fallen nature,³ Augustine holds that men are driven by self-preservation rather than reason, attending to their own personal needs before the needs of society.

This recognition of human imperfection influenced countless political philosophers throughout the centuries, and despite the renaissance of Platonic optimism brought about...
by the Enlightenment, with time the flawed nature of man has again become a foundational part of the ideological framework of many modern philosophers, including the sociologist Max Weber. Indeed, Weber’s influential theory of bureaucracy is built upon the expectation of human error. Within this theoretical model, bureaucracy is a complex web of workers with individually small responsibilities, able to overcome individual human fallacy in government by minimizing the effects of each individual’s imperfections. He asserts that bureaucracy is the most efficient and rational way to organize human activity, and Weber does so because of his Augustinian view of human nature that sees each individual as a source of possible error to be monitored rather than as a rational being to be empowered. By simplifying the tasks fulfilled by each individual, and by placing each individual in circumstances wherein his or her actions are monitored by others, Weber’s bureaucracy minimizes opportunities for exploitation or abuse of power.

This is precisely the critique which many give of Edite’s administration of the Sete de Setembro neighborhood association: as a lone individual, her leadership is fraught with human errors that even the simplest and smallest of bureaucracies could help avoid. However, within the social context of Brazil, asserting an immediate switchover to Weberian bureaucracy as the solution to the association’s problems would be very simple-minded, as such a statement ignores the social and political history of Brazil itself. As pointed out by Roberto DaMatta, Brazilian society is historically aristocratic, based upon extreme preoccupation with social position and a strong sense of respect for those in positions of power. In such a system, the absolute rule Edite uses to govern Sete de Setembro seems quite normal—indeed, such power relationships are quite common in Brazilian society. They are based upon a sense of patronage and reciprocity, in which those in need of help will court the good favor of the individual in power in order to gain personal assistance. Though individuals in such positions of power may be resented (as Edite is resented by many members of her community), they are also pragmatically respected by those who might one day need their assistance. Edite’s role in the Sete de Setembro neighborhood association is a perfect example of this very common Brazilian social dynamic.

São José and Associação Sete de Setembro

São José is a working-class neighborhood in the heart of a northeastern Brazilian metropolis. According to local knowledge, the area has been inhabited for hundreds of years, ever since it was first settled by a West African woman, who had come to Brazil in search of a relative sold into slavery. It is estimated that around sixty families currently living in São José are descended from this original landowner.

About fifteen or sixteen years ago, an open field in São José, used for the occasional soccer game, grew into a new neighborhood, known as Sete de Setembro. A group of about five women, living in expensive rented housing in other areas of São José and lacking the resources to buy land, illegally claimed the public soccer field by building simple shacks on it with wood and mud. Edite was one of these five women. Since then, the land claimed by this group has been extensively developed, with the installation of running water, electricity, and the building of solid cement homes. Edite estimates that two hundred and fifty families now live in Sete de Setembro.
Though today it is a permanently established community, the residents of Sete de Setembro have gone through much difficulty to maintain their seized land and remain in their newly established homes. The city government and police have repeatedly knocked down these residents’ houses and performed raids in the area, pressuring them to abandon their illegally obtained property. In response to this pressure, the residents organized Associação Sete de Setembro, or the Sete de Setembro neighborhood association, as a means of representing the community and defending its residents’ right to property. In an open election, Edite was chosen as president, and a committee of other officers was formed from members of the community. With donated materials, the residents built a community center in which the neighborhood association could organize and hold meetings.

As mentioned above, the original intention of this group was to defend the community’s right to the land on which it was built. However, over time, these rights were legally granted, leaving the association with little more to do in this arena. As a result, the association redefined itself as a forum for community problems, addressing issues such as the installation of water pipes, sewer systems, and electricity. Over the years, these needs were also met, as sewage and electrical systems were installed and the Sete de Setembro area became more developed. As the community became permanently established and the neighborhood association’s original purposes were completed, the association underwent a strong structural change. Instead of serving primarily as an advocacy group for residents’ rights, the neighborhood association began to focus on education, emphasizing activities for teenagers and small children. Today the association offers classes in several forms of capoeira (a popular Brazilian martial art), afro-Brazilian dance, and theatre. It has also offered short-term technical courses in areas as diverse as fashion modeling, computer skills, and soap-making.

Superficially, this shift in the association’s focus from advocacy to activities would seem relatively painless. A number of community children participate in the association’s programs, and parents speak positively about its influence in their children’s lives. However, as I continued to interview the residents of the Sete de Setembro area, I met many who feel excluded from the association’s current activities. One young man said that he had never participated in any of the association’s programs, because he was out of the loop, only finding out about new programs after enrollment had already ended. Another man had experienced the same problem, having gone to sign up his two daughters for the association’s dance class, only to be told that it was already full. Another resident, explaining why this would happen, asserted that only those who have personal connections with Edite may benefit from the association’s programs.

This sentiment was echoed by dozens of people I interviewed. All of these individuals felt excluded, and many had negative opinions regarding Edite’s personal character. However, this exclusion is understandable when one looks at the organizational structure of the association within an Augustinian framework: namely, it is the individualistic (and thus flawed) organization of the association that results in its exclusivity.

“Edite Does Everything”—Her Solitary Role as Association Leader

In the constitution of the neighborhood association, there exist the positions of president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, all with specific responsibilities. Technically, each of
those offices is currently filled, but most officers do little in the performance of their duties. The association’s constitution requires monthly presidency meetings that rarely happen. On a practical level, Edite is the lone figure who actively participates in fulfilling the association’s duties and enacting its programs.

Edite credits self-interest as the main force behind lack of community participation, as the responsibilities of the presidency provide no benefits or remuneration. In her own words, “No one wants to work for free. No one wants to do volunteer work.” Indeed, though free elections are held every two years for the association’s positions, only a few individuals have ever campaigned against Edite, and none have made a strong enough case to replace her, as few people seem interested in dedicating the time and energy required of a position in the association. Thus, Edite is forced to pick up the slack in order to keep the association from closing its doors. “There is a treasurer, a secretary, a coordinator, it’s just that no one does anything. So, in my right as a representative of the institution, not wanting its doors to close, I assume all the responsibilities. I’m the treasurer, I’m the coordinator, I’m the president, and I’m the secretary.”

As I lived with Edite and watched her daily schedule during the course of my fieldwork, I saw the truth in this. Edite acts as the secretary: all of the association’s paperwork is kept in a folder in her living room. She acts as the treasurer: when the association has funds to be used, she determines their use and maintains the financial records. She acts as the representative to the community: when announcements of new activities need to be made or quarrels need to be settled, Edite is the one that visits community members’ homes. Speaking pragmatically, Edite is the neighborhood association. To both Edite and most of the community, the neighborhood association is directly correlated with her person. This was humorously reflected in the beginning of most of my ethnographic interviews: I would begin by mentioning the neighborhood association, and the interviewee would begin by talking about Edite, without any previous mention of her name. As I saw this happen again and again, it reinforced to me how strongly these two entities are correlated together throughout São José.

The fact that Edite single-handedly runs the association is not without ramifications. As a flawed individual, Edite’s direction of the neighborhood association is also flawed; without others to check her power and authority, her personal imperfection becomes reflected in the institution itself. The association, identified singularly with Edite, begins to take on Edite’s personality. Although this makes the association much more personable, it also makes it much more fallible, as the association assumes all of the problems and foibles of the individual at its head. Instead of acting as a relatively objective public organ, the neighborhood association becomes an extension of Edite’s person, a domain over which she has private control. What should be available for the public good becomes a personal resource, even personal property. In effect, the line between public and private becomes very heavily blurred.

Handling of Association Resources

Along with her exclusive administration of the organization’s activities, the blurring of lines between Sete de Setembro and Edite is furthered by her personal maintenance of the association’s resources. On one hand, Edite has personally invested heavily in the association
itself and association activities, both emotionally and materially. Similarly, though all of
the materials that are a part of the patrimony of the association belong to the association
in name, they are cared for by Edite as if they were her own. As a result, the separation
between what is hers and what is the community’s has been eroded to the point of being nearly
indistinguishable.

On numerous occasions during my time in São José, I saw Edite’s personal property
used for the association’s ends. For example, the power and water companies have threatened
a number of times to turn off the utilities in the association. In order to allow the association
to continue functioning, Edite has paid for several months’ utilities out of her own pocket.
Though she has maintained the receipts from these transactions, hoping to pay herself back
whenever the association receives money, her use of personal funds to pay public expenses has
strongly blurred the line between public and private.

Above and beyond finances, Edite has also been quite lenient in allowing the association
to use numerous pieces of her personal property for its activities. Both Edite’s stereo and VCR
have been irreparably damaged after being loaned to the association and mishandled.

The largest example of Edite involving personal resources in the association occurred around
a year ago, when Edite and several other community leaders were involved with the production
of a European documentary about São José. As a result of her participation in the film, she
was privately paid the large sum of ten thousand reais (around five thousand dollars). Instead of
spending that money personally, Edite donated it to the neighborhood association. Her intent was
to use the money to purchase supplies for the association, such as a computer, a VCR, a stereo
system, a stove, a refrigerator, and several other small items. Thus, her privately owned resources
were used in a public sphere for the public good. Or so it would superficially seem—the reality
of this donation was much more complicated. Though all of the items purchased with the five
thousand dollars technically belong to the association, Edite keeps many of them in her house,
using them as if they were her private property.

The neighborhood association’s computer is a perfect example. When I arrived in São José,
the computer was kept in the association’s office. However, during my first week in Edite’s
house, the computer was brought over and set up in her living room while she, I, and several
community members were working on a grant proposal. After this day, the computer remained
in Edite’s house, and when her sons weren’t using it to play games, I often used it to compile
notes from my fieldwork. Over the course of my research, I spent many hours there, as Edite
had given me permission to use the computer as much as I needed. On one particular afternoon,
I was busy compiling my notes on this computer when Edite’s son decided to mop the floor. I
was in his way, and Edite asked me if I was close to done, implicitly asking if I wouldn’t mind
moving while her son cleaned. I told her that I could easily take a break while the floor was
mopped, but as I said so, I also wondered why the computer couldn’t be moved back to the
neighborhood association’s office so that I could use it freely and avoid this type of conflict.
When I mentioned this to Edite, her answer was interesting—she said that when the computer
was kept in the association’s office, the two local girls who taught a dance class would go into
the association office and listen to music on the computer all day, running up large electricity
bills and at one point breaking the disc drive. Edite reasoned that while the computer was in
her living room, she could at least keep an eye on it. Anyone who wanted to use it could come
over to do so, but it remains somewhat protected by remaining under her supervision. As I listened to her explanation, I realized the degree to which Edite cared for the association’s property on a personal level. Moving the computer to her house was not only a short-term practical move to facilitate our work for one day, but was a reflection of the personal level of responsibility that Edite felt towards the association and all of its possessions. 

Aside from her sense of personal responsibility for association materials, Edite also uses the association’s resources out of an understandable desire for personal retribution. For example, Edite explicitly told me one day that the reason she keeps the association’s VCR and stereo at home is because (as mentioned above) the association had broken her own. She stated that she would still try to fix her old stereo and VCR, and that when she eventually did so, she would then give the old ones to the association, keeping the new appliances in her home. The misuse of her personal resources by the association had resulted in a feeling of entitlement on her part to use association resources for personal motives. One breach of the line between public and private space led to another.

The debate over the ownership of the aforementioned computer is another example of this phenomenon. When I began to see Edite’s children use the association’s computer for personal ends, I became confused regarding its ownership and asked Edite about it—when I did, she said that the computer belonged to her. However, when I asked again several weeks later, the answer was different—this time it belonged to the neighborhood association. Sensing my confusion, she quickly qualified this answer, asserting that because she had bought it with her own money, the computer didn’t officially belong to the association, though technically she had given it as a gift. Given these contradictions, the ownership of the computer and other items purchased by Edite with personal funds seems somewhat vague and undetermined. Though these appliances are mostly referred to as association property, Edite was also quick to mention her own personal role in their purchasing, leaving them in a liminal, almost “un-owned” state in which their use by Edite’s family within her own home becomes validated. As time progresses, these resources become closely tied to Edite’s person, and her sense of ownership regarding these resources grows. The line between public and private disappears.

The association’s stereo system, also purchased with Edite’s personal funds, is another strong example of this. Though the sound system is kept in Edite’s living room, the capoeira students came daily during the period of my research to borrow it in order to play music during their rehearsals. At one point, after several weeks in which capoeira practices had gotten more frequent, Edite snapped at several students as they came to get the stereo, saying, “You’re going to take the stereo every day now, is that it?” Though she allowed the students to use the stereo that day, Edite asserted that the next day she wouldn’t let them take it, effectively declaring an ultimatum about the use of the stereo establishing it as her own personal property. Another instance involving the stereo was similarly telling. It was a little past eight in the evening when Edite’s son Afonso complained to her that he wanted to use the stereo, which had been picked up that morning by the capoeira class for practice and hadn’t been brought home all day. Visibly frustrated, Afonso said that he was going to go to the neighborhood association to get it and bring it back. I ended up following him, and when I got to the association, one of the dance teachers was talking loudly with Afonso in the association’s doorway, telling him
that the stereo didn’t belong to him or to his mother, but that it belonged to the association and the community of São José. With attitude, she told him that if he wanted to listen to music, he should buy his own stereo. The strong feelings shown by both members of Edite’s family and participants in the neighborhood association about the use of the stereo exemplifies how confusing the discourse regarding its ownership has become, as well as the indefinite state of the line between public and private.

Though the logic behind Edite’s feelings of entitlement is understandable, it is also easy to see how this discourse has caused frustration among community residents. Justifying the use of association materials for personal ends only dims the already faint line between public and private ownership and easily provides a motive for the common accusations of corruption and greed which are brought against Edite throughout São José today. To conflate Edite and her personal sense of ownership with that of the neighborhood association is to identify Edite as being the neighborhood association, providing an easy sense of frustration among the other residents whom the neighborhood association is meant to serve.

Edite’s personal control over association resources is extended to the educational and occupational opportunities that are made available to the association as a public body. As president of the neighborhood association, she is often asked to recommend individuals from the community to receive public scholarships or participate in social programs. These opportunities, though offered to Edite through her role as a community leader, are often dispensed through Edite’s roles as mother, friend, or mentor. In an interview with a neighbor girl named Cliceane, this point was made quite clear: “If a program offers ten enrollment slots to the neighborhood association, we already know who will get them, and that I’m not one of them.” When I asked her who would be among those chosen, Cliceane listed Edite’s children, their friends, and several teenagers in the neighborhood who are close friends with Edite.

Just as in the case of the association’s material resources, such favoritism is quite understandable given Edite’s position. Much of her preferential treatment does not seem to even be purposeful, but rather is once again a result of human imperfection and a lack of bureaucratic checks and balances. I felt this strongly one day when I casually ran into Edite in the street. She told me that she was going to a neighborhood nearby called Nazaré to turn in applications for a series of technical courses that were being run through that neighborhood’s local Catholic church. I asked her how she had heard about the program, and she said that a friend of hers and fellow community leader had told her about it. The problem is, she noted, that there are only eight available slots, and lots of people looking for opportunities like this. When I asked her who she had asked to fill out the applications, she listed her son Afonso and several of his close friends, summarizing her list by saying, “You know, the boys from the community around here.” As she did so, I thought back to my interview with Cliceane several days earlier, and realized that Edite’s list was almost identical to Cliceane’s list of those most often chosen to benefit from association activities. However ironic this seems, I realized that Edite did not appear to have engaged in favoritism consciously—when she had said that she had offered the slots to “the boys from the community around here,” the expression on her face was one that implied that she thought the answer was obvious. In her eyes, she hadn’t committed favoritism—she had sincerely offered a positive opportunity to the community of São José. She saw those boys not as personal “favorites” but as her community.
Tying this blurring of public and private space to Weber’s theory of bureaucracy, the real issue here is the lack of secondary leaders within the neighborhood association. Edite, due to her many responsibilities, is not acquainted with every member of her community and his or her personal needs, and is especially out of touch with many of the youth in her community, only really being acquainted with those that already participate actively in the association and its activities. As such, when she is offered openings in technical courses and programs such as this program in Nazaré, those who immediately surround her are at an unfair advantage, for they are the individuals to whom she can offer such opportunities most easily. Without a representative infrastructure to assist her, Edite has neither the time nor the means to ensure that all of the opportunities which come to her as association president go to those community members who need them most. As such, she has no real way of divorcing her public persona from her private one. When she becomes aware of programs and courses, her mind will inevitably turn to those people she knows who are in need of such things, and the openings are inevitably limited to her personal social network. Since effectively she is the neighborhood association, one must know her in order to enjoy the opportunities that come to the neighborhood association.

Even Cliceane, the same community member who protests Edite’s cronyism, recognizes favoritism as inevitable: “Automatically, if you’re at home, and you hold a certain position, and a certain opportunity comes to you and you have friends that need it, you’re going to look to your friends, you know?” In a very real sense, true impartiality is impossible for Edite, or for any individual in a similar position of power. The solitary nature of Edite’s leadership prevents any potential for sincere nonpartisanship.

Edite’s favoritism with regards to programs and scholarships can also be understood by citing again her potential feelings of entitlement, with benefits granted to family and friends seen as forms of unofficial payment for her extensive dedication of time and resources. When I once asked her if there was any amendment in the association’s constitution that demanded public accountability of how the association’s resources are used, she hinted at this sense of entitlement herself, saying with a wistful look, “The association is the one that needs to be accountable to me.” Such an answer is understandable when seen in the context of Edite’s willingness to loan personal property (her VCR and stereo) and invest personal resources (paying utility bills).

What’s more, Edite’s involvement with the neighborhood association has hardly been limited to material resources—she has dedicated a great deal of her personal time and labor to maintaining the association’s organizational structure and facilities. As a result, her feeling of attachment to the association is intimate and personal. This can be seen very vividly and poignantly in the following example: early one evening, Carlos, the association’s capoeira teacher, called a meeting in the association with all of his students. At one point in the meeting, Edite arrived and began scolding the class for not helping with the association’s maintenance or upkeep. Her speech became very impassioned over the course of a few minutes, with her complaints moving beyond the students to include the entire community and their perceived unwillingness to help keep the association going. As she kept talking, the whole speech began to seem more like an emotional release than a constructive piece of criticism. Once she finished, she began whimsically pacing the room, approaching a desk in the corner and absentely looking through the drawers. Upon opening one particular drawer, she began pulling out outfits that
had been used in a presentation by the association’s dance group. Pulling them out one by one, she started folding them lovingly, mentioning how she had sewed them all by hand, only to see them used once. “I must be stupid, I must be an idiot,” she said, to let herself get used this way. Watching this poignant scene, I could feel the love and attention which Edite had put into the association and its activities, and I could sense her mourning over her unappreciated efforts. Given this level of dedication and attachment, it is not surprising to see Edite feel entitled to some payment or benefit.22

These sentiments were echoed in numerous interviews with community members. Cliceane, for example, doesn’t necessarily blame Edite for using her position for personal ends: “If you’re in a position where you have access to certain opportunities, of course you’re going to help out your friends, you know?”23 Recognizing that this type of behavior isn’t restricted to Edite, Cliceane sees Edite’s behavior as reality more than injustice. As she stated:

[Who’s] going to stop looking after their own in order to look after others? We simply need to recognize that for some things, we won’t get those opportunities, independent of whether that’s a good or a bad thing. If we were to stop to think about it, we’d realized that in that position, we would do the same thing.24

Interestingly enough, Lúcia, a neighbor who is very critical of Edite, echoed the same sentiment: “I understand that those who seek out opportunities for the community will give a little bit of priority to themselves.”25 Even Edite’s enemies are forced to recognize that, given her opportunities, they would act the same way.

Generally speaking, the residents of Sete de Setembro exemplify a strongly self-interested and Augustinian nature, and recognize their own tendency towards such. However, such comments need not be limited to São José in particular—rather, they seem to exemplify DeMatta’s argument regarding the natural tendency towards self-interested aristocratic behavior throughout Brazil. In this sense, São José is merely one example of a reality which permeates Brazil as well as political structures around the globe, a reality in which abuses committed by those at the top are commonplace enough to be accepted by common people as an unjust but unavoidable part of life.

Theory Applied to São José’s Reality

In summary, Edite and the Sete de Setembro neighborhood association are a case in miniature of the ancient and worldwide political debate regarding the level of strength and power that should be exercised by the individual within a governmental system. Within this context, Augustinian philosophy could explain Sete de Setembro’s problems as the result of an overextended dependence upon Edite as a single imperfect person. As mentioned above, many community members who resent Edite’s leadership do not necessarily condemn it—rather, her actions are understood and accepted through an Augustinian discourse of inherent human fallibility and a lack of Weberian checks and balances on Edite’s administrative power (principles which the residents of São José understand and accept, even if they would not necessarily phrase them in the same terms). Within this context, Edite’s solitary position of leadership within the neighborhood association virtually guarantees the eventual manifestation of human error.

As stated above, it would be easy in this context to invoke Weberian principles of bureaucracy as the solution to the association’s problems. Weber defines bureaucracy as a lack of favoritism,
or in his own words, as governing “without regard for persons,” or “without anger or passion.”” Bureaucracy’s strength is its formality and its impersonal nature, as opposed to the relative and imperfect justice of an autocratic individual ruler. The more complex and institutionalized a political system is, the less personalized its affairs are allowed to become, and thus the more efficient and objective the system is allowed to be. If the Sete de Setembro neighborhood association were to increase its bureaucracy, one could expect increased efficiency and relative effectiveness, which is arguably what the association most needs.

Such an argument would, however, be simplistic—Edite herself often complains that the creation of such a bureaucratic order is exactly what she would most like to see in the neighborhood association. The reason why such a bureaucracy is missing is not for lack of desire from current leadership—rather, it is due to the voluntary nature of the association’s positions. Especially in a working class neighborhood like São José, few are willing or able to dedicate the time and effort needed to effectively participate in volunteer work. When one looks from this perspective, the autocratic form of government used in the neighborhood association should be viewed as a practical rather than ideal choice, caused by a simple lack of options. Returning to DaMatta’s work, one could argue that this tendency toward nonparticipation in the neighborhood association hierarchy is a reflection of the general Brazilian acceptance of aristocracy. Since Brazilians are used to a system in which a few key individuals enjoy near absolute power and others need to court their good favor in order to receive privileges, the development of such a position for Edite within the neighborhood association is accepted as normal. Her confusion of her roles as mother and association president, her disbursement of association resources as a friend and mother rather than as a public figure, her hazy definition of the line between public and private space—all of these are natural outgrowths of the Brazilian cultural context in which São José finds itself, rather than evidence of any particular degree of conscious power-seeking on Edite’s part.

Conclusion

As has been shown, Edite’s nebulous definition of the line between private and public space has turned the neighborhood association into a confusing combination of both. While continuing to offer public services, the association has also become an inextricable extension of Edite herself. Especially within a working-class community that stands desperately in need of the services being offered by such an organization, one is able to understand the resentment felt by the community towards Edite for her failure to maintain the association as a reliable and objective public organ. However, within a theoretical paradigm combining elements of both Augustine and DaMatta, Edite’s personal subjectivity is perfectly understandable. On a practical level, the personalistic administration of the neighborhood association is simply a concrete example of Brazilian cultural norms regarding social groups and Augustinian notions of the inherently flawed and selfish nature of humanity. Thus, while the actions of Edite and the association may not be justifiable relative to the classical Western notions of justice and equality, they may most certainly be understood within the context of the unjust reality of Brazilian society and inevitable human imperfection.
NOTES
20. Cliceane, interview.
23. Cliceane, interview.
25. Lúcia, interview.

APPENDIX A: BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF PRINCIPAL FIGURES

Edite is the president of the *Sete de Setembro* neighborhood association, and one of the original settlers of the *Sete de Setembro* area.

Afonso is Edite’s eighteen-year-old son, who is finishing high school and is also a regular participant in the association and other neighborhood activities.

Carlos is a community member in his late teens who teaches the association’s capoeira class. Like all of the association’s teachers, his work is unpaid.

Cliceane is a teenage neighbor of Edite’s that is preparing to enter college through a locally-offered scholarship. She has participated in a few of the association’s activities, such as capoeira and theater, but does not consider herself an active participant.

Rogério is a neighbor of Edite’s and a father of several small daughters whom he has unsuccessfully attempted to enroll in the association’s activities.

Lúcia is another neighbor of Edite’s who likewise resents what she sees as the denial of opportunities to her teenage daughter and others by Edite and the neighborhood association.

Joãozinho is a teenage neighbor of Edite’s that has never participated in the association’s activities, despite living next door to the association.
In this article the author argues that the Mayan concepts of k’ex and respect that have traditionally maintained an eldercare system have come into danger from Ladino influences because many youth, whose responsibility is to care for the elderly, no longer value these concepts. The author uses ethnographic data from field research in rural Guatemala to show that grandparent/grandchild relations are a vital part of K’iche’ culture. Grandparents care for their grandchildren when they are young, a relationship which is reciprocated when grandparents are older. Naming patterns also reinforce this relationship by linking specific grandchildren to their grandparents. These ideas maintain the importance of eldercare in the opinions of the younger generation. However, influences from Ladino culture—such as pop music, dress, and possessions—give K’iche’ youth new focus away from their communities. Consequently, the youth neglect their responsibilities toward the ancestors and the elderly in their community.

“Tojo papi, tojo amor,” Juana playfully beckoned her young grandson from across the kitchen. The child glanced over at her, but instead toddled towards the plancha, the ceramic stove, aiming directly for the opening at the front of the plancha where Juana had just added more wood to the fire burning inside. Once there, the child proceeded to play with the cold ash emerging from the front of the plancha. The family looked on unconcerned and continued their conversation about how many cows to buy in the market the next day. Suddenly Miguel, the grandfather, lunged forward shouting “no, no, no!” as he confiscated a flaming stick from his young grandchild.

“Ai hombre!” the child’s exasperated mother exclaimed as she stood and took the mischievous toddler from his grandfather.

Most families in Antigua Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan (ASCI) live in family compounds where the normal dinner conversation consists of interactions like this between three generations of family members. Families are constantly together, speaking to one another and building relationships in day-to-day activities. Grandparents and grandchildren are no exception. Grandparents are key figures in the lives of their grandchildren and will traditionally act as backup parents for grandchildren when grandchildren are young. This nurturing relationship not only extends from grandparents to their grandchildren, however. After grandchildren have grown and grandparents can no longer take care of themselves, the grandchildren have a new responsibility to care for their grandparents, just as they were once cared for by their grandparents.

Grandparents are also distinctively important in K’iche’ culture because respect for ancestors is so prominent in Mayan ideology. Respect toward grandparents may act as an extension of this idea since grandparents can be seen as living ancestors. One of the most visible signs of this in ASCI is the k’ex bond between grandparents and grandchildren.

K’ex literally means “to exchange or replace one object for another.” K’iche’ naming practices name children after their grandparents. Consequently, children named after their
grandparents become their grandparents’ k’ex, their replacement. This continuous cycling of a name ensures that the ancestor is never forgotten. Aspects of k’ex can be found in regions around the Maya world, such as Momostenango, San Andres Semetebaj, and even into Chiapas, Mexico.

Nevertheless, few studies have examined k’ex in detail.

These two concepts in Mayan ideology, respect for ancestors and k’ex, reinforce the pattern of nurturing between grandparents and grandchildren. These create a system where all members of the society are taken care of. The cultural system is dynamic, however, and culture change from Ladino (non-indigenous Guatemalans) and Western influences has put the eldercare system in danger of breaking apart. Instead of remaining in the community and taking care of the elderly, many young people are now leaving the communities. Even if youth do stay in the community, many of them are unconcerned with making sure of the care for their grandparents.

The Mayan concepts of k’ex and respect for ancestors that have traditionally maintained an eldercare system is being threatened by Ladino and Western influences because many youth, who should care for the elderly, no longer value the Mayan concepts. In this study, I first discuss previous research about grandparents and globalization in Guatemala that exists in anthropological literature and give geographical and cultural background on ASCI. Subsequently, I establish the importance of grandparent/grandchild relations among the K’iche’ by examining children as a remembrance of their grandparents and grandparents as parents. Finally, I look at the significance of showing respect in Maya ideology and then examine the factors contributing to loss of respect. I show that the eldercare system among the K’iche’ relies on a strong bond in grandparent/grandchild relations as exhibited by respect towards grandparents. Without this bond the eldercare system, based on kinship care giving, can no longer function effectively.

My research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with informants with the help of a Spanish/K’iche’ translator, as well as participant observation of everyday life in ASCI. During these interviews, I asked questions and presented pictures that I had taken of the community to stimulate conversation about grandparent relations. Many of my informants were grandparents, but I also interviewed all ages of community members from nineteen-year-old young men to middle-aged mothers. Participant observation was based heavily on my own household, in the two households of families where other students were staying, and my translator’s household, which were all considered average households in ASCI. Some of my most valuable participant observation actually happened during interviews. I witnessed, for example, family fights and grandmothers breastfeeding grandchildren where the cultural information I learned from observing the family may actually have been more significant than the information from the actual interview.

I also completed a survey of forty households in ASCI in collaboration with all the students in our group conducting research in Nahuala, Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan, and Antigua Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan. The general survey consisted of forty questions of varying length and format. My own personal survey consisted of one multiple choice question and nine Likert scale questions. The surveys were conducted by paid translators, under the supervision of the student.

Grandparenting and Globalization

Kinship relationships have historically been a favorite topic in anthropological literature,
including the role of grandparents in kinship. However, Jocelyn M. Armstrong argued more research is needed on grandparental relationships as these roles change with growing globalization. Grandparents in developing nations are now living longer than their predecessors and are faced with new challenges as their grandchildren are exposed to and accept Western traditions. Consequently, anthropology has seen a resurgence in literature about the elderly and aging topics.

Many authors have noted how grandparents and grandchildren are mutually beneficial for each other. Armstrong noted the prevalence of fictive grandchildren among the elderly women she worked with, indicating that grandparenting is beneficial to the health of grandparents. Anne Gauthier suggested that grandparents are beneficial in the lives of their grandchildren, because they perform roles such as temporary care givers and companions for their grandchildren. Benedicte Ingstad described grandparent roles in Botswana that used to include continuation of the lineage, emotional fulfillment, and help with smaller daily tasks. Now grandparents have more responsibility to actually care for their grandchildren because many of the children have been left as orphans, their parents casualties of AIDS.

Research on grandparents among Maya groups suggests that Kaqchikel grandchildren and grandparents are structurally equivalent to parents and children. Kaqchikel grandchildren are therefore responsible for taking care of their grandparents, just as they are responsible for taking care of their parents. Anthropologists have long established the importance of ancestors in Mayan ideology, yet grandparents as living ancestors have rarely been studied in Guatemala. Some of the few studies that have touched on the subject of grandparent relations are James L. Mondloch’s examination of naming patterns among the K’iche’ and Robert S. Carlsen and Martin Prechtel’s ancestor study. Nevertheless, no research has been done solely on grandparent/grandchild relations among the K’iche’.

Although Ingstad was referring specifically to African nations, Guatemala is also facing new challenges, in this case, challenges that come with globalization. Linda Green stated that media images in the form of billboards, radio, and television, portray Guatemala and the world in general as wealthy, non-indigenous whites. Walter E. Little described how television has influenced Guatemalan perceptions of the world by allowing indigenous Guatemalans to stay caught up on world news. An increasing amount of Guatemalans now have access to cable television, which has allowed them to view programs in other languages and stay caught up on the latest news from Hollywood and the NBA.

The youth of Guatemala, the majority of who are indigenous, are, therefore, torn between retaining their culture and traditional ways, or conforming to what is perceived as modernity by emulating pop culture. Tradition is seen as backward and outdated, Western consumerism and individualism as hip and desired. This ideological environment labels indigenous ethnic status and traditional practices as being backward and uneducated. These influences drastically affect the way that grandparent relations are viewed among the K’iche’, where the elderly are traditionally valued for their wisdom of traditional customs. Studies from the U.S. have shown that as immigrant grandchildren become more acculturated to American customs they have less interaction and affection for grandparents. Less interaction with the elderly among the K’iche’ also leads to a decrease in respect for the eldercare system.
The Community in Context

My first view of ASCI came through the fog as I came bumping down the mountainside in the back of a beat-up pickup truck. The first noticeable building was the relatively large Catholic church situated in the center of town, its white dome peaking out of the fog long before any of the surrounding buildings appeared. The other students and I couldn’t see much else through the fog until we entered the town plaza and made our way to the first host family’s house. Everywhere we looked, dogs roamed the dilapidated streets, which were littered with trash. Yet, even as I viewed the sad state of the once-bustling town, all I could think about was how beautiful the town was, the town where I would be living for the next three months. After the fog cleared, I was thrilled to see the beautiful landscape surrounding Ixtahuacan on all sides and to meet the friendly people who wore their colorful *traje*.17

I never got over the run-down condition of much of the town, however. The plaza consisted mainly of ten small stores—all of which were never open at the same time, except on Sunday market days—the run-down municipal building now used as a school, and, of course, the Catholic Church. A wooden pavilion with tin roofing, once used frequently for protection against the elements during the town’s two weekly market days, stood empty in the middle of the plaza. Now the market is small on Sunday, almost nonexistent on Thursday, so the pavilion gets little use except by young boys who come to play in the rafters. The only time I saw the plaza without an abundance of trash was the day before the first lady came to speak in the town, and after she left, the plaza was full of trash again from all the people who had come from neighboring villages to hear her speak. There were also many empty, half-destroyed houses still left as remnants by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

The current villagers of ASCI are those who refused to go when the rest of the town left after the destruction left by Hurricane Mitch and move to a new site closer to the Pan-American Highway. Signs of the destruction are still visible in the buildings around town, from the cracks in the elementary school to the abandoned *salón*,18 littered with broken walls and shattered glass. Villagers I talked to about the move told me they simply did not want to go; they wanted to stay with their land, where they were born and had grown up. They didn’t hold it against the other villagers for going, that was the decision that the other villagers had made. However, the villagers approximated that about three fourths of the town did decide to move, reducing the number of households to about one hundred and fifty.

The current residents are now faced with the task of reviving the town, with its reduced population and decrepit buildings. One man’s response to a photograph of the rundown plaza in ASCI was that it was “a picture of Ixtahuacan, a town that has fought a lot and wants to work to be a town again.” The town no longer has an official government since the municipal and all the governing offices were taken and established in the new village. If a villager from ASCI needs to register a birth, obtain a marriage license, or even obtain a new *cedula*,19 they must travel to Nueva Ixtahuacan. The town also faces increasing influences from the outside Ladino world. The youth are embracing Ladino ideas, dreaming of things like wealth, possessions, and migration to the United States to obtain them. Where does this leave the town, if the town’s future generations value Ladino ideals and are no longer interested in the old ways of their ancestors?
Grandchildren as Remembrance: The Observance of K’ex

The eldercare system in ASCI is based on kinship care giving. Consequently, it is important to understand ideas associated with grandparent relations to understand the eldercare system. One of the most visible connections between grandparents and their grandchildren is the K’iche’ pattern of naming grandchildren after their grandparents. The firstborn son is named after the paternal grandfather, the second son after the maternal grandfather. Similarly, the first daughter is named after the paternal grandmother and the second daughter after the maternal grandmother. After their first four children, parents are free to choose any name they liked, usually the name of a saint.

Parents usually take the first name of the grandparent and use it as either the first or middle name of the child. There is no difference in whether the child’s first or middle name is the same as the grandparents. Regardless of name order, those who are named after their grandparents are all considered the k’ex, the namesake, of their grandparents.

Research from other Maya areas indicate that a k’ex is much more than a namesake. Mary Shaw included a story in her collection of folk stories, According to our Ancestors, in which a woman states that children exist because “we just exchange places here in the world,” indicating that the young k’ex is a replacement of the grandparent. Ideally, every grandparent will have a grandchild to take their name, become their k’ex, and eventually serve as a replacement of the grandparent.

Indeed, Mondloch argues that this bond between grandparents and their grandchildren is a “social mechanism for replacing the ancestors” and is viewed as “a way for obtaining personal immortality.” Some Maya areas believe that grandchildren are the reincarnated spirits of deceased ancestors. In ASCI, a k’ex is certainly more than a namesake, but the relationship between k’ex and grandparent is generally not seen as a literal replacement or reincarnation of the grandparent. Rather, a k’ex is significant because their name serves as a continual reminder of a deceased ancestor. One informant related that she felt like her name would continue to live after she dies because she has a k’ex. Her k’ex will in turn have a k’ex, which will in turn have a k’ex, and so on. In this way the name eternally cycles as a constant reminder of the ancestors. The same informant gave the example that when she sees her grandson, who is named after her deceased husband, she feels like her husband is still alive because that grandchild serves as a reminder of her husband.

This traditional method of naming connects the younger generation to the older one, even in death. Carlsen and Pretchel stated that among the Tzutujil Maya, k’ex refers to the transfer of life from generation to generation. One informant, Manuela, said that parents name their children after the grandparents “because when the mother or the father dies a remembrance remains, the name of the mother or father.”

In life, grandparents will occasionally give gifts to their k’ex, their “replacement” or “namesake.” One man, Javier, related that he was thinking about giving some land to his grandson as a remembrance of him. The other grandchildren would not receive land from Javier, rather theirs would come from their father. Other people have given small gifts, such as shoes, to their k’ex. Even though it is customary to give gifts to your k’ex people generally do not feel bad if their grandparent does not give them a gift. For example, Javier received no gift from his grandfather simply because his grandfather did not have the means to give a gift to all of the grandchildren named Javier.
Mondloch further explained how the k’ex bond is played out in daily life.25 The way community members treat a grandparent’s k’ex is seen as a reflection of how they would treat the grandparent. If a k’ex is treated well, then the grandparent feels happy that they are being treated well. Furthermore, grandparents are happy if a k’ex actually takes on their characteristics. If a grandparent and grandchild have particularly strong bond, the grandparent may give some land to the child as an inheritance, as in the case of Javier.

This practice, once obligatory, has been declining in recent years. While there are still many grandparents today who have many k’ess, informants related that this practice was followed more strictly in the past than today. Whereas in the past it was taboo not to name children after their grandparent, today it is acceptable. Many young families today decide that they would rather name their child something else, stating that they believe that there are already too many children with that name in the family. Instead parents will use a book (almanac) to find the names of their new children or simply use some other name they know that they like.

In a survey of forty households, fourteen people (mostly women) identified that they were named after a grandparent, fourteen people identified that they were named after a Saint, six people responded that their name came from a book, and six people did not know where their name came from.26 All respondents that stated that their name had come from a book were under the age of forty-five, while those who identified themselves in the other three categories had a spread of ages from nineteen to seventy-three, indicating that using other sources for names may have become popular about fifty years ago.27

Grandparents as Parents

Despite the strong link between certain grandchildren and their grandparents, grandparents are quick to point out that they love all their grandchildren the same, whether they are their k’ex or not. Manuela also said, referring to her grandchildren, “They are all the same because I think they are all my children. They are children of my children, so I love all of them the same, whether they are named Manuela or something else.” This statement reflects the ideal grandparent/grandchild relation—one of parent/child. Grandparents say that they should treat their grandchildren just like they were their own children. As noted earlier, grandparents and grandchildren are seen as structurally equivalent to parent and child.28 In reality, however, grandparents may not always have the same responsibilities over children that parents do. Grandparents do not always live with their grandchildren, so they are not present to discipline and instruct their grandchildren like a parent would instruct a child. Even when grandparents do live in the same compound as their grandchildren it is still the primary responsibility of the father and mother of a child to care for him. This pattern has a significant impact on the way that elderly in the community are cared for.

Instead of acting as a second set of parents all the time, grandparents allow their children to raise the grandchildren, only stepping in to give advice or to take over in an area when the parent has failed or needs assistance. In this, grandparents serve as backup parents to ensure that children are properly taken care of.

For example, Manuela explained that when she was younger her grandmother had noticed that there was a boy who was interested in her. However, Manuela was attending school and
could not give enough attention to the fact that the boy was interested in her. It was seen as ideal for a young girl to marry and, since Manuela’s mother would not do anything about it, her grandmother made her quit school. Manuela was soon married, thanks to the prompting of her grandmother.

In extreme cases, parents may raise grandchildren themselves. For example, Maria, now a grandmother herself, recounted the fond feelings she felt for her paternal grandparents because they had raised her. After Maria’s mother died when she was young, her father had moved in with his parents, Maria’s paternal grandparents. When Maria’s father remarried he moved to another town with his new wife, but Maria and her siblings remained with her grandparents because they believed that the new stepmother was too frail to raise children.

Similarly, Manuela had a daughter who remarried and left her six children with Manuela to raise. Now that many of those grandchildren have married and moved away they always come and visit Manuela rather than going to their mother’s home because they feel like Manuela is their mother.

Although it is rare to find a grandparent/grandchild relationship that is as similar to a parent/child relationship as the aforementioned example, grandparents still, like Manuela said, think of their grandchildren as their own. In a compound where a grandparent lives with their grandchildren the grandparent will help take care of the children when the parents are busy, especially when the grandparents are relatively young and still able to do a lot of work. It is a common sight to see fifty-something-year-old grandmothers in the market place with their young grandchildren. This time without children gives the mothers a chance to catch up on their weaving or to wash clothes without having to watch their small children. Grandfathers will also play with their grandchildren and watch to make sure the children don’t harm themselves.

If grandchildren do not live with their grandparents, then it is important that the grandchildren go often to visit their grandparents. Grandparents seem happy with visits from their grandchildren every few days if they live in the same town, or every few weeks if they do not. When grandchildren come to visit, the grandparents get the chance to treat their grandchildren like their own children. If grandchildren come during a meal then the grandmother will make them food. If not, they may still provide a snack such as bread for them. Some grandparents even prepare the tuj, the bathhouse, for their grandchildren when they come so they can bathe.

The relationship between grandparent and grandchild is not just a one-sided relationship. Because of the close bond that grandparents share with their young grandchildren, grandparents expect that their grandchildren will also help them in their old age. Edward F. Fischer has documented that Kaqchikel Maya children must repay their parents for the “gift of life” after they have moved out of the household by giving gifts. In ASCI, grandchildren are expected to give gifts of aid to their grandparents, just like children would to their parents. As Ana expressed, “Grandchildren should love us and talk with us. They should give us a little bit of nourishment or things to use.” They are expected to bring food, firewood, money, and medicine, among other things, to aging grandparents. Researchers have noted that although young Maya children consume more than they produce, in later years children become vital to survival of the family through their economic contributions, in this case their contributions to grandparents.
It is important that a grandchild visits a sick grandparent. Not to merely bring medicine but to talk with them and to make sure they are all right. Grandparents like to talk with their grandchildren, so when they are sick it is very important to come visit and talk to the grandparents. Even those who do not visit their grandparents very often will go and visit them if they are sick. The relationship between grandparents and grandchild is therefore beneficial to both the grandparents and the grandchild. When the grandchildren are young, they are cared for by the grandparents, and when the grandparents are older, they are cared for by the grandchildren.

**Respect and Migration**

An important part of the grandparent/grandchild relationship is the performance of respect toward grandparents, a concept found in many cultures. Sjaak van der Geest noted that although young people in Ghana say they respect their grandparents, they often don’t value grandparents in their actions when they become adults. The young people no longer ask for advice from the elderly because advice from grandparents is seen as outdated. Respect for ancestors, and, therefore, grandparents, is emphasized in K’iche’ culture. According to Maria, a grandmother of five, “It is important to respect all people but especially the elderly and especially the elderly leaders.” Many grandparents lamented to me that the youth have no more respect. Instead, increasing Ladino influences have changed the focus for youth from Maya ideals to Ladino ideals.

What are Ladino influences? What, for that matter, are Maya ideals? Fischer noted that Mayans focus on interdependence within the community. He stated that what is so different about the Pan-Maya movement from traditional Maya culture is that the movement focuses on instilling pride among Mayans for being Maya rather than for being Ixihuaconos or Nahualenos. Traditionally, pride comes from being a member of your distinct community, not your ethnic group or even language group.

However, Western concepts do not emphasize community solidarity. An informant related to me that many indigenous youth in Guatemala are now embarrassed by where they come from. When they return from a large city, such as nearby Quezaltenango, many youth will whisper the name of their town to the helper on the bus, embarrassed that they must get off the bus in an indigenous town. This is directly in conflict with the pride that community members traditionally feel for their own villages.

One of the biggest pushes from outside of Ixihuanos is to become educated and wealthy. Although not a negative goal, education is not something that has been traditionally emphasized in Maya culture. Educational aspirations come into conflict with existing social mechanisms because ASCI does not have the resources to educate its own youth beyond a basic education.

The school system in ASCI is now small. Informants told me that when the town split, the old community members took all the school supplies and funding up with them to Alaska, a nickname the villagers have for the new town, Nueva Santa Catarina Ixihuanos (NSCI). With most of the people from the community now gone, the schools are much smaller. There are more opportunities for a better education in the big cities, outside of the small communities, like Guatemala City. I met many youth in ASCI who had left the community to study for a while in Guatemala City and heard of others who were still in the city. There they connected to life outside of their little village.
Fischer described that many people who leave the Kaqchikel town of Tecpán for an education never come back to the community. There are more jobs in the bigger cities, where people can actually make money rather than live off the land. In the cities, they can use the education that they have gained to build a better life for themselves. Thus, it is very likely that a community member who leaves the town to gain a better education will never return, because there would be no jobs for that person back in the community.

Migration that is not for educational purposes also affects who stays in the community. The allure of wealth and stability has drawn many Guatemalans away from their communities and into larger cities or to the U.S. for jobs that do not require an extensive education. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimated that in 2000 there were 144,000 Guatemalans living illegally in the U.S., a figure that does not include the approximately ten thousand Guatemalan immigrants who legally enter the United States annually. Although there are still relatively few people from ASCI who have immigrated to the United States, there are many who have the desire to go in coming years. Many of their friends and family from NSCI have successfully immigrated, making it all the more feasible for the men of ASCI. This migration creates a problem in ASCI, where care for the elderly is based on the assumption that the younger generation will be available to care for their parents and grandparents as they age.

However, not all young people, or even the majority, leave the village permanently. The reduction of men in the village is still not a major problem (although it could potentially become a problem in the coming years) compared to the loss of respect shown towards care for the elderly. Other Ladino influences, such as showing less respect towards the elderly, have come with more acceptance of Ladino culture by K’iche’ youth.

I met a young man in the village, Pascual, who was very concerned with the state of his village. He was in his early twenties and had left the village for a time to study in Guatemala City. Now he was active in the community and sought to improve it. I asked him one day after he had been expressing his concerns to me if I could sit down and interview him and record what he had to say. Later that week, he asked if the other anthropology student in the village and I wanted to accompany him and his younger brother to a nearby village. We walked out of the village on a small dirt road, the only level road leading out of town, and slowly watched the rooftops of Ixtahuacan fade behind us into endless milpa fields. I soon found out the road was obviously well traveled as we passed farmer after farmer with bundles of firewood on their backs and machetes in their hands. We greeted each person who passed us with a friendly “Xeq’ik” and they all in turn gave us an emphatic “Xeq’ik.”

After a while, we stopped to wait for some of Pascual’s friends before continuing on to the other village. We clamored onto a large, flat rock on the edge of the road and looked out over the ravine to a view of green mountains blanketed in fog. Seeing my chance for an interview, I pulled out a pile of pictures, my tape recorder, and my notebook, and asked Pascual if I could interview him. The pictures intrigued him, so we started the interview. I listened as Pascual described each picture to me. We soon came to a picture of my host father with his grandchildren out in the milpa.

“This is part of education, to be with grandparents, to know about them,” Pascual began. “When I was with my grandfather, we would go walk, and he would tell me stories. He would tell me that one should respect people, how to respect people, how to be humble, how
to be a leader. Because the ancianos know. When young people leave the ancianos, they [young people] go crazy, they don’t think anymore. Now it is sad. When the ancianos die, I don’t know what will happen. The whole culture of Ixtahuacan is ending because without them we are nothing. We are only youth changing a new world. On the other hand, they, have it inside.”

Next, I showed Pascual a picture I had taken of five teenagers leaning against a wall in the plaza. “Ahh, these are the new ones,” Pascual told me. “The social change; this is the change that I told you about. The ancianos leave, and the teenagers stay in ignorance. They don’t know about life. They only want money, cars, and houses. They don’t want life like this, without cars or money . . . they are preoccupied with materialism. They don’t worry about the well being of the town; they only worry about themselves.”

Pascual returned to this topic later in the interview when I showed him a picture of the villagers from the surrounding smaller towns. “They are the ones who keep their culture. My problem is with the youth. They are the ones who change a lot after. They don’t think about what the grandparents give them. So, it makes me sad that Ixtahuacan will no longer be like this in twenty years. It will be more modern.”

Pascual identified several topics that I found were vital to the current eldercare system. First, he discussed the importance of the elderly to the younger generation. Pascual felt that it was important to preserve their culture and felt that the way to do this was by learning from the elderly. Furthermore, the elderly teach the youth about things that are pertinent to the world today, such as how to be a good leader. Consequently, respect should be shown towards the elderly.

Second, Pascual identified a growing trend in the youth toward materialism that is easily identified in Ixtahuacan. Youth who own Walkmen and TVs are proud of their possessions. They show off their electronics and keep them safely put away when not in use. Other electronics, such as cell phones, computers, and DVD players are now common in households in the larger towns surrounding ASCI. Ixtahuacenos see this and think of how they too can acquire these possessions. This materialism leads to a decrease in respect for the elderly because migration and education outside the community is often the only way to build up financial resources. The eldercare system comes into danger when material possessions, and the desire to seek after those possessions, become more important than maintaining traditional ties and values.

Most grandparents have many grandchildren. If one grandchild cannot take care of their grandparent, there is always another grandchild there to help. However, the Catholic community in the ASCI still saw a need to create a program where elderly community members could come daily to be fed lunch. Where are the children and grandchildren of the people who come to this program? They are in the village, and they try to take care of the grandparents, but it isn’t enough. They are not meeting every need of the elderly grandparents.

A few weeks earlier, my translator and I had visited the household of Catarina, an elderly woman with many children and grandchildren. We met in a small room that Catarina had been weaving in. As we entered the room, her grandchildren brought out two plastic stools for my translator and me to sit on, while Catarina sat on a straw mat on the floor and continued to weave. Every so often I would glance toward the door and see the curious faces of the grandchildren with whom Catarina lived.
I started out by asking how grandchildren should treat their grandparents. Somehow the question was misinterpreted because Catarina answered that she treats the grandchildren that live in her family like her kids and has a better relationship with them than her other grandkids because they are around. The other grandchildren who don’t live with her don’t come to see her. This surprised me because in other interviews I had done the grandparents say that their grandchildren visit often, with responses varying from every fifteen to twenty days down to every two to three days. To clarify I asked, “So when do the other children come?”

Catarina answered that they never come. The kids that don’t live in the family, which I assumed to mean the compound she lives in, never come to visit. On the other hand, the ones that do live here always come and visit when the grandfather is sick and give him medicine. But the others, “Nunca vienen, nunca, nunca” [They never come, never never].

“I guess that is understandable,” I thought. “If they live in Alaska, the place Ixtahuacanos call the new Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan, because it is so cold. It takes a couple hours to make it down here by foot from Alaska, and even in a truck it is still a half hour ride.”

“Where do the ones live who never come?” I asked, expecting the answer to be in Alaska or possibly on the coast. But the response to this question also surprised me. The children who visit live right here, and the ones who don’t, live down the street a little.

“But they live here, down here?” I asked to clarify once again.

“Vivan aquí abajo y ha otro familia que vive allá,” [They live down here and another family lives right over there] my translator told me.

Not quite sure how to respond to that, I nodded and moved onto a new question. The topic of grandchildren never visiting came up quite often, even when the question I asked had nothing to do with frequency of visits. Catarina told me that she feels unappreciated by her grandchildren, that they don’t love her. She has given her children and grandchildren everything, but they don’t see that. That is why her husband has to go out and work everyday, because their grandchildren don’t give them any firewood or food.

I asked again how grandchildren should treat their grandparents. This time it was interpreted correctly and Catarina responded that grandchildren should take care of grandparents, because they are old now. The grandchildren who come and see her do take care of her. They take her nixtamal to be ground and make tortillas for her and make her work easier.

I asked again how grandchildren should treat their grandparents. This time it was interpreted correctly and Catarina responded that grandchildren should take care of grandparents, because they are old now. The grandchildren who come and see her do take care of her. They take her nixtamal to be ground and make tortillas for her and make her work easier.

I asked how she treats each grandchild, and she says they are all the same to her, even the ones who don’t come to see her. She just doesn’t go and see them either because she feels like it would make them feel bad to have her visiting, when they never visit her. Later in the interview, she said that the children don’t come because their parents have not taught them to come. However, she went to live with another one of her children once, and the grandchildren in that home treated her badly so moved back. She said that that is why she never, never wants to leave the family she lives with now. While she was talking about this experience, she started to cry. The parents of those grandchildren were good, they always invited her to come and eat with them, but the grandchildren were not good.

As Catarina’s experience demonstrates, visiting grandparents is a major part of the responsibility grandchildren have to care for their grandparents and one of the most important aspects of eldercare in the community. Visiting not only ensures that the physical needs of the elderly are met, but it also gives grandparents a feeling of self-worth because they feel
their grandchildren actually care about them. When grandchildren visit, they bring supplies for their elderly grandparents, such as firewood or water. Grandchildren also show that they value their grandparents by greeting them respectfully as soon as they arrive and telling their grandparents about their lives. For the most part, Catarina was taken care of physically by the family she lived with, but she was emotionally distraught that her other grandchildren would not visit her.

Although visiting is such an important part of maintaining relationships, many grandchildren do not visit very often. Grandparents told me that the ideal amount of visits from their grandchildren would be two to three times a week. In reality, most grandchildren come to visit their grandparents one to two times a month if they live outside the village, or once a week if they live in the same village. Grandchildren are busy with the combination of school, home, and church responsibilities. Furthermore, many grandchildren moved from ASCI after Hurricane Mitch and do not have to resources to make the trip back multiple times per week.

Catarina was not alone in her frustrations with her grandchildren. Other members of the community also face similar circumstances. There were two women in the community who did not live with any of their children because all their children had chosen to move to NSCI. These women refused to leave their home village and lived together making weavings to support themselves. They had no family left in the village to see to their needs at a time when their family traditionally would have seen taken care of them.

Conclusion

Social change within the K’iche’ culture system has gradually come as K’iche’ villagers are exposed to Western technologies and, therefore, Western ideals. For example, televisions, once a rarity in ASCI, have been purchased recently by many people in the village. This has allowed K’iche’ youth to see beyond their borders and yearn for things they see on those televisions. Furthermore, K’iche’ youth have become familiar with Ladino pop culture and music and oftentimes become overly preoccupied with them. They appear to no longer value Mayan ideals, such as respect toward the elderly. Two ways to get the material things are by becoming more educated or by migrating. Both of these require that the youth leave the village.

One of the many problems these create is that the system to care for the elderly is left with many holes. Traditionally all members of the community, from the very young to the very old, are provided for. Young children are taken care of by their parents and grandparents, and the elderly are taken care of by their children and grandchildren. This idea is reinforced in ASCI by the concepts of k’ex and respect, which emphasize the importance of the elderly in the community.

Today, however, many grandchildren would rather spend their time trying to make money or catching up with the latest fashion than taking care of their grandparents. Other countries have experienced this problem, including China.39 However, in Guatemala, there is no state system in place to take care of the elderly if their family fails them. The spread of Western ideals and Western products around the globe should also come with an understanding and preservation of native cultures and social systems. Without this, cultures that have methods for things like health care and discipline that have been successfully used for centuries will face major social problems if they cannot adapt quickly enough. Further research should be
done into the health care system for the Maya elderly before more elderly are inadvertently abandoned by their kin without alternative support systems.

NOTES

1. I will use the terms Ixtahuacan and ASCI to mean Antigua Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan.
7. Armstrong.
12. Ingstad.
17. Traditional dress.
18. Meeting hall.
20. Mondloch, pp. 9–25; Mondloch, who worked in the same areas of Nahuala and Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan in 1980, found similar results, although he did not see any particular order for naming the children.
23. Watanabe.
26. This was an open question, but all respondents gave one of these four answers.
27. See appendix.
29. Ibid., p. 144.
32. Fischer.
33. Ibid.
35. One informant told me that there were only five men from ASCI who had successfully migrated to the United States.
36. A cornfield.
37. Good afternoon.
38. The elderly.

REFERENCES

APPENDIX
Three respondents chose not to disclose their ages; they are included here as age zero.

![Figure 1](image-url)
In the rural highland town of Nahualá, Guatemala, the Maya-K’iche’ place communication at the center of kinship relationships. As defined through language, physical space, traditional kinship, and gender roles, communication creates implications for not only kinship but also the reception of foreigners and the regionalized worldview of this rural population.

Introduction

I kneel as the truck climbs the winding dirt path, clutching my two pieces of luggage with one hand so that they don’t careen out of the pickup bed; my other hand is gripped tightly around the metal rim on the side to keep from tumbling out. During the fifteen minute climb, I feel every bump, pothole, and washed-out rut in the road. Yet my mind is more focused on the rows of children creeping out of the maize fields and adobe huts to watch the new white-skinned arrival to the community than on the road ahead of us. A few run to the edge of the road and yell “‘Jas ab’i?’” (What’s your name?) Answering with my preset Spanish nickname, I respond: “‘Cristina. Xek q’ij.’” (Good afternoon.) All of the children are shocked, some are giggling, while others let out whispering gasps of surprise at my apparent understanding of their K’iche’ phrases. They scurry off and scatter into obscurity. Soon to be repeated with new host family members, respondents, informants, and town members, the encounter speaks of K’iche’ interactions with outsiders and particularly the possibility of outsiders speaking their language.

Working in the rural highland Maya town of Nahualá, Guatemala, I had originally planned a linguistic project concentrating on kinship terms that was soon abandoned in favor of an analysis of familial communication patterns. I had envisioned studying code-switching in a bilingual community, and the connection that may or may not play out in kinship terms, only to find myself on the outskirts of a highly monolingual village. As such, the focus then became the importance of language and its broader connection to the family beyond the selectivity of kinship terms. Surprised at the arrival of a white person speaking K’iche’, how do the natives envision visitors and communication with outsiders? Why would the people be more than willing to chat for hours on topics of marriage, sex, illness, death, incest, and murder while hesitating or refusing to answer about their thoughts on visiting patterns and language? What relationship do the K’iche’ have with their language, the environment they employ it in, and the social ties dictating the proper use of that language?

Connecting kinship and spatial relations through linguistics, I explore specific K’iche’ terms to understand how the K’iche’ people talk about talking, how they perceive language and its role in their relationships, and what outside factors influence how they conceive of their own behavior in personal communications. Aided by linguistic analysis, I argue that the Maya-K’iche’ conceptualize space into a small, immediately-visible reality wherein effective communication depends, in part, on the physical placement of the speaker and audience.
When requiring travel to share the same location, the physical-spatial displacement of traveling between compounds subjects all visitors to the perceived dangers of the road. Interplaying with these phenomena are cultural, family, and gender roles dictating proper visiting etiquette, contacts, and the subsequent emotional and physical effects of maintaining those roles. Thus, for the Maya-K’iche’ of Nahualá, linguistic perceptions, spatial conceptualizations, and the concentration on familial role expectations operate as primary factors in the cultural schema of communication and visiting.

First, I briefly survey the existing literature (and lack thereof) on Maya language, space, and family-gender role relations. Then, I describe the Nahualá context and its rural versus urban conditions. From this context, I will then describe the native perceptions of the K’iche’ language and its primary venue of employment through visiting, the environmental and cultural factors surrounding visiting patterns, and the spatial conceptualizations born from these linguistic, cultural, and environmental interactions. These arguments support the evaluation of behavioral communication patterns as they reflect the unique K’iche’ constructs of language, space, and family.

**Review of Literature**

I will briefly describe works relating to linguistic analyses, physical-spatial analyses, and the lack of kinship concentration in ethnography. Unfortunately, I must separate these theoretical domains because few successfully crossover and none (to my current knowledge) has sought to succinctly connect all three. Additionally, I describe how the unique linguistic, spatial, and kinship contexts of the rural Maya reality has failed to be adequately represented alongside the urbanized, bilingual populations.

The Maya peoples of Guatemala have been marginalized for more than five hundred years, under the domination of Spanish culture, yet have remarkably maintained a high degree of language retention and cultural identification. This maintenance of language, dress, and traditions has contributed to the distinct separation between indigenous and Ladino groups. The result has been, in general, a strong dominant hegemony of Ladino culture over a large indigenous population and strong racial tension which ultimately contributed to a bloody civil war aimed indiscreetly against indigenous Maya. Following this thirty-six-year war and strings of bloody dictatorships, the tenuous relationship between Maya and Ladino is evidenced strongly in education, politics, and a strong counterhegemonic “Pan-Maya movement,” favoring national ethnic identity over the traditional regional identity. Central to the emergence of this movement is the cultural, educational, and political emphasis given to native language and a perceived urgency for linguistic appreciation, standardization, and preservation. Thus, without specifically examining this counterhegemonic movement, it documents larger perceptions of language and its role in identity.

As demonstrated through the Pan-Maya movement, language is essential to the native Maya construction of identity and remains central to political, social, and cultural movements. The importance of the language has mostly been explored, however, only through the lens of the national, urban movement despite conflicting with the regional variation and community concentration described by the rural populations. As authors continue to work with national movements and generalized association with a language
rather than individual locales, the vast majority of Maya peoples find themselves excluded from the ethnographic record.

As first explored through “linguicultures” by Paul Freidrich, a then expounded as languacultures by Michael Agar, post-Whorfian theory has led us to provide more flexibility and gradation to peoples of the same language group. Regardless of official classification, no language is employed or envisioned in exactly the same way across different locales. Operating within the overall umbrella of a language are numerous languacultures informed by different contexts and conditions. Gary Ferraro states, “Language is a coercive force that causes people to see the world in a certain way.” Conversely, the world people are seeing influences them to speak in a certain way and about certain things. Language cannot be oversimplified to exclude situations created by factors such as social, physical, and political environments, etc. We are then led to seek an insiders understanding to incorporate the individualized settings within which a group of “communicatively competent” members coordinate together to define language and its role in their world view. Singularly Nora England who, as a linguist, cofounded a Maya-run school of linguistic study after extensive work with the Mam group, has been instrumental in understanding the power and importance given to native languages as cultural markers of identity for Maya groups. The difficulty, however, is the drastic under-representation of the view from the layman rural Maya rather than the oversimplified, idealized rhetoric of government, urban, and educated informants.

More than 60 percent of Guatemala’s population lives rurally, though the majority of rural ethnographic description has been conducted in the town centers similar to the setup of Nahualá (to be discussed later). In these rural town centers, translators for monolingual Maya language speakers are not as necessary, technology (including electricity and running water) is more available, and the town leadership are nearby. Subsequently, providing relevant literature for the purely rural population implies a certain degree of misapplication from existing semi-rural ethnography.

As a languaculture, the Nahualá Maya-K’iche’ are not an isolate exempt from cross-cultural comparison. Especially with Maya groups in Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize, degrees of correspondence and carefully considered comparisons should not be overlooked, though they are feasible only if recognizing the “immense cultural diversity among Mayas.” In Eve Danziger’s work with the Mopan of Belize, she extensively explores their linguistic classification of personhood and community through spatial deixis and referential practice. Space, as a part of community identity against the fear of the outside world, contributes to personal identity and point of view acquisition. Most poignantly, even among insiders, face-to-face introduction is required to use full consanguineal kinship terms. This idea of interpersonal identification emphasizes the concept of physical space having social power. Richard Wilson presents the Q’eqchi’ cases connecting the community identity, health, and success as embodied through local “mountain spirits,” intimately linking the power of physical place with social connection. Other non-Maya cultures also exhibit a high association between physical surroundings and cultural identity.

Finally, the role of kinship and family systems has been largely overlooked in recent anthropology following a revolutionary challenge to traditional kinship techniques led by David Schneider. Though limited in scale, some kinship studies were carried out among
the Maya before the Schneider challenge. Recently, while addressed as a key element of traditional Maya cosmology and contemporary society, the Maya family and kinship patterns continue to receive only tangential treatment or purely supplementary status, taking backseat to gender, religion, violence, alcohol, language, and dress. Similarly, only a handful of recent scholars pursue a reinstatement of ethnographic inquiry into kinship models as bases of social construction.

This presentation of existing literature demonstrates the lack of truly native rural ethnography among the Maya of Guatemala capable to bridge the linguistic, spatial, and kinship analyses. Particularly, the import of language as physical substance in Maya-K’iche’ kinship has yet to be explored. In contextualizing my individual findings into overall anthropological literature, no succinct connections between language, spatial construction, and kinship have been uncovered. While partially an extension of post-Whorfian theory, I find my data supporting, instead, what I term “spatial sociolinguistics” to correlate all key factors of linguistic classification, spatial construction, and the social roles created from perceptions of both. In other words, I feel that the languaculture of Nahualá’s Maya-K’iche’ utilizes shared spatial and linguistic constructs for the governance and practice of their social—particularly familial—relationships.

The Nahualá Context

Nestled among rolling hills of maize fields and scattered Maya villages, the town center of Nahualá lies just off the Pan-American highway in the department of Sololá. From its proximity to the highway and the resources of the urban center of Quetzaltenango, Nahualá grew into the regional center complete with a thriving market, three Internet cafés, and the locus of both primary and secondary schools. While the official national language is Spanish, the majority of residents in Nahualá speak K’iche’ as their primary (and often only) language, one of the twenty-one officially recognized Mayan languages. Residents in this town center are more likely to be bilingual, educated, and aware of political and social issues outside the community. With the government offices, secondary schools, and biweekly regional market, this town center is nonetheless designated as mostly rural, with an estimated population of twenty-eight hundred. Contrarily, referred to as “k’ayib’al” [market, town] by all residents residing on its outskirts, it is conceptually urban regardless of official classification.

The boundaries of Nahualá extend far beyond the town center to a population of more than sixty-five thousand. The town center, therefore, represents only a small part of the entire municipal jurisdiction. Propped up on the surrounding hillsides, stretching for fifty kilometers toward the Pacific Coast, and far removed from the town center, smaller divisions of cantones (hamlets) and caseríos (smaller hamlet divisions) fill the Nahualá landscape. From studying in a remote, rural cantón requiring a somewhat strenuous forty-five minute hike out of the town center, I provide data to supplement previous semi-rural representations oblivious to separations of physical, technological, educational, and opportunity-based schisms from the city dwellers.

Obstacles and Methods

As a white, single female from the United States, doing fieldwork in a rural highland Maya town is a daunting task. I learned a small degree of the K’iche’ language before traveling but envisioning only casual utilization for building rapport and depending instead on my Spanish
fluency for communication. This changed as work began in a household of monolingual K’iche’ speakers. Despite the culture shock and the difficult process of understanding myself through foreign eyes, I gained a far more poignant understanding of their worldview, and the intimate family relationships defining their lives. Dedicating myself to work solely in K’iche’ (both with and without translator help), I observed the role that language and the perceptions of linguistic communication played in the rural world of the Maya-K’iche’. Seeking to truly represent the native rural perspective, the data presented comes from rural contacts and mostly middle-aged monolingual K’iche’ women. It should then be noted that these arguments do not necessarily apply to other Maya groups, nor to more urban, educated, bilingual K’iche’ populations. As with all studies dealing with a foreign language, I do not assume to present a comprehensive survey of K’iche’ communication terms as it is highly subject to my personal learning and understanding biases.

In addition to the more obvious obstacles of cultural difference and ethnic separation, I encountered several cultural barriers that tested traditional ethnographic methods though they contributed to my desire to pursue my research questions. Rumors spread about my presence, my intentions, and the funding of my project. Working on my own, neighbors and potential informants often suspected me of being a child kidnapper, FBI agent, thief, or merchant seeking payment for interviews. With a translator, I was often met with reluctance or outright refusal to be interviewed with a few families even refusing my visit. Once, after having casually interviewed a mother of three, I returned for a follow-up interview only to be told by her four-year-old that she was hiding inside the house, avoiding me. And yet, I have learned that a negative response can be just as telling as an informant willing to spout a life story. The repeated non-response to formal methodologies helped clue me in to the intimate, emotional nature of communication among this unique population. Open communication requires reciprocity, intimate personal connection, and adherence to certain host/visitor roles that are all ignored by formalized interviewing practices. The arguments in this paper, then, draw from extensive participant observation, supplemented by numerous informal interviews, initial semi-structured interviews, and discussions with translators and local town leaders.

**Qach’abaal—“Our language”**

The K’iche’ language is the primary mode of communication and therefore the beginning point for examination. In a recent modification of Guatemala census questions, in addition to being asked “Are you indigenous?” respondents were queried about their maternal tongue, how many native languages they speak, and their level of Spanish fluency. Surveys administered in four other Latin American countries were modified for Guatemala to separate the indigenous population into “Traditional Indian,” “Modified Indian,” and “Ladinized Indian” on qualifications of language and dress. England goes so far as to say that speaking a Mayan language is the only universal Mayan symbol, as it is the only purely indigenous characteristic not corrupted by Ladinization. This view contributes to the current linguistic revitalization of both large and small Maya language groups through Maya-run organizations working for standardization, promotion, and preservation of indigenous languages. When combined with the traditional dress of Maya weaving, for the rural population, language often explicitly defines the Maya against the dominant Ladino hegemony.
Having been a purely oral tradition for almost five hundred years and becoming a standardized written language only within the past thirty-five years, K’iche’ was often described as “qach’ab’aal lee winaq waraal” (language of the people here) or the “manera kqachomanik” (way of our thoughts). Even with the advancements in education and standardization, often at the hands of urban Maya in a “Pan-Maya Movement,” the illiteracy rate in some rural communities still rises over 80 percent, and those who are literate are often so only in Spanish.25 Statistically, illiteracy is dramatically higher among the indigenous compared to the Ladinos. And, while more than a million residents of Guatemala report speaking K’iche’ as their first language (the largest group of all Maya languages), dialectal variations within K’iche’ between different municipalities and departments undermines its application beyond the neighborhood setting.26

The K’iche’ language is still by and large an exclusively oral language. It is termed by natives not with the official term of K’iche’ but as “qach’ab’aal” (our language). Explicitly possessed in this way, the reference carries a strong degree of exclusivity and reflects the regional seclusion that will be discussed later on. In contrast, Spanish, and to a lesser extent English were described as “better languages.” Used for business, travel, and to receive information about the outside world, these languages were often connected to economic status, educational opportunity, and especially contact with outsiders. Natives who had learned Spanish often referred to K’iche’ as the “dialecto” (dialect) or “lengua” (tongue) rather than the official term of “idioma” (language). Diminishing the complexity of K’iche’ to a dialect or tongue reflects the perceived limitations to interpersonal interaction and discounts its legitimacy as a vehicle of effective communication, while also contrasting it to the dominance and utility of Spanish.27 The fact that I spoke K’iche’, too, was a tremendous anomaly with informants. Clearly an outsider, I wasn’t supposed to know any K’iche’ and was repeatedly told I was the only white person they had ever known able to say more than a greeting. One of the first students residentially placed outside the city center, I subsequently came into contact with many families that had never held a conversation with a foreigner before. They asked where I learned, why I learned, and what I was going to do with my newly acquired language. When I returned by asking if they knew other languages and what they thought about their maternal tongue, the answer almost invariably cited language as “cultura” (culture) and subsequently how losing the language was explicitly losing cultura. This created an interesting paradox: the maternal tongue represented seclusion and limitation while remaining crucial to the preservation of their way of life and the key to their culture.

This regionalized view was also part of the explanation I received for informants’ hesitancy. They knew I was a foreigner and therefore didn’t grow up speaking their language. Fear of not being able to communicate persuaded them not to talk at all. A young mother with only enough Spanish to negotiate prices in the market, told me:

I feel comfortable in our language ['qach’ab’aal’ or K’iche’]. I don’t have to think. I go out of town, and I’m afraid to use the wrong word or that we won’t understand. I’m afraid to talk with others that don’t speak our language.

Spoken freely at the house and community levels, the K’iche’ language is then tied to its limited outside comprehension. Indigenous peoples’ difficulty in acquiring Spanish fluency has been fuel for discriminatory images as ineffective learners, workers, and
members of society even including national images of Rigoberta Menchú. Due to fears of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and an overall awareness of being the outsider, speaking K’iche’ is reduced to specific realms of home, family, and neighborhood—their individual languaculture—as it is directly tied to the customary behavior and relational ties built within those realms through visiting.

**Talk About Talking**

Before discussing the behavior of visiting and the cultural context surrounding communication, I now proceed with the rhetoric of visiting, talking, and conversation: how the Maya-K’iche’ talk about talking. Beyond the value placed in cultural attachment to their individual system of language, Maya ideology contains a high respect for the power of any speech act as a communicative tool. Spoken language is connected to emotional well being through honesty, virtue, and trustworthiness. In declaring a story, concept, or report as being true or valid, speakers would emphatically state: “‘Tzij!’” (Word!). In contrast, someone rambling, spouting unconfirmed stories, or joking would be dismissed by saying “‘Xaa kub’ij’” (He’s just saying). It is from this concentration on spoken language as a symbol of truth and trust that informs the conceptualization of conversation and visiting as an exchange of physical substance.

*Ch’ab’ej*

One of the difficulties in conducting ethnography is to employ native vocabulary along with the connotations you understand them to carry from your translation. Using my K’iche’ to English dictionary, I had learned the verb “q’atajik” (to visit). When a question was introduced with this verb, the response would use the verb “ch’ab’ej” instead. Using the Spanish verb “visitar” would also typically be translated into “ch’ab’ej.” Used in its transitive form, ch’ab’ej refers to a person “calling on” somebody else but is also used without a subject in the K’iche’ intransitive third voice. Usually more formalized, a visitor to the house would be introduced with: “kach’ab’exik” (you’re being called upon/you’re being visited). Wanting to get acquainted with the gringa in town, I was often promised “katinch’ab’ej” (I’ll call on you/I’ll come visit you). In this way, ch’ab’ej was connected to the unnecessary, friendly visit that would subsequently require more formal attention. Ch’ab’ej is also a euphemism for incest, adultery, and sexual misconduct. Catching up on the community news with my translator and working on my K’iche’, she recounted a recent incident between a woman and her father-in-law. Using ch’ab’ej, she explained that the father-in-law had slept with his daughter-in-law, while the husband was away in the United States.

This crossover between the reception of a visitor in a more formal manner and euphemism of sexual misconduct presents a strong commentary on the power of face-to-face communication and the social intimacy created by it. Talking as a visit or creating a conversation is a highly personal, exclusive, and intimate interaction that can be distorted and degraded into sexual misconduct.

*Ch’owik and Tzijonik*

Used to describe a more general activity of talking, ch’owik is an intransitive verb that emphasizes the action and the subject but does not contain an object. In other words, the person carrying out the act of talking is described without any mention of the subject matter.
of the actual speech. Conversation, then, is a powerful bonding tool between participants regardless of what is specifically communicated.

Tzijonik, as well, was used to describe idle conversation. As a noun, tzij means “spoken word.” In its intransitive form, this verb also implies a lack of explicit subject matter, simply “making words.” Words are made, shared, given, and taken in an act of creation and transformation.

This presents a seeming contradiction as informants report the importance of speech as a presentation of truth and honor while the actual verbs of transferring verbal communication emphasize the act without regard to the words exchanged. In reconciling this contradiction, I qualify the distinctions through application—the behavior of visiting and conversation.

The Visit

As I began to pursue family communication, I started with observation of visiting patterns and what was expected in the visitor/host relationship. Being a visitor myself, the formal aspects of a received visitor were easily observable. The informal aspects, however, are more delicate and more telling of the cultural significance of communication, and the expected behavior of guests.

The Formal Visit

All visitors arriving at the compound are expected to call out at the street or edge of the property until recognized and met by a member within. From there the reception is differentiated between formal and informal visiting. Guests are often received into the largest room of the compound—a formal sala or sitting room. This is often the most recently built and doubles as the family bedroom. Guests are invited to sit down on a chair, stool, or bed edge depending on what is available. Some sort of food or refreshment is customarily offered consisting of a hot drink and purchased bread. Full maize meals are rarely if ever offered, and the food must be brought away from the kitchen to be consumed in the formal receiving room, typically the only room visitors are allowed to see, and then promptly expected to leave once the business has been concluded. Conversation is more reserved and factual, seeking to satisfy the demand of the visitor and not to build relationships. In doing so, the guest is not only physically but metaphorically restricted from access to the family. Not surprisingly, this setup is also the kind offered to traveling salesmen and strangers in general.

Having the requirement of refreshment or offering, many respondents connected visiting (especially outside the family when the setting would more likely be more formal) to economic obligation. With more than 75 percent of Guatemalans reported to live below the poverty line, this economic obligation has a large impact on individual motivation for visiting. Without justifiable presence, an individual would be considered greedy, selfish, or disrespectful. Much of this obligation and embarrassment is negated when visiting family members and being received in the informal setting.

The Informal Visit

In contrast to the formalized, restricted reception, the familial and preferred setup for receiving guests occurs in the “nukb’al q’aq’” (place for fire/kitchen). After being recognized and met at the door, guests may be welcomed to come and sit in this busier, less secluded room. Women working with wood-burning stoves spend much of the day inside the kitchen
preparing, consuming, and cleaning up after meals in the kitchen. Here they may also set up their weaving looms, spending even more time in the same room. It is the locus for family gatherings, a singular place for cross-gender conversation, and the hub of compound activity. One family I knew preferred to throw down their sleeping mats here as well, creating a multipurpose room occupied at all times. By allowing visitors into this room, hosts demonstrate a large degree of trust and intimacy otherwise reserved for residents of the compound. Visitors typically given this reception include distant family members, neighbors, and markedly, fellow church members. They are also more privileged to move around the family compound and trails without being accompanied. Even as invited guests enter this inner space, guests are rarely allowed to eat a full meal with the family. Refusal of refreshments offered to those in a formal setting is more acceptable in the informal setting and does not pose the disgrace and embarrassment it would as a formal visitor.

As I sought informants, every primary encounter would be highly formalized as described. I was both physically and metaphorically kept at a distance from the inner parts of the house and therefore the family. Only in participating with feast preparations and among my own host family was I ever included in activities taking place around the hearth. As cited among the nearby Kaqchikel-Maya, the kitchen and, specifically the hearth, determines a specific “hearth group,” which “serves as a primary nexus of identity.” Allowing a stranger to eat and participate in this intimate space would imply their inclusion in this hearth group, and the subsequent family role obligations attached to that inclusion.

This conceptualization of who should and should not eat and chat around the family hearth presented a distinctly awkward position for a student paying for three square meals a day. Despite my professor introducing me as a sister, daughter, cousin etc. according to the hierarchy of the patriarch, my presence was admittedly strained and the family later confessed “Xqaxij qiib’ chawach” (We were scared of you [literally we were scared toward your face]). I had been artificially transported into a role as family member though obviously not of their lineage, culture, nor hearth group. Soon, they called me “-alib’” (sister-in-law/daughter-in-law). Rather than treatment as an immediate family member, the kinship term is one of distance and non-blood connection. In this way, they could reconcile my presence around the hearth, while also recognizing that I was not truly family but rather an arrival from another hearth group.

At daily meals, the eldest son vacated his seat nearest the fire alongside the family patriarch, giving me a highly honorary station. Women traditionally sit on the floor or, more recently, on the sides of the large stoves. The warmest seats near the fire are reserved exclusively for male leaders of the house. Even when family members would visit and be received into the kitchen, offered food, and a seat, they would typically sit behind the circle of the hearth and participate in conversation from a distance. With such a prized seat, they gave me a very clear message that I was special and honored. At the same time, I occupied a highly male position. I was highly educated, exposed to the outside world, free to travel without reporting to my parents, and therefore more closely resembled the role of a male. At the same time, I
was not biologically male and they restricted me from attempting any male work such as agricultural work in the fields, chopping wood, and carrying firewood. On the one occasion I accompanied an outing to gather firewood, they instructed me to sit and watch despite plans to work for the next four hours. Refusing to accept the role of fragile outsider, I convinced one of the hired workers to rig up the ropes to carry the firewood on my back as the men. Shocking the entire crew, I proceeded on fourteen trips, hauling the wood attached to the strap on my forehead.

In all spheres of K’iche’ life, gender helps define proper behavior. From the placement of family members around the kitchen hearth to opportunities for travel and social interaction, gender roles are explicitly and (at least traditionally) rigidly enforced. This rigidity, as well as my nonconformance to it, helps to explain the high degree of non-response. Not having been properly socialized into my gender-age role and without a blood relative present to instruct me, I threatened the community and gender roles they so highly value. While energetically interested in my presence, my personality, and my life in the United States, many hesitated to approach me as this would essentially condone my inappropriate social behavior. Thus, as not only an outsider but a disgrace to traditional femininity, my reception was one of distance and caution—similar to that of traveling salesmen and government officials.

Health, Emotion, and the Necessity of Visiting

While effective communication requires face-to-face interaction, the social and economic obligation attached to it promotes caution and consideration before making a visit. At the same time, visiting is explicitly described as one of life’s necessities. When asked why a member would visit another family member, the response was simple: “Are’ rajawaxik” (It is necessary/important.) Asking why it was necessary/important yielded unexpected references to physical health and emotional well being rather than the content or frequency of the visit.

Drawing from these initial responses to why visiting is necessary, I conducted a free list stating, “What is the most important reason you visit your family?” From this question, informants provided answers that fell into two distinct themes. The primary response was a state of sadness: kinb’isonik (I get sad), and boredom: kinq’itajik (I get bored). Mentioning one or both, 54 percent of the thirty-one households surveyed responded with this sadness and boredom, accounting for 49 percent of all forty-seven responses. Secondly, responses centered on the physical well being of the family members being visited. Members were concerned about sicknesses: yab’iil, and pain/difficulty: k’ax. This response accounted for an additional 27 percent of respondents and 17 percent of all responses. In summary, 81 percent of all respondents and 66 percent of all responses focused on these emotional and physical issues.

Additionally, should a regular visitor be unable to visit and leave no reason for the lack of communication, that person would be considered sick—either physically, emotionally, or spiritually—and in need of immediate rescue. One respondent talked of her two sons in the United States. I asked if they called her or contacted her. She stated:

Jun, no. Kinub’isoj taj. Maj kub’ij uk’ux. Lee otro, si. Pero, na junam taj pa teléfono. Kinwil taj uyawab’iil. Are’ nub’is. Jas kqab’ano? Maj. (The one, no, He is not sad about me/he doesn’t miss me. His heart/soul says nothing. The other, yes (he contacts me). But,
it’s not the same on telephone. I can’t see their sickness. That is my sadness. Yet, what can we do? Nothing).

There are three important conclusions provided by this explanation. First, the mother comments on communication lapses having affective power upon both the failed visitor and the intended recipient. Second, there is an explicit tie to communication as a visual activity; the lack of which creates physical and emotional harm. Third, there is a strong sense of inability to adapt to nontraditional modes of communication (like a telephone) and a resignation in facing the obstacles created by them.

Beyond the common emotional value given to communication, the Maya-K’iche’ attach physical properties to language and visiting that carry power to aid physical health, spiritual well being, and the overall balance an individual must maintain for successful existence. The difficulties of sickness, poverty, pain, and sadness are weights thought to rest upon the entire social network to be addressed, handled, and solved by the entire community. Support and solidarity are most often achieved through open communication and physical presence. Many reported not having gifts or food to offer their family; therefore, they sacrificed their time and attention to visit. As the mother’s commentary illustrates, a lack of communication connects to the mental, emotional, and spiritual state of the person. Failing to verbally and communicatively support the family represents a failure of character, a departure from cultural and familial values, and even a mental or emotional imbalance. This emphasis on community and family reinforces the reciprocity of conversation, wherein the emotional healing power of mutual communication is lost alongside the sense of selfless consideration for others.

Understanding the different venues of visiting provided a solution to many of the contradictory values of the speech acts versus reciprocity and interaction. Overall, it is the act of visiting that presents the core values of communication as the behavior is more influential than the actual information presented by creating an opportunity for shared speech acts. Concerning the individual participants, the intimate nature of the visit platform, and the exclusivity of calling upon another house require a degree of honesty and virtue to uphold the power of communication and prevent the misapplication of that power (as exemplified by ch’ab’ej and sexual misconduct).

The Language of Spatial Conceptualization

I now discuss unique K’iche’ connotations attached to verbs and situations concerning travel and physical displacement. The essence of the spatial sociolinguistic phenomenon, terms attached to personal travel and the physical displacement of visiting conceptually, transform communication into a physical object.

To arrive: -oopan vs. –ul

A primary locative distinction in travel is “–oopan” (to arrive over there) and “–ul” (to arrive here). One cannot simply say “I arrived” without automatically signaling arrival at the current location or elsewhere. It is often customary to greet a visitor by asking “Laa xatulik?” (Have you arrived here?), answered by “Xinulik” (I arrived here). Visitors and foreigners are often called xnul stemming from a contraction of the sentence xinulik. Not only do the verbs apply to the speaker’s location but more specifically to the speaker’s location in relation to the audience. The applicability becomes more complicated, then, when the speaker relates the
same story at different locations. Ideally, the speaker and audience share a single location and thus the spatial context of arrival.

Moreover, the “here” typically refers to a single household compound or building connecting the speaker to the family unit within which they reside. It can, however, also refer to the city at large or the community as a whole but rarely extends beyond the boundaries of the immediate visible surroundings. This shared visible reality contradicts modern abilities to communicate without sharing the same physical space. Phone conversations and all written correspondence separate the speaker and audience so that the “here” to one person is the “there” to the other. This same emphasis on locatives occurs with other verb sets such as -k’am loq (bring here) and -k’am bik (bring there), -el loq (leave here) and -el b’ik (leave there), though unlike –ul and –oopan, the articles b’ik and loq are attached as explicit physical locatives. In understanding the importance of these oppositions, distinct separations exist between the inner world of the home/compound, the outer world of the town center and Maya-K’iche’ people, and the greater world at large. In all examples, the reciprocity and shared contextual space is disrupted whenever an exchange occurs by any other means than face-to-face (or soul-to-soul) contact.

Exemplifying the Maya notion of balance and the interaction between the soul and the body, the arrival of a visitor using -ul [to arrive here] references the arrival of the soul to complete the physical presence. Having homesickness implies that the soul has not yet arrived, endangering an individual’s balance and risking physical or emotional illness. The separation between “here” and “there” extends to the physical location of the soul with its ability to remember, understand, and communicate. Questioning the arrival of visitors customarily assures their emotional and physical well-being. At the same time, this notion of the soul’s arrival applies only to outsiders and foreigners because natives’ souls are necessarily within close proximity.

This physical connection to language is also clearly visible in the corporeal references given to language and its acquisition. Learning K’iche’ in the classroom, I learned the verb “to know or understand” as -eeta’am. When I heard a word that I had not learned, or I did not understand they were saying, I would then respond with “Na weeta’am taj” (I don’t understand). Simply repeating the question to me, I remained just as confused as before. Asking a bilingual translator how to express a lack of understanding, I was told to say “Na kinch’op taj” (I can’t reach it). Furthermore, when asked whether I spoke K’iche’ or not, rather than literally asked if I spoke (“Laa kach’ow pa qach’ab’aal?”), I was asked whether I heard K’iche’ (“Laa kata’ pa qach’ab’aal?”). Once convinced of communicative competence, many people further commented that the language had “Xok pa ajolom” (entered (my) head). Information from church, wisdom from the elderly, and other life lessons are also viewed as speech acts that must be “reached” (the subject being the one responsible for the action) and then “entered” (the language itself being responsible for the action). This same verb –ok is used in reference for a guest entering the household, entering the tuj (traditional sweathouse), entering the classroom and other physical rooms or spaces, as well as the sun (rather than “rising”) and the night entering the sky.

This physical acquisition is reinforced through its capability of being lost or reacquired. Visiting with many local families, a common side remark is: k’ol ch’owik (there is talk/conversation). The verb in conjunction to conversation is k’olik (to be) as referring to the physical existence of an object, or its presence in tangible form. In preparing to leave the communities, I was questioned
“Laa jakoj le K’iche’ pa Estados?” (Will you speak K’iche’ in the States?) Literally, (Will you put on K’iche’ in the States?) Rather than an abstract verb of usage or continuance, koj is the same verb for putting on clothing, coverings, and other external physical objects. Using these verbs as attached to physical activities, language is conceptually transformed into a physical substance entering the speaker’s head by being “heard” and received through “reaching” and maintained by “being put on.” As a substance, language is not simply learned, but shared, acquired, and retained or lost through personal interaction. Language and knowledge are thus envisioned with physical, tangible properties which often relate to an immediately visible surrounding and shared contextual space.

Roads and Traveling

Leaving the compound is often necessary to fulfill the expressed necessity of visiting. To explore the perceptions of visiting and communication, we must then understand the unique spatial conceptualizations of physical environment and the road. Danziger reports that Maya operate intimately with their immediate geography but have little access to outside communities.32 This is partially a pragmatic reality created by the local geography and environment. Outside of the town center, even the main arteries of vehicle travel are unpaved or, at best, paved only on the most inclined sections. The unpaved sections are further crosscut by streams of dish and laundry water from each family’s washbasin and treacherously whittled down by the daily rain. In the entire 14,118 km of highway in the country, 9,247 km are unpaved.33 Most families do not own a car, and those that do opt for a pickup truck for hauling things back and forth, including people.

Residential areas, however, are not often built along any highway. An extensive “non-classified road network” with “the only form of access for numerous villages”34 leaves many houses accessible via single-file footpaths also heavily torn by the constant rain. Travel, therefore, becomes not only difficult but dangerous, prompting a common exit greeting: “Matzaaqik!” (Don’t fall!) Or, more concretely tied to the danger of traveling: “Matzaaq pa b’e!” (Don’t fall on the road!) Most families do not own a cell phone; fewer own a land line phone. Not surprisingly, word of mouth through informal social networks is the primary means of communication. Connecting face-to-face, however, requires personal travel. As travel is usually dependent upon walking and individually traversing the countryside, it is significant that many cultural fears, myths, and K’iche’ terms of interpersonal communication involve references to travel and physical displacement.

Rules of the Road

Ancient Maya cities were connected by elaborate causeways called sak beh [white road] that symbolized the Milky Way: the pathways of the earth, the stars, and death as man journeys into immortality. Linda Schele describes these roads as veins giving the “outlying population” a connection to the town center;35 yet, Mayanists, like ethnographers, have failed to adequately explore the cultural significance of these roads. While recognizing the architectural mastery of carved stelae depictions of the sak beh, the focus favors the destination or the traveler rather than the importance of the road itself. In daily life however, traveling was essential for trading, external communication, and exploration as roads evolved into sources of cultural exchange and sites of social definition and hierarchy.
In contemporary Maya-K’iche’ society, age veneration is often expressed through encounters on the road. As any two people cross paths, the younger person is expected to stop, step aside, and allow the elder to pass. As recounted by a translator, the ultimate respect would dictate the youth to bow down and “esperar la bendición sobre la cabeza por la mano de su superior” (wait for the blessing over his head by the hand of his superior). Most respondents only cited the movement to clear the road (which is still commonly practiced in modern times), recognizing others on the road, and asserting your social relation with them. When encountering me on the rocky hill, children running full speed would consciously halt, walk slowly past me, and then continue their running descent. Trying to employ this custom, I would take the initiative of standing to the side of the road, often causing momentary impasses as native travelers—though older and arguably more socially respected than an unknown foreigner—would try to give me passage instead. Asking why this occurred, I learned I was being respected as an “extranjera rica con poder e influencia” (rich foreigner with power and influence). Beyond respect to the traditional gender-age hierarchy, determinants of money and access to the outside world now afford an individual increased social status and respect.

Concerning this practice, informants frequently reported the importance in clearing the road and respecting your elders, but would lament the custom’s decline, stating the youth “maj keek’ixijnik” (don’t have respect/shame). Some even reported stories of youth pushing and shoving their elders rather than clearing the road for them. As they continued, informants stated that fathers were not teaching their children to respect their elders and rising generation, though educated, was lazy and disrespectful. The current pattern of perceived family disintegration, then, included a lack of proper communication and social recognition on the road.

Many cited the introduction of formalized education. Many feared the exposure to danger on the road as children left their family compounds and walked to school. Once there, rather than learning the gender-delineated tasks in the family setting, youth become separated from the authority of their family patriarch and educated according to age rather than gender. Enhanced by the nontraditional destination, the subjugation to the dangers of the road threatened the rising generation and their connection to kin, reinforcing the spatial sociolinguistic argument as social and familial roles are disrupted through the physical displacement of traveling.

Thieves and Tumbling

Roads are also strongly associated with thieves, violence, mischief, and k’ax (finding pain). Working in the various cantones and personally venturing on hikes around the narrow, steep and isolated footpaths of the hillsides, host members invariably asked where I was going, who would be accompanying me, what I would be doing, and when I would return. Despite initially ignoring these warnings as paranoia from a protective host family, one particular outing spoke of cultural perceptions in the danger of foot travel.

I had planned to meet another student and seek out a trail leading to a nearby community. Presenting my plans to my host family, they begged me not to hike with my friend but to take the bus instead. They started by citing the fact that it would be faster than walking, then followed by warning that “keekoos awaqaan” (your legs will get tired), “kariq k’ax pa b’ev” (you’ll find pain/hardship on the road), and finally “ee k’o elaq’oomaab’ Katkich’ayo” (There are thieves; they’ll hit you.). Assuming these warnings overprotective, the two of us
left to find the trail. Once upon the nearby hilltop, I was shocked to find other members of the community holding a prayer service. The participants again questioned my destination and activity, warning me that my legs would tire, I would find thieves, and I should just take the bus. In frustration at such a seemingly simple outing, I explained that we liked seeing the landscape, we weren’t from here, and we enjoyed exploring our new surroundings. Pointing to the approaching rain clouds, we continued our journey. Walking on, I simply didn’t understand—every adult in the area knew foot trails to a dozen nearby towns yet were seemingly terrified to ever walk beyond the town market. The complex answer came a few weeks later when two girls from the town center were attacked along a trail near a known gang hangout.

Upon hearing the news of the attack, the one girl confirmed dead and the other sent to a nearby hospital, multiple families warned me not to be out at night and to stay inside if I didn’t need to go anywhere. While I shared their concern, I was surprised by the subsequent discourse connecting the girls’ tragedy to areas of travel. I was told that, traditionally, elders had sat outside and watch the roads. Males heading to the milpa fields would pass by, greet the elders, and then continue on their way. Women would pass by, greet the elders, and then continue on to the market, a family member’s house, or to visit a sick friend. The youth would pass by and be stopped by the elders, who would ask where they were going. They would then be advised to return as quickly as possible from their errand. Should any individual, particularly a stranger, be sighted on the road without having a necessity or errand justifying his presence, the elders held the responsibility to remove the threat. Being on the road without an explicit purpose equated to being a thief or drunkard, bringing disrespect to one’s family.

The girls were largely dismissed as “getting what they deserved” for venturing out without appropriate purpose. In connection with the hiking experience, the warnings surrounding my leisure journey came not only from a protective attitude, but depicted a prevailing perception of roads as symbols of social interaction. Rather than enforcing social and age hierarchies, the roads have become an extension of disintegrating models of familial and elderly respect. The gender model would require parental permission, a female or blood-related male escort, and a gender-appropriate destination—the market, mill, church, or family member’s compound. Accompanied by a non-relative male companion for a recreation trip, I denied all conventions of travel and exposed myself to the possible repercussions. Despite the described intricate network of paths, trails, as well as modern paved roads and highways, K’iche’ employs a single word for them all: b’e. Consequently, the attachments, connotations, and cultural phenomena associated with the road are attached to all roads regardless of size, length, or locale. Traveling requires leaving the familiarity and safety of the home compound and entering in unpredictability of the road. Not within the sacred space of the home compound and not yet at the familiarity of the destination, roads represent a site of dangerous uncertainty and unpredictability.

**Market Days and Outside Travel**

One of the things a tourist must experience is a traditional Guatemalan market. For the Maya-K’iche’, this market is not a mere attraction in excitement and enterprise, but their
lifeline of weekly food and goods. On main market days—held twice a week (and dwindled numbers during the rest of the week)—vendors gather from as far away as one hundred miles starting as early as four in the morning to set up booths, stalls, and even fried chicken stands. Goods from fresh produce, newly butchered meat, and packaged powder drink mixes to rubber sandals, woven textiles, and individualized packets of aspirin are found filling the crowded main streets of the uk’ux tinamit (town center). At least one member of each household would trudge down the steep slopes to the k’ayib’al (market/town), most often the matriarch as she is in charge of the finances as well. In many families where a younger son and his wife live with the elderly parents, the daughter-in-law would buy her family’s food separately even if both groups ate and cooked together. Most envos would leave early in the morning when the largest concentration of vendors are present, take time to sit down for a snack, and return midday to begin cooking dinner.

In talking with women about their visits to the market, I soon learned that the biweekly event represented a complex mixture of necessity, social interaction, and gender role maintenance. With no refrigerators, ovens, or microwaves, cooking in rural Guatemala occupies a great deal of women’s time. With these conditions, it is necessary to restock often and rely upon fresh goods. No matter the distance from the market, women make the journey at least twice a week. In addition to the sheer necessity of buying food, market days stood as one of the only established outlets for female social interaction appropriate to gender expectations without bringing additional economic obligations. In charge of household cooking, cleaning, weaving, and rearing children, women are highly confined to the space of the family compound. Requiring a husband’s approval before any outing often reinforces this limitation. When I first entered the community as a single female, I was often asked if I had family living nearby. Having no family to speak of, I was then asked with shock how I was able to travel by myself. “Laa katuyajo apapa?” (Will your father yell at/scold you?) They wondered if I had the permission of my father to travel, and why he would allow me to go so far from my home and family. As my father, he is responsible to ensure my sanctity, eligibility for marriage, and the pursuance of my domestic abilities. Flying to a far away place to interview people and learn about their culture did not coincide with their expected role of young women and therefore should not have received the open approval of my parents.

Again tied to the notion that roads are dangerous and people found alone on the road are dangerous or disrespectful, women are expected to travel only with distinct purposes appropriate to her role as domestic provider. In having the market days, then, women are given gender-appropriate opportunities to gather with other women, share neighborhood gossip, and socialize with members outside of their immediate family setting.

The TV Trip

The interaction between the regional-minded rural Maya-K’iche’ and urbanized Ladino was most poignantly illustrated by a trip I made with a local family to buy a TV. Using the money sent home from a working immigrant son, a family wanted to buy a large television to replace an older, smaller one that had been broken for the past eighteen months. Negotiating over several cell phone conversations, the son instructed his family what screen size and brand to buy. They were also instructed to buy the television at a large store in Quetzaltenango rather than an open
stall vendor. Being the rajaw (lord, guardian, owner) of the money in the family’s bank account, the son was explicitly consulted for approval for any withdrawals and subsequent purchases. Having immigrated more than three thousand miles away six years earlier, he faithfully maintained his bimonthly payments from his restaurant job. He would be waiting for a report, and if he became unsatisfied by their spending behavior, they risked losing the money for their weekly food and monthly electricity bill. This time, however, following the son’s instructions presented a small predicament. Going to the department store in the city required buying the TV from salesmen who only spoke Spanish and nobody in the family spoke enough Spanish to complete the transaction. As I spoke the most Spanish in the cantón, the family asked that I help them find the “tele pa 24 pulga pa ri marca SO-NY” (24-inch Sony television).

We ambled down the steep dirt path leading down to the highway entrada. Curious children peeked over the rising cornstalks to watch the gringa tucked in between the sixty-four-year old patriarch and his fifty-eight-year old wife as our small entourage headed to the city. After boarding the bus and suffering through the jolty, twisty ride through the green countryside, we got off near the indoor mall/department store and started the search for a TV. I struggled to be their translator, talking through price and size options from Spanish into K’iche’, but we eventually walked out with a large peanut-filled box. As the store employee rolled the TV out to the corner with us, he, openly curious, asked what I was doing with the family. I simply explained that they didn’t know Spanish and needed to buy a TV. Softly, he smiled and remarked: “Usted es una buena persona.” (You’re a good person).

So excited to have purchased their TV, we now faced the task of hauling it back to their cantón on the hill. Public transportation in Guatemala is widespread, highly dependable within daylight hours, and a local necessity for a population where 75 percent live under the poverty line and can’t afford a personal vehicle. Two types of intercity travel (extra-urbano) buses transport the busy daily traffic. First are second-class camionetas, converted American school buses for commercial use offering luggage service strapped to the roof, retrieved by an ayudante climbing a ladder attached outside the door. Second, pullmans, slightly more expensive tour buses, offer individual seats and luggage storage in large compartments underneath the bus. For the large TV, I proposed to the family that we pay extra to ride the pullman rather than risk storing it atop a moving vehicle. They hesitated, stating they had never taken a pullman because only the rich Ladinos could afford them. They questioned if they would be allowed on board and instructed me to buy the tickets to ensure they would get a ride.

As the pullmans typically leave from individual offices in the main cities, we had to discover a way to bring the TV and family to the office. I explained what options I saw available: find a taxi and pay an extra 20-30Q (about three dollars U.S). or hail a microbus hoping they would allow the burdensome TV inside. Waiting on a street corner for the patriarch to make a final decision, a pickup truck turned down the street. Immediately, the father waved his hand, attempting to signal the pickup for a ride. Surprised that the truck didn’t stop, I explained that pickups don’t do that here in the city. We ended up getting the taxi, taking the pullman, then hiring a pickup at the city limits to carry us all up the hill to the family compound. After hours of waiting, riding, and worrying, we arrived safely with the TV.

This anecdote reveals much of the reality and difficulties of communication and travel in the highlands. First, the family wanted to buy a television despite the fact that they did not speak
Spanish and would receive nothing but Spanish programming. The difficulty in acquisition, the cost, and the cultural barriers of utilizing the television, however, were outweighed by wealth-social status, visual contact with outside information, and an opportunity to learn some Spanish. Secondly, request for a translator with the Spanish-speaking workers reflected the limiting regionalism of the K’iche’ language beneath an overarching Spanish culture empowered with intercommunity communication. Their native tongue was only fully applicable in their surrounding municipality. Thirdly, the attempt to employ rural-appropriate signals in the urban setting (hailing a pickup truck in the city) further emphasized the regionalized mentality and ethnic separation between agriculture workers of the hills and urban white-collar workers dependent on public transportation. Finally, the dependence on me as a traveler for transportation information and the conceptions of first- and second-class buses displayed recurring racial separations and wealth/class associations extended to transportation. Typically symbols of spatial connection bridging inter-city workers, students, travelers, and tourists alike, first-class buses also represented part of the “outside world” open only to those who spoke Spanish and could afford the luxury of the higher fare. Dichotomized not only by fare and quality, the bus system was ethnically separated into Ladino and Maya distinctions as well. As spatial sociolinguistics, language ethnically separated the populations already physically separated by residence and occupation.

**Conclusion**

Language is one of the most pervasive points of indigenous identity for the Maya-K’iche’. The Mayan languages, however, contain multiple linguacultures within the overall language groups, distinguished primarily by their rural or urban affiliation. Though spoken by numerous communities across Guatemala, the K’iche’ language as described by the Maya-K’iche’ of Nahualá is understood and envisioned only within the local setting. Reinforced through the common use of locatives and demonstratives when discussing travel and conversation, the K’iche’ language operates primarily within a visible reality surrounding both the speaker and audience.

Beyond this, speech and speech acts are transformed into physical objects requiring the speakers to give and intake the physical substance of conversation for effective communication. In doing so, speakers must face the dangers of the road, the limitations of their gender roles, and the obligations produced upon making either formal or informal visits. Visiting, then, depends upon physical face-to-face interaction, and the reception of strangers coming from the road (connected to uncertainty, danger, mischief, etc.) is hospitable but cautious. Verbal communication in calling upon another person, particularly if requiring traveling, is so intimate and powerful that it can be misapplied in sexual misconduct and causative of complete social disintegration. Visiting is valued as a sacrificial act, necessitated regardless of the occasion, connected with physical and mental well being, but restricted by geographic constraint, economic obligation, and social reciprocity. And yet to be fully explored, I see the dependence upon the oral language, informed by regional seclusion and fear of the “outside world,” creating obstacles for modern, alternative communication as they disrupt contextual space, and the reciprocal exchange of communicative substance.
Ideal, effective communication in K’iche’ is relegated to the intimate, visible realm of compound, family, and neighborhood within the physical power of their maternal tongue. Once language is combined with an understanding of the unique spatial conceptions and the physicality of conversation, we begin to understand the rural conceptions of family communication and visiting.

NOTES
1. All translations (whether from K’iche’ or Spanish) are by the author, unless otherwise noted. K’iche’ quotations come from informants; Spanish quotations are taken from my translator/assistant, unless otherwise noted.
10. Wilson, p. 55.


18. Ley de Idiomas Nacionales, 2003
19. Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas
25. Fischler, Edward F. *Cultural Logics and Global Economics: Maya Identity in Thought and Practice*; Warren, Kay B. *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1998; It should be noted that the Guatemalan census providing statistics of literacy has yet to develop standards for measuring literacy in native languages and query for Spanish ability only.
26. Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Guatemala
32. Danziger, Eve. “Getting Here from There: the Acquisition of “Point of View.””
33. CIA Factbook.
34. (Dirección General de Caminos as quoted by World Bank 2003)
36. CIA Factbook.

**REFERENCES**


