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# The House in the Market: How Q'eqchi' Market Women Convert Money and Commodities into Persons and Personhood

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**The House in the Market: How Q'eqchi' Market Women Convert Money and  
Commodities into Persons and Personhood**

S. Ashley Kistler

**ABSTRACT**

Recent research argues that globalization in Latin America sometimes results in the homogenization of culture and loss of indigenous identity. This paper, however, explores how Q'eqchi'-Maya market women in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala, generate Q'eqchi' personhood by embracing the conflicts of value introduced by the confrontation of globalization with longstanding Q'eqchi' values. I argue that in Chamelco, market women are mediators of value who participate in global capitalism to reinforce the categories that structure indigenous life. Q'eqchi' women engage in marketing activities not only to accrue capital resources, but also to maintain local values, centered on the *junkab'al* or "house," or "family." In doing so, they convert the money and commodities exchanged in the market into kinship and Maya personhood. They do so by sustaining local *junkab'als*, providing them with products necessary for survival, and by constructing marketing as an occupation practiced by their ancestors. When faced with globalization, Chamelco's market women harness capitalism to reproduce longstanding Q'eqchi' values, rather than lose them to global capitalist ones. This research contributes to the growing literature on globalization in Latin America by revealing how Maya communities interface with global ideals to perpetuate, rather than alienate themselves from, indigenous values and categories.

## **THE MAYOR AND THE MARKET WOMEN**

On a cold, rainy night in December 2005, the Q'eqchi' Maya market women of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala confronted their municipal government over the location of the town's annual Christmas market. In addition to running stalls in the permanent marketplace during the year, market women sell their wares in the Christmas market. This year, though, the city changed the Christmas market's location to avoid traffic problems in the town center, enraging the market women, who argued that this would negatively affect sales. They launched a week-long protest, which came to a head on this particular evening. As an angry group of market women argued with the municipal judge in the street outside the market, Chamelco's mayor looked on from a hiding spot behind town hall. When the women spotted him, he took off running. Nevertheless, the market women constructed their market in the town center that night, without his permission. Resolving to confront the women, the mayor arrived at the Christmas market the next morning, toting a gun. Waving it in the women's faces, he threatened to end the struggle with a single shot.<sup>1</sup> The women laughed and returned to business as usual. Ignored into defeat, the mayor and other town officials were forced to accept the market women's location of the Christmas marketplace.

This story, among many others from my twenty months of fieldwork in Chamelco, reveals the prominent role of market women in local affairs. I argue that market women earn status by embracing the conflicts of value created by their increasing incorporation into the global capitalist system. While confronted with capitalist values, Q'eqchi' women in Chamelco use their market roles to reproduce Q'eqchi' notions of value centered on principles that they deem equally important as the accumulation of capital. Through marketing, they transform the potentially alienating social effects of globalization into the Maya categories and values that

have structured local life for generations. While Chamelco's marketers outwardly appear to be mercantile capitalists, they market not only to accrue capital, but equally, or more importantly, to generate a sense of Q'eqchi' personhood, centered on the *junkab'al*, or "home." Since Chamelqueños identify marketing as the occupation of their ancestors, they use global changes introduced to the market to embody their town's indigenous history and produce a sense of Q'eqchi' identity. As models of personhood and value, market women dominate conflicts with local officials and institutions. In their confrontation with the mayor, market women won because they transform the money and commodities they exchange into the *junkab'al* and Q'eqchi' personhood by participating in two hierarchically ranked spheres of exchange. To analyze these arguments, I examine the growing body of literature on globalization and global capitalism. Next, I discuss the exchange spheres that structure Chamelco's market. Finally, I analyze how Chamelco's market women enact kinship and personhood through marketing.

### **GLOBALIZATION, GLOBAL CAPITALISM, AND VALUE IN LATIN AMERICA**

Recent studies provide countless examples of how globalization and global capitalism result in cultural homogenization, the loss of identity, and increased gender stratification (Amadiume 155; Chaney and Schmink 160; Chinchilla 56; Comaroff and Comaroff 302). Capitalist values displace local ones, they say, in situations of culture conflict. Marx was the first to explore the universal values of capitalism. He argues that in capitalist systems, agents exchange commodities for their universal equivalent form: money. Transactors universally use money to gain surplus-value and generate capital (Marx 261). In exploring this "metamorphosis of value," Marx outlines several exchange circuits made up of the various spheres that underlie agents' participation in capitalist transactions. Marx argues that mercantile capitalists use money (M) to

purchase commodities (C) that they circulate through marketing. Marketers resell these commodities at higher exchange values ( $M^1$ ), earning additional money to serve as capital for future transactions, or  $M-C-M^1$  (249).

Nevertheless, more recent studies suggest that the values associated with exchange processes vary according to cultural context. Piot argues that one cannot separate the values that govern indigenous exchange systems from the larger social contexts in which they occur (419). Thereby, the values underlying capitalist exchanges are not universal, but can be understood as part of a total social system (Graeber 13). Gregory states that value stems from human social interaction and serves as the “invisible chains that link relations between things to relations between people” (13). Value centers not on the accumulation of wealth, but rather on the complex processes that govern social interactions. For example, individuals often use exchange to develop and enhance relationships (Plattner 14; Weiner, “Women of Value; Men of Renown” 227-228; Uzendoski, “Manioc Beer and Meat”, 895; “The Horizontal Archipelago” 336-337; *The Napo Runa*, 116-117). Expanding on Mauss’s gift theory, Gregory argues that individuals create debt by gifting objects that exhibit inalienable qualities (42). Through personification, gifts assume the qualities of their owners and acquire meaning by representing the relationship between transactors (Gregory 41; Godelier 104-105). Piot also suggests that a transactor’s social identity depends on the status he acquires through exchange networks (58-59). Although most scholars have explored these phenomena as defining characteristics of gift economies, Gregory shows that gift and commodity economies often exist on a continuum (42). Thus, the quest to build relations and gain status may be a primary value underlying any economic transaction.

In examining the impact of globalization on indigenous value systems, recent research shows that indigenous communities adopt the changes introduced by globalization in ways unique to their particular cultural contexts (Inda and Rosaldo 24; Klima 121; Caldwell 23). Appadurai argues that indigenous communities appropriate the information, ideas, technologies, and items of material culture introduced through global flows in ways that are locally meaningful. Giving the example of the popularity of Kenny Rogers' music in the Philippines, Appadurai states that "Americanization is certainly a pallid term to apply to such a situation since not only are there more Filipinos singing perfect renditions of some American songs ... than there are Americans doing so, there is also, of course, the fact that the rest of their lives is not in complete synchrony with the referential world that first gave birth to these songs" (49). These songs do not hold the same symbolism for members of both communities, but rather have their own culturally interpreted meaning. Sahlins also suggests that globalization does not necessarily alienate indigenous societies from established values (17). He argues that indigenous communities sometimes embrace global capitalism to produce new versions of their value systems. Gregory states that "people create multiple value systems for themselves and are constantly *switching* between them according to the dictates of the moment" (6).

A growing body of literature explores such impacts of globalization and global capitalism in Maya communities. Annis explores how the introduction of Protestant religions in San Antonio, Aguas Calientes, Guatemala created significant changes in economic production. Though Maya community members practiced *milpa* agriculture for centuries, their conversion to Protestant religions led them to abandon the traditional economic system in favor of new industries. Similarly, Ehlers argues that in San Pedro Sacatepéquez, Guatemala, the incorporation of the local industry into global capitalism diminished the trades that sustained the

town for generations. Women who previously achieved financial autonomy through family businesses were forced to rely on men for financial survival. Female businesses, which had been passed down from female family member to female family member for decades, were abandoned as the younger generations chose formal education over family industries. Green documents the culture conflict that results from Maya youths' participation in *maquila* factory work. Young Maya factory workers reject practices indigenous to their communities after returning from the *maquilas* (102). "Many of these young Mayan women (and men) are caught between two worlds—one a 'cultural' world, only partially intact, wholly diminished, with scant resources for creating a future—the other 'modern and globalized' from which they are simultaneously excluded, exploited, and seduced" (Green 103). Thus, incorporation into the global economy forces changes in Maya notions of power, gender, and family.

Nevertheless, other studies examine how Maya communities transcend such consequences of global capitalism and use the cultural changes it introduces to redefine post-war Maya identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In *Global Maya*, Goldín documents the impact of the global economy on highland Maya towns. Globalization creates significant changes in Maya life, including diversified household work activities, the emergence of new socioeconomic strata, new cultural institutions, and increased status for women (Goldín 158-165). Nevertheless, Goldín concludes that "the rural people of Guatemala have inserted themselves into the capitalist market in ways that are diverse and innovative while maintaining some degree of connection with their traditional practices" (157-158). Similarly, Fischer (*Cultural Logics and Global Economies*) explores how the transition to "nontraditional agriculture" impacts Maya life in Tecpán and Patzún, Guatemala. Though Guatemala's integration into the world economy began in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was during the last thirty years that many Maya communities became

involved in nontraditional agricultural export (Fischer 226). Producing cauliflower and broccoli for export, among other crops, many Kaqchikel Maya have abandoned subsistence agriculture for commercial farming. This redistribution assigns more power, possibility, and wealth to Maya communities, thus increasing their standards of living (231). Nevertheless, though participation in the global economy has changed Maya subsistence and land tenure, its agricultural focus perpetuates a clear sense of historical Maya identity.

Though these studies examine the impact of globalization on production, few studies examine the impact of globalization on Maya markets. Little analyzes the impact of global tourism on Kaqchikel Maya identity and community in Antigua, Guatemala (264). He explores how *típica* vendors in Antigua's tourist markets embrace global processes to define contemporary Maya identity. Maya vendors, Little argues, sell not only their wares, but Maya culture in the marketplace. They must perform Maya identity to sell goods that global tourists want to contextualize in the framework of Maya culture. Maya vendors also embrace globalization by using many introduced technologies and items of material culture. Little states that "Those Kaqchikel Mayas ... that I know do not think that using such things as cellular telephones, computers, gas stoves, refrigerators, televisions, and cars makes them less Maya. In fact, these things make them more Maya because they make it easier to maintain basic and special cultural practices" (264). The Kaqchikel do not move between the "global" and the "local" but rather see both systems as one and the same. For Maya vendors in Antigua's tourist markets, then, globalization affirms a strong sense of Maya personhood.

Like Little, this paper argues that marketing generates a clear sense of Maya identity. Chamelco's market women use alienated networks to reproduce value in a nation where globalization and political unrest challenge Maya identity. To examine how Q'eqchi' women



use capitalist exchange to convert the money and commodities they circulate into persons and personhood, I turn to ethnographic data from the Q'eqchi' of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala.

## MARKETS AND MARKETING IN SAN JUAN CHAMELCO

Located eight kilometers southeast of Cobán in the *departamento* de Alta Verapaz, the *municipio* of San Juan Chamelco is home to an estimated population of 46,503 (INE 1). In 2002, 98% of the town's population identified themselves ethnically as Q'eqchi' (INE 72). Q'eqchi' is the *municipio*'s dominant language, though most community members are bilingual in Spanish. Archaeological records suggest Chamelco and the surrounding region have been home to the Q'eqchi' since the Early Classic Maya period (AD 300-600) (Estrada 9; Gomez 15; Granados 9). Although Chamelco was officially founded by the Spanish colonial government in 1543, it was designated a *pueblo de indios*, or "Indian town." Chamelco was left largely under autonomous rule throughout the colonial period. Currently, Chamelco covers 80 square kilometers, politically divided into the town center, eighteen *aldeas*, and 86 *caseríos*.<sup>2</sup> Chamelco's urban center today consists of twelve neighborhoods, each named after a patron saint. Chamelco is no longer an independent political unit, but rather is part of the regional politics of Alta Verapaz and of national Guatemalan politics.

The *Mercado Municipal*, "Municipal Market," serves as the town's primary center of commerce. Archaeological evidence suggests that San Juan Chamelco has been a central trading town since the Pre-Columbian era (Feldman 19, 90). In the early nineteenth century, visitors to Chamelco recorded that women in the town's local marketplace sold soap, salt, *kakaw*, and meat each afternoon in front of the Catholic church (Goubaud 46). Because marketing has "history," they say, it serves as the embodiment of Chamelco's indigenous past. Today, the market houses

more than 120 permanent vendors, 99% of whom are women. Products sold in the market range from food staples to vessels used for food preparation to meats and the woven cloth used for women's indigenous dress. Products sold in a typical market stall include soap, shampoo, candles, rice, beans, pastas, noodles, snack foods, boxed drinks, and other dried goods. While most Chamelqueños farm to some extent, they grow mostly corn, beans, and squash, and rely on the market for access to other goods. Although market women's ages, marital status, and educational levels vary, most trace their families' histories in the market back for generations.

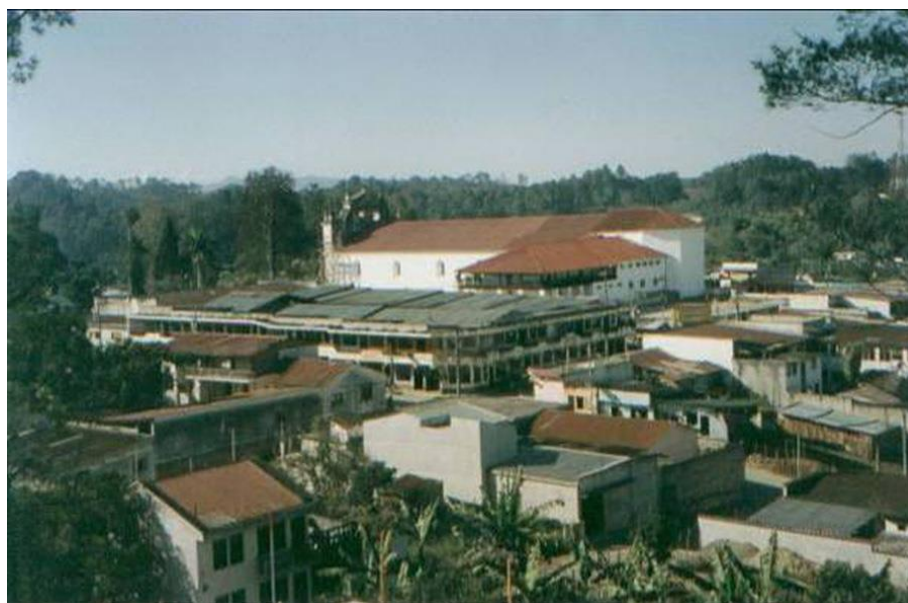


Figure 1: A View of Chamelco's Municipal Market

Chamelco's market has undergone many transformations throughout its long history. Elder market women remember selling in the open-air market in front of the church as very young girls. They sold only products that they grew on their *milpas* or that they could buy in the nearby market in Cobán. Soap, *kakaw*, copal incense, and chile were the primary goods sold in this market. The market moved to its current location sometime in the 1940s and the first market

building was constructed in the early 1980s. In January 2000, the municipal government opened the current market building, which accommodates more vendors, making it more crowded than previous markets. Market women now have access to running water and sometimes, electricity, in the marketplace, and are protected from heavy afternoon rains by the concrete walls and tin roof. Nevertheless, market women remain unhappy with the current building because it restricts traffic flow and makes sales more difficult for those women whose locales are out of the highest traffic areas.

The products sold inside the market have changed as well. Today, though women sell all of the goods they believe their ancestors did, including chile, homemade soap, herbs, straw mats, and *panela*, they also offer a variety of canned and dried goods that they purchase and re-sell from wholesale distributors in the nearby town of Cobán or from vendors who distribute them throughout Central America. While many stalls also sell some produce, this produce likewise is not grown locally, but rather comes from Eastern Guatemala.

Although the market has been a prominent commercial center throughout history, the town's incorporation into global capitalism has been recent. Until the 1970s, Chamelco remained isolated, as there were no paved roads connecting it to the country's major highways, and the town was largely self-sufficient. Rather, Chamelco's integration into the global economy occurred over the last few decades. While no national department or grocery stores have entered the community, a variety of nationally and internationally manufactured products have. Marketers purchase items from these distributors and clients use *quetzales* (Q), Guatemala's national currency, in all market transactions.<sup>3</sup> Market women often buy goods on credit from distributors, which they re-pay monthly. Vendors also extend credit to market

clientele. As a result, today's market is quite different from the market frequented by previous generations of Chamelqueños, in which women sold local products through trade and barter.

Nevertheless, the changes in Chamelco's market do not impact the prestige women earn or their roles in generating personhood and kinship. The nature of the goods they sell is unimportant; what matters is that women continue to provide access to subsistence goods through face to face interaction with community members. While the introduction of a national chain grocery store, such as the *Paiz* or *Despensa Familiar*, would challenge the market's role as a center of Q'eqchi' personhood because community members would be alienated from sales and the processes of production, continued involvement in local marketing on any level perpetuates Q'eqchi' women's family market legacies, guaranteeing their prominent social positions.

Chamelco's integration into global capitalism extends beyond the market, though. Since 2003, internet cafés have appeared throughout Chamelco's center and in a few *aldeas*. The majority of Chamelqueños have cell phones. Most Chamelqueño households have numerous technological items, including cable TV and computers. Local banks opened branches in Chamelco, offering credit and loans to community residents. An ideology of development pervades Chamelqueño thought. Chamelqueños battle for access to potable water and for the expansion of highways connecting them to nearby towns. Nevertheless, Granados argues that despite such "external" influences, indigenous values endure in Chamelco (16).

### **Q'EQCHI' VALUE AND QAXE'QATOON**

Today, Chamelco's market women embrace global capitalism by using money to buy the commodities that they sell in the market for more money. In my general census of the market, I asked marketers to explain how and why they began to sell in the marketplace and continue to do

so today. Women's responses to these questions generally fell into three categories: financial need, enjoyment, and family history of marketing. The majority of women initially responded that the need to support their families served as their primary reason for marketing. Many women serve as the heads of households, since they are unmarried or their husbands do not have steady employment.<sup>4</sup> In other cases, women stated that while their husbands work, they cannot meet all economic responsibilities.

Doña Faustina, a pig butcher, highlighted financial need as a reason for marketing:

Only this [marketing] gives a little money ... If I am going to work, let's say, with another person, I am not going to earn what I earn at my business. But I still have to pay my lights, my water, my cable, everything, and where am I going to get this [money], if I am only going to work? It's not enough (Anonymous, 12 Sept. 2005).

She emphasized financial intake as a primary factor underlying her decision to market, a sentiment most other market women confirmed in my initial interviews with them.

Based on such statements, I set out to examine how much profit marketers actually made in the market. Conducting budget studies of women's expenses in the marketplace, as compared to their intake, proved futile, as women often serve many customers at once and market sales are hectic to record. Most women state that they do not keep track of daily intake, as they often pay accounts due, purchase small items of merchandise, and give money to their children who visit them throughout the day. They do not see any profit at the end of the day, they said, and often return home empty-handed. While I initially thought that they were apprehensive to share these intimate details, I later realized that most market women are unaware of how much profit they make. As long as they make enough money in the market to cover daily expenses, finance

children's education, and participate in other activities, they are unconcerned with their exact financial intake. Women do not know how much profit they make because it is only one of many factors underlying their decision to market.

In fact, upon closer examination of market women's financial intake, I realized that many women experience a loss in the market, making very little profit and, on occasion, losing money. While women usually experience a high volume of sales on municipally-designated market days (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday), business is often slow during the rest of the week. Although some women calculated that they sell between Q100-Q200<sup>5</sup> on a typical day, many women sell less than Q50, approximately 10% of which is profit. Women whose stalls occupy less desirable locations, such as in the back of the market, in dark corners, or in the middle of the market away from the entrances, often make few or even no sales throughout the day, since customers prefer to buy from more conveniently-located and highly-visible stalls. I calculate, based on my observations and interviews about product pricing, that these women sometimes make less than Q5 daily, barely enough to pay the rent on their market stall, which runs between Q30-Q100 a month.<sup>6</sup> These calculations suggest that, depending on their specializations and location within the market, market women make anywhere between Q150-Q1000 a month,<sup>7</sup> significantly less than the monthly minimum wage of roughly Q1200 (Smith).<sup>8</sup>

As a result, I observed on many occasions that Chamelco's market women were unable to pay debts to wholesale vendors who extend credit. Because of decreasing sales due to increased competition from the *municipio's* ambulant street market, some women lose a portion of their merchandise if it spoils or collects mites before it can be sold. Since sales fluctuate seasonally, women's financial intakes vary. It seems, then, that although women make profit during some months, during others, they lose money through marketing.<sup>9</sup>

The question remains, then, as to why market women choose to market, rather than pursue more financially advantageous forms of employment, including work as domestic employees, shopkeepers, or as teachers and secretaries.<sup>10</sup> When I asked women about this decision, many responded that they “wouldn’t like” any other job. Profit or no profit, they preferred marketing over other employment. Other market women stated that despite financial disadvantage, they continued marketing because they “enjoyed” it, or suggested that marketing was simply easier than seeking alternate employment. They were “conformists,” they said, and pursued marketing since it is what they know the best:

My mother was also a conformist, she conformed to the little that she earned. I think that I am the same as she ... there are days in which there is no movement, we make no sales. The conformist people say, oh, I am going to wait, and eventually another customer will come along. Sometimes [the business] gives, sometimes it doesn’t (Anonymous, 9 August, 2005).

Women continue to market to keep with tradition, even when they make no profit.

The decision to market is a complex one, then, and I suggest that marketing is not a conscious choice that women make. Q’eqchi’ women are not motivated to market, they market because family histories identify them as marketers. Many women state that a force beyond motivation draws them to market; many describe being asked by their ancestors to do so. Thus, I propose that Chamelco’s women market not only to earn a profit, but because marketing enables them to reproduce local values by generating Q’eqchi’ personhood.

Before I explore my argument about the reason for Q’eqchi’ marketing, however, I must first outline how the Q’eqchi’ define and construct value. For Chamelqueños, value centers on being “taken into consideration” by others, both in contemporary life and as a part of the town’s

historical memory. Doña Sara,<sup>11</sup> my good friend and a lifelong marketer, explained to me that in Chamelco, Q'eqchi' life centers on establishing a good image of oneself and one's family in the eyes of the community. The Q'eqchi' often state that they strive to leave a "good image, good memories behind" (Anonymous, 12 July 2005). To do so, the Q'eqchi' prove themselves as wise, hard-working, moral, compassionate individuals, all characteristics that they associate with *qaxe'qatoon*, their "ancestors." To present oneself as someone who stirs up trouble lowers one's status and that of her family. Instead, the Q'eqchi' strive to present a respected public persona by embodying the characteristics and serving as mimetic copies of their ancestors<sup>12</sup>

By exhibiting such qualities, Chamelqueños develop friendships with individuals throughout the *municipio* and other neighboring towns. These friendships are key to understanding Q'eqchi' notions of value because they allow individuals to develop extensive social networks that span the *municipio*. Chamelqueños value friendships and social networks because they become synonymous with their relations (Piot 17-18). In Chamelco, friendships and social relations determine one's status and identity in local society. One gains status by being invited by friends to take part in their personal celebrations, lead church groups, serve as godparents, or occupy important ritual positions in local *cofradías*,<sup>13</sup> "saints day brotherhoods," all prestigious domains. By presenting themselves and their families as individuals worthy of emulation, Chamelqueños make sure that they are taken into consideration by community members in life. By presenting a good image in life, Chamelqueños guarantee that they will also be remembered in death.

Q'eqchi' notions of value, then, center on being remembered. The Q'eqchi' create memories to ensure that future generations of Chamelqueños will *nokoonaq sa' xch'ooleb'*, "remember [them]." Community members frequently told me that the status that one earns in



life defines not just his social position, but that of his family. In this way, Chamelqueños define not only their legacy, but also that of their closest family: their *junkab'al*.

Nevertheless, local notions of value also center on remembering, not just on being remembered. Throughout daily life, Chamelqueños try to *junelik xb'aannunkil lix b'aanuneb'* “maintain the customs” of the ancestors. Wilson and Hatse and DeCuester argue that the Q'eqchi' generate indigenous identity by perpetuating various ancestral cultural practices. They show that the Q'eqchi', among other Maya groups, place great emphasis on remembering their past and incorporating it into their present and future. The founder of the national *Academia de Lenguas Mayas Guatemala*, ‘Academy of Mayan Languages, Guatemala,’ conferred that, “As a nation, we must have a relationship with our past, we have to have history. And the past helps us to feel more secure” (Anonymous, 21 Jan. 2004). Many Q'eqchi' use their past to determine their place in the present. They strive to keep their ancestors alive by honoring their beliefs, morals, and practices.

As a result, the Q'eqchi' “invent” and “reinvent” traditions (Hobsbawm 1) that they identify with their ancestors. They perform the ceremonies, speak the language, wear the dress, eat the foods, and engage in other practices that they believe their ancestors did. These cultural beliefs and practices represent the *patz b'alaq'* or “inheritance,” that their ancestors left behind. The Q'eqchi' remember their ancestors by honoring this inheritance.

Chamelco's women enact and reproduce such values in the market by using money to buy commodities which they in turn sell for a profit. I argue that today, market women embrace the market as a symbol of their indigenous past, present, and future. Since many contemporary market women trace their families' histories in the market back for generations, they state that they market to honor their ancestors' work. One lifelong market woman told me that she began

marketing because her mother asked her to do so. “Enter the market. Sell there. I don’t want my name to die. I don’t want my business to die when I have worked so hard to build what I have,” she said.<sup>14</sup> By marketing, she said, she honors her mother in the market. Another woman related that marketing honors her ancestors because she “remembers” them in daily market life. She said that, “When I first sold in the market, I really thought about them [my ancestors] and that is what helped me, you see ... with the simple things.” In other words, women keep the memory of their ancestors alive through market life. Because Chamelqueños associate the market with Q’eqchi’ ancestors, it is an ideal institution for reproducing the categories of Q’eqchi’ personhood. Thus, while market women use capitalist exchange spheres in the market, they are mediators of value who do so not just to accumulate capital, but also to meet their own, locally important ends.

### **MONEY AND COMMODITIES INTO PERSONS AND PERSONHOOD**

To explore this argument, I draw on Bohannon’s model of exchange spheres. In examining Tiv commodity exchange, Bohannon states that the Tiv exchange commodities, brass rods, and wives to earn prestige, establish relationships, and strengthen kin ties. Bohannon outlines three exchange spheres that comprise the Tiv economy: the “subsistence” sphere, which includes the exchange of household necessities; the “prestige” sphere, made up of high status items, including brass rods, slaves, and cattle; and a “supreme” category, which consists of the rights to give women in marriage (62). Though individuals usually exchange goods for equivalent ones in the same sphere, a phenomenon which Bohannon terms “conveyance,” the Tiv sometime convert goods in one sphere in exchange for higher value goods in a more prestigious sphere.

Thus, using Bohannan's models of exchange spheres, I propose that market women participate in two hierarchically-ranked economic spheres. The first, which I call the "production" sphere, consists of daily consumption goods, and money exchanged in the market, while the second, "prestige" sphere, includes market women's participation in prestigious activities and in defining local personhood. Using this model, I argue that Chamelco's market women engage in market exchange even when it is financially detrimental because it allows them to convert money and commodities in the production sphere into personal status, kin ties, and Q'eqchi' personhood in the prestige sphere.

One of the primary means through which Q'eqchi' market women enact local values is by reproducing local kinship, centered on the category of the *junkab'al*. Previous ethnographies of Q'eqchi' life briefly examine Q'eqchi' kinship system and social organization, stating that it is patrilineal and organized according to the household economy (Ghidinelli 200-219; Wilk 204-205). Providing little information about the composition of Q'eqchi' families, these ethnographies suggest that patrilineal descent structures Q'eqchi' kinship as it does in other contemporary Mesoamerican communities (Hopkins 101; Redfield and Villa Rojas 89; Vogt 229). My research, however, suggests that Chamelqueños identify individuals who reside together in the same home, rather than those who share biological descent, as kin based on their participation in daily household life.

Levi-Strauss (*The Way of the Masks* 170-187; *Anthropology and Myth* 155-156), McKinnon, Gillespie, and Carsten and Hugh-Jones identify the "house" as an indigenous kin category prevalent in societies that base kin relationships on common residence and shared participation in household activities rather than strictly on consanguinity and blood ties. Using these works, I identify the *junkab'al*, which translates literally from Q'eqchi' as "one home" and

is used to refer to the family, as the basic unit of Chamelqueño kinship (Cu Cab and Cu Cab 72). Individuals who share a home build trust, affection, and solidarity. Don Sebastián Si, the president of the Q'eqchi' Academia de Lenguas Mayas in 2005-2006, related that one way, “to make someone feel like family, to consider some people as family, is ... to have solidarity, companionship, cohabitation, and to share things.” The Q'eqchi' create kin ties by sharing meals and household experiences, and creating memories that ground local shared substance.

Q'eqchi' *junkab'als* consist of a number of individuals who develop such kin ties through various means. While some may be related to the *junkab'al* through blood ties, many others are not. For example, in analyzing his own family, one Q'eqchi' man discussed a group of individuals who had lived with him during his childhood. He related that they:

bear no blood relation to me, don't have the same last name, or anything, but we almost consider ourselves to be family. Yes, we are family ... we say good things about them and they say good things about us. We all love each other, and when they come here, they are welcome, we serve them, give them a place to sleep. In other words, they are part of the family, without having anything to do with consanguinity, in that respect. They have nothing to do with it, simply because it is rather a question of sharing with one another, purely and simply sharing with one another ... this is our concept, our idea of family. (Sebastián Si, Sept. 11, 2005)

Friendship, adoption, *compadrazgo*,<sup>15</sup> marriage, and employment, in addition to consanguinity, are thus a few of the ways that individuals build solidarity and incorporate themselves into specific households, becoming *junkab'al* members. They reinforce their positions as *junkab'al* members through continued participation in the household, and for market women's families,

market life, creating the memories, trust, and affection that serve as the shared substance of kinship. Q'eqchi' *junkab'als* ground the identity of their members, determining their status and positions in local society.

Market women generate kinship with one another through participation in household and market activities. On numerous occasions, I observed market women using kin terms to refer to other vendors with whom they share no *junkab'al* or consanguine connection. They refer to them as their “sisters,” “in-laws,” or “cousins.” They develop the shared substance of kinship by working together in the market, tending to one another's stalls, helping to obtain inventory, extending loans, and establishing solidarity and creating kinship. By generating kin ties in this way, they use marketing to reinforce established Q'eqchi' notions of shared substance.

Market women also convert the act of selling into kinship by forming kin relationships with their clients. When commodities change hands between a vendor and her clients, it binds them (Piot 58-59). This bond translates to friendships outside the market, and sometimes, kinship, when clients ask market women to be godparents to their children. As *compadres*, they frequently socialize with one another in the market, in their homes, and during important community events, including *cofradía* festivities, family celebrations, and church events. In other instances, market women form kin ties with clients when they introduce their children or siblings, who later intermarry and establish affinal ties. In both cases, women use marketing to create the memories that ground Q'eqchi' shared substance.

Nevertheless, market women use marketing not only to create kin ties with others in the market, but also to generate *junkab'als*. Many market women hire young men or women to assist them in their market stalls. Since many market women's houses are in close proximity to the marketplace and because some market products are processed in the home, market employees

often choose to reside with market women's families. By sharing in market and household life, these individuals build solidarity, and ultimately kin ties, with market women and their families. Doña Blanca, a lifelong vendor of daily consumption goods, related that a former market employee became a part of her *junkab'al* by working with her in the market. "We ate together at one table, we slept under one roof, we went to Cobán together, or if I had another commitment, he would go to my business. I would tell him, 'Well take care of my customers, sell, I trust you.' ... He was like my son" (Anonymous, 4 Oct. 2005). Through such means, market employees develop solidarity, trust, and affection with market women and their *junkab'als*, becoming family over time. By incorporating these individuals into their families, market women thus use marketing to generate their *junkab'als*.

Q'eqchi' *junkab'als* persist by passing down the "material and immaterial wealth" that define their identity (Levi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks* 174). Members of the house bequeath their life histories, heirlooms, and land to new house members to ensure continuity of the house (Joyce 210). For market women, market businesses constitute a crucial part of the *junkab'al's* estate,<sup>16</sup> since they inherit their *xk'ulu re kayink* "rights to market" from *junkab'al* members and bequeath them only to *junkab'al* members. Since market positions ground household identity, market women view them as inalienable *junkab'al* possessions,<sup>17</sup> vital to maintaining the *junkab'al* and its status. Their own life histories entwine with that of their market businesses. Because market positions, their stalls, stands, and market merchandise serve as integral house possessions that embody family legacies, market women keep them in the *junkab'al*. Market women refer to their market positions as *inpatz b'alaq*, which in Q'eqchi' means "that they ask for me in the future." One marketer explained that women want heirs so that they "won't be forgotten ... they like to always have a presence" in the market (Anonymous, 21 August 2005).

Chamelco's former mayor related that market women don't want to "lose their locales, and lose the work of their ancestors, because one wants to remain [in the market] permanently"

(Anonymous, 26 Oct. 2005). In other words, marketers want to make sure that both they and their market ancestors who bequeathed them their positions are "taken into consideration" by future generations of Chamelqueños. Maintaining a presence in the market through their heirs secures their places in Chamelco's historical consciousness.

In the absence of biological or adopted *junkab'al* kin, market women turn to market employees to serve as heirs. Because of the inextricable connection between market positions and household identity, market women only designate *junkab'al* members as their heirs. One market woman explained that they do so because, "One wants to conserve what she has already done. Leave them for their families, so that they appreciate them, because if they leave them to other people, who knows if they will take care of them?" (Anonymous, 12 July 2005). When market positions leave the *junkab'al*, the memories of the ancestors who sold there are lost. As a result, women strive to keep their market positions in the *junkab'al* to ensure that they, and their market ancestors, remain at the forefront of local memory.

Market women further highlight Q'eqchi' values by sustaining all local families through marketing. One market vendor's husband explained that, "For us, the market is a place of ... of cultural sharing. A place where people, sell ... and buy their products, but not with the goal of taking advantage of other people, but more precisely with the concept of ... mutual benefit" (Anonymous, 11 Dec. 2005). Since most municipal residents turn to the market for access to many of the goods necessary for daily life, market women provide valuable resources to persons throughout the community, sustaining families and producing persons. Market women become the very force that keeps other families alive. As Chamelco's life force, market women are

“taken into consideration” by other community members, and remain at the forefront of the town’s consciousness. By generating all local *junkab’als*, they earn prestige that defines their own, and their *junkab’als’*, social positions.

Chamelco’s market women thus emerge as truly powerful figures who others classify as prestigious and who dominate religious, ritual, and political domains. Studies of Latin American market women document that women use their roles in market exchange to achieve social freedom, develop political power, and otherwise gain status as marketers (Buechler 355; Chiñas 28, 29; Mintz 256; Seligmann 194; Marti 41; Sikkink 213; Weismantel 46). In Chamelco, many market women are leaders in their churches, both Catholic and evangelical; lead ritual organizations like *cofradías* as *mayordomos* or *chinames*<sup>18</sup>; and participate in local and national political campaigns. Such participation reveals that their status is greatly superior to that of other Mesoamerican women, who occupy positions of low social status (Eber and Rosenbaum 174; Maynard 79, 87; McClusky 2001; McClaurin 103; Rosenbaum 40).<sup>19</sup> Chamelco’s market women transform their identities from low to high status ones by anchoring community values in the moral examples that they set for others. Since they provide a service vital for maintaining all local families, they are widely known throughout the *municipio*.

While their status stems in part from their roles generating families and kinship, it also comes from the personal qualities that Chamelqueños demonstrate during market interactions. Chamelco’s market women construct themselves as intelligent, hardworking, compassionate, and moral, embodying all of the characteristics that ground Q’eqchi’ personhood. One market woman’s husband explained that marketers “maintain strong interpersonal relations with other people. Their clients get to know them, and if they are very amiable people, then, of course, they are sought after and appreciated in the market ... it gives them a strong social position”



(Anonymous, 11 Dec. 2005). Another market woman similarly related that community members respect them because “we make an effort to find products, to be hardworking, [to have] a variety of products so that customers come to us” (Anonymous, 13 Oct. 2005). Because market women demonstrate morality and compassion for others, they garner prestige as individuals worthy of emulation. As a result, they provide a stellar example of Q’eqchi’ personhood.

Market women’s prestige is further enhanced by the fact that Chamelqueños classify marketing as an ancient occupation. As such, the market grounds local personhood by connecting not only the women who sell there, but all Chamelqueños who participate in market life as clients, to their indigenous past. One market woman explained that marketing is prestigious because, “it is ancient, or maybe because they [our ancestors] taught it to us” (Anonymous, 5 Sept. 2005). In other words, market women earn prestige by continuing the ancestors’ work. By perpetuating a tradition that all Chamelqueños perceive as ancient, market women connect themselves, their patrons, and the families that they sustain to the Q’eqchi’ ancestors. By bridging the gaps of time and space in this way, Chamelco’s women use marketing to produce Q’eqchi’ personhood and identity that defines life for all Chamelqueños who rely on the market for survival. Other community residents deem market women individuals worthy of emulation and “take them into consideration” for participation in highly valued social domains beyond the market, including politics,<sup>20</sup> *cofradía* leadership, and *compadrazgo*.

Market women’s roles as godmothers to local children provide a particularly salient example of the prestige women earn as models of value. Many women state that they consider it a great honor to be taken into consideration and chosen by clients, vendors, and other community members to serve as their children’s godmothers. Q’eqchi’ women gain prestige by serving as

godparents because, as they told me on many occasions in casual conversation, “not everyone is sought after to do so.” Parents take great care in selecting godparents because they play such a prominent part in their children’s, and their own, lives. As a result, they select couples or individuals whom they, or the community, view as wise, respectful, compassionate, and humble, and thus worthy of emulation. One Chamelqueño man explained that the prestige associated with godparenthood stems from the fact that as a godparent, “you have to provide an example for ... the next generation” (Anonymous, 26 Oct. 2005). Parents seek godparents who embody Q’eqchi’ value and serve as role-models for their children. Because godparents give their godchildren advice and guidance, they play a critical role in shaping children’s character. By transmitting Q’eqchi’ values in this way, they generate persons who, like themselves, exemplify Q’eqchi’ personhood. This generativity is what makes godparenthood prestigious.

Because of the godparents’ role in generating families, market women emerge as ideal candidates for godparenthood. On average, most Catholic marketers were primary godparents for at least ten children, but a few claimed to have 50 or more godchildren.<sup>21</sup> People from throughout Chamelco and in nearby Cobán and Carcha seek Chamelco’s marketers as godparents because of the strong moral examples they set. Market women enhance their prestige based on this widespread recognition as respected individuals. They gain real power by generating persons (their godchildren) and sustaining their *compadres*’ families.

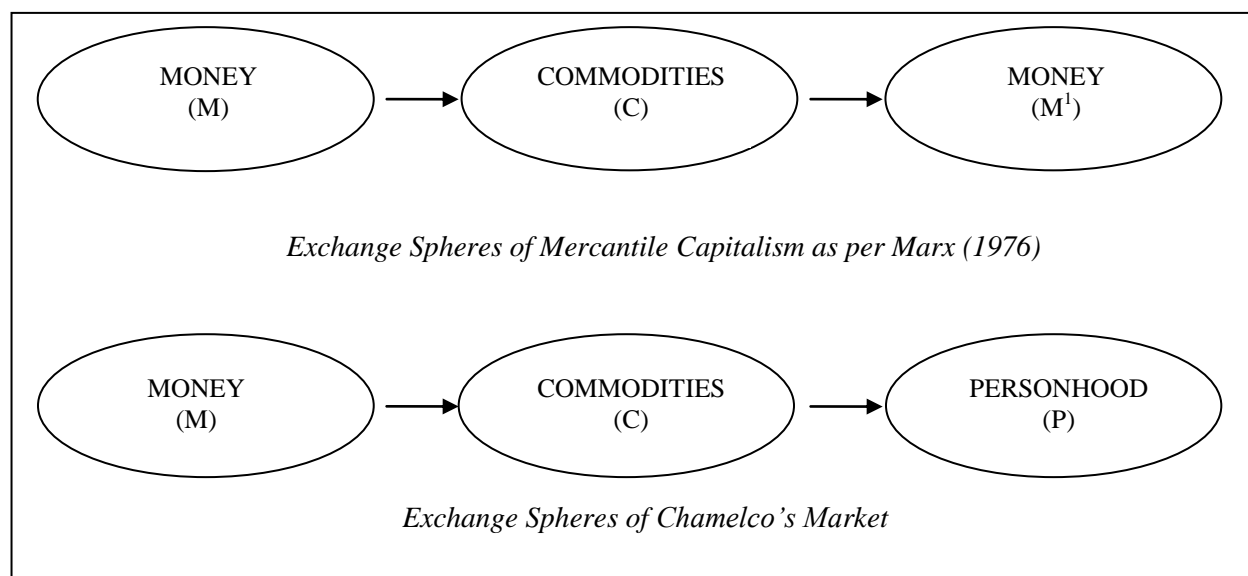


Figure 2: Exchange Spheres of Chamelco's Market

By becoming a part of the town's historical narrative through marketing and godparenthood, Q'eqchi' market women maintain both the practices and the categories that structured indigenous life in Chamelco. Not only do women highlight the local category of the *junkab'al* through marketing, but they also remind people about what it means to be Q'eqchi'. Through the relations they create in the market and the act of marketing itself, women prove that to remember and to be remembered are the ultimate values grounding Q'eqchi' life. The act of marketing, then, allows market women to convert the money and commodities they exchange in the production sphere into kinship and personhood in the market. They embrace the exchange spheres of capitalism by using money to buy commodities which they in turn sell for more money in the market (M-C-M<sup>1</sup>). Nevertheless, they generate value, in addition to accruing capital, in the prestige sphere. For these reasons, I argue that Q'eqchi' market women use the conflicts of value created by global capitalism to convert money and commodities into a model of prestige, persons, and kinship that defines life for all Chamelqueños (M-C-P).

## CONCLUSIONS

Let me now return to the story with which I began. In December 2005, market women defeated Chamelco's mayor by deploying their prestige to impose their location for the Christmas market. The proposed changes in the Christmas market's location enraged market women not only because of the potential economic loss they faced, but also because the re-location of the market to a parking lot would reduce their visibility and thus the prestige they earn through marketing. This prestige, which gives women political influence and solidifies their families' reputations also gives them the power to confront institutions whose non-Maya origins come from the legacy of Spanish colonialism. In the struggle with the mayor, the women confronted a political representative responsible for keeping local life in conformity with national law. In this battle, however, the market women won, because the *junkab'al*, the prestige of the market, and the power of memory are the sources of real indigenous power in Chamelco.

Q'eqchi' market women in San Juan Chamelco, then, reveal a very different reality than that described by the growing body of literature that suggests that globalization and global capitalism result in the homogenization of indigenous culture. Instead, as many recent studies of the Maya in the global economy suggest, Q'eqchi' market women embrace capitalism to define indigenous life and generate a stronger sense of Q'eqchi' identity. The introduction of capitalism into the town and into Chamelco's market has not required a shift in Q'eqchi' social organization, value, or identity; instead, it simply presented a challenge to which the Q'eqchi' market women chose to adapt. Though they sell global products, the new capitalist market allows women to maintain personal interaction with clients, which gives them the visibility that serves as the basis of their prestige and enables them to reproduce local personhood. Thus, I argue that Q'eqchi' women confront the conflicts of value with which they are faced. While

women participate in mercantile capitalism in the market (M-C-M<sup>1</sup>), they do so to meet their own ends, not only to accrue capital. Instead, women use the market, an institution they perceive as “ancient,” to construct themselves as wise, moral, and hard-working individuals worthy of emulation by connecting the Q’eqchi’ to their indigenous past and future. Despite the financial loss some women endure, Chamelco’s women market to create their own *junkab’als*, earn prestige, and sustain all local families. They create not just families, but also persons by serving as moral examples for all Chamelqueños. They generate a sense of indigenous identity by perpetuating the practices of their ancestors and honoring the legacy of the women from whom they inherited their stalls. As marketers, they carve out their own place in the narrative of market life and in the town’s historical memory by becoming “taken into consideration” by all Chamelqueños in various social realms. As individuals deemed worthy of emulation, they gain prestige that defines their own, and their *junkab’als*, identity by generating Q’eqchi’ personhood for Chamelco as a whole. By converting the money and commodities they exchange in the market into Q’eqchi’ value, market women connect with their history and produce indigenous personhood and houses (M-C-P). This paper thus adds to the critique of previous formalist economics that overlook the social motivations of exchange and argues that to understand the logics of alienated exchange systems, one must examine local cultural categories, including kinship. It also demonstrates that the Maya, like other indigenous Latin American communities, appropriate global capitalism to strengthen, rather than erase, indigenous identity and practice.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>I was not present for this event, but learned of it from those who witnessed it.

<sup>2</sup> An *aldea* is a village associated with a particular municipality while a *caserio* is a political unit in rural areas where residents hold land communally.

<sup>3</sup> During the time that I conducted my fieldwork in 2004-2006, the exchange rate ranged from between seven and a half to eight *quetzales* to one American dollar.

<sup>4</sup> While some men work as teachers, bus drivers, butchers, wholesale vendors, agriculturalists, or in the nearby city of Cobán, others remain unemployed. Their lack of employment thus leads them to contribute little to the household income.

<sup>5</sup> Given the exchange rate of seven and a half to eight *quetzales* to one US dollar, women's calculated intake on a typical day ranged from \$12.50-\$13.33. However, my observations indicate that many women took in only \$6.25-\$6.66.

<sup>6</sup> Q5=\$0.625-\$0.66 USD. Women's monthly market is between \$3.74-\$13.33.

<sup>7</sup> Monthly intake thus ranges from between \$18.75 and \$133.33 USD. Butcher women, however, often earn more because of the high price of meat and the fact that they sell meat wholesale to local restaurants and sausage makers. One butcher calculated her monthly profit to be around Q3000, while others claimed to have higher monthly incomes.

<sup>8</sup> I do not suggest that Chamelco's marketers have always, or will always, participate in a market that is not financially advantageous. I believe the current financial situation of Chamelco's marketers to be a recent phenomenon, as increased competition from the expanding marketplace, higher municipal rent charges, and the worsening national economy have lowered their ability to

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earn profit. As a result, I believe that the model of marketing I describe herein is viable only as long as it is economically sustainable.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the loss they incur during some seasons, most women make enough money to subsidize their household expenses most of the time. Those who do not often run small stores at their homes from which they earn a profit or live with family members who have a steady income. Others sustain themselves through credit offered by bank loans, from the wholesale distributors who provide their merchandise, or from fellow Chamelqueños.

<sup>10</sup> Many market women have some degree of formal education. A few are certified teachers, while others have received training as secretaries. In 2005, a few market women were attending college or were pursuing professional certificates in night schools.

<sup>11</sup> I have changed the names of all of the individuals who I directly cite in this article.

<sup>12</sup> See Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*

<sup>13</sup> Guatemalan *cofradías* parallel the *cargo* system practiced by indigenous populations throughout Mexico (see Vogt 1969: 246-271). Each *cofradía* pays homage to a certain saint by honoring it on its specified day in the Catholic Church's calendar.

<sup>14</sup> I reconstructed this conversation, as I was unable to record it.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout Latin America, *compadrazgo* refers to the institution of godparenthood and the social relationships that stem from it (see Vogt 1969:231). .

<sup>16</sup> The Q'eqchi' refer to each household estate as a *junkab'lal*.

<sup>17</sup> Weiner (Inalienable Possessions) coined this term in her famous work on indigenous economic systems.

<sup>18</sup> *Mayordomos* and *chinames* lead Chamelco's saint's day brotherhoods.

<sup>19</sup> The status that market women achieve in Chamelco often surpasses that of local men.

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<sup>20</sup> Many of Chamelco's market women assume prominent roles in both municipal and national politics. One market woman served as the president of Guatemala's national women's organization, *La Defensoría de la Mujer*, which fights for women's rights.

<sup>21</sup> In Latin America, Catholic children have godparents for any event celebrated with a Mass.

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