Manuscript 1158

Tamales in Yucatán: Reflections on 52 years of Piib gastronomy

Allan F. Burns

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mayaamerica

Part of the Ethnic Studies Commons, Indigenous Studies Commons, and the Latina/o Studies Commons
Abstract: “The first time I made tamales in the Yucatán of Mexico was in a village close to Tixcacal Guardia, Quintana Roo in 1972, some 52 years ago as I write this essay. It was in the fall and extended families were celebrating the harvest of milpas with something called “jaanali kol” (the feast of the milpa). We dug a pit, about four by eight feet oblong, lined it with stones, and built a fire. We were all men around the fire, and women were nearby in a house making chicken stew and other foods.” So begins this personal reflection of the anthropologist Allan Burns, recalling his first deep experience in Yucatecan culinary practictices and food culture, continuing over the decades into the present.

Resumen: "La primera vez que hice tamales en Yucatán, México, fue en un pueblo cercano a Tixcocal Guardia, Quintana Roo, en 1972, hace unos 52 años. Era otoño y las familias extendidas celebraban la cosecha de milpas con algo llamado "jaanali kol" (la fiesta de la milpa). Cavamos una fosa, de unos cuatro por ocho pies oblongos, la forramos con piedras y encendimos un fuego. Éramos todos hombres alrededor del fuego, y las mujeres estaban cerca, en una casa, haciendo estofado de pollo y otras comidas". Así comienza esta reflexión personal del antropólogo Allan Burns, recordando su primera y profunda experiencia en las prácticas culinarias y la cultura alimentaria yucatecas, que se prolongó durante décadas hasta el presente.

Key Words:
Tixcacal Guardia, Quintano Roo, Piib, Mukbi waj, Janali kol, Mukvikax

Acknowledgements

I thank the villagers of the towns around Tixcacal Guardia, Quintana Roo as well as the Tuyub family of Ticul and Merida, Yucatan for fifty years of friendship and hospitality. I also thank David Bolles for commenting on this essay, helping me improve it.

*The biography of the author follows at the end of the document
The first time I made tamales in the Yucatan of Mexico was in a village close to Tixcacal Guardia, Quintana Roo in 1972, some 52 years ago as I write this essay. It was in the fall and extended families were celebrating the harvest of milpas with something called “janali kol” (the feast of the milpa). We dug a pit, about four by eight feet oblong, lined it with stones, and built a fire. After the fire burned down and the stones were almost red-hot, we pulled out the burned wood with pincers made of tree branches. Then the fun began.

We were all men around the fire, and women were nearby in a house making chicken stew and other foods. I was handed a ball of corn dough about the size of a baseball and with everyone laughing, the others and I began making very thick tortillas, about two to three inches thick. We poked indentations in the top signifying different numbers and put ground pumpkin seeds in the dents.

Extra-large tortillas made by men during the janali kol. Señor, Q.R., October, 1972
We wrapped the overly thick tortillas in banana leaves. We lined the pit with *ox* or *ramon* in Spanish (*Brosimum alicastrum*) tree leaves, then placed the three dozen fat tortillas in the pit. Someone put some sweet potatoes (‘iiso’ob) in the pit as well, and then two of the principle *milperos* put a tin sheet over the pit and covered the whole thing with dirt, sealing the earth oven or *piib* completely.

Covering the *piib* with dirt to seal in the heat. Ticul, Yucatan, July, 1996

About an hour and a half later, the same two men uncovered the pit and pulled out the tamales (*mukbi waj* or *pibi waj* in Mayan) with pincer tree branches. After they cooled a bit, we opened the tamales, about the same time that women and a lot of children came from the house with *lek* (*or jicara in Spanish*) gourds filled with chicken stew. They also had a large *lek* filled with cooked chicken feet. Six or seven ten- to twelve-year-old boys and girls grabbed a tamale each and ran home laughing, waving them in the air all the way to their houses. *Jaanili col* is a time to share good fortune beyond each extended family who had helped with the milpa.
We sat on stones around the pit, men and women together, and began eating the chicken stew with the chicken feet, accompanied by pieces of the piibi waj tamales. The young men with us laughed at me eating a chicken foot and took several pictures of me for posterity.

**Going home with piibi waj recently cooked in the piib during janali kol. Señor, Q.R., October, 1972**
Villagers near Tixcacal Guardia, Quintana Roo took pictures of me during the Janali kol, harvest feast. Señor, Q.R., October, 1972

La Maya (Yucatec Mayan language) has elaborate verbs, conjugated to reflect time, point of view, person, number, tense, aspect, and even credibility. In contrast, nouns are fairly simple and have few modifiers: for conditions such as essence, singular, plural, within sight, far away, and unseen. So “tamales” in Maya villages is a word that only refers to things from other parts of Mexico, wrapped in corn husks rather than banana leaves as is the tradition in Yucatan and Central America. Instead of talking about “tamales,” people emphasize the act of making food in the piib or earth oven, “mukbil.” Mukik is verb that refers to burying something, and bil as a suffix refers to completion of an act. Mukbi waj, sometimes called piibi waj, are tortillas that have been completely cooked in a buried oven. Most dialects of spoken Mayan today don’t pronounce the last “l” of the suffix “bil” and I have not included it in this essay. Supermarkets in the United States now carry “Kutbilik” (K’utbi iik in Mayan) a hot sauce made from crushed habanero peppers mixed with garlic and vinegar.

Villagers who hunt also cook what they find in the wild mukbi style: Mukbi kej (venison), mukbi kutz (oscelated turkey), mukbi wech (armadillo), and mukbi kitam (peccary)
were in the many piib that made up the gastronomy of the towns around Tixcacal Guardia. Sometimes young boys would trap gophers (baj) while they accompanied their fathers and older relatives to the milpa. Mukbi baj was the result. Likewise sweet potatoes or yams ('iis), many different kinds of squash (k'uum), and ears of corn (pibi nal) are commonly added to piib oven with meat or more often cooked alone when meat is not available.

Women preparing the mukbi kax. Ticul, Yucatan, July, 1996

Mukbikax or chicken cooked in the piib earth oven is the favorite dish that today is associated with Janali pixan or the day of souls who have passed on. Mukbikax is prepared by de-boning chicken and slightly cooking it with spices like achiote. The meat is then spread over a dough made from corn that has been washed in lime powder before being ground (nixtamal). The dough and chicken is on a flat tin sheet that is rectangular, about one by two feet. Then more dough is put on top and the entire plate is wrapped in banana leaves. After four or five of these large tamale-like plates are made, they are put into the earth oven piib which has been lined with ox leaves. Ox leaves cover the tins and then another large tin
cover is put over the piib, and then the earth oven is sealed with dirt. After cooking for an hour and a half, the tins of mukbikax are opened, cut into squares, and enjoyed by everyone.

*Mukbi kax* ready to be put in the piib. Ticul, Yucatan, July 1996

*Mukbi kax* ready to be put into the piib. Ticul, Yucatan, July, 1996
One year I was told that mukbikax would not be made, because an elderly family member had died less than a year before the Day of the Dead gathering of the family. When I asked why, I was told that the matriarch who had died that year would still be on her journey through the underworld and that the wonderful odors of the chicken cooking underground might cause her to return home, rather than complete her journey. So that year we made panuchos—fried tortillas with beans, turkey, and condiment—instead.

Today, mukbikax has become a popular recipe that is found in hotels, restaurants, and even among food bloggers on the internet. It has been renamed “Mukbil pollo” so that Spanish speakers know what it is they are eating. It has joined other dishes that have crossed over into popular cuisine in the Yucatan, including cochinta pibil (roast piglet also cooked in an earth oven), tikinxik (fish cooked in banana leaves in an earth oven), and pollo pibil (chicken cooked in banana leaves without corn dough, likewise cooked in an earth oven). But Mayan speaking villages emphasize the act of making and cooking piib, not the item that is cooked in it.

When villagers in the Yucatan go to the time and energy to prepare the piib earth oven, their linguistic propensity of thinking first in verbs leads them to think about other uses of the act of cooking. Even before I made fat tortillas for the feast of the milpa, I had learned to use the piib for other activities. One was the curing of a hour-glass shaped gourd or chuj, used as a canteen when traveling to the fields or forests. A hole was cut in the green gourd, large enough for a cork, and then the gourd was covered with red mud (chak lu’um). After it was cooked in the piib the now dried seeds were shaken out. Then the water gourd was washed inside and out until it was ready for use. Sometimes miniature chuj were cured at the same time. They were given to baby boys when they were first carried on the hip of the mother. That event, hetzmek, was a time when hopes and dreams for the future of children were presented to children: children of milperos might be given a miniature chuj, or if hopes of education were strong, a small book or a miniature computer.
Today in Merida, the capital of the state of Yucatan, tamales can be found in restaurants, including local *cocinas economicas* or informal, small eateries. Tamales, and their smaller cousins called “*vaporcitos*” (steamed tamales) are always made with banana leaves, and the idea of corn husk tamales is simply an exotic food from other parts of Mexico. Likewise on Sundays, Meridianos have their favorite places to get a sandwich of *cochinita pibil* on a small French-bread roll. Both *vaporcitos* and *cochinita pibil* stress the activity of creating these Yucatecan staples, suggesting that the Yucatec Mayan language penchant for focusing on action forms part of the deep structure of Yucatec Spanish today. An exception to this is *brazo de reina*, a steamed tamale made with corn masa, *chaya* leaves, and wrapped in banana leaves. I never heard a Mayan translation of *brazo de reina*. 

Alba Amaya Burns and Allan Burns at our favorite street-side Cochinita stand in Chuburna de Hidalgo, Yucatan. January 2020
The culinary art of making foods in an earth oven, including those that could be understood as Yucatecan tamales like *pibi waj* and *mukbi kax* is hard work, often making even more insufferable the very hot Yucatecan summer afternoons. But the process is also a kind of every-day celebration, marked by laughter, jokes, and sometimes alcohol. Men who dig the pit and cook the food enjoy *yax ja’* – “green water” or beer while waiting for the piib to cook, and women preparing the chicken and condiments sometimes have some rum to enliven the afternoon. My experiences in Quintana Roo, Ticul, and Merida with this Yucatec Maya cultural treasure are filled with the camaraderie of the *piib*, the heat and smoke of burning wood over the stones, smell of the food as it is opened on a table, and unforgettably delicious meals. The University of Florida/Autonomous University of the Yucatan exchange program began in 1984 and continues today bringing students from Yucatan to the U.S. and U.S. students to Yucatan. Over a thousand students from the U.S. have been to Ticul where they helped make *mukbikax* and *mukbi waj*, chicken and corn cooked *piib*.

One past exchange student from the 1990s wrote to me thirty years later, asking, “what was that chicken dish we had in Ticul? It was so good!” I wrote back to him, “some people call it a Yucatecan chicken tamale, but the people who made it call it “mukbi kax.”

**Biography**

Allan Burns is professor emeritus in anthropology of the University of Florida. He learned Yucatec Mayan while researching dialects of present-day Mayan in the states of Yucatan, Campeche, and Quintana Roo as well as in Belize. His book, *An Epoch of Miracles*, reflects his interests in Maya oral history and spoken poetry in Yucatan. He has also worked and studied in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador with Maya, Garifuna, and Lenca communities. Burns’ advocacy work with Guatemalan Maya immigrants to Florida resulted in his collaboration with Jeronimo Camposeco in their book *Maya in Exile*. Burns continues to do pro-bono expert testimony in immigration courts in favor of asylum applicants from Central America.