

## FOOD AND HEALTH: TRANSFORMATIONS AND MEANINGS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAYANS IN YUCATÁN, MEXICO

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**Abstract:** The relationship between eating habits, health and illness has existed since the origins of society; However, due to the development of human beings, habits have changed. Nowadays, the increase in processed foods, rapid urbanization and changing lifestyles have changed eating habits. In this work, it is shown, through interviews, that local communities identify the transformations in the eating habits of their community and at the same time the biological role of traditional foods, as well as their sociocultural function, assign meanings or valuation to them. own, as a source of healthy nutrition, and, this way, achieve local food security; They make them part of their culture, which gives them identity, and also part of their gastronomic heritage, so each region manifests itself through its own cultural and gastronomic identity.

**Keywords:** eating habits, health, illness, identity and culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Food is a basic, fundamental right that contributes to a dignified life for people and is vital for the enjoyment of other rights such as health, life or education and that lead to the full development of their physical and mental capacities. Talking about the right to food refers to the possibility of having uninterrupted access (from self-production or purchase) to food in sufficient quantity, adequate quality and in accordance with the culture and traditions of the population, to guarantee people and the next generations, not only on an individual level, but also collectively, a full, healthy and dignified life (Antún, 2022).

Food is not only considered another basic need, since it not only satisfies a vital need, but is also a manifestation of culture in a society; It is an act that is interrelated with all the aspects that make up the identity of a people (Aguirre, 2001). Food, therefore, is a sign of identity, understood as the subjective perception that a

social subject has of himself and his group to which he belongs (Fernández, 2020).

The act of eating, of nourishing oneself, is a vital biological function and also an essential social function. It is an everyday activity that, beyond obtaining the substances required to live, is one of the main tasks through which human beings manage to satisfy and express their feelings, emotions, traditions and culture (Sedó & De Mezerville, 2004); represents a symbolism that creates class identities, recognition, belonging, gender, ethnicity and socialization, the latter, reflected especially in social celebrations or parties, in which festive eating and drinking are part of social and cultural integration. and communion between diners. Living in society defines symbolic structures and their representations, in which food has a recognition that distinguishes the person who prepares it, but also the person who receives it and interprets the assessment of its consumption (Troncoso et al., 2018).

Although the need to satisfy hunger, understood as the physiological need to eat and appetite as the selective intake of food, is common to all populations in the world, the way to satisfy both needs is not, since they influence this decision. cultural, individual, environmental, economic, family factors, food availability, and countless more, which ultimately constitute eating habits (Carcamo, 2006). The relationship between eating habits, health and illness has existed since the origins of society; However, these habits have changed due to the development of the human species. Today the increase in the production of processed foods, rapid urbanization and changes in lifestyles have transformed eating habits. Currently, people consume more high-calorie foods, fats, free sugars and salt/sodium; Many people do not eat enough fruits, vegetables, and dietary fiber, such as whole grains; This generates adverse health effects (WHO, 2018).

It is important to mention that a healthy diet helps the body function properly, maintain or restore health and have adequate development and growth; A healthy diet is one that is capable of covering the nutritional and energy needs of the individual and providing pleasurable aspects from a psychological point of view, as well as facilitating family and social relationships (Corio A. & Arbonés F, 2009). Healthy eating habits are not the only thing that determines the health of an individual; The best of habits consists of prudence with the foods consumed, their quantities and combinations; No food is completely bad or good, all of them in their right measure are important for the good development of the human being and must vary according to each stage of life, since in each one, the needs are different (Research and Teaching Management, Department of Information and Scientific Dissemination-Library National Institute of Hygiene Rafael Rangel, 2014).

In Mexico, the effects of globalization, such as the preference for industrialized foods instead of traditional ethnic foods and migration from the countryside to the city, have led to changes in the lifestyle of the population (Román, Ojeda and Panduro, 2013). The consumption of the traditional Mexican diet (whole grains, tortillas and beans, a variety of vegetables and fruits, and moderate intake of products of animal origin, sugar and fats) has decreased, giving way to the increase of the Western diet (excessive consumption of red meat, processed foods, saturated fats, refined sugars and low intake of fiber and vitamins), which is consolidated as an example to follow as it represents a symbol of abundance, social prestige and status. (Gómez & Velázquez, 2019). This change in nutrition in Mexico is reflected in the decrease in spending on foods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meats, and greater spending on high-calorie foods of low nutritional quality, resulting in

a food and nutritional transition replacing consumption of traditional foods and being associated with the risk of presenting different diseases such as overweight and obesity. Despite this, there are eating customs that have resisted dietary modifications because the population has managed to transmit their practices despite the changes, influences and accessibility to all types of foods. These are the consumption of some ingredients of pre-Hispanic food, especially corn, beans and chili (Galán G, 2021).

Local communities have the ability to identify traditional foods in their biological role of delivering nutrients, but also in their sociocultural function, which is why they assign meanings or their own valuation, such as being a source of healthy nutrition, in order to, this way, achieve local food security (Troncoso 2019). They also make them part of their culture, which gives them identity, and, therefore, part of their gastronomic heritage; Each region manifests itself through its own cultural and gastronomic identity (Fusté, 2016).

As far as health is concerned, from the Mayan worldview, the concepts of health and illness must be understood holistically and related to balance in relationships in general; It is the result of a harmonious state with life and with the Formative Creator; a harmonious state between mind, body and spirit, which translates as being calm and peaceful. When there are excesses and limitations, illness occurs since these are imbalances or absence of harmony. When there is imbalance, there is anguish, frustration, bitterness, loneliness, anger, dissatisfaction and aggression. Likewise, and with the purpose of maintaining the health of individuals, indigenous communities seek to recover and maintain an internal and external balance, since, if this balance is broken, the body becomes ill and the family and community may be affected, that is

Therefore, health depends on the context and social relationships, since it is addressed in a collective way (Donis, 2019).

The objective of this work is to show the nutritional wealth of a community in Yucatan, its meanings and transformations in the conception of the health of the people and the community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **PROCEDURE**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants from the community, as well as community experts working in collectives in the field of food at the regional level. The information collected about food and health focused on the conception of what is healthy, what is done to be healthy, what is needed to be healthy, and changes in the way we take care of our health; They were invited to participate, they were informed of the objective of the research and appointments were scheduled to be interviewed; some at home and others at work. The duration of the interviews was approximately between one and two hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. This manuscript is part of the results of the project “Measuring food poverty from the socio-critical paradigm and an intercultural perspective for Mayan-speaking communities of Yucatan”, with funding from the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) of the call: Poverty and Multidimensional inequality: towards new social pacts? project approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Regional Research Center “Dr. Hideyo Noguchi” with registration code CEI-12-2022.

## RESULTS

Seven community experts were interviewed, four men and three women; and from the community of Petulillo to 7 people: four men and three women.

It is evident that the conditions of nutrition and health in the Mayan populations are diverse, with a plural reality that is far from being homogeneous, therefore, it is important to consider that its approach must be in a singular and particularized way and not in a general way. In the narrative, both from community experts and from the people of the community themselves, the existence of communities in resistance with strong components of identity that try to preserve the ancestral food system, producing and consuming what the cornfield, the backyard provides them. and the mountains, and, where money allows the purchase of products with which they have a varied diet; Likewise, they point out other communities that reconfigure themselves using cultural elements and global consumption practices, producing food for sale and the acquisition of industrialized products.

“Well, as I tell you, they are not people who go and plant natural things in the cornfield that they can eat, that is the problem that people have, the quickest thing is to go to the supermarket to buy, go to the market to buy and that's it” ( man 5).

In this sense, food and the link with health is an aspect that they reveal; health as a process in which several elements are involved such as vital energy, strength to work, joy and balance with their relational and environmental environment, in which nutrition is present with the consumption of natural foods produced mainly from cornfield. They relate the healthy with the natural. Health is conceived not only as the absence of any disease, but also involves physical and psychological aspects in balance with their environment.

“First is having health... it is not only the question of physical health but also mental health where one can live in a healthier way in terms of food, nutrition, having healthy meals so that you are well” (man 6).

“It is consuming foods that we produce or that are produced here in the community that are more nutritious for our diet, eating healthy foods instead of consuming junk foods” (man 6).

“Be healthy, because I think that since most families plant, they try to eat everything as healthy as they can, harvest what they have and thus make food with them...” (woman 1)

Likewise, from the discourse of these people about what is healthy, a term emerges that they denote as nutritional wealth in which elements of identity, customs, natural eating practices and forms of community life that contribute to stable mental health are involved.

“The healthiest are those that we produce in the cornfield, in the fields, in the mountains, where not a single chemical is applied... life before was healthier, it was more self-sufficient, what was produced in the cornfield, in the solar, in the garden; In the mountains you could find sapote, kanisté or many trees that bear fruit and that can be consumed” (man 7).

“Everything that is grown from the cornfield, both corn, pumpkin, even what has been the food that is normally made there, which are animals from the mountain. There are not so many backyard chickens, backyard eggs don't have as many chemicals. All of this is healthier for me.” “Well now we see that that is what it is, giving value mainly to our work and that on the part of the farmers is something very important for both mental health and health as well” (woman 3).

They identify healthy food with what is produced in the cornfields and with those foods that are not processed or industrialized.



“In the municipality we eat mostly products from the fields, from the cornfields; This season that ended was that of beans, corn; In December we were with the pumpkins, we ate very traditional foods, in this case such as “Joroch”, which are balls of dough that you put inside the strained beans... when the iis season began, which is the sweet potato, most of the The people consumed the sweet potato and for seasons before the rain starts or something like that, Mayan ceremonies are held and we eat food such as Ya’ach’, which is a preparation of buried tortillas and they make a soup; So I consider that, apart from being delicious, it is healthy” (woman 4).

“Everything is a benefit for the farmer who can vary what he is going to eat so that he does not get bored” (man 2).

However, it is also recognized by these people that all these elements are being transformed. At the symbolic level, there is a commercial food environment that seeks to position the Western diet in consumer preferences and that is legitimized through the individual choices of those who prefer to consume this type of food and configure a new food environment. that deprives us of a sense of traditional life. This way, food is devoid of its cultural, social and political elements.

“In terms of health, right now it has gotten worse because of not recognizing who they really are, because of suddenly changing their way of eating and mainly because of the emotional issue that they are not stable, because of the way they are thinking about things” (woman 3).

“Here in the community, to see that they are healthy, it means taking care of all the things that we really eat, of everything that is fumigated, in the town we have already suspended all that for the health of the community, of the children... What the difference, so, for example, today the cold meat cart arrives... the famous Bimbo arrives,

now they bring coca here, Pepsi they bring here, so that’s the difference, before there was no excess of any.” (man 3).

It is striking that in addition to eating to be healthy, they recognize the importance of other aspects of community life such as coexistence and the dynamics of food exchange between people, which ultimately leads to an emotional state of well-being.

“Rather, it is what we have from our communities, from what we produce, such as coexistence and it is not only eating things... but a way of sharing, that if you had some leftover beans you would share it with a neighbor or something and now Normally the neighbors have their fence and no longer share... it is not only having but knowing how to share what you have” (man 6).

“He must be a conscious person, more active, more participative, who has initiative, who can talk, can agree, can work in a group, he must be working in his cornfield, on his plot, in everything” (man 7).

“We support each other... it was taken into consideration, that we do not sow together, it is my turn to sow and with that we assume that this month of March we are going to sow everything and we establish, every 15 days, who goes so that we do not spend it, that I use up the cilantro, I’m going to tell Adela that she already has it... and I have to buy it from her (man 3).

It is interesting that they also recognize that public policies underestimate the production of basic grains and replace them with non-food products, strong influence of industrialized and/or processed products with a large caloric component, generational changes in food consumption patterns with loss of natural products in the usual diet in the face of the valorization of industrialized things, such as bottled soft drinks and fast food.

“On the lot, plant fruit trees, vegetables and have a little bit of everything to eat, to have a healthy life and try not to depend too much on food that comes from outside because we know that it is not very good. Also, not depending too much on programs that come from outside because it is good that they help us, but there are many things that come with certain rules and they want you to do it that way, when in a community it is not like that, we don't have to do it that way, We bring customs, traditions, but we also bring our ways of producing our food, for example, there are many government programs that say “yes we can help you, but with these seeds and you have to provide these inputs...”. Just as they are seeds already adapted for you to apply chemicals, if you don't put them in they won't give you a production either; So I say: we have to continue sowing the seeds that our grandparents inherited from us, all the native seeds are the best, and not put chemicals in them that contaminate them” (man 7).

“When Pepsi and coca began to arrive, many instead of pozole, grabbed a bottle of coke and charritos. He is like the technician when he comes to visit us. We have to drink soda with him when he comes” (man 4).

Self-esteem was also considered an important aspect for health care and that allows making a healthy selection in food:

“I can speak from my side regarding what nutrition is, the way of living acceptance to be able to take care of yourself, self-love mainly because once you have self-love you will want to be well and once you want to be well You are going to want to eat properly” (woman 3).

“Even if you are eating healthy and doing other things like anger... well it is also like... even if we are eating something healthy, we are not giving it any benefit... that also makes us sick... like I am exposing my body... we have to calm down” (woman 1).

Modern lifestyles lead to unhealthy eating practices that both community experts and people in the community identified and pointed out as health disorders that manifest themselves as alterations in metabolism and in the very conception of the disease.

“The famous cancer, both stomach cancer and what it is in the body of babies, it hurts us that it happens in this community... those who have diabetes are hard because they cannot eat anything, even if it is natural, sometimes it hurts them because the pressure and sugar that rises, they cannot use, for example, honey, which is good, chicken broth, and if it has a little fat, I cannot eat it at all, which is pork, beef” (man 3).

“I think that's why there is a lot of illness... because the diet, speaking in general, has already changed a lot, right now everything is bought, the pork comes from the farm, we want to eat chicken it comes from the farm, we want to eat tomatoes it comes from the store with a lot of chemical, everything that is consumed now is contaminated” (man 8).

## ANALYSIS

While it is true that, since the beginning of human civilization, the link between food and health has existed, it is also true that, within the framework of food modernity, discourses on food have been transformed and medicalized; Therefore, health has also been modified and medicalized.

In this sense, in this work it was possible to perceive changes in the discourses of all the people interviewed, both regarding the diet that, from their perspective, they consider healthy, as well as the state of health of the communities since they point out that diseases are due to a poor diet and excessive consumption of industrialized foods, which could be considered the imbalance that Donis (2019) talks about.

Health becomes a relevant factor when choosing what foods to consume; However, and despite seeing resistance towards industrialized foods, they fight to maintain the production of their food as an integrating and cultural element that allows them to strengthen their identity linked to their community. For some, the fact of working in groups allows them to continue and be facilitators in this process of resistance, while others, from their communities, encourage the consumption of cornfield products among their families, to consolidate it as part of their culture and identity and, therefore, its gastronomic heritage as Futé (2016) has pointed out.

However, any local product, even when it is framed in the maintenance and transmission of practices, traditions and knowledge linked to the production, preparation and consumption of food, it is possible to notice differences between the discourse and practice of the people, who allow themselves the consumption of traditional and modern foods, as an effect of globalization mentioned in the work of Román, Ojeda and Panduro (2013).

There is a process of resignification of foods, since what is perceived as “healthy” transcends the strictly nutritional perspective and includes other nuances such as the cultural identity that is perceived through the foods that are worked in the cornfield, as well as the obtaining and consuming these, such as the “natural” that is “healthy” and the “outside” that they consume, but discreetly.

In this sense, the emphasis in their speeches denotes tensions and contradictions that they correct by giving priority to foods produced in the cornfields, in an effort to resist modifications in their diet and transmit those meanings of “healthy” in their cultural practices to despite the changes, influences and accessibility to other types of foods as indicated in the work of Galán (2021).

In the present study, the influence of diet on health was revealed, where changes in diet generated by modernity have disrupted people’s health with the presence of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cancer, as a result. of a food transition noted in the work of Galán, (2021). An aspect that Güémez Pineda (2018) also points out when he states that overweight and obesity are problems that severely impact the health of the Yucatecan population and, in particular, the Mayan people and that therefore the articulation of various areas of knowledge is essential to address and confront nutritional disorders and increase hope and quality of life and that in every project or program it is required to have sensitive personnel capable of understanding that indigenous peoples, such as the Mayan, have their own culture of food: values attributed to foods and drinks, the ways of classifying them, preparing them and consumption habits; Otherwise, we will be following a model that underestimates social, cultural and gender aspects; rites, life cycles and knowledge in the maintenance or loss of health, and imposes another, foreign to the group in question.

## CONCLUSIONS

From a holistic vision, it is necessary to recognize that local communities have the ability to identify traditional foods in their nutrient content, but also in their sociocultural function, which allows them to assign meanings or evaluations such as that they are the source of a healthy diet. and with this, achieve the local food security that is so often referred to in public food policies.

The way they eat, although it is dynamic and modifies according to social reality, is also part of their culture and identity, and therefore, part of their cultural gastronomic heritage. Knowledge of traditional food as healthy allows us to recognize the importance of food in the health and social life of communities,



in addition to the economic and productive particularities that it entails.

Although there is a motivation in the consumption of food that ranges from biological needs focused on health care, it is also motivated by the maintenance of local traditions and cultural gastronomic identity that mixes cultural elements such as religion, history, ethnic diversity, values, beliefs and traditions. It is important to understand that traditional food is a space where you can achieve healthy eating.

## LIMITATIONS

The mastery of the Mayan language in the Mayan communities was a limitation to establishing adequate communication. Despite having personnel in the group of researchers who spoke Mayan, the lack

of everyday life and fluency in it made interaction difficult; However, the empathetic attitude of the people in the community led to intercultural negotiation that favored investigative work and the development of interviews and workshops in their own spaces. Another aspect that served as a limitation was the remoteness of the community and the difficult access that did not allow visits to be more frequent and prolonged.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to facilitate communication channels that allow a process of intercultural dialogue, not only from the need to communicate in the Mayan language, but from the decisions that are made reciprocally and horizontally, giving value to their knowledge.

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