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**Keeping Loved Ones Present:  
Marriage, Food and Migration in Highland Ecuador**



***Introduction***

Accounts of male migration often portray the women who remain in exporting communities as passive victims, economically reliant on their husband's sporadic and decreasing remittances, indebted to people traffickers, and subject to infidelities and eventual rejection. Kyle (2000) writes of women so immobilised by their husband's departure they can no longer tend fields or care for their children, and while his account is an extreme example, it is not uncommon for male migrants to be portrayed as carefree agents who exert economic control over their physically distant female kin, while building their new lives and becoming increasingly assimilated into their host country. Women's fate, it appears, is to live in a state of suspended limbo, until they are forced to migrate and locate their husbands, or acknowledge the relationship is over and suffer a de facto divorce. As Brettel (1986) confirms, 'men migrate, and women wait'.

Yet, the women of Jima with whom I work do not just wait, but actively seek, as do their husbands, to maintain their trans-national marriages over many years.

Subsequently, in this paper I challenge the oft-cited notion that the female kin of migrants are in a socially and economically precarious position by demonstrating that, despite their physical distance, the gifting of particular foods and objects, and the transformation of remittances into material goods, enables both partners to maintain a presence in each others' lives. Thus, I question the assumptions regarding gender roles and the nature of marriage often applied to accounts of gendered migration.

This paper is located in the village of Jima in the Southern Ecuadorian Highlands. The region has witnessed sustained male economic migration, primarily to New York, since the 1950s, although the number leaving increased dramatically with the economic crisis of the late 1990s. Due to its illegal nature, migration is long-term with many men remaining in New York for over ten years. For many households, significant levels of remittances continue to flow throughout this period, and as a result, Jima is now effectively a village of newly-wealthy women.

### ***The Gifting of Food***

One evening during the initial stages of my fieldwork I entered Maria's kitchen and was greeted by the sight of her sister, Teresa, standing at the kitchen sink rinsing blood from a freshly plucked and slaughtered guinea pig. "For the United States" she explained, "for Don Pepe; he asked", and nodded her head in the direction of the back garden where I found Maria, Don Pepe's wife of fourteen years, tending to the bonfire over which the carcasses would be roasted. She informed me her husband had telephoned from his apartment in Queens and requested a number of roast *cuy* (guinea pig) to be sent as soon as possible, as he had woken that morning craving "the food of home".

I soon became accustomed to observing Jimeñas prepare, roast and package *cuy*, as they send the meat to their migrant kin, not only on request, but also for public and private celebratory events. Birthdays, anniversaries, public holidays and ritual celebrations are all occasions for sending the meat cooked whole and nestled among kernels of *mote* (white hominy), with Jimeñas paying forty dollars to a specialist courier service to transport the package across international borders. Each package,

which generally contains two to three whole *cuy*, usually arrives safely at its final destination in the U.S. within five days. Jimeñas do not just send packages to their husbands for their own private consumption, but will mail enough meat for all members of their husband's household unit. As these units are often kin-based, a Jimeña is therefore not only supplying food to her husband, but is also often feeding her sons, nephews and cousins.

*Cuy* and *mote* are the only foodstuffs sent to migrant kin, and the common explanation given by my informants for this exclusivity is that other foods do not "travel well". As Doña Victoria clarifies;

*Cuy is good to send to the United States; chicken, it's not worth it, it doesn't travel well; pork is the same, it doesn't travel well. It doesn't keep; when they get it, it's rotten, it's horrible. But cuy and mote, they're always fresh, they stay tasty; they travel well.*

### ***"They Travel Well"***

I would like to unpack this concept of particular foods 'travelling well', and ask what specific qualities *cuy* and *mote* have in this context.

While *cuy* and *mote* are widely available across the Andes and beyond, Jimeños regard them as locally specific dishes. The foods feature significantly in historical narratives, with my informants explaining that the village takes its name from the *zhima* corn from which *mote* is produced and stressing their relations with the neighbouring community of San Miguel de Cuyes. Moreover, in a village which appears, at least on the surface, to be embracing modernity and social change, the valorisation of *mote* and *cuy* as a 'custom of ours' is striking. This distinction between *cuy* and everyday life is not only evident in the manner in which it is consumed solely on festive occasions and ritual celebrations, but also in its method of production. *Cuy* and *mote* dishes are only prepared by members of a household's intimate social network in a time-consuming, labour intensive manner, and the use of domestic servants and electric appliances is strongly censured.

The foods are thereby rich in cultural capital, and the circulation and exchange of *cuy* in particular plays a significant role in defining and maintaining social networks; as

Weismantel states; “to kill a *cuy* for someone...is an open declaration that you would like to deepen and formalize the relationship” (1988: 131). In both its raw and cooked states, *cuy* generally circulates across restricted social networks. In Jima, the newly wealthy rarely produce these dishes as commodities, but on the occasions this occurs, for example health fairs, mechanical spit roasters and servants are employed, and distance is created.

### ***Being Present: Food, Labour and Migration***

The contents of migrant packages are therefore not just any food, but are the two dishes most firmly associated with Jima and being a Jimeño social actor. The foods symbolise aspects of Jimeño social and cultural life – its past, its customs and its unique recipes – which are locally conceived as contributing to the village’s distinct character. From this perspective, Doña Victoria’s assertion, that only *cuy* and *mote* travel well, take on new meaning and the food she rejects, chicken and pork, do not have the same cultural and social resonance. The consistent manner in which the two dishes are the components of migrants’ parcels is therefore not coincidental and based on the vagaries of food decomposition. Rather, I suggest, the dishes selected enable Jimeñas to remind their migrant kin of their true familial home. This process is reinforced by the practice of sending packages on ritual and festive occasions, which gently coerces migrants into acknowledging and participating in these events. Subsequently, power relations are not as one-sided as commonly portrayed as migrants’ time is, to some extent, governed by their Jimeño kin as migrants recognise family occasions and their children’s life-cycle events, and subscribe to Jima’s ritual calendar through their consumption of festive food.

Thus, through their acceptance and ingestion of *cuy* and *mote*, migrants are being consistently remade as Jimeño, and the packages can be seen as way of counterbalancing the exogenous foods of the United States. This perspective is found in migrants’ narratives, with Don Pepe explaining that the *cuy* purchased and cooked in New York were “never as good as the ones from home” and asserting “now I always get *cuy* sent from home; they taste better”. Moreover, in sending food to which commensal restrictions apply, Jimeña wives effectively collapse space by encouraging both branches of their household to share a meal and festive occasion across

transnational boundaries, thereby reminding their male kin of their place within their Jimeño home. Thus, through their commensal relations, migrants remain members of their intimate Jimeño social network as the boundaries of the household are extended to incorporate the New York branch; a process which is further facilitated by reciprocal exchange.

Within the Jimeño norms of reciprocity, the acceptance of *cuy* enmeshes individuals into a web of mutual obligations, provoking a return gift. Migrants are not, however, in a position to reciprocate their gift of *cuy* with other Jimeño or self-produced foodstuffs, yet they are able to reciprocate with remittances and gifts from New York. We can thereby conceive of this transnational circulation of goods and money as an exchange of labour; women send food manually produced and imbued with love and the essence of home and men reciprocate with the products of their waged labour, US dollars and American consumer items, normally clothing with US emblems. Seen through this lens, the exclusion of domestic servants, appliances and mechanical intervention is not coincidental, but is central to the production of *cuy* and *mote* in this context. Furthermore, women wear and display their gifts of clothing and transform remittances into large houses and consumer goods; a process which further dissolves trans-national boundaries and unites both branches of the household. Thus, women's practices not only valorise the male migratory journey by publicly demonstrating its success, but also help maintain migrants' presence in Jima, keeping them physically close and concretizing their labour and endeavours through material objects. These objects include telephones and computers, which virtually propounds a migrant's presence through calls and emails and encourages requests for food packages, and video and digital cameras on which messages and events are recorded and mailed. Hence the cycle of exchange becomes self-perpetuating and consolidated.

### ***Conclusion***

I have contended that far from being subject to the whims of their carefree husbands, the wives of migrants work hard to maintain their trans-national marriages. Due to the bias in the literature and the manner in which my research is located in the exporting community, I have focused this paper primarily on the actions of women although, as indicated, men also uphold their end of the migratory bargain. Thus, despite their

physical distance, gifting, accepting, reciprocating and transforming products of each others' labour enables migrants and their Jimeño kin to perform their marital roles and maintain a presence in the others' lives. This performance continually remakes migrant men as Jimeño and as the husbands and sons of Jimeño households, and women as wives and mothers. Thus, Jimeños remind us that successful marriages and kin relations are not always founded upon physical proximity, but can be sustained for many years across space.

I would like to end with a postscript. Eleven years after he first left Jima, Don Pepe returned, moved into the palatial villa his remittances had facilitated and Maria had constructed, and met his youngest son for the first time. I had anticipated this reunion would be awkward, yet within a day every member of the household had re-assumed their roles as if he had never left. I would return home to find the family cuddled up on the sofa watching Maria's favourite soap operas and be astounded at the ease in which Don Pepe had been seamlessly incorporated into the home, until I realised that he had, in essence, always been there.

### ***Bibliography***

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