

*Seneca*  
*Onondaga*

*Oneida*

*Mohawk*

*Mvskoke*

*Zuni*

*Tesuque*

*Laguna*

*North Navajo*

*Raramuri*

*Nahua*

*Teenek*

*Tzeltal*

*Cuchumatanes*

*Kichwa*

*Quechua from the south hills*

# *Voices of Maiz*

COLLECTIVE WORK FROM ABYA YALA



# *Voices of Maiz*

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Deydania López  
showing cobs of  
seed corn near the  
community seed reserve  
in her community of  
Quilínco, Chiantla,  
Huehuetenango,  
Guatemala.  
Photographer: Ana  
María Castañeda Diego



The colors of maize and  
seeds of their ancestor,  
teosinte in the center,  
are part of the seeds that  
agriculturalists have  
put into the community  
seed reserve in the  
community of Nuevo  
Progreso, aldea Quilínco,  
Chiantla, Guatemala.  
Photographer: Ana  
María Castañeda Diego



# Foreword

**V**oices of Maíz emerged after a gathering in the winter of 2015, where a small group of us came together to dream and create a vision for strengthening our relationship to maize as Indigenous communities and as a global community. We recognize ourselves in maize. As the sacred book of the Maya, the Popul Vuh says, our flesh is made of maize, we are women and men of maize. It is because of this that we envisioned a powerful image of maize uniting peoples across borders and throughout Nations. Out of this conversation emerged 'Voices of Maíz', a collective process of storytelling that came out of conversations and gatherings, hosted in Indigenous communities throughout North and South America to bring people together around pressing issues related to maintaining and practicing traditional corn knowledge, and defending and maintaining the incredible diversity of seeds.

Over the last year, *Voices of Maíz* has become a collective journey around this sacred plant so intimately tied to many of us, our ancestors and people from corn nations. Through gatherings in the North and South of the Americas, this publication shares various voices from Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, Muskogee, Zuni, Tesuque, Laguna,

Navajo of the north, to the Raramuri, Nahuatl, Teenek, Tzeltal, Maya, Cuchumatanes in Mesoamerica; to the Kichwa and Quechua Pueblos of the Andes in Ecuador and Peru.

On this journey we heard again and again that maize is more than just a grain or a food. It is a humanized plant, an incarnation of god, a family member, a member of our community, to whom we speak, sing, pray, and give our love to. Along with maize exists another vision of the world, a system of thought, a culture, and a cosmovision. Maize, for many communities across the Americas is the center of creation, and her cycle of life has made possible the lives of humanity as well as a way of life based on community, coexistence, harmony, reciprocity and respect. These *Voices of Maíz* show the inseparable connection between these ways of conceiving of, and comporting ourselves with the world, everyday ways of being, and the fluid relation between seeds, land, knowledge, cultural, and biological diversity. *Voices of Maíz* intends to transmit and modestly amplify these teachings, to make them known to the world as an alternative to the mainstream way of life that we know is leading us to destruction. These corn culture voices show a very different way of acquainting ourselves with the world who we all have much to learn from.





Julia Mateo in her milpa in the community of Nuq'Witz, Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Photographer: Harald Herland de Noruega.

The milpa developed as a system of polycultures in which a wide variety of crops harmoniously coexist, establishing support relationships in which the specific characteristics of one supports the other. The milpa way of coexistence is reproduced at the social level where differences between people are recognized, and accepted and further, are considered an important difference to help each other with our deficiencies to flourish collectively. Growing together as a milpa opens the door to a system of virtuous coexistence very distinct from the competitive way of living so prevalent in the modern world. The Milpa as a way of cultivation allows the development of synergistic relationships in the lands and territories in which the various crops and elements of nature coexist in harmonious relation.

From the South to the North, we hear again and again that maize is not just a food, but a deep part of identity, and that there is an inseparable connection between seeds, knowledge, water, forests, and landscapes. We hear that protecting and defending corn is intimately connected to the defense of territory and the strengthening of Indigenous cosmovisions connected to maize. We hear repeatedly of the importance of revaluing and recuperating ancestral knowledge, and of working with Indige-

nous maize experts to maintain ancestral knowledge. We hear about the multiplicity of seed laws threatening community seed systems around the world and the need to defend Native seeds from intellectual property regimes and of stopping scientific interventions into areas of traditional knowledge. We simultaneously hear of the need to strengthen participatory plant breeding processes, to conserve maize in situ, and to reignite the deep understanding within communities that maize is the fundamental base upon which the lives of many communities exist. That maize is food, medicine, energy, health, and that when the traditional seeds are lost to hybrids, or to abandonment of the countryside caused by various public policies, that is when the health of communities deteriorates, and that there is a direct correlation between the loss of maize and the death of cultures. The crisis of maize has essentially come from commoditization of life, and conservation of the world's biodiversity and agrobiodiversity comes from ensuring the self determination and autonomy of Indigenous peoples who have maintained and continue to maintain this diversity, and to respect the gifts of seeds that we are all dependent on. These voices illuminate the stories and intimate memories that generate understanding that maize, truly is the biocultural patrimony of humanity.



Photographer:  
Semillas de  
Vida A.C

## *Benigno Robles Reyes*

**Information received from the working group Centro Ceremonial Maam Ts'itsin-inik of the flyers of bixom tiw, San Luis Potosí, México.**

As Teenek, we were created from corn: our bones are of "olotes," our meat of masa, and our hair of corn silks. Dhipak (God of Maize) gave his breath to wake up humanity, blowing through a caracol shell through our head. Since then as all Teenek, we have a spiral in our heads that is both the entryway and exit of life.

Lilaab, which translates as "sacred seed," is very important since she is the heart that guards all life. There are different types of seeds but maize is the most important because from maize emerged humankind.

Dhipak is the spirit of the corn seed and it is also the seed of humanity. At one time the seeds were thrown everywhere and that did not please Dhipak who took them back. Now one must ask for a good cultivation and harvest in the cave or on the mountain because that is where the seeds are.

Our ancestors went to the mountain and asked for the seeds of music and were given nine sounds. Wits k'aan-ilaab - "precious sacred seeds" or "sacred music" - is music that springs from Dhipak--the God of Maize and only plays for the seed. The musicians of the danzantes and the birds have a greeting to the sun and the wind, and

where the winds meet the sun everything connects. Through music and dance we ask for and give gratitude for a good sowing and harvest.

In the universe of Teenek everything is connected to the sacred; and every place, every animal and every person occupies a place in that universe. If this order is disturbed our equilibrium is broken.

In these times we are living, it has become difficult to maintain our universe. There are many things that come to us from outside that are good but also cause damage and we have been taught to believe that the outside world is better. We are sold "improved" seeds, pesticides, insecticides and herbicides. Now we know that all this is harmful, not because we hear it, but because we have experienced it. Our community has become sick and the earth no longer produces as she did before. The animals have died and lots of woods have been cut down and have been given a different value. Already, many people do not want to sow our seeds because it is expensive and it is cheaper to buy corn from outside.

Performing our ceremonies and re-creating the Teenek way is how we will save our seeds.





Josefina Lema beginning a seed exchange with a ritual that cleanses the surrounding energy and generates equilibrium. Photographer: Mona Caron.

## Josefina Lema

**Pueblo Kichwa  
Mojandita,  
Otavalo, Ecuador.**

Our mother maize is, for us, for Indigenous peoples, more valuable than gold. Corn is gold in grain. It is our capital, our life, the corn mother.

We have to work our Mother Earth. That's what I tell my family. We always say that even though the youth are studying, they are going to need to fill their bellies with our grains, so we have to work to grow them. That's what we do.

It is important that young people are always in contact with the Pachamama, with Mother Nature and Mother Earth. It is necessary to continue producing, to continue training, and to continue multiplying so as not to lose contact with the Pachamama.

We have to continue taking care of our seeds. We have fought against free trade agreements, we marched from here to Quito against the laws that the government wants to put in place to prohibit seed exchanges.

And we have to continue fighting to defend our rights and the rights of the seeds. On the topic of health, we have to work first on the issue of food because if we do not eat well we will continue to be sick. All that happens when we don't have our living seeds. That's our work, to ensure we continue to take care of them.



Josefina Lema demonstrating her diversity of seeds cultivated in the "chakra." Photographer: Mona Caron.



Carmen Lozano and her granddaughter Tamia, with her chalina fabric full of "mote" (maize slow cooked in ash to bring out the nutrients), a staple food of Saraguro. Her family is gathered in the cemetery on Day of the Dead along with people from all over the community on this day to offer mote and other foods with passed relatives and to share food with each other. Photographer: Karen Swift

## ***Carmen Lozano***

**Pueblo Kichwa,  
Saraguro, Ecuador.**

Maize is the sustenance of life. We use maize for everything. When we have "mingas," (work parties/gatherings in solidarity to do communal work) we eat corn. We eat corn for lunch, dinner, for the holidays, for Christmas, for Easter. Without maize a party is incomplete. If someone dies, maize is the main meal. We make tamales, coladas (maize beverage) with many different maize varieties. We make humitas, tamales, tortillas, "choclo" and "mote." We make chicha, a very sacred drink that gives us lots of energy and strength. All the colors of corn are for different things. If we lose maize, that will be the end of our people. We do everything with maize. We need to have maize.

In the cities people live off of consumerism, but our foods are a part of our identity. The new

***We are people of maize,  
children of maize,  
and we live from  
maize. Maize is the  
source of life and the  
fundamental basis of  
our communities.  
It is our medicine and  
food. Our seeds belong  
to our ancestors.  
Our seeds are more  
resistant, resilient,  
healthy, and energetic.***

seeds such as hybrids and genetically engineered seeds that governments of the world are pushing with chemicals is ushering in a loss of our identity, of production, of food sovereignty, and is giving us poor nutrition. The new seeds are contaminating our seeds. "Along with the new seeds and foods, an entire new class of illnesses are emerging, which are contaminating our communities, lands, and waters."

You can't even chew the corn stalk of hybrid corn. We have the right to chew our corn stalks and eat our "choclos" (corn on the cob).

We have the right to food, to food sovereignty, to buen vivir, and to good health. We guarantee all of this with our seeds. Our seeds and our traditional knowledge are ours and we reject that the government intervene in these matters. Our grandparents lived more than 100 years and nowadays people hardly reach 60 years of age.

As ancestral peoples with our own autonomy, we reject the idea that anyone, that any government or corporation, can strip us of our right to life. We must be included at the decision-making table and we must be the ones who write the regulations and laws that affect our seeds. We have to participate fully, and any law that can affect our seeds must guarantee our survival and the decisions of our communities. We have the autonomy as Indigenous peoples and we are the ones who define how we maintain our native seeds and our models of cultivation.

Our seeds are part of the patrimony of humanity, and do not have an owner. Maize is collective and through its cultivation we practice solidarity, reciprocity, coexistence, and harmony. Maize is our life and if maize, we lose life.





Angela Ferguson, Onondaga and Janice Brant, Mohawk demonstrating a braid of blue corn.

## Angela Ferguson

**Onondaga, USA. She is one of the key people who started a food sovereignty program, with the support of the tribal council in the Onondaga Nation. Their crew of ten people last year produced enough food to feed 1600 people in their village of 2000 people.**

The corn is what connects us. All of our foods connect us, but we are made of corn. We are the people of corn. We are from corn.

I try to go back at least four generations on everything that I plant. So I know that that's exactly a true seed that is pure. I don't need a scientist to tell me that. I don't want a scientist to tell me that. I would prefer that I already know it and that was something we were all talking about.

## Roger Cook

**Mohawk, USA.**

One of the things my father told me before he passed was to keep the seeds going. That was one of the reasons I decided to keep the seeds going. These seeds are sacred and we had to keep these seeds going for future generations. I decided to keep them going, knew they were part of our ceremonies and we had to keep them going, as well as the health benefits, we had to keep using them and go back to our traditional foods.

The food most people eat these days is poisoning us. Diabetes is a big problem. If we can get our children involved and show them that this is how we are supposed to eat then we won't need medicine from doctors because food is our medicine."

My purpose is to keep the corn seed alive to pass it on. We are the seed bank. Our old people held onto the seeds and kept them going. I got involved in a bigger network of seed keepers and seed exchangers and started expanding out from our Haudenosaunee territory and saw that there were other nations focused on keeping their seeds, and I started trading seeds with dif-



Roger Cook displaying his braid of blue corn that he is about to plant. Photographer: Mateo Hinojosa

ferent nations. That was great. We then started doing food exchanges and seed exchanges. I have learned quite a bit from other Nations and I am sharing their knowledge as well. I live in the Onondaga Nation and we started growing our corn to donate to ceremonies. Now we grow to give back to the people. The council of chiefs saw that we were doing this and supported us. It is something they were talking about for years, putting our food up and going back to our traditional corn and diets. They support our farm projects and they now sanctioned us to have a new place to prepare our corn, which is the corn crib that I helped construct.

# ***Evaristo Polo***

**Tlatahuquitepec,  
Puebla, México.  
Unidad Indígena  
Totonaca Nahuatl**

Maize is sacred, has life, and is like a human being. Without the care of men and women, maize is nothing and vice versa. That relationship has to be revalued and revitalized. Maize is to be taken care of, preserved and protected. It gives us life, the totality of everything, joy. We as nahuas have said that maize is the one who shouts, who laughs, who talks, and who dialogues. Maize is the one who creates the determination of a community: it organizes the people and collectivizes everything. In any social or cultural event the corn unites us. Even at a funeral, when a loved one dies, we only bring maize and a few other offerings, but the fundamental part is maize. "



Photographer:  
Semillas de  
Vida A.C



Rosa Maria Andrango  
showing the best seeds she  
has saved from her "chakra"  
to cultivate this season.  
Photographer: Mona Caron

# ***Rosa Maria Andrango***

**Pueblo Kichwa,  
San Francisco De la  
Rinconda, Otavalo,  
Ecuador.**

To sow our seeds, we hold a ceremony for the grains, because the grains have life, just as the Earth, our Pachamama, has life. Today, the young people who do not plant have a lot of health problems. But our elder mothers do not get sick, they still live eating our seeds. We have to keep preserving the seeds and we should not be neglectful.

When we sow our seeds, they are adapted to our land. That is why we want the seeds of our grandmothers and ancestors, to live on live on, so that we all continue to live on. We do not

want to lose our seeds. We cannot allow seeds to come from the outside. Hybrid seeds will not work with our seeds, our seeds will not allow it. Hybrids do not adapt to our climate.

Seeds from the outside come with with lots of fertilizer from other countries. Those seeds are causing disease and cancer to our bodies. Those who do not eat our own seeds get sick. Without our foods our bodies become weak. We have to defend ourselves, we have to accompany the struggle, we cannot just sit around. For our foods, we have to defend our communities.



# *Ana Maria Castañeda y otros miembros de los Cuchumatanes*



Carmen Lopez in her community El Suj, Aguacatán, Huehuetenango. The photo was taken in her milpa. Her principle work is to gather the herbs in the milpa, process the maize into tortillas, tamalitos, atol and other foods. Just as her mother and grandmother showed her, the first leaves that sprout from the milpa are used to wrap tamales to be eaten with chicken broth, as gratitude that there will be an abundance of food in the coming year. Photographer: Ana María Castañeda.

The development of productivity from Mayan spirituality begins with the cultivation of maize. Maize is our center of life. It corresponds to a brilliant articulation of the Mayan calendar, to divinity and to the sacred grain. These three elements are an indivisible unit and form the basis of the Mayan culture. As Mayans we call ourselves Women and Men of maize - this is because:

The wax (mountain cat), the oq (coyote), the chel (chocoyo parrot) and the joj (crow), were the animals that broke the news of the yellow and white cobs of corn to them. Thus they found the food, and this was their blood, and from this became the blood of the man and the woman; according to the Mayan-Q'anjobales.

Now, climate change is one of the main factors threatening our maize, as well as strong winds, droughts, heavy rains and the emergence of

**Asociación de Organizaciones de Los Cuchumatanes, Guatemala.**

new pests and diseases, that our communities are not familiar with and do not have the power to control. Another threat is the migration of the men to other places, causing families to buy their maize and not to cultivate, because no one is there to take care of the sowing. The smuggling of maize entering our country's borders from Mexico especially, is another threat to maize in Guatemala; it comes cheaper and in abundance without knowing the origin of the seeds. Finally, the promotion of transgenic maize, is threatening our native seeds.

Because of all this, we are working to recuperate our local varieties of seeds (including maize, beans, vegetables, and herbs). At the national level there are 13 races, and 9 identified sub-races of maize. In our communities in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes we have 10 races of the 13 identified nationally. To maintain our seeds in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes we are promoting Community Seed Reserves, in total we have 11 community seed reserves. We are maintaining and improving local varieties of the seeds from the same communities and working on educational outreach with Agrobiodiversity Fairs.



Concepción Bautista Reyes Seed Sowers. Photographer: Semillas de Vida A.C.

## *Concepción Bautista Reyes*

This ceremony was learned from our grandmothers and grandfathers. It is a ritual as old as maize, which is the plant that gives us life, work, food, and is the Creator. All us men and women dedicate ourselves to know the earth, we know how to treat her as a living being so that in communion with her we can produce our food. To you we offer this meeting, our hope, our illusion of being able to be producers of the seed to feed the people.

Our identity has to do with corn. If we do not take care of maize, the milpa will take care of maize, and we take care of the milpa with our work, and our economy, and this takes care of our the community.

**Reforma Community; Municipality of San Martín Huamelulpan, Oaxaca, Mexico.**



Group of women shucking Seneca white corn for use in white corn soup and to grind into flour. Photographer: Mateo Hinojosa.

***Corn is our sustenance. The three sisters [corn, bean, squash] provide for our spirits as well as our bodies.***

## ***Mary Arquette***

**Wolf Clan,  
Mohawk, USA.  
People of the  
Flint.**

I grew up hearing lots of legends about the creation story. We have so many stories about corn. The corn would talk to our people, at one point the corn had grief and wanted to leave us after the president George Washington the "town destroyer" came to burn our corn. We remember what he did to the women, the land, and the crops. The corn had grief and asked to go back to Sky World, and we begged that corn to stay, we asked her not to leave and we promised to honor her, so we include songs for her so she continues to support and care for our babies. Part of the responsibility the Creator gave to the corn was to take care of all the beings, not just us, but lots of animals and insects. So those animals and insects also love the corn. We promised those plants that if they stayed there to take care of us we would take care of them, so we have to do it.

One time I would have dreams over and over again that I was pregnant and going to have a baby and there was no one around and I was starting to panic, and I could feel the corn touch me and say, you will be ok, we are here to help you, we are here to take care of you. I knew at that time that corn was still reminding our people that if we continued to have that loving relationship with her and her sisters that we would be ok, we would be healthy, our babies would be healthy. So that was one of my personal experiences. We have to have that relationship with those foods, and we have to not just grow them, but eat them and celebrate them at our ceremo-

nies and if we do that then we will be healthy and ok. Without our traditional foods our spirits aren't healthy and our bodies aren't healthy. Our foods are our medicine. We have to plant our corn, we have to be healthy, this is the only way we can be healthy. Though we have to take care of the beans, the squash, and all of the plants and not only focus on corn because if they are separated they will be lonely.

There are a lot of challenge to maintaining corn. A lot of the biggest challenges comes from inside of us, because there are so many things going on in this world that are distracting us, that are pulling us away from our traditional teachings, our traditional cultural practices and it is hard to be focused on those things when there are so many other things that are pulling our young people away. The imposition of the English language is a mind changer, when you are thinking in Kanien'kéha, our language, you are always thinking in the female form, always thinking about building words, about putting things together, always thinking in pictures. So if our young children cannot think that way, they miss out on our natural relation. If you cannot speak your language, it immediately puts a barrier. When we plant we promise in our language that we won't abandon them, that we will take care of them, because this is a duty and a responsibility that we have had since the beginning of time. You have to be able to do that in your own words. English doesn't cut it. The power is in the word, and the word is the power of the thought.





Florencio:  
The Milpa is  
part of place.  
Photographer:  
Semillas de  
Vida A.C

## ***Florencio Carlos Zavaleta***

**Unidad Indígena  
Totonaca Nahuatl,  
Sierra Norte de  
Puebla, Mexico.**

We plant to maintain life, to reproduce life. We know that without maize there would be no Indigenous communities. "Those who have maize do not have to worry." It is necessary to reconstruct our faces and our hearts as Indigenous people. Without maize we lose our humanity. It is important to take care of our seeds because without them we will lose our humanity, the spirit and the custom of our Peoples. We will lose our culture and identity as Indigenous people. We will lose the physical, material and spiritual nourishment of our communities. We will lose our spiritual life. We will lose the food security of our Peoples and families. We will lose the security that we have the autonomy to decide for ourselves. We will lose our dignity; our religion; our national sovereignty. We will lose our face and heart as Indigenous people. Our life as a community will be lost. We will lose our autonomy and self-determination as peoples. Our food sovereignty will be lost. Without our seeds we will not have our hearts, our faces, our blood, our life or our bodies.

## ***Carlos Beas Torres***

**Unión de  
comunidades  
indígenas de la zona  
norte del Istmo,  
Oaxaca. Mexico.**

The defense of corn is the defense of life. In the defense of the milpa, it is the women who are in the front, as doña Mine, from the community of Mogoñe says, "from the milpa comes all of our food, from the milpa is our food for the day and we do not need money to have it." Indigenous women are the ones who maintain and reproduce our traditional culture, and in this important role, for them, the milpa is at the center of it all. The women help plant, harvest, and, through the smoke from their comixcales stoves, they are the ones who throw totopo or remove from their comales of clay (a traditional griddle) their freshly made tortillas of maize.

***The milpa is a tradition  
and is the future of our  
Peoples. The defense  
of the milpa is the very  
defense of life. Of our  
life.***



Making a real  
tortilla starts with  
nixtamalizing the  
maize by soaking and  
cooking the maize  
with lime (calcium  
hydroxide) or ash,  
which makes it easier  
to digest and absorb  
the vitamins and  
minerals in the maize.  
The cooked maize is  
then stone ground  
into a masa and made  
into a tortilla. Photo  
from Bacabureachi,  
Mexico.  
Photographer: David  
Lauer

# Luis Pérez

**Comunidad de Repechike, Chihuahua, México.**

A ritual to maintain equilibrium and harmony among the community and the seeds, Mojandita, Ecuador. Photographer: Manlio Masucci.



In all rituals, everything that is done in our community to heal a sick person, is done with maize; the tesguino, the tortilla, the tamales. That, in some way, is a type of psycho-social work that maintains our community, and which maintains our unity, and helps us understand a part of the reality of ourselves that we value. Sometimes people call us poor, but we have our foods and values, and the most important part of that is maize.

We and maize are one family. Understood in this way, we, as all of nature are from the same family, and each and every one that exists in nature has its own value. We have to understand this reality. We are of a different culture, but life is one thing. Wherever one goes, people have their own way, and their own rhythm. I think that's what we have to understand: that there are different ways of life, but life is one thing.

# Josefina Garcia Garcia

**Mazahua, Zitacuaro Michoacan, México.**

Maize isn't just maize, it is a "milpa". Milpa means a lot of things. A system of cultivation that is nature-friendly, which replicates nature when in itself is a biodiverse system from which you can get food not only in the moment when one harvests the cobs, but year-round. And the qualities of the maize allow its application in the kitchen and other aspects. From the moment when the cob appears, the leaves from the Milpa are already there, even when the plant dies and becomes forage. There isn't a moment when maize isn't utilized.

We say no to genetically engineered corn (GMOs) because with a GMO we can't see what the maize plant is missing- its colors tell us if the soil is lacking nutrients and the other plants in the milpa tell us this too. Look at the diversity of things we have in the milpa, these "quelites", the grasses and large quantity of herbs that are

food for us, and for the animals and which help the production of corn. This milpa wouldn't be there with GMO corn. I would say no to GMOs and I'd rather have our native maize. Some say the cob is smaller, but I'd rather have the smaller cob that gives us a yield over the long term than GMOs that yield on the very short term. So, this is why I say no to the GMOs.

If I found out my cobs were contaminated I'd feel frustrated and worried because the GMO seeds are patented, they're owned by one person, I'd be worried that they'd come charge me for "planting" their corn when they contaminated mine. I'd be worried about how that seed would affect my health, and also I'd be worried because after a while my native seeds won't produce anymore. We need to know how we prevent it from contaminating and what can we do as a community to begin to free ourselves from this.



Santa Gertrudis, where the community is uniting to organically grow and collectively work their parcels of land. Here they are weeding and harvesting plants. Photographer: David Lauer



# Sonia Quispe Titto

**Quechua,  
Choquecancha  
community, Lares,  
Peru.**

When we remove the kernel from the cob, we start removing from the base or from the top, these seeds are usually damaged and so we only use seeds from the middle of the cob for sowing; this helps us avoid urhua (seeds with no yield). My mother taught us this method when we were children and I now am passing it on to my children also. It is usually us women who select the seeds, but it is always the men who sow them while the women prepare the food and beverages.

We work separately with each variety of maize, so when we store the maize, we store them separately too. Both men and women store the maize, but the man is the one who does the more physical labour and the women will help out in any other way they can. We select the maize in the drying room and we choose according to five different qualities we need, for seeds, for the barter market, for consumption, for making chicha, and for food for our animals and ourselves. Our traditional knowledge has taught us that in each storage room we must place a Quintu (three coca leaves) with the maize. We place two different Quintus alongside the maize, one from the previous harvest, and a new one for the current harvest; we join the quintus together and burn incense. This is a ritual from our ancestors that it meant to bring bountiful production and ward away scarcity; the Quintu stays in the storage room to protect the maize. We save the Quintu and at the end of the harvest season we show our husbands as proof we had placed it in the room, if we have not saved the Quintu, conflict can arise. If we see our supply is diminishing, we burn incense.

Corn pollen is collected from the tassels of the plant (the male). To pollinate the maize, the pollen must encounter the silks of the corn (the female). Photo collecting pollen from Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico. Photographer: Mateo Hinojosa



Sonia Quispe Titto, separating seeds of the Q'ello variety of maize to make mote and chicha and to use for the barter market. Fotografa: Asociación ANDES.

# Wahleah Johns

**Black Mesa Water  
Coalition, Navajo,  
USA**

The corn pollen and corn is how we understand who we are. We use it almost every day and in all our ceremonies. The way we communicate with dawn is with corn, or the way I communicate with the dawn is with corn. Corn is my identity, it's my strength, it's my understanding of this world, and understanding of our narrative of how we came to be in this world. We know this through our creation stories, but also through the relationship we've built with corn and with everything that's around me; with nature, with the land, air, water, and mountains. Corn is central in everything we know.

# Steve Mccomber

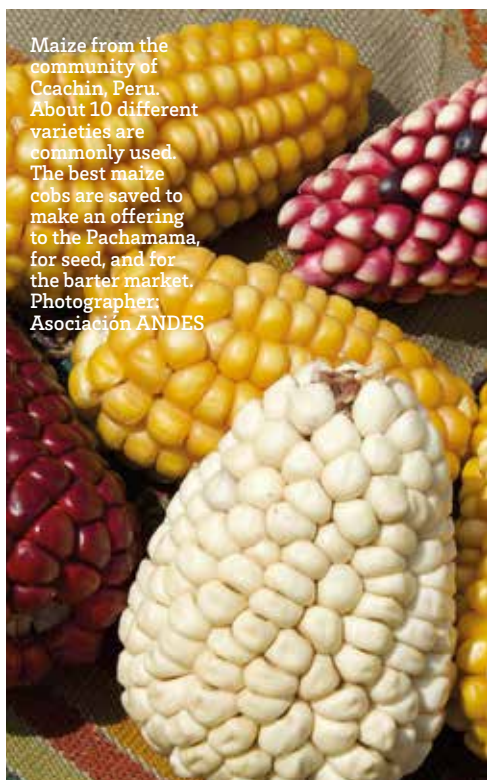
## Mohawk, USA

The quality of seed is important. Our ancestors always selected the best of their corn, always kept the finest of the year to make braids of excellent seed corn. My belief is that some of these things survive because of ceremony. I think if it wasn't for ceremony we would have lost a lot of varieties of our corns. To me the seed is a living thing it's not a vault to store things and leave it there and say well 20 years from now people in the future will have seed. They may have seed but may have totally no knowledge because if you didn't live it or be a part of it, you know or you're not making it a part of life. You know all these people that I've got seed from planted and grew it. And the seed has been here 30000 years. It all happened without the seed bank. It all happened without putting it in a freezer and all that." You know we we braid our corn and we select our corn and then we plant it out every year. And you know people always put away seed for at least two seasons. In case of a bad season next year. So that mindset has always been the indigenous knowledge of seed preservation. You know so that was a living seed bank.



Braided Haudenosaunee white corn hanging in a corn crib, the traditional way to store seed throughout the six Haudenosaunee nations, including the Mohawk nation. Photographer: Mateo Hinojosa

***The quality of seed is important. Our ancestors always selected the best of their corn, always kept the finest of the year to make braids of excellent seed corn.***



Maize from the community of Ccachin, Peru. About 10 different varieties are commonly used. The best maize cobs are saved to make an offering to the Pachamama, for seed, and for the barter market. Photographer: Asociación ANDES

## Rafaela Mayo Sihuín

### Community of Ccachin, district of Lares, Peru

We save the seeds by selecting the best cobs and sharing them with our communities and continuing to hold ceremonies for the spirit of maize. We rely on sowing only the best seeds and on the guidance of the positioning of the stars and the lunar calendar.

The biggest threat is climate change because when there is a lot of sun the maize goes bad. Also within the communities the amount of people taking part in the sowing of the plots is slowly lessening due to migration from the communities to urban centres in search of better economic livelihoods. Climate change also contributes to low production harvests and thus people feel the need to migrate in order to make a living.

Also, the knowledge given to us by our ancestors, is slowly being lost; it is not how it was before. Before, when we stored maize, out of respect one could not enter into the storage room with shoes or a hat; this was part of the beliefs our ancestors had. They believed we would contaminate the maize. We would use natural baskets, not plastic – this helped preserve the spirit of the maize. We must keep teaching our children this knowledge so that it can be passed down and preserved. There should be workshops with elders and young people, and ceremonies to preserve the spirit of maize.



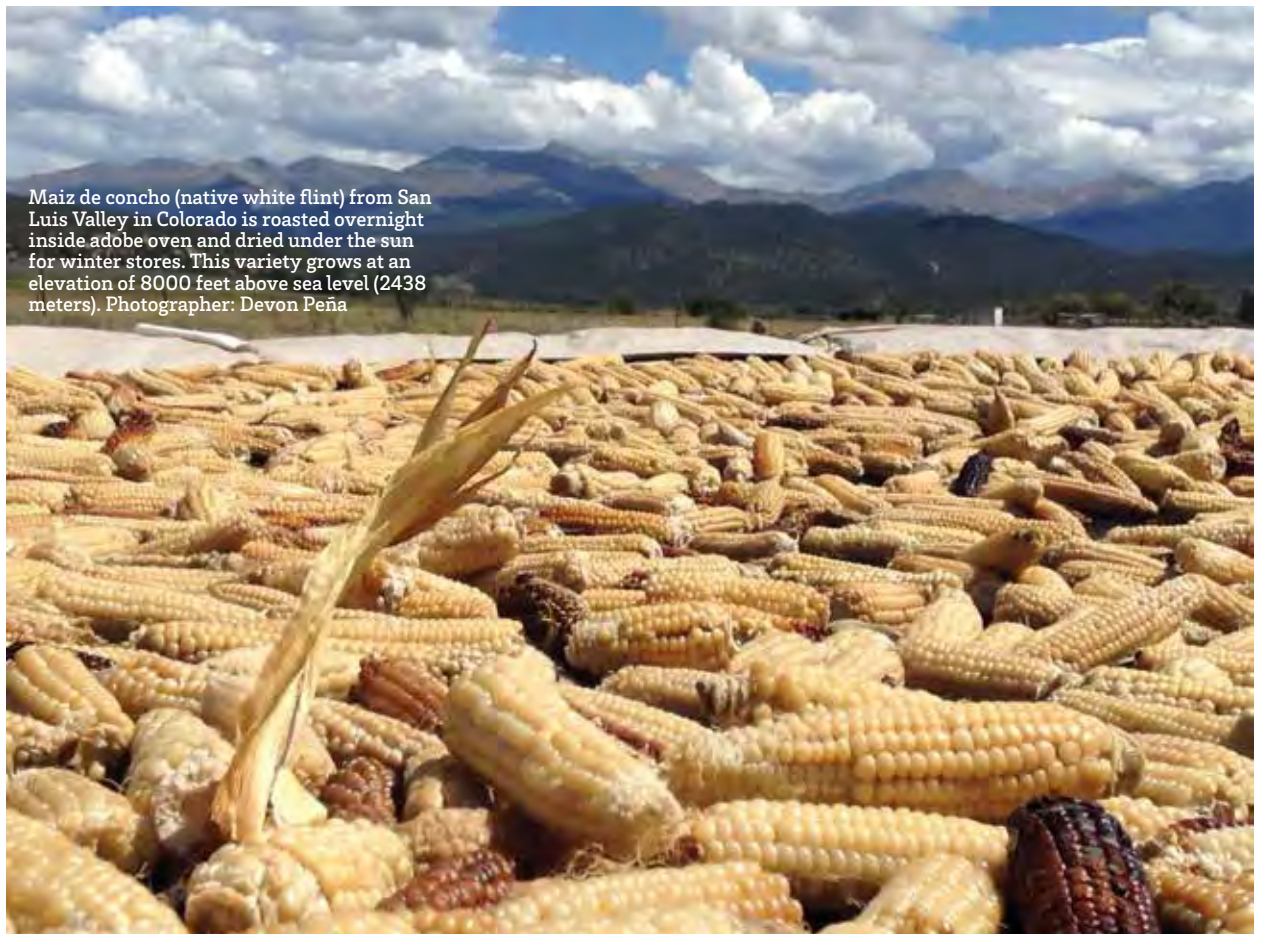
# Frank Buffalo

Mvskoke, USA

We want to keep our corn as pure as we can be because we understand our corn. We understand how it grows, how it behaves. Lessons that corn has taught me is you have to work to survive, you have to treat your land good, you have to keep your environment healthy because if your environment dies, you die as a people. One indicator is corn. We can always grow our corn and we can survive. But if we cannot grow our corn and our corn won't grow than we cannot survive. So it all comes back to protect our environment and to be healthy. If you don't you disappear. There are a lot of civilizations who have disappeared.



Maize is connected to the entire environmental landscape. Photographer: Semillas de Vida A.C.



Maiz de concho (native white flint) from San Luis Valley in Colorado is roasted overnight inside adobe oven and dried under the sun for winter stores. This variety grows at an elevation of 8000 feet above sea level (2438 meters). Photographer: Devon Peña

## Devon Peña

**Acequia Institute,  
San Luis Valley of  
Colorado, USA.**

My abuela would have the "chicos" corn on a simmer, with the onion, red chile and spring water, and some cut of meat like elk, mutton, pork, or chicken; even rabbit. This food is not just slow. It is deep food. Deeply rooted in place. Handed down across the generations. There can be no local slow food without long duration in

place; you need deep roots for us, and our plant relatives. These are our foods but no one owns the seeds. Those who believe in this delusion threaten our ability to continue being corn protectors. This is our first obligation: Protecting our sacred corn means no patents on life.



# Clayton Brascoupe

**Mohawk, corn farmer in Tesuque Pueblo, New Mexico, USA.**

All the older varieties all the older races of corn are just way superior in nutrition than the hybrids or generic engineered stuff. Each year with what people are calling climate change, or a better term, climate chaos, everyone is having a really hard time predicting what this season is going to be like. If you have these old land races that have made those adjustments over the millennia they still have that innate ability to make adjustments if it is either too wet or too dry. These older varieties have that that memory to make those adjustments so you will get a crop at the end of the season. You'll hear other maybe commercial farmers talk about yield in a field bushels per acre. Right. And they say well this hybrid or whatever it may be will produce X amount of bushels per acre, but they're nutritionally deficient, and not resistant. I don't think anyone has yet looked at these corns especially, and figured out how much nutrition per acre and then measuring the inputs to produce that nutrition. You know this is all done without any artificial inputs, not even manures



Clayton Brascoupe, Mohawk demonstrating his corn growing in Tesuque Pueblo, New Mexico. Photographer: Mateo Hinojosa.

or anything like that and very minimal amounts of water. We've grown Hopi corns and they'll produce years of good healthy cobs with real minimal water. You don't need to use pesticides on them or anything. They just have that ability and strength within them. They don't need those artificial additives you know. Plus they've got better flavor, better nutrition, and even look prettier.



Carolina weeding her recently planted field in her community, Ccachin. Photographer: Asociación ANDES

# Carolina Silvia Loaiza

**Community of Ccachin, district of Lares, Peru.**

This is a canchón (a closed off plot), here we use Miska and Mahuay (early sowing methods), and this why you see the maize is sprouting up in uniform and separating; this is the effect heat has on the crops, we haven't had rain here in a long time, and because we are very high up, the grain matures very slowly and the leaves stay green longer than usual; and it is this is why we practice Miska. What is sown in the lower regions will be taller than the maize in this plot, and it will also take less time to mature. This is why we use the Miska method and plant early. This plot will be ready for harvest in six months. Men do much of the hard labour with maize, like the sowing and the transportation, but women do all the Pankiy (replanting) and we oversee the controlling of weeds and pests. We also prepare food and chicha to bring it to the plot.





Dionisio Oblitas and others in the *chakra* (field) in their community of Ccachin, Penqollonqa district of Lares, Peru

## ***Dionisio Pucco Oblitas***

**Community of  
Ccachin, district of  
Lares, Peru.**

Our whole lives are connected to maize, we take part in ceremonies and make offerings to Mother Earth with maize. It provides food for our communities and protects our animals and us from being visited by evil spirits and from being struck by lightning. We hang maize in our doorways so bad entities will not enter and only good spirits will visit our homes.

I learned from a very young age about the traditional knowledge passed down from our ancestors. They were wise agriculturists and knew about sowing, seed recognition, and storing practices. We pass this knowledge down to our children and grandchildren. Things are not how they once were, there are not as many ceremonies; before there would always be a marriage on a maize plot to ensure a good harvest. We can only keep a promise to keep passing on our traditional knowledge to our young people, so that they may keep our traditions going and stop them from being lost. Climate change is the biggest threat we face in the community. The dirt in our plots is becoming harder and the ground is becoming damaged. We also used to sing songs about maize, about how to preserve its spirit, and now those songs are not sung.

## ***José Gutiérrez Jiménez***

**Manzanillo  
Pinabeto, Rayón,  
Selva Negra,  
Chiapas, México.**

Maize for us is life. From our childhood, we are raised with maize, and as we grow, we come to know the work and the custom of maize. And we cannot lose our ways, because where did our lives come from? Where does our sustenance come from? Without maize, we don't have life, and we don't have a place to get our food from. From maize we draw resources to sustain our everyday lives.

If we do not cherish our maize, the maize will not produce. To sow it, we must sow it with love, with reverence, showing that yes, we love it. If we have that spirit that yes, we cherish the maize, that we want the seeds we sow to rise, our maize, our milpa will rise with courage, and the maize will also love us. Maize loves us when we go to our milpa, and we show affection to our corn, we caress our plants and we observe how beautiful it is growing, this is how we give love to our work and to our milpa.



Jose Gutiérrez showing his corn in the milpa.  
Photographer:  
Elvia Quintanar



Raramuri milpa, which resembles the other milpas throughout Mexico where various distinct plants are cultivated together, including maize, beans, squash and quelites. Photographer: David Lauer

***My corn is as tall as any other, endures everything, and is better than any other variety that I know.***

This is the one that I revere most, I have no better maize, my maize is with me, I feel that the spirit of this maize is with me. I have tried other hybrid seeds, but my native seeds have beaten them all. Yes, the hybrid seeds have produced, but not strong and they don't taste good. They are not as good as our native varieties, we must keep our varieties for our coming generations. I like to eat my tortilla, my pozol, my atole, everything made with my native seeds is tasty.

This native seed that we have, has been here since we were born, and we are conserving it. After the coming generation, our seeds will still be here. We are conserving them. Many people have lost their seeds, but we are continuing to maintain our seeds to give them to the people who have lost their maize. We give seed to those who do not have seed, and now I am in charge of

this seed. This seed has a name, it is called pablo, that is what our parents told us it was called, and it has its meaning, we cannot lose its name: pablo maize and white maize.

If we do not eat maize, if we only eat the contaminated seeds that they sell, we will get sick, and we will die of cancer. If we eat our native maize, it is healthy because it has no chemicals. We take care of our maize, we clean it so that it doesn't get any plague, and we maintain it. I stand with the other campesinos to defend our native corn, and to prevent transgenic seeds from entering our communities. We have spent a lot of ourselves to conserve our native seeds, so to lose them, no. I would advise everyone to preserve and defend ourselves with our native seeds that we have. I am defending them by planting our own seed, and not buying it from elsewhere. "



# *Miguel Angel Lozano*

**Pueblo Kichwa,  
Saraguro, Ecuador.**

A threat to our maize is individualism, which comes from capitalism. People go to the cities and have devalued the countryside. They come back with a capitalist worldview. They no longer eat mote. And people who do not eat mote have colon problems, intestinal cancer, and gastritis. If you eat mote, the mote helps cleanse the intestines. [Mote is corn grains cooked in water with ash or calcium.]

We have to have gatherings, exchanges, seed fairs, and meetings with the people to recover our food sovereignty and to revalue and recover the land, because the earth is tired too.



Miguel and his mother Carmen weeding around the maize, beans, and squash to help the development of the plant.  
Photographer: Karen Swift



Petronila Quispe Quispe measuring the corn stalks.  
Photographer: Asociación ANDES

# *Petronila Quispe Quispe*

**Choquecancha,  
Lares District,  
Peru.**

Maize for us represents *sumaq kausay* (balance of spiritual and material well being) as well as helps to ward away unwanted spirits and keep our children from being scared and from getting sick. Nowadays, the biggest threats to our seeds are chemical products and climate change.





Rowen displaying a variety of her ancestral and heirloom maize seeds. Photographer: Mateo Hinojosa.

## *Rowen White*

**Mohawk, USA. Seed saver and teacher.**

The seeds that I carry, it's a miracle that they're still alive. You know there were some seeds that were whittled down to just a tiny handful that were carried with families because of the displacement, the loss of land, the residential schools, the imposed shame, all of these implications of colonization and acculturation. So they were whittled down to just a few. And our own cultural memory, our own remembrance, our own understanding of how to plant seeds was also, in the same way, whittled down to just little handfuls of memory, of knowledge, of an inkling of what was you know. It's a very potent form of activism and prayer when we put seeds into the ground. Putting our hands in the earth and planting the seeds is the only way that I know how to, in a healthy way, metabolize that historical trauma. The only way that I can work through that. There's a huge movement of food sovereignty and seed sovereignty happening all across Turtle Island, and especially within our Haudenosaunee communities. And so I see that we're kind of getting back towards that balancing point.

The emergence in the last couple of decades of genetically modified seed and corn that has been so denatured that it doesn't really nourish our bodies in the same way. Really it's a reflection of where people are, in general, in the world right now. We have a lot of broken hearted people who are very disconnected from anything that's real culturally and spiritually. Spirit fires are very low in a lot of people. People don't have a very deep spiritual connection to the land. And so, in that way, the seeds become a reflection of how we are as people.

If we have strong, good corn it means our people are good, we're healthy, we have good crops, we've grown those things in good mind.

How are we going to move from the syndrome of genetic modification? How are we going to move through that as a culture? How are we going to get to a place where we render it obsolete? I think it's through people learning how to be reverent planters again, and spreading that message, and getting their hands dirty, and learning how to care for the corn because she is our grandmother, because she is a relative.

***Through learning how to be reverent planters again, and spreading that message, and getting their hands dirty, and learning how to care for the corn because she is our grandmother, because she is a relative.***





# ***Pedro Turuséachi Sevórachi***

## **Rarámuri**

If at some point our seeds disappear, if for some reason we lose our seed, it would almost be like talking about the end of a culture, the end of a group of people. Maybe it wouldn't end immediately, but the culture would be more vulnerable, more likely to collapse instead of staying alive as a family or as a people.

We must respect our corn. For we share the earth and the universe together. We share the same territory, the same waters, the same forests, the same breath, and the same spirit. We have an obligation to educate our children with the principles of life and teach respect for the nature that

surrounds us and allows us to live well. We grow our maize in many colors, shapes and sizes, and this we eat with different flavors, to nourish our blood, our body, our soul and our spirit.

If at some point our seeds disappear, if for some reason we lose our seed, it would almost be like talking about the end of a culture, the end of a group of people. Maybe it wouldn't end immediately, but the culture would be more vulnerable, more likely to collapse instead of staying alive as a family or as a people.

For life and for everything, que viva el maíz!

Pueblo Norogachi, Chihuahua, in the Sierra Tarahumara of México. This elder is participating in identifying the best ears of corn for the entering agricultural cycle. Photographer: David Lauer

Voices of Maíz is an ongoing collaborative, participatory project among various organizations and people coming together to amplify the voices of communities internationally, to recuperate knowledge and to re-engage the sacred in corn, and to show the essential role of Indigenous cultures in the conservation and regeneration of maize.

This storytelling collaboration is a response to the threats corn cultures are facing through the globally imbalanced relationship to maize and the deterioration of its genetic base directly tied to its commoditization. The voices of local stewards who have maintained agrobiodiversity as an extraordinarily rich and important part of their cultural fabric, are who we must listen to, to guide the future of maize.

To further this work, to get involved, to show the exhibit, to host a community event, to share stories, please contact us through:

[voicesofmaiz.org](http://voicesofmaiz.org)



In Quechua communities in Peru there is a profound relationship between coca leaves and maize. Photographer: Asociación ANDES