

IU Department of Anthropology Presents:

“Food as resistance: A diachronic study of food sovereignty as political tactic”



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As the Aztec Empire spread across Late Postclassic Central Mexico (AD 1325-1519), the state of Tlaxcala stood as a blemish of resistance to imperial expansion. Despite being surrounded by imperial allies and tributaries, Tlaxcala's capacity to remain independent is poorly understood, and largely unexplored. In this talk, I will demonstrate how community foodways and shared food knowledge was central to Tlaxcala's continued autonomy. Melding bioarchaeological dietary isotope analyses and oral history interviews, I establish the role of foodways as a site of political power, and a central strategy in Tlaxcala's capacity to remain sovereign. Through a multi-scalar biocultural perspective, I illustrate the ways in which food becomes a site of community resistance and resilience from the ancient past to the present. I approach the bioarchaeology of Tlaxcala as a living history, one that was intentionally removed from modern Aztec-centric Mexican-nationalist narratives of the past. As enemy of the Aztecs, Tlaxcala allied with the Spanish in AD 1519, leading to a unique colonial history shaped by an indigenous "gobierno de indios". Elsewhere in Mesoamerica, the traumatic and lasting impacts of Spanish colonialism influence the social dynamics of the present, most notably in the continued exploitation and dispossession of indigenous communities. Yet in Tlaxcala, food was and is a space used to resist external threats and develop internal history-making narratives. Through a decolonial approach, my work brings archaeology into dialogue with contemporary ancestral communities, aligning with and supporting grassroots systems dedicated to food education and food sovereignty. Through this approach, I use community-driven research to reshape bioarchaeology as a tool of contemporary politics, while also centering theory within real-world interactions.