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Expressions of Maya Identity and Culture in Los Angeles: Challenges and Success among Maya Youth

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Maya believe that when their culture is under attack, the younger generation will pass on the torch and reconstruct Maya culture for following generations. The revitalization of Maya culture responds to this faith and the hope for a better future.
- Victor Montejo (2005)

The sisters and brothers who, due to adverse circumstances, have lost part or almost all of their cultural identity but who are enthusiastically working to recover their culture and their identity are also Maya.
- Raxche' (1996)

Maya resistance has always existed. Even Under Christian domination, the Maya found the capacity to express and safeguard their culture.
- Irma Otzoy (1996)

Introduction

The previous three decades witnessed the migration of thousands of Guatemalan-Maya due to political violence and poverty which led to the establishment of various diasporic communities throughout the United States. A frequent destination for the Maya is Los Angeles, California, where they are confronted with the pressures to adapt within an environment that is predominately Latino/Hispanic. In addition, Maya identity expressed through the use of *traje* (Maya clothing), language, literature and spirituality is challenged by American culture such as western style of dress and the practice of English which discriminates against these customs. These conditions are more severe for the

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to the people who gave their time to share their experiences and insights with me for this research. Without them, this paper would have been impossible. In addition, I wish to thank my family, particularly my parents, as well as Alicia Estrada, the members of Contacto Ancestral, Arturo Arias, Martha Menchaca, Charles R. Hale, and Erik Hernandez for their support and belief in me. Lastly, I am forever grateful to my abuelita, Clara Coyoy Ixcot, an eighty-eight year old K'iche' woman who has worked all her life for her family and who has served as my link to my own Maya past and identity.

children of Maya who were born and raised, or raised, in the U.S., as they face the difficulties in preserving their heritage as a result of institutions such as public education which socializes them into U.S. culture and history.

This paper argues that while some children of Maya have been able to preserve and express their identity through various channels such as music and language, others are unaware, ashamed or apathetic of their indigenous roots and history. In order to understand this process, Maya migration and settlement in Los Angeles is examined to determine the factors such as discrimination and a strong anti-immigrant environment which influence some Maya to conserve or relinquish their identity and incorporate into the Latino community. Second, the different methods in which children of Maya identify will be explored. Finally, this paper will analyze the various methods and spaces in which Maya youth express their culture with a focus on the marimba as a means of preserving their identity.

Research for this study included fourteen in-depth interviews with the children of Maya, Maya parents and community members.² In all, I was able to interview six children of Maya; two Maya parents; one non-Maya community member and five Maya community members. These interviews were supplemented with an equal amount of informal conversations that also included these segments of the Maya community in Los Angeles. Questions directed at the children of Maya focused on the manner in which they self-identify; the methods in which they express their identity; their awareness of

² The fourteen formal interviews were conducted between March 2009 and August 2009 in Los Angeles. All interviews were conducted in Spanish or English and lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. The majority of interviews were scheduled with a predetermined location such as schools, churches and at participants businesses. All names of the participants used in this paper are pseudonyms. Fieldwork also included observation and participation of Maya programs and celebrations such as the annual fiesta of Santa Eulalia in February 2009.

Maya culture; and the cultural activities and programs in which they participate in Los Angeles. This included children of Maya who did not self-identify as Maya in order to determine the factors that influence them to relinquish their indigenous identity. Furthermore, Maya parents interviewed provided insight into their views of Maya culture in Los Angeles; reception and settlement in a predominately Latino environment; challenges facing the youth in preserving indigenous identity; and the process in which they raise their children. For instance, some parents might encourage their children to learn a Maya language whereas other parents might believe that a Mayan language is no longer useful in Los Angeles where English and Spanish are the dominant languages. Community members, both Maya and non-Maya, were asked similar questions to provide further data. Lastly, my own personal experience as a second-generation Guatemalan, grandson of K'iche's and upbringing in Los Angeles has also contributed to this study and fieldwork.

Maya Migration to Los Angeles

The Maya in Guatemala have historically been discriminated against by the government which views them as a roadblock to progress, economic growth and modernization. Although the Maya are the majority in Guatemala, political and economic power has remained with ladinos (non-Indian) who have attempted to assimilate the indigenous population into ladino society or what they term the “national culture.”³ Despite these efforts, Maya populations have maintained their identity through the use of *traje*, language, music and spirituality. Yet, continuous racism and migration

³ For more on race relations between Mayas and ladinos in Guatemala, see: Richard N. Adams and Santiago Bastos, *Las Relaciones Étnicas en Guatemala, 1944-2000*, (Guatemala: Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica, 2003); Charles R. Hale, *Mas que un Indio: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala*, (New Mexico: School of American Research, 2006).

to urban centers with a large ladino presence has caused some Maya to relinquish their culture and ethnic identity. These experiences are also visible in Los Angeles where Maya immigrants are forced to adapt into an anti-immigrant atmosphere where Latinos/Hispanics are the majority population.

Maya migration and settlement in Los Angeles since the 1970s can be divided into three distinct stages: pioneer, war refugee and youth-driven migration (Popkin 680).⁴ The pioneers were the Maya who began arriving to the United States in the 1970s after learning about employment opportunities while visiting and working in Mexico or the Guatemalan capital (Chinchilla and Hamilton 45; Popkin 680). Many of these pioneers included groups such as the Q'anjob'ales from the department of Huehuetenango who learned of job opportunities in Los Angeles from their Mexican neighbors (Peñalosa 1984, 206). With the intensification of the civil war in the 1980s, thousands of Mayas were forced into exile where many found refuge with their relatives and community members in Los Angeles. War refugees were also accompanied by impoverished Maya such as those who sought alternatives to seasonal migration to the Pacific coast where they picked coffee and cotton under harsh and abusive working conditions (Ibid). Whereas earlier migration was done as families in regions heavily impacted by the war, throughout the late-1980s and up to the present, migration began to be dominated by young single men seeking economic opportunities (Burns 12).⁵ As a result, there is a gender imbalance in Los Angeles where Maya "men outnumber women approximately three to one" (Wellmeier 102).

⁴ While Popkin uses these three stages as a model for the Q'anjob'al region of Huehuetenango, I believe it is also useful in describing Maya migration to Los Angeles.

⁵ The continuous migration of young people from Guatemala became evident in 2006, when 1,006 children from the United States and 3,171 from Mexico were deported back to Guatemala (Palencia 2).

Upon arrival, many Maya which include various groups such as the Q'anjob'ales, K'iche', Chujes and Kachiqueles settled around the Downtown area in the districts of Pico-Union and Westlake as well as in Hollywood, the San Fernando Valley and South-Central. Since many Guatemalan migrants are undocumented it is difficult to determine how many live in the United States. In December 2009, the *Prensa Libre* reported that there were an estimated 1.2 million Guatemalans living in the United States (Méndez). Popkin estimates that there are 118,069 Guatemalans residing in Los Angeles in which 10,000 are Maya (Popkin 694-95). The motivation for migration to Los Angeles has varied since the 1970s in which the Maya are the minority within the Guatemalan community.

Reception in the United States is characterized by a very hostile anti-immigrant environment creating an atmosphere of fear of deportation that presents difficulties for undocumented groups to actively practice their culture in public spaces. Anti-immigrant animosity in California was evident with the passing of Proposition 187 in 1994 which sought to prevent undocumented immigrants from accessing many social services (Harman 159).⁶ More importantly, between 2005 and 2009, 108,154 Guatemalans were deported from the United States, some who arrived as minors or have U.S.-born children or spouses (Bonillo).⁷ As a result, Maya immigrants are forced to blend in within the Latino community in order to avoid raising attention and being identified as an immigrant from local authorities. For instance, many Maya women are unable to wear their *traje* in public out of fear of deportation. Furthermore, continuous discrimination and

⁶ More recent anti-immigrant legislation on the national level includes the failed HR 4437 in 2006 that sought to strengthen enforcement of immigration laws and enhance border security.

⁷ Deportations have increased within this time period from 11,512 in 2005; 18,305 in 2006; 23,062 in 2007; 28,051 in 2008; and 27,222 in 2009. Fifty-seven percent of those deported were between the ages of 18 and 30. Moreover, fifty-five percent left family in the United States.

marginalization within the Guatemalan community against indigenous people has caused some to assimilate into the Latino population. For example, Roberto, a K'iche'-Maya immigrant, states that many indigenous people are chastised for mispronouncing Spanish words (which is sometimes their second-language) and are often called “*indios*” or “*inditos*,” both derogatory terms. Roberto claims that these circumstances led two of his younger immigrant brothers to no longer identify as Maya and assimilate into the Latino population. On the other hand, these conditions have also led to the adoption of strategies to promote Maya identity evident within religious institutions.

Due to the large Latino population in Los Angeles, the Catholic Church has made little effort to incorporate Maya culture into their parishes and instead have categorized them as Hispanic to avoid conflict (Wellmeier 107).⁸ Consequently, the Maya in Los Angeles began establishing their own religious-cultural organizations. For instance, the Q'anjob'ales from Santa Eulalia created FEMAQ' in the late-1980s in order to incorporate Maya spirituality or *costumbre* within the Catholic Church as well as a vehicle to preserve their ethnic identity (Wellmeier 100).⁹ Organizing around the Catholic Church has also given rise to a national Maya organization, Pastoral Maya who gained official recognition from the Office of Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the late-1990s. Since then, the organization has held meetings at a national level to discuss “important aspects of Maya culture and spirituality, [and] the needs of the communities” (LeBaron 125). As of 2005,

⁸ In the early 1980s, Peñalosa similarly noted: “some young people who attended a K'anjobal church group in Guatemalan are now attending Spanish language churches here, wanting to identify with the Latino community. Here we see a process similar to what happens in Guatemala as Indians become Latinos through the assimilation process, except that here it is an assimilation to the local Latino culture of Los Angeles” (Peñalosa 1984, 220)

⁹ Wellmeier further details the relationship of the Catholic Church and the Maya community as well as providing background information on FEMAQ'.

approximately forty Maya communities are associated with Pastoral Maya and come from states such as Arizona, Georgia, Tennessee, Indiana, Alabama, Colorado, Oregon, South Carolina, Florida and California. During workshops of the third national conference in 2004, among problems identified as “threats” to the Maya communities across the United States included, discrimination, racism, deportation, insults and loss of culture. This was followed by discussions and recommendations to best resolve these issues (Ibid 125-42). Thus, Pastoral Maya has provided space for the Maya to build networks of support across the country to confront many of the same problems shared as an ethnic group. Reception and the manner in which immigrants adapt into Los Angeles will strongly influence their children and the method in which they self-identify and assimilate into American society (Portes and Rumbaut).

Children of Maya

Children of immigrants of all backgrounds are a growing population in the United States who face the difficulties in preserving their parental language, culture, identity and transnational ties to the home country.¹⁰ These challenges can be attributed to the educational system, intergenerational conflicts, media, anti-immigrant environment and poverty. Students from Latin American backgrounds within the educational system in Los Angeles are often socialized into U.S. culture and history wherein attempts to appeal to the Latino community is based on a curriculum that emphasizes Mexican culture and celebrations such as *Cinco de Mayo*. Peñalosa observes that Maya children, particularly those “bused long distances to suburban schools,” are treated as Hispanics by school

¹⁰ Portes and Rumbaut report that by 1999 first and second generations of immigrants and their children totaled fifty-five million persons or one out of five Americans. In Los Angeles County, immigrants and their children constituted sixty-two percent of the area’s 9.5 million residents (xviii, 21).

personnel (Peñalosa 1986, 234). Moreover, intergenerational conflict is exacerbated with language since many immigrant children learn to speak English at school and Spanish on the streets in which preference is given to the former (Menjívar 544; Portes and Rumbaut 113-46). In addition, Harman notes that Maya elders and grandparents are absent or hold minimal responsibility in children's education in Los Angeles which differs from their traditional role in Guatemala where they are a crucial element in transmitting culture to the youth (Harman 162).¹¹ Los Angeles Mayas have commented that the lack of elders contributes to children's lack of respect for their elders and indigenous principles, which they believe is a problem. As an outcome to these circumstances, the Maya have adopted strategies to preserve their heritage among their children.

According to Jose, a Q'anjoba'l father of four, the Maya community has designed cultural activities for their children in order to teach Maya ethics, language and music, but the issue of financing hampers their efforts. Thus, when parents are eager to transmit their traditions to their children, financial constraints may diminish their endeavors, especially for the undocumented and those in the lower-class.¹² But even when monetary funds are available some children of Maya may protest or refuse to participate in revitalization programs due to the factors listed above. Under these conditions, children of Maya have self-identified into four general categories in which indigenous identity is either retained or diminished (see Table 1). Below is a brief discussion on the factors that contribute to the construction of identity among the youth.

¹¹ Portes and Rumbaut reported that only 13 percent of immigrant families in their study had a grandparent living with them (73).

¹² Financial and legal constraints may prevent activities or exposure to Guatemalan/Maya culture such as trips to Guatemala.

Table 1: Self-Identification among Children of Maya

Identify as Maya and Reject Latino/Hispanic Identity	Dual Identity as Maya and Latino/Hispanic
Recognize an indigenous past but do not fully identify; assimilate into Latino/Hispanic population	Unaware or apathetic of an indigenous past and assimilate into Latino/Hispanic population

The first group consists of children of Maya who are unaware or apathetic of their indigenous heritage since many of their parents may themselves be ashamed, no longer identify as Maya or see any value in teaching their children an indigenous culture. Underlying discrimination within the Guatemalan community contributes to Maya parent's unwillingness or negligence in transmitting language and culture to their children as demonstrated with the example of Roberto's brothers. Consequently, Maya identity is often diminished before many children are even born. In addition, life in Los Angeles for many Guatemalan immigrants and their children is characterized by the daily efforts to survive in violent neighborhoods, characterized by drugs, gangs and poverty (Loucky 221; Harman 158). Moreover, American values of individualism have undermined a sense of community and threatened family unity (Loucky 221). As a result, many youth are unaware or apathetic of their indigenous past since they are never exposed to or place high value on Maya culture into their lives within inner-city neighborhoods (Menjívar 538).

Although, some Maya children may recognize an indigenous past, some may not fully identify as Maya since they are unfamiliar with the culture or are ashamed. Alejandro, a twenty-year old son of Q'anjoba'les from San Pedro Soloma, Huehuetenango, is characteristic of this second group. Alejandro speaks "broken Spanish" with his parents and only English with his siblings. Moreover, most of his friends are of Mexican descent and knows little about Maya culture since his parents

rarely exposed him to their traditions or discussed life in Guatemala. Though Alejandro recognizes his parent's indigenous background, he identifies as Latino. Menjívar notes that many Guatemalan children are sometimes ashamed of their parents' language or background since non-European immigrants and non-English speakers are often associated with low social status and poverty (Menjívar 544). According to Miguel, a Q'anjoba'l-Maya teacher and active community member, many children of Maya are ashamed of their parents indigenous background and at times deny their roots among their Latino peers. Thus, these two groups have assimilated into the Latino community.¹³

The third and fourth groups consist of children who either retain their Maya identity and reject a Latino/Hispanic label; or have adopted a dual identity in which they incorporate themselves into both the Maya and Latino communities. Children who identify as only Maya and reject a Latino/Hispanic identity, tend to be the children of active community members. Maria, Jose's U.S.-born sixteen-year old daughter, declares that she is a Maya and not Latino/Hispanic. Other youth who recognize themselves as both Maya and Latino tend to be from similar backgrounds and often participate in Maya programs and celebrations. Although many recognize their indigenous background, they also believe that they are a part of the Latino/Hispanic community since they share many personal and cultural similarities in music and food as well as relating on various political and social issues such as immigration, discrimination and survival within rough neighborhoods. Expression of Maya identity and culture has been reconstructed within the United States in many forms and is still developing among the children of Maya in Los Angeles.

¹³ It is important to note that this does not mean that these groups are incapable of identifying as Maya in the future.

Expressions of Maya Identity and Culture

The expression of Maya identity and culture has manifested through various channels such as dress, spirituality, fiestas and language. The Maya in Los Angeles have designed and adopted revitalization projects similar to those in Guatemala in order to encourage indigenous language and traditions within youth.¹⁴ Most recently, members of the Maya community sponsored a Q'anjob'al language course in 2008 in which twenty-five Maya students participated. This was followed by another course that allowed students to learn either K'iche', Q'anjob'al or Maya spirituality in the summer of 2009. Sonia, a six-teen year old K'iche', immigrated to the U.S. at the age of ten to reunite with her parents and was a participant of the 2009 summer course. She views language as a source of Maya identity, especially since she no longer wears her *traje* in the United States as she did when she lived with her grandmother in Xela.¹⁵ Furthermore, Sonia was often accompanied by her younger ten year old cousin who was also interested in learning K'iche' in order to speak the maternal language of his parents. Similarly another girl was proud to say she spoke Q'anjob'al to her grandmother in Guatemala over the phone. Angela, a K'iche' mother, accompanied her twelve year-old daughter to a couple of classes. She claims that she did not inculcate Maya culture and language to her daughter but was satisfied by the fact that Angela wanted to learn K'iche' and attend these classes after she heard about them in her school. Here we can clearly see a demand by children who want to learn their maternal and ancestral language as well as a sense of pride towards their roots. Revitalization programs such as language courses have

¹⁴ For more on the Maya movement and revitalization programs, see R. McKenna Brown and Edward F. Fischer, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin: U of Texas, 1996); Victor Montejo, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance*, (Austin: U of Texas, 2005).

¹⁵ Xela (also known as Quetzaltenango) is the capital of the department of Quetzaltenango in Guatemala.

provided children of Maya the space and opportunity to learn, (re)discover and express their identity which is repressed in Los Angeles.

Annual celebrations of patron saints of various Maya communities have been held in Los Angeles since the early 1980s. One of the earliest Maya communities to celebrate fiestas in Los Angeles are the Q'anjob'ales from San Miguel Acatan. Peñalosa, who attended this fiesta on September 29, 1984, observed:

with as many as 200-300 people in attendance...there was a mass, voting for candidates for queen followed by an elaborate crowning ceremony and dancing to a marimba band, as well as the consumption of typical Guatemalan foods. The proceedings were entirely in Spanish, except for a few words uttered in K'anjobal by an Anglo priest, and a K'anjobal song (Peñalosa 1984, 211)

Hence, it is in fiestas as well as other religious celebrations where women are able to wear their *trajes* and traditional Maya and Guatemalan food such as tamales and atole is served. Today, many of these fiestas have maintained many of these practices and ceremonies such as the presence of marimba, dancing and the crowning of *princessas*. But these celebrations have changed in a few areas. For example, the fiesta for the patron saint of Santa Eulalia is held in February where Q'anjob'ales participate in cultural activities that has increasingly involved their children. In 2009 this included speeches of *princessas* representing the various Maya diasporic communities in Los Angeles as well as the first ever *princesa* Maya (represented by a K'iche').¹⁶ All were second-generation women who spoke a Maya language and Spanish to address and encourage the youth in attendance to be proud of their indigenous roots. Another activity at the fiesta included the re-enactment of a scene in the marketplace in the western highlands of Guatemala where children and adults sold and bought products such as pottery and *trajes*.

¹⁶ *Princessas* are prevalent in Central America and tend to be the female cultural representatives of their respective communities. They have come to play an increasing role in many Central American diasporic communities in the United States.

Since the 1980s, fiestas have increasingly incorporated Mayas born and raised, or raised in the United States, some who may have never visited or remember Guatemala. Fiestas allow children to get a sense of life in Guatemala and simultaneously promote Maya identity and spirituality as it provides a space for children to express their culture along with their parents and as a community.

Among one of the most important cultural tools of the Maya in Guatemala and Los Angeles is the marimba which provides a channel for children to express their identity and culture through music. According to Rodriguez and Fortier, cultural memory contributes to the formation of collective ethnic identity among people which is transmitted from generation to generation through images, symbols, oral communication and ceremonies (Rodriguez and Fortier 14). Rodriguez and Fortier examine the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a tool for the Nahua to deal with the agony of colonization and oppression by the Spanish and the restoration of their dignity that continues today and passes on “values of self-worth and appreciation of one’s own language, culture and tradition” (32). In addition, they claim that the image of Guadalupe assist Mexican Americans in honoring and preserving their religious-cultural traditions in the United States (30). Similarly, Wellmeier claims that the marimba for the Maya “embodies the soul of their culture” and is considered “semisacred” (Wellmeier 109). The marimba usually requires seven musicians to play in unison and thus demonstrates the cooperative character of Maya communities. During the civil war in the 1980s, some Q’anjob’ales carried their marimbas in their flight to Mexican refugee camps where they utilized it as a means to preserve their culture and confront the anguish of exile (Montejo 113, 160). The Q’anjob’ales in Indiantown, Florida and Los Angeles have also used the marimba as

a means to express their collective Mayan identity (Burns 144; Wellmeier 110).

Recently, the Q'anjob'ales organized a marimba band in the early 2000s consisted of U.S.-born Maya in order to promote their culture.

The marimba group began as an effort to inculcate Maya identity and community among U.S.-born Maya. The roots of the band started in 1999 when Victor, a Q'anjob'al from Santa Eulalia and marimbista, along with the support of FEMAQ' organized and notified parents about their plans to form a marimba band.¹⁷ This first effort suffered a few setbacks due to various factors such as the lack of space for practice. After a couple of years in hiatus, Victor again attempted to create a group in 2001 which was successful after he was able to secure a garage space for practice along with the commitment of parents and children. Although the marimba group is open to all Maya and Guatemalans, all its members are children of Q'anjob'ales. Currently, there are approximately fifteen players whose age ranges from seven to eighteen.¹⁸ The group has performed throughout California and in other states such as Nebraska and Arizona.

Maria and her thirteen-year old sister Nancy have been playing the marimba since 2001 and feel joy in expressing their Maya heritage through music. Since they are the only girls participating in this traditional male activity, both claim that their male cousins have made fun of them for playing marimba.¹⁹ Nancy recalls being teased by one of her cousins when he told her "your tamales will never come out right because you're playing marimba." The importance of the marimba in transmitting a sense of Maya identity,

¹⁷ Victor himself has played in a marimba band to raise funds for FEMAQ' and another Q'anjob'al organization, IXIM, in the 1990s. According to him, the marimba is the symbol of the community wherein every key has a different meaning and role which makes part of the whole.

¹⁸ There were other players in the band, but some left for different reasons.

¹⁹ Although, the Q'anjob'ales do not discriminate on the basis of gender, Wellmeier notes that in general Maya women did not play the marimba and none were present in her 1998 study in Los Angeles (111). Thus, Nancy and Cindy are among the first females in Los Angeles to play the marimba.

history and cultural memory was demonstrated by Nancy who claimed that playing the marimba provided her with a “good feeling” and pride since it was the same instrument that her elders played before her. The marimba in Los Angeles has served to express Maya identity as well as demonstrate the reconstruction of Maya culture.

Conclusion

The Maya in Los Angeles are forced to deal with marginalization on two fronts: anti-immigrant sentiments from American society; and discrimination within the Guatemalan and Latino communities. These conditions have held serious impacts and implications on the ethnic identity formation of the children of Maya in which indigenous identity is either diminished or preserved and expressed through various channels such as music and language. Future research will need to further investigate the impact of class and U.S. legal status within the conservation of indigenous culture among youth. In addition, more interviews need to be conducted with the children of Maya in order to understand the other methods in which they identify and express themselves as well as reinforce the findings discussed here.

This paper has demonstrated that some children of Maya are aware, preserving reproducing and reconstructing their Maya culture and identity in Los Angeles while many others have ended their indigenous legacy by assimilating into Latino communities. In conclusion, within the last 500 years, the Maya have suffered colonization, migration, displacement, genocide, exclusion, discrimination and racism. Yet, Maya identity and culture has survived and has been continuously transforming across time and space; this process is still present, evident with its existence and reconstruction among Maya youth in Los Angeles.

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