

Indigenous Epistemology: Centering the Experiences of Maya Youth in Los Angeles

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This paper will discuss the development of the principal theory I have used in my thesis research. Before developing this theory I knew that any theory I developed to analyze or understand the experiences of Maya youth in Los Angeles had to make sense to my own personal experience since I am Maya K'iche', born in Guatemala, but raised in Los Angeles. In this same vein it makes sense for me to explain to all of you some of my own identity formation. I can begin by saying that had you asked in high school how I identified, I would have said something like "I don't know, Guatemalan I guess." It was only after I attended a workshop entitled "Guatemala Libre" at a youth conference put on by M.E.Ch.A. that I understood that I was not just Guatemalan, I was Maya and the racism and marginalization my family experienced had everything to do with my childhood experiences of being raised without my parents and on many different levels my struggle to connect with the people around me.

As I continued onto my undergraduate education I began to have deeper conversations with my aunt who is the matriarch within my family. She shared with me her experiences with poverty, her own isolation, and the shame she felt at being Maya. It was through my discussions with her and my own educational endeavors that I began to understand myself as Maya K'iche. I can now say that I am Maya K'iche by memory, tradition, and heritage.

While discussing my own personal context was crucial for my thesis, I was also introduced to other indigenous theorists who have developed theories through which to understand and write about their own communities. Manulani Aluli Meyer (2008) in an article entitled "Indigenous and Authentic: Toward a Hawaiian Epistemology," proposes a theory of triangulation to understand our identities. Triangulation, a method often used in sciences like

astronomy, examines two known positions or locations to determine the location of a third previously unknown point. Meyer focuses on the three points of body, mind, and spirit. She argues that for her as a Hawaiian, her mind, her intelligence, her epistemology is directly linked to the physical experiences of her body in connection to the land and the spirituality of her people. Part of what was particularly impressive in her work was that she argues that if we look into our own specificities (as individuals and as a people) we can find the universalities that allow us to understand each other.

After reading and re-reading Meyer's article I began to think about this theory of triangulation. While her theory rang very true to my own experiences, I knew that for me the articulation of Maya youth identity had to take into account the history and imprint left on my community after Spanish colonization and the Civil War. These two aspects in history have shaped our experiences as Maya people in Guatemala as well as our experiences as a diaspora.

Spanish colonization has been influential because it developed the ideological and systematic processes that have continued to be used by the nation state of Guatemala to marginalize and attempt to exterminate Maya people. At the time of colonization, the stereotypes of savage and barbaric were used to justify the intense cruelty enacted by the Spanish against indigenous people across the Americas (Blockler & Herbert, 2002). For the Maya, these acts included the spread of diseases, the destruction of books, and the violent imposition of Christianity. All these acts essentially attempted to destroy this community not only physically, but the burning of books and prohibition of spiritual practices also attempted to destroy the spiritual and cosmological aspects of being Maya. In addition, the implementation of a caste system ensured that Maya people were relegated in all aspects to the margins of society. The stereotypes of Maya people as drunks, exotic, savages, ignorant, and content laborers then served

to justify the racism experienced at all levels of the state by Maya people, whether it be within academia, on fincas or plantations, in government, etc.

These same ideologies then served as the basis for the genocide experienced during the Civil War from 1960-1996. This 36-year civil war resulted in the death of over 200,000 people, 83% of these deaths were Maya people, and 93% of the violence was enacted by the military regimes (REMHI, 1999). It is also due to this intense repression that beginning in the 1980's, and increasing in the 1990's, there has been a large exodus of Maya people from Guatemala to the United States. In *Guatemalan Transnationalism in Los Angeles*, Quiquívix (2006) states, "According to the U.S. 2000 census, the total Guatemalan population grew from 268,779 in 1990 to 372,487 in 2000 an increase of almost 39%...The Pew Hispanic Center estimates the 2000 figure to be closer to 520,233" (p.4). As the diasporic Guatemalan community continues to grow, it becomes more complex and layered. Since then, Los Angeles has become the largest population outside of Guatemala and Mexico to have the largest Maya population. In order to even begin to understand Maya youth in Los Angeles we must first understand that the history of colonization that excluded their ancestors continues to shape their experiences since it is because of this exclusion that their parents or grandparents decided to migrate to the United States. It is because of this history, that my triangulation method uses colonization as the first known location from which to understand the experiences of Maya youth in Los Angeles.

In addition to the point of colonization, my second known location is pre-colonization. This point has to do with looking at the traditional customs and ways of practicing or maintaining Maya identity. For this I have focused on the importance of traditional clothing, traditional food, land and photographs to help me better examine how these youth understand their roots as Maya people with a specific emphasis on how that meaning has been created. This

section is especially important because various authors have discussed that the identity of the colonizer is founded on the relationship to the colonized, it cannot exist if that unequal relationship does not exist. What I argue, however, is that for indigenous people and for Maya people, our link to our ancestors provides us with an identity that existed before colonization and therefore has and can continue to exist even without that unequal relationship. Meaning, that we have been Maya since before Ladinos or gringos existed.

Part of what may be becoming clear to all of you is that these points rather than existing neatly in their own boxes are deeply inter-related. This brings me to an essential point that Meyer articulates, which is that all these points exist at once. For Maya youth in Los Angeles they can neither escape that they are Maya nor that they exist in a colonial situation. This understanding is key because as we articulate and define our third point we must understand that it too has always existed. Our continued existence as Maya people demonstrates that we have always sought out decolonial spaces that allowed us to connect to our ancestors even within colonial and repressive situations.

Conclusions

The advantage of this triangulation method is that the two points really exist to define a third seemingly unknown point. In this case, the colonial and pre-colonial can help us shape a de-colonial space. What makes the de-colonial different from say the *post* colonial is that it does not assume that colonialism is a thing of the past that we have all overcome. The de-colonial acknowledges that both the colonial and pre-colonial continue to exist simultaneously. In addition the fact that youth continue to struggle to remain connected to our traditional ways even in repressive colonial situations demonstrates the need for a decolonial space that is informed by our precolonial and colonial histories.

For youth in Los Angeles one of the best examples of this is the decolonial space that exists in the usage of the *traje*. Irma Oztzy in “Maya Clothing and Identity” analyzes the use of Maya clothing as one cultural element that embodies the processes of historical struggle, cultural knowledge, and political resistance. Oztzy problematizes the definition of what is considered Maya by writing, “the specific historical origin of an element does not determine whether or not the element is Maya. To the contrary, the incorporation of new symbols into the Maya meaning system permits textiles to serve as a dynamic expression of the Maya experience” (p. 144). Oztzy makes this argument in specific reference to the incorporation of new symbols or images in the *po't* (*huipil*). However, this same concept can and should be applied to Maya youth who were either born or raised primarily in Los Angeles. The fact that they were not born or do not know the land of their ancestors should not automatically exclude them from participation in Maya community. However, we must acknowledge that these youth may conceptualize a Maya identity differently from Maya people within Guatemala and that that process is a valuable part of our community. For example, the wearing of the *traje* is an everyday experience for many Maya women in Guatemala. Many Maya women feel that it is shameful to not wear your *traje*, there is a sense of loss without it. However, within the U.S., many Maya young women do not engage in this act in an everyday way. Many may still use or wear their *trajes* but it is done so on special occasions or in unconventional ways. One young woman shared that she uses her *corte* as a blanket to sleep with. While this may go against the sense of propriety for some, we must seek to understand these new experiences within the context of a desire to connect with their ancestors as well as their existence in a country that does not truly understand or acknowledge their presence. From this foundation we can then seek to engage with each other as a community that can acknowledge their experiences as different but meaningful and important.

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