

# EXPRESSIONS OF MAYA IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN LOS ANGELES: Challenges and Success among Maya Youth

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 children of Maya who were either raised or born and raised in the U.S., as they face the difficulties in preserving their heritage posed by institutions such as public education that socialize 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 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 that 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 was conducted through informal conversations with members of the Maya community as well as fourteen formal interviews that included children of Maya, Maya parents, and community members in Los Angeles. Moreover, the researcher's personal experience as a second-generation Guatemalan raised in Los Angeles also has contributed to this study and fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>



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## Maya Migration to Los Angeles

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 1995:159).<sup>3</sup> More important, between 2005 and 2009, 108,154 Guatemalans were deported from the United States, some who had arrived as minors or having U.S.-born children or spouses (Bonillo 2009).<sup>4</sup> As a result, Maya immigrants are forced to blend in with the Latino community in order to avoid attracting attention and being identified as immigrants by local authorities. For instance, many Maya women are unable to wear their *traje* in public out of fear of deportation. Furthermore, continuous discrimination and 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 to assimilate into the Latino population. On the other hand, these conditions also have led to the adoption of strategies to promote Maya identity that are evident within religious institutions.

## Children of Maya

Children of immigrants of all backgrounds are a growing population in the United States who face difficulties in preserving their parental language, culture, identity, and transnational ties to the home country.<sup>5</sup> 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, with attempts to appeal to the Latino community being 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 personnel (1986: 234). Moreover, intergenerational conflict is exacerbated with language since many immigrant children learn to speak English at school and Spanish on the streets, while preference is given to the former (Menjívar 2002: 544; Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 113–146). In addition, 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 1995: 162).<sup>6</sup> Los Angeles Maya 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 financial issues hamper 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.<sup>7</sup> 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. Below is a brief discussion of the factors that contribute to the construction of identity among the youth.

The first group consists of children of Maya who are unaware or apathetic of their indigenous heritage since some parents may themselves be ashamed or 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 parents' unwillingness or negligence in transmitting language and culture to their children as demonstrated by 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 a struggle to survive in violent neighborhoods characterized by drugs, gangs, and poverty (Loucky 2001: 221; Harman 1995: 158). Moreover, American values of individualism have undermined a sense of community and threatened family unity (Loucky *ibid.*). 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 in their lives within inner-city neighborhoods (Menjívar 2002: 538).

Although some Maya children may acknowledge 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 he knows little about Maya culture since his parents rarely exposed him to their traditions or discussed life in Guatemala. Although Alejandro recognizes his parents' indigenous background, he identifies as Latino. Menjívar notes that many Guatemalan children are at times ashamed of their parents' language or background since non-European immigrants and non-English speakers are often associated with low social status and poverty (2002: 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.

### 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 among youth.<sup>9</sup> 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 in summer 2009 that allowed students to learn K'iche', Q'anjob'al, or Maya spirituality. Sonia, a sixteen-year-old K'iche', immigrated to the U.S. at the age of ten to reunite with her parents and was a participant in the summer 2009 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.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Sonia was often accompanied by her younger ten-year-old cousin who also was 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 in 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 in their roots. Revitalization programs such as language courses have provided children of Maya the space and opportunity to learn, recover, 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 is 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 that 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 practices and ceremonies such as the playing 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, when Q'anjob'ales participate in cultural activities that increasingly have 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 *princessa* Maya (represented by a K'iche').<sup>11</sup> 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 reenactment 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*. Since the 1980s, fiestas increasingly have incorporated Mayas raised or born and raised in the United States, some who may never have visited or remember Guatemala. Fiestas allow children to get a sense of life in Guatemala and simultaneously promote Maya identity and spirituality, as they provide 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 Fortier and Rodriguez, 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 (2007: 14). Fortier and Rodriguez 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 assists 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" (1998: 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 on their flight to Mexican refugee camps, where they utilized it as a means to preserve their culture and confront the anguish of exile (Montejo 1999: 113, 160). The Q'anjob'ales in Indiantown, Florida, and Los Angeles also have used the marimba as a means to express their collective Mayan identity (Burns 1999:144; Wellmeier 1998:110). In the early 2000s, the Q'anjob'ales organized a marimba band that consisted of U.S.-born Maya in order to promote their culture. Currently, there are approximately fifteen players whose ages range from seven to eighteen. 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 traditionally male activity, both claim that their male cousins have made fun of them for playing marimba.<sup>12</sup> 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, 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 caused serious impacts on and implications for the ethnic identity formation of the children of Maya, in which indigenous identity is either diminished or preserved and expressed through such channels as music and language. This paper has demonstrated that some children of Maya are aware of 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 have survived and been continuously transforming across time and space; this process is ongoing, as evidenced by its existence and reconstruction among Maya youth in Los Angeles.

## Notes

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2. The fourteen formal interviews were conducted between March 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, or at participants' businesses. All names of the participants used in this paper are pseudonyms. Fieldwork also included observation and participation in Maya programs and celebrations such as the annual fiesta of Santa Eulalia in February 2009.
3. 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.

4. 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. Of those deported, 57 percent were between the ages of 18 and 30. Moreover, 55 percent left family in the United States.
5. Portes and Rumbaut report that by 1999 first and second generations of immigrants and their children totaled 55 million persons, or one out of five Americans. In Los Angeles County, immigrants and their children constituted 62 percent of the area's 9.5 million residents (2001: xviii, 21).
6. Portes and Rumbaut reported that only 13 percent of immigrant families in their study had a grandparent living with them (2001: 73).
7. Financial and legal constraints may prevent activities or exposure to Guatemalan/Maya culture, such as trips to Guatemala.
8. It is important to note that this does not mean that these groups are incapable of identifying as Maya in the future.
9. For more on the Maya movement and revitalization programs, see R. McKenna Brown and Edward F. Fischer, *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Victor Montejo, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
10. Xela (also known as Quetzaltenango) is the capital of the department of Quetzaltenango in Guatemala.
11. *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.
12. Although, the Q'anjoba'les do not discriminate on the basis of gender, Wellmeier notes that in general Maya women did not play the marimba and none were present during her 1998 study in Los Angeles (111). Thus, Nancy and Maria are among the first females in Los Angeles to play the marimba.

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