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# "I am Maya, not Guatemalan, nor Hispanic" —the Belongingness of Mayas in Southern Florida

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**Key words**: Mayas; Guatemalans; ethnicity; Hispanics; belonging; home; immigration; immigrants; identity; biography

**Abstract**: This article explores the personal meanings and public expressions of home, ethnicity and belonging among Maya/Guatemalan immigrants living in South Florida, specifically from the viewpoints of seven biographies of first and second-generation Maya immigrants. Our examination of their narratives suggests why these immigrants actively resist a public mis-categorization of being part of the Hispanic community by emphasizing their indigenous heritage. As such, this study provides a new type of research regarding Maya immigrants and their "positioning" or their "self-localization" as indigenous peoples seeking refuge in the United States. These are narratives of Maya lives, most of them child survivors, who fled the genocide in Guatemala with their families and who have faced discrimination while living in the United States. What is unique about our study is its emphasis upon biography for portraying particular facets of ethnicity and indigeneity and the difficult processes of transnational migration faced by Maya peoples now living in Florida.

**Table of Contents**



## 1. Introduction

Migration from countries engaged in protracted civil wars is a global phenomenon. At the climax of Guatemala's long-lasting civil war (1960s – 1996), a shift in the fighting took place and resulted in genocide on a massive scale, mostly affecting the rural-indigenous Mayan populations (MORRISON & MAY, 1994). Because of genocide in the 1980s thousands of Maya fled to the United States (STONICH, 2001). Entering in different waves related to the Guatemalan civil war, an estimated 29,000 – 60,000 Maya/Guatemalan, depending on source, resided in Florida in 2000 (UNITED STATES CENSUS, 2000; BURNS, 2001). [1]

Indigenous immigrants from rural Guatemala living in the United States are often lumped into the ethnic category of Hispanics. Such categorical simplification of census claims about Maya/Guatemalan by implication does not differentiate

between ethnicities, especially between Hispanic and non-Hispanic ethnicities as Cubans living South Florida versus indigenous Maya groups. Moreover, census statistics do not distinguish between generations of Hispanic immigrants such as Cubans arriving after the Revolution in the 1960s and those who arrived in the 1980s Mariel boat lifts. [2]

What is unique about the Maya/Guatemalans is their indigenous heritage, which they themselves contrast with "*Ladino*" populations (non-indigenous). In this manner, the prejudices known in their home country of Guatemala are carried to the new host country of the United States when faced with other *Ladino* or Hispanic populations for competition of jobs, educational opportunities, or other prejudicial circumstances as both a form of remembrance and continuation of racism. [3]

In this article we discuss the lives of individual, Maya/Guatemalan immigrants in Southern Florida and explore the processes of how individuals maintain and negotiate their collective identities within this circum Caribbean and Latin American region of the United States. A major finding in the construction of their identities is a predominance of what we call "Mayan-ness" over any other collective identity. [4]

To understand the distinctiveness of this population we will first introduce the reader to the Guatemalan civil war, explain reasons for the Maya exodus to South Florida, and generally their everyday lives in the present day. In order to present our main findings and analyses we will provide extensive quotes from four life-story interviews of Maya/Guatemalan immigrants (first and second hand generation accounts) living in South Florida. It is important also to state, since our focus is upon Maya lives and biography, our sample size is relatively small in comparison to other qualitative studies such as ethnographies or phenomenological studies. Through the specific narratives of our informants and their life stories we will examine how these individual Mayas construct, negotiate and maintain their collective identity in their newly adopted host country of the United States. [5]

## 2. The Socio-historical Context of Guatemalan US-oriented Immigration

### 2.1 The Guatemalan civil war and migration

Contemporary Guatemala has evolved from a history of violence, notably from the Guatemalan civil war which began in the 1960s and ended with the peace accords of 1996 (unfortunately, various forms of violence in Guatemala have continued to this day). Because of the genocidal violence during the civil war era much of the rural population suffered greatly, causing an estimation of 200,000 deaths and thousands others to flee and seek refuge outside the country (COMISIÓN PARA EL ESCLARECIMIENTO HISTÓRICO [GUATEMALA], 1999). During the civil war Guatemalans were placed in a vortex of fear of the present and future and how to live a life of "normalcy" (GODOY, 2006). Civilians were

caught in a seesaw of violent conflicts between government troops and paramilitaries as well as guerrilla rebels (MORRISON & MAY, 1994). [6]

At the climax of the conflict, between 1981 and 1984, a shift in the fighting took place and resulted in large-scale genocide from the army's scorched earth policy (MORRISON & MAY, 1994, p.114). Whereas the Mayan population was not alone in their suffering, the intensity of the warfare against them was disproportionate comparative to the rest of the population. Within only a few years, army offensives involved numerous massacres and destruction of over 400 Mayan villages by the military's own account or more than 600 according to other sources (JONAS, 2002; LOUCKY & MOORS, 2000). The genocidal violence, poverty and economic instability were major factors for Guatemalans, usually entire families, deciding to leave the country for a better life or being forced to flee the country for pure survival (MORRISON & MAY, 1994; STONICH, 2001). [7]

Although peace accords were signed and the civil war officially has ended, there has been a backlash. It must be remembered the end the civil war does not simply represent an end for those who lived through it. Rather that demarcation in time, the peace accord ending the conflict, is more a symbolic marker for history whilst the personal memories of genocide for so many survivors persist to this very day. "The problems of the past—extreme hunger and poverty, high levels of violence and human rights abuses, distrust and fear—still remain today" (FLYNN, 2002, p.63). GODOY (2006, pp.106-107) depicts the narratives of individuals in Guatemala and summarizes how interviewees articulated their need to migrate because of such oppressive conditions. While the devastation from the civil war took many lives, impoverishment and hunger continued to take others. Not only were people killed but whole villages burned and fields destroyed and families scattered, many never to return again to their natal villages. [8]

A first wave of migrant families, from here onward Mayan political refugees, fled in the early 1980s at a time that is considered one of the most violent phases of *la violencia*—"the violence." One can speak of a forced migration or "quasi-voluntary departure" (FAIST, 2000), since staying in their villages during the height of the civil war would have come with great risks to their survival. In a second migration wave that started in the late 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s, mainly single migrants left Guatemala hoping to find a better life for themselves and their families in the United States and Guatemala respectively. These migratory phenomena of "economic/family survival" and "remittances" are generally discussed in studies related to the causes of labor migration and/or development (cf. ARNOLD, 1992; CONWAY, 1998; JONES, 1998; LEVITT, 1998; MONTO, 1994) [9]

However, making a clear cut distinction between these migration waves would be misleading since economic migration is strongly connected to the aftermath of the protracted civil war. [10]

### 2.2 Guatemala Mayan immigrants in South Florida

In 2000 an estimated 60,000 Maya/Guatemalans resided in Florida. However, these numbers are difficult to confirm since many Maya/Guatemalans were fleeing the atrocities of the civil war in Guatemala entered the United States illegally (BURNS, 2001). According to U.S. census data, 29,000 Guatemalans were living in the state (US CENSUS, 2000). Allan BURNS, an anthropologist who has spent years with South Florida's Maya population, remarked they are a people who "have been cut off from their land and their settlements, where they and their families had lived for generations, and from their own identity as a people" (2001, p.220). Maya/Guatemalans distinguish themselves from non-Mayan populations on the basis of their heritage, language, way of life, and self-identity (BURNS, 2001). Mayan religion has traditionally focused around agriculture, reproduction, the spirits of sacred places and times, and interpersonal relations and is presently syncretic, mixing traditional beliefs with Catholic rituals since the colonial era. [11]

From a psychological perspective, SONN (2002) maintains that immigration, forced or unforced, is accompanied by factors such as severing community ties, the loss of social networks and familiar bonds, and the loss of resources and meaning systems. Regardless of their religio-cultural development, Maya/Guatemalans in South Florida face major challenges regarding the negotiation of their social identities. It is stated that members of the Maya population in Florida continue to reinvent and seek their Mayan identity in their attempt to fulfill the obligation inherited from their forefathers (CAMPOSECO, 2000). [12]

The social environment in Southern Florida is more than a mere framework of the study. The first wave of Maya immigrants came to the nearby rural area, more specifically Indiantown, because they heard it was a refuge for Indians.[1] These first immigrants were fleeing the civil war in the 1980s, subsequent waves of migrants came for work reasons. Over time, the populations living in Indiantown, Martin County, also moved to other cities and communities in South Florida as Jupiter and Lake Worth for better employment and social services (BURNS, 2001). Today, Jupiter, and Lake Worth are towns with significant Maya populations. The significance of this specific region is underlined by the accounts of a Mayan community leader who recollects visits by Guatemalan President Óscar BERGER PERDOMO in 2007 and the Mayan Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta MENCHU in 2005 during his interview. [13]

1 Indiantown, Florida, was actually named for the Seminoles.

## 3. Study Sample

The Guatemalan sample of the study was made up of seven individuals, four of which are Mayan and three of which are *Ladinos* (see Table 1). The sample is part of a larger study on sense of belonging among immigrant populations in the United States (CHAITIN, LINSTROTH & HILLER, in this issue). For the purpose of this article we discuss the narratives of Mayas who are first and second generation immigrants, 1 male and 3 females. Our analyses will assess how these different Mayas view their sense of Mayan-ness and belonging to the Mayan culture.[2] At the time of the research the interviewees resided in Palm Beach County, Florida.

| Name | Gender | Ethnicity | Year of birth | Immigrant generation | Year immigrated |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sergio | Male | Mayan | 1977 | 1 | 1981 |
| Lorena | Female | Mayan | 1976 | 1 | 1983 |
| Elena | Female | Ladino | 1941 | 1 | 1984 |
| Maria | Female | Mayan | ~ 1972 | 1 | 1993 |
| Marta | Female | Ladino | 1923 | 1 | N/A |
| Veronica | Female | Mayan | 1979 | 2 | – |
| Beatriz | Female | Ladino | 1971 | 1 | 1988 |

Table 1: Overall Guatemalan sample [14]

## 4. Results and Analyses—"Mayan-ness" over National Belonging

The concepts of ethnicity are fluid and ever changing. Pre-war studies in Guatemala on Mayan identity were constructed on the basis of Frederic BARTH's (1969) notion of ethnic boundaries (FISCHER & BROWN, 1996; MOORS, 2000). We must understand our participants' ethnic belonging in the line of investigations reflecting the "personal and political issues surrounding and constricting one's choices" (MOORS, 2000, p.228). For example, most highland Maya have a strong sense of identification with their immediate community. Being faced with new situations, Mayas in diaspora often extend their communal sense of belonging to a larger group held together by similar or identical languages (MOORS, 2000). [15]

Scholars examining Maya and their notion of belonging in diaspora are confronted with a central question: "Will the sense of being Maya come to outweigh that of being Guatemalan ...?" (LOUCKY & MOORS, 2000, p.6). For

2 It should be noted we are aware of the ethnic differences between the language groupings associated with varying Mayan identities, whether stipulated as Kanjobal, Mam, Tzeltal and so on. In all there are 20 some language groupings and depending on the linguist as many as 32 language groupings. As such, we are aware of these ethnic distinctions. Yet to protect our informants and interviewees, we will not identify their language-ethnic grouping.

this discussion we will focus on a particular aspect of Mayan identity in diaspora —a phenomenon examined by scholars with regard to the "dynamic implications of uprooting and resettlement, social and psychological adjustment, long-term prospects for continued links to a migration history from Guatemala, and the development of a sense of shared ethnicity among peoples of Maya descent" (LOUCKY & MOORS, 2000, p.5). [16]

The following stories provide valuable insight into historical and structural conditions of individual and collective identities of Maya/Guatemalan immigrants in the United States. Maria's narrative was translated from Spanish (her second language) to English while Sergio, Veronica and Lorena told their life-stories in flawless English.[3] [17]

Maria, 35 years old at the time of the study, fled Guatemala as a child with her family to Mexico. This was the early 1980s, and as pointed out above is considered one of the most violent phases of the Guatemalan civil war. After fleeing this violent context with her family, she initially hid in the mountains in the state of Chiapas in Southeastern Mexico and subsequently worked on plantations in the U.S.-Mexican border zone in the state of Baja California, eventually arriving to Florida in 1993. When asked "Please tell me your life story, whatever you think is relevant and whatever you wish to share" Maria began her narrative as follows:

> "Ok, well, the life with my parents it has always been working hard, ((laughs)) the story as many Mayan children, I am not a Latin, neither Hispanic, just to make the clarification because many times people confuse us because we speak a little Spanish, for the way we dress, and that's it, you are a Latin, and no, in reality is not like that, in Guatemala there are 80% of Mayan people, with 22 Mayan languages, that are written and read, they have grammar, a dictionary and partly the 100 dialects, and partly the Spanish [she uses the Mayan expression for 'Spanish'], we always encounter, when I was a child, my parents always inculcated us with knowing where we are from, in order to not be lost in the future because you must know what is your ethnic [group] and I won't know what to say, perhaps I am going to say that I am American or Latin but I am not, just like the Hispanics, to be Latinos is very important for them right, they carry with them their culture, their ethnic [group], it is the same for us too right, so, that's what our parents always taught us, to be responsible, oh yeah, well, we must be responsible, very hard workers, that's all we must do from when we are, like all Mayan communities ..."[4] [18]

When asked to elaborate on how she perceived herself as not being Latin or Guatemalan Maria said:

3 For the protection of our interviewees their names and those of the people they mention are pseudonyms. The names of their native communities have been changed. The names of larger districts or regions in Guatemala, however, have been kept.

4 We are aware that quotes at times have unclear language. The interview was translated form Spanish to English. As indicated above, Spanish is not Maria's native language. To be as close as possible to her original words, we have not corrected grammatical errors and/or language related problems of expressing her thoughts.

> "I am a Mayan, I have my own language, my own culture, rituals, clothes, we don't dress like that [Western], well, we have to do it because it is cheaper and because our clothes are not sold over here, and if they are sold they [the clothes] are very expensive, so there are families that have five girls for example, they won't be able to buy five clothes of that, they cost 50 to100 dollars, 75, it depends on the material, well, the *huipiles*, well this is a blouse, *huipiles* we call them when they are handmade, and the originals cost like 75 dollars, and if I have 3, 5 girls I won't be able to buy them right, so that's what we are, descendant from the Mayas like you are from the Spanish, it is the ethnic, right, ..." [19]

Maria defines herself as Mayan through what she says is her culture, language, rituals, and clothes. In her everyday life in the United States, she wears her traditional Mayan dress—her *huipil*.[5] For Maria, being Maya is an unquestionable part of her collective and individual identity through which she distinguishes herself from being a Guatemalan national, or Hispanic (*Ladino*) in the United States. For Maria, the *Ladinos* in Guatemala are the persons who received all the benefits from the government:

> "... sometimes there are scholarships but they were given to the *Ladinos*, and not to Mayan people, even though they [Mayan] had good points [grades] they [the government] always want that the Mayas are always down and continue being peasants, and housewives because they [the government] are the ones who want to control the country, and it is until now, that there is not a Mayan president because they are not millionaires, the ones who have been always millionaires are the *Ladinos* who control the country, the *Ladinos* are descendant from the Spanish, that are not Mayan, they don't have Mayan blood, they have Spanish blood because they are the descendants (3), that is the Hispanic or Spanish, I don't know, I think all the Hispanic are descendants from the Spanish, right, they come from Spain, so those are the ones who are in Guatemala." [20]

Scholars examined the notion of *Ladino* identities with its nuances (see for example HALE, 2006; REEVES, 2006). Essentially the term *Ladino* must not be understood out of the context of the Spanish conquest that lead to the emergence of new racial categories such as *Ladinos* or *Mestizos*. In this racial hierarchy, *Ladinos* are located on the upper levels of Guatemalan society. Many *Ladinos* act either individually or collectively to defend their status and thereby opposing Mayan cultural and political assertion (HALE, 2006, pp.17-18). Maria's open resentment against *Ladinos* demonstrates her strong self-identification as a Maya as well as her perceptions of the racial/social hierarchies in Guatemala. [21]

Maria's Mayan spiritual sense of belonging stands above national belonging which she consciously reinforces and makes clear to the interviewer. Her spirituality is deeply rooted in a relationship with nature, the creator, the universe and mother earth. She said:

5 We will discuss the significance of the *huipil* in Section 5 of this article.

> "... so, the Mayas we don't have that religion ... many people get engaged more in religion but the majority of us keep the spirituality, the Mayan we don't have that religion in which we are locked in, we are more like freedom, we all practice it, that is what the war couldn't take from us, our culture, our idiom, and not only that, we have been suffering for more than 500 years, when the invasion of the conquerors, the Spanish happened in Central America, that is part of the oppression, I know that our ancestors suffered a lot in those times, in that war, in that time we didn't have religion, they were not religions, and there wasn't, well, they practiced the spirituality, well, my, in our culture, I see my parents, and I feel like that, we don't believe in that, we feel it, because everybody believe it but besides what you feel, in reality there is the spirituality, where you can share with others, and all that helps us to improve and to keep the culture too." [22]

When asked to elaborate on her spirituality, she said:

> "The spirituality means that we still do Mayan ceremonies, in our way, it is like making a mass, they do it in their way, you don't believe what the bible says exactly right, and we do our Mayan ceremony where we use several elements from the nature, for example now on the 17 of November we have, no, the 18 we have a ceremony, and a Mayan priest is coming from Guatemala, we call it *ajk'im* [or a similar expression] but it more or less is translated to Spanish as Mayan priest, he guides it and is the one who knows more, he is the one who guides because I don't know how to do the ceremony very well, I know a little but not that much, I am like when you visit a mass, but I am not like the priest, it won't be the same, his knowledge, so we also have a spiritual guide, so that is the Mayan ceremony, for us it is the cosmos, the universe but it is deeper right, for us it is very important, the nature, mother earth, we say the cosmos because it's everything (3) but in the ceremony many things are mentioned, that is the part of our spirituality, in that moment when we have the ceremony we have that communication with the nature, with the creator, with the universe." [23]

Maria also organizes Mayan ceremonies that are held in South Florida. Such ceremonies are carried out on a communal urban property. Sometimes the Mayan priest is flown from Guatemala to the special ceremony where traditional clothing is worn and the participants bring offerings. Those partaking in the event may join in prayer, while marimbas are played and tamales are shared. By observing and talking to the participants, including Maria, their sense-of home and belonging seems to be unquestionable. However, the ceremonial context certainly can heighten these feelings and manifestations of being Maya as opposed to the everyday aspects of this identity. It appears as if Maria's strong connection to her Mayan identity is what gives her a sense of home. Living in Southern Florida now, Maria is often lumped into the broad ethnic category of Hispanics. From listening to her life-story we gather Maria is a genocide survivor whose personal and familial struggles in relation to her conceptualization of Mayan collectivity define her Mayan identity. [24]

By contrast there is the story of Veronica, a 27 year old second generation immigrant. Veronica actively searches for her sense of belonging and has a desire to assume a Maya/Guatemalan identity, despite having been born in the

United States. As such, she never completely identifies herself as an American. In her interview she stated:

> "... in L.A. there were a lot of people from Mexico and other Central American countries, everybody was kind a lumped into one big thing, and whatever, here it's you, you try to identify with your own because everybody is so different here, that I definitely saw like how the community from San Carlos was, which is where my mom is from, they have at this church, in Lake Worth, they have like weekly meetings, and we had our youth group and at that youth group I felt I could identify with them, because their parents were like mine and they were from the same town and you know their uncles, and their mothers knew my mom from when she was little so everybody knows each other, so in that sense I felt I could relate to them in that aspect, ... but then as I started to go to high school then I felt like a pull, I wasn't able to relate as much, but definitely there is a bigger sense of community here from San Carlos anyway, I learned a lot more when I was here in Florida, I learned about our history our rituals and what the colors mean, and what the gods made, and how long ago that was, and why we have the fiesta de San Carlos every year, why are our fiestas the way that they are, always food and music, because that's what they do, the marimba is another thing that I really never even saw in L.A., when we came here it was everywhere the music, the *traje tipico* [traditional clothing] nobody in L.A. ever wore that, when we moved here my aunt who was really not well known throughout the community, all here wore a *traje tipico*, I still don't know how to put one on, but I know what it means and I know different towns, the *traje tipicos* means something different to them depending on the colors, depending on the objects that are woven into it, and before I don't think I would have been exposed to that because you try to blend in, whereas here it's more acceptable to be Guatemalteco, because of the population." [25]

Veronica talks about several processes of identity formation being influenced by her environment. In Los Angeles, where she was born, she belonged to a local, and mostly Hispanic community, which from her perspective was well integrated interethnically. Living in Florida she believes has made her more individualistic. Nevertheless, when discussing her exposure to the Maya/Guatemalan community, we have the impression of her need to be part of it. Such views are enhanced by her Guatemalan co-workers and the Guatemalan service center she works for. Despite her sense of belonging to the Maya indigenous community, Mayas perceive her in her neighborhood and in Guatemala as the "white girl" from her fluency in English and her education in the United States. [26]

Through exposure to many Maya immigrants in Florida because of work, Veronica seems to actively seek a Maya/Guatemalan identity. Her identity is further manifested from ideas about her culture, language, rituals, and clothes. Veronica constructs her Maya/Guatemalan identity from a position of external learning which she transformed into teaching. Talking about her work at a Guatemalan community center she said:

> "... I've also done conferences nationally, for native Americans, we were trying to get recognized as indigenous people, because a lot of people group us into the Hispanic

> category which we're not, so I know along with Sister Irene I don't know if you've heard of her, she's an advocate, of a big advocate in the Guatemalan community, she's been around for like twelve years I think, kind of when the center started, I worked with her and through her I was able to travel different states and go to these conferences and speak on behalf of the Guatemalan Maya population and explain to them what the [indigenous] customs were and we wear the *traje tipico* [traditional clothes] and just get more exposure out there, to know who we are, what we are about or what our customs are and just learn about others while we are at it, so I've had that experience and now I've been here at agency for about six months almost and it's definitely opened my eyes to completely different aspects that I wasn't exposed to earlier on." [27]

Based upon Veronica's narrative we argue her desire to be Maya is a positive, even an exotic sensibility. She speaks of the Guatemalan community in Southern Florida in terms of "us" and "they." For more positive aspects of Guatemalan identity she uses the term "we" while for more negative aspects of being Guatemalan, she uses "they," embracing a "best of both worlds" notion. One might also note the difference between being Guatemalan and being Maya. Maya immigrants sometimes mix and match their nationalistic identity of being Guatemalan and being Maya as a means of ignoring their Maya identity in order to fit in and not be prejudiced against. Referring to her Guatemalan identity Veronica said:

> "... I think that we [Guatemalans] tend to be different from everybody else, just based on our experiences just culturally speaking we're so much more different ..." [28]

However, later on in the interview, she goes on to talk about Guatemalan society:

> "... I've always told them I come back when I'm married and have kids and am allowed to kind of be, but until then I don't think so, they're too controlling or protective." [29]

The way Veronica shifts her identity back and forth in the "we" and they" dichotomy seems to tie to her internally ambivalent sense of belonging. Being Maya/Guatemalan means being part of a strong community. Belonging to the Guatemalan community through nationalistic sentiment is secondary to the Maya sense of belonging. Thus it means being indigenous rather than Hispanic and more specifically belonging to the small Mayan town of San Carlos (pseudonym) in rural Guatemala, which in reality she only knows from her mother's stories and her own visits. [30]

Veronica's narrative expresses the creation and recreation of identity and is strongly determined through her interaction with other Mayas and her immediate social environment in relation to Maya immigrants. Other people told her who she was ("white girl"), which she appears to have at least partly accepted as part of her social identity. In Guatemala she was the American, in the U.S. she is the Hispanic or Guatemalan and when she went on speaking tours about Maya cultures she was Maya. We see a rather unique form of constructing a sense of

belonging and home—one where the social environment is not only influential but determinative. Interestingly the imposition of collective identity does not only take place in the context of hierarchical and/or majority making as discussed by numerous scholars (cf. CAMPBELL & REW, 1999; GLADNEY, 1998). Veronica faces collective labels imposed on her by non Guatemalans and Guatemalans alike. [31]

For Veronica these labels mean that her own process of identity formation may cause uneasiness, because she might need to break out of externally imposed and consequently internalized social identity constructs. In this line, her own conscious construction of a Mayan identity provides her with a personal and comforting community identification which outweighs the U.S. or Guatemalan national identities. [32]

In sum, the analysis of Veronica's life story suggests to talk of the metaphor of a "white *traje tipico*." In her narrative Veronica mentions the *traje tipico*—the indigenous Guatemalan dress—repeatedly. She does not wear it in her everyday life and admitted that she did not even know how to put one on. Nevertheless she has traveled the country to explain to American people what the *traje tipico* is about. The use of colors in the *traje tipico* in Guatemala has attached meanings for the ones weaving and wearing these clothes. Veronica's white *traje tipico*, referring to her being labeled as white girl, is one that reflects the meaning of ambivalence toward her Maya/Guatemalan identity of fitting in but being different. [33]

Our next story is about Sergio, a 29 year old Maya/Guatemalan whose family fled Guatemala at the violent climax of the civil war in 1981. They migrated first to Los Angeles and after 5 years made their way to South Florida. They were one of the first families who moved to Indiantown in Martin County, Florida. Indiantown was a beacon destination for many Maya families wishing to seek a haven from the Guatemalan civil war during the 1980s (BURNS, 2001). [34]

Currently Sergio works in an administrative/supervisory position at a Mayan community center. When asked if he ever returned to Guatemala he said:

> "... I returned once when I was in high school, uhm, it was in 1994, I returned once for a whole month, uhm but since then I haven't returned. I plan to go back, not to live there, not to send my money back so I can build a house on my parents' land out there, which is the normal custom here—you come here, make as much money as you have, send it back to Guatemala, and build yourself a mansion. Or send enough money to where you go back and you live a nice comfortable life. That is not in my future plans. I've been raised here, I wanna live here, and I wanna die here, I wanna create my family here. I just ... you know, 'cause I left at three and returned when I was, uh, sixteen for a month and in that gap I lost whatever, whatever feeling most people have attached to Guatemala that come from Guatemala, I lost that feeling, I don't know what it is to miss it. So, why am I going to go back to a foreign place, to try to start life? Economically, it would make sense, you know, I would live like a king but I wouldn't be happy there, I wouldn't be happy." [35]

This quote and Sergio's overall life story suggests the United States is the home he most strongly identifies with. His upbringing and formal education in the U.S. have taught him to value the American way of life. In this regard, a dominant theme in Sergio's life-story is that of language. LOPEZ MARTINEZ (2001, p.292) explains the importance of language as a cultural element among indigenous people. He states that:

> "one's mother tongue forms a means of contact with the world ... it is normal and commonplace to hear some non-indigenous peoples treat indigenous language as mere dialects and refuse to give them their due value ... it is indigenous children who suffer most from racial discrimination in this context who, when starting school, are forced to stop speaking their mother tongue and study a language they have never heard before." [36]

Whereas LOPEZ MARTINEZ (2001) writes about the Central American and Caribbean contexts, we argue his ideas are transferable to indigenous immigrant populations residing in the United States. This pattern identified by LOPEZ MARTINEZ (2001) emerges in Sergio's story. To avoid rejection and discrimination while growing up in the United States, Sergio needed to refrain from speaking his native language. At several points in his life-story he refers to the difficulties associated with language. He said:

> "... [my parents] knew that to survive here in the United States, you had to learn the language; you had to learn to assimilate, a manner of assimilating is learning the language and so by doing that they wouldn't let us speak our language. So we would practice Spanish and English in the house. So what happened was: us losing our dialect in the sense that we can't speak it but we can understand it." [37]

Despite his U.S./Western ideological orientation, Sergio's narrative suggests why he perceives a difference between himself as a Maya and Hispanics in general. Talking about difficulties he encountered in grade school he said:

> "Right, ok. Grade school was pretty difficult, especially, uhm, trying to learn the language and not using the language correctly. Uhm, we were ridiculed a lot, uhm, interestingly, we weren't really ridiculed by the Americans or African-Americans, we were ridiculed by the Mexicans and Latinos—Spanish people. Uhm, in hindsight, the reason why is ‘cause we were trying to learn Spanish first and our Spanish was broken, ah, so then they would ridicule us regarding that. That was really a blow to the ego, ‘cause, you know, you think you're saying it right but then someone points out that you're saying it wrong but they do it in a manner that, uhm, it's bad and it's a step backwards instead of forwards ... When I say that, it' s uhm, it was ok to go out there and use the English language, and even though you got ridiculed you still felt good because they understood what you were saying, they might laugh at you but they understood what you were trying to say and the majority of the time they would correct us but it was done in a way that we didn't take it as an insult compared to when we were leaning Spanish and then all kinds of Spanish people would just laugh at us and ridicule us." [38]

Sergio was not only facing difficulties related to language in relation to growing up in the U.S. social context but also in relation to being Maya. He said:

> "But we receive a lot of flack, (laughing) a lot of flack, uhm, from the Guatemalan community, 'cause then all of this happened like when I was growing up—since we didn't speak the (Mayan dialect) we were ridiculed by our own people—'Oh, so you think you're better than us? You can't speak the language, now all you speak in English?' It's one of those things—'oh, so you're wearing better clothing than us now?' But that wasn't the case. We didn't do it because we want to go against the grain, that was just how we did it I don't think my parents raised us like that, it's just how life was, how we saw life, how we took it, ..." [39]

Three different languages have shaped Sergio's way of understanding his own identity as a Maya and not Hispanic. The indigenous language is the one his parents and the Maya community use among themselves. It is a language he understands but is unable to converse in. Sergio's parents talk to him and his siblings in Spanish because it is the only way that enables them to have a conversation. English is the language that allows Sergio to communicate fluently within American society and which makes him feel accepted and gives him a sense of belonging. [40]

The Mayan aspect of Sergio's belonging is obvious in his discussion about his parents and their homeland in the Western highlands of Guatemala. He expresses his respect for his parents' traditional customs and attachment to their land. Even so, his interior feelings and thoughts seem to differ from what his parents are expecting from him. According to Sergio, his parents' desire is for him to follow their inherited traditions. For example, they expect Sergio and his siblings to bury them in Guatemala and visit them on the *Dia de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead) every year. Moreover, according to Sergio they intend to pass on a piece of land to their children as a form of representing them in their home community. Sergio cannot identify with any of these traditions. While respecting his parents' perspective, it appears that Sergio tries to break loose from these imposed aspects of being Maya. Respectfully he considers his family a very "tight knit group ... where your parents don't want you to move out." However, he identifies more with a U.S./Western perspective where "once you create your own family, you have to start your own lineage." [41]

Sergio's identity also has been shaped by racism, which emerged as another theme in his life-story. Sergio internalizes racism into his identity construction depicting it as a phenomenon one has to learn to live with. Talking about the manifestations of racism in the U.S./Western context Sergio said:

> "... now you're in the real world and now you're not secluded, you're not protected and racism, discrimination—it's an everyday ... it's a part of everyday life. You learn to live with it, uhm, we come from a culture of where we're a passive people. We're not in your face, we're not vocal, so when we are mistreated we accept it but we try to play the role of—ok, these people are uneducated, they just don't know what they're talking about ... I've had this armor built over the years and it's so strong that it

> doesn't really affect me, but I think ... it affects me only when I see it being done to others and what I mean with others—people that are close to me, that's what I mean with others." [42]

Sergio's identity is one of resisting labels and categorizations others impose on him as a Maya and those of his people. Sergio is a young man whose identity has been shaped and challenged by two different worldviews. Guatemala is the homeland of his parents, also his birthplace, but remains distant from early childhood and blurry memories. The United States is a country where he sees himself and his future. While he acknowledges forms of discrimination while living in the U.S., he identifies with the American way of life. Sergio does not view himself as a victim but as a person in control of his own destiny, while productive within the U.S. Maya community. His story reflects a sense of contradiction and ambiguity identified by DUNCAN and LAMBERT (2004) for immigrants who are exposed to opportunities in the host country while at the same time feeling estranged from the original homeland. [43]

We will now discuss Lorena's biography and her assertion of Mayan-ness. She is a 30 year old Maya who was born in Guatemala and fled with her family at the height of violence and persecution during the civil war in 1982. After having grown up in a rural town in the northeast of the United States through the support and adoption of Benedictine monks, she moved to Florida and has been a resident since 1999. Born Maya, but having lived most of her life in the United States, the construction of her Mayan identity is of an inquisitive nature about where she comes from. Remembering a trip to her native community in Guatemala where she was attending her mother's appointment ceremony as a community elder Lorena said:

> "... for me it was really important to be there for her at this particular event, because we know, my sisters and I my brother, how hard my parents work and my mom, and in my case I am very interested in the Mayan culture, in the Mayan elders and their roles in the community, and the Mayan calendar, and the Mayan number system and the ceremonies and the colors and the symbolism behind all that, I knew just how intense and how eventful this was for her, so my siblings and I saw that and we decided that I was going to be the one to represent us from this country, and have a family presence in this event, it was great it was wonderful." [44]

During her college education, Lorena continued her construction of a Mayan identity from an intellectual perspective. She said:

> "I majored in Latin American studies, and with that I had to have either Portuguese or Spanish, you know I chose Spanish because I thought it would be more useful for me instead of Portuguese, and I befriended a lot of the professors in the department, in the independent research project with the chairman of the department, what was the topic, something like Mayan identity post the peace accord of 1996 or something like that, it was somewhere around that line and then I did another one which was like coffee and politics in Guatemala, ..." [45]

Living in Florida, Lorena continues to construct and strengthen her Mayan-ness. She stated:

> "Well, it took me a long time and I am so not adjusting to Florida, the only thing, well first of all my older sister here, my younger sister is finishing her first, no she is starting her second year, she just graduated college last year, so I have family here, but the other thing is that this is the first place that has really helped me to become aware of who I am as a Mayan, a Guatemalan Mayan, and has really it's almost like everything that my parents taught me and everything that I learned in college I am applying them all here, so it's nice to be able to take theories and putting them into practice and see what happens, and Florida is a great place for that, because I can use it in my line of work, I've traveled so many times back and forth to Guatemala and Mexico because I'm curious why did all this stuff happen, so by doing that, when I'm doing like a home visit here for example, when a family tells me oh I'm from Coban, Alta Verapaz, I can say oh I've been there before, what part, or if a family is hesitant about talking to me first, and once she tells me where she's from, when a family tells me, I grew up in the area of Ixcan, well Ixcan went through a very horrific time during the war, so I can see somebody who fled from that being hesitant, being worried, being traumatized, and also even if they just came in this week from this area, there is no running water there is no electricity cause I was just there in 2002 2003 doing research, and I've lived there, researching and living with the families and communities, and so I feel that my research came about because what I learned in college and my interest in Latin American studies and culture and history and politics and that came about because of what my parents taught me and where we were coming from, ..." [46]

Mayan-ness in Lorena's story gives her an emotional home (cf. DUNCAN & LAMBERT, 2004; SIGMON, WHITCOMB & SNYDER, 2002). Not having experienced Guatemala as a physical home, Lorena made an intellectual connection to Guatemala by conducting field research through which she learned about Mayan issues in her native country. [47]

Lorena's time at college appeared to be meaningful in identifying her collective belonging. During this period she was exposed to a diverse student population where one's belonging to a student group seemed to be determined by ethnic belonging. She remarked:

> "... I never did really fit in with the students, I tried belonging to La Unidad, which was the Latina club on campus, I went to one or two meetings and I was just like, I've never really truly have identified myself as Latina, I mean I happen to be from Latin America, but I've always identified myself as Mayan, as a Guatemalan Mayan with indigenous background, so being there in La Unidad I was just like this is so strange, I can't relate to any of these women, and so instead I also had friends who were native American, Hopi, especially Hopi and Cherokee, and we decided to expand the native American club on campus and it was, there weren't many of us, but we did that, and that was a lot of fun, because I could relate to them on so many levels, because there is so much we have in common with the native Americans here in this country, more so than I did with the other young women who coming from areas that,

> you know I grew up in rural Vermont and trying to reach something who grew up in Washington Heights, it was really hard to relate to her, and she also couldn't relate to me, and a lot of people thought I was such a snob from New England, who thought I was more white, but I grew up in Vermont and that was my upbringing, socially that was a bit challenging, in High School never had that issue, I always kind of going with the flow, had a lot of friends, my whole identity who I am that never came out, it was never really addressed until college with the whole issue of who do you belong to, whose club are you going to join, us native American is it Latinas is it Hispanas is it African Americans is it Caribbean, I mean you start questioning all these things and in the end you are just like I want to be left alone, because you tie yourself to a club and in the end you know it always labels, that was that for me was really really hard, but at the same time it was great because through all the negative I did a lot of questions, who am I really who do I identify myself with, and I remember I even took this quiz from a fashion magazine how Latina are you, respond the next 10 questions, and I didn't do too well and I turned to my friend, ok I don't think I'm Latina enough, I am not, this is not who I am." [48]

This quote shows the difficulties we alluded to in the introduction of this article. Ethnic categories in the United States are imposed on individuals and groups without taking actual differences and nuances into consideration. By actively constructing her Mayan identity, Lorena copes with these imposed false-labels that have created confusion and discomfort to her. [49]

Lorena's conscious construction of Mayan-ness is underlined by her narrative on weaving and its meaning for Maya women and communities. Growing up in the United States she has not been able to participate in the traditional weaving trajectory of the women in her family and her native community. Talking about her native town and weaving she said:

> "... my town is known for its weavings, the women there are all weavers, the way it goes you have playtime when your five years old, you do your first major piece but simple at probably eight or ten, by the time you're 15 you should not only select the colors but work the weaving put all the sticks in the weaving and start doing some of the designs of the weaving itself, by the time you're married well you know 17 18 19 or 20 you should be able to do a masterpiece, a blouse or the hairpiece and you should be even able to sell your products to other towns that don't have weavers, or they do but they do a different type, maybe they are known for making skirts, we are known for making blouses...because of the war, because we left so early so young, the only one who really knows how to weave quite decently is my sister, she is 33 old, she had more experience in Guatemala, she learned a lot, and all of us learned, at least in my case, I learned the basis, but the whole process, I never really learned that, but for me that was really frustrating because now as an adult it would be kind of nice to have kept that, I am sure I can still learn, I have the main concept but not the detail, and the issue is time." [50]

When later asked to talk more about the significance of weaving she declared:

> "... my mom is a great weaver, my grandmother is a great weaver, people come from far to have my grandmother work a weaving for them, set up a weaving for them, now she is getting old in age, she is in her 70s, she's not going to weave anymore but she will put the weaving together, what I mean selecting the colors, doing the threat counts, making sure everything is correct, and my mom is just as wonderful as that, so is my older sister, so for me personally I feel as if I was cheated out of that connections, but in a larger scale weaving identifies who we are as Mayans, not all Guatemalan Mayan woman are weavers, some of them are men, and and in some areas are now more for their ceramic woodwork, or weaving like baskets or straw mates, but Guatemala in general is identified, you know the weaving is what identifies us, you know my father was always telling us you know Lorena, weaving is like a book, there's a story behind the color the design, even the person who made the weaving what was she like what was she thinking when she put the weaving together, what influenced her creativity what was the nature like around her, was there more water that's why she's using more blue, was there more flowers, that's why there's more colors, all of these things, so for me it's almost like great, this is a book that I can't understand that was really frustrating, but at the same time I have taken, ( ) to learn more about the art of weaving and just because I feel like this is something I don't want to lose, and I think what's happening is that, you know that earlier on I said how my parents didn't shelter us from a lot of things, but my father he made sure that we all learned how to weave, I'm not a skilled weaver but I can weave, ... I feel really lucky and really fortunate that my parents never really kept that away from us, as a matter of fact sometimes I feel they overdid it sometimes, but looking back it's what I use that information or what I do with the information is really up to me now, so that's why with the whole weaving thing it comes down to, it is not something everyone in my town does, it's a connection to that town with other women in that town, and if I walk into somebody's yard and there's like three women weaving there I don't want to feel left out when they're weaving, even though I can't sit down with the weavings, with visiting I know the process that they are growing through and I can communicate, talk their language which is the weaving language, [51]

By talking at length about weaving, Lorena creates a direct link to her native town. Even though she cannot speak about her personal experience, her narrative implies her strong desire to uphold the female-lineage of her family and communal tradition of weaving. Moreover we can identify her frustration about not having grown up as part of a tradition which serves as an identity marker for Maya women and their respective communities. [52]

The notion of weaving and Mayan dress traverses the narrative of the three female participants. Since these are highly visible manifestations of Mayan-ness in the U.S. context, we will direct the discussion toward the interpretation of traditional Mayan clothing and its meaning in foreign environments. [53]

## 5. *Trajes*, Weaving and Mayan-ness in South Florida

Weaving and Mayan clothing as related by the female informants in our study are forms of ethnic Mayan assertion. SANDERS' (2002) perspective on ethnicity holds that material aspects of ethnic assertion follow a pattern of mutually acknowledged cultural elements and are interpreted in different manners. Maria, who wears her *traje tipico* as part of her regular daily outfit, asserts her Mayan-ness in her everyday social interactions in Florida. Veronica's Mayan-ess emerges most visibly when she educates non-Mayas in the United States about the meaning of the *traje tipico*. Lorena's interpretation of weaving helps her identify with female Mayan-customs and helps her to find a sense of belonging with other Maya women. [54]

Mayan forms of dressing have been studied widely and from different perspectives (see OTZOY, 1996 for a review of literature). Very broadly speaking, Maya weaving and clothing are considered cultural elements passed on through generations and embody "the processes of historical struggle, cultural creativity, and political resistance of the Maya people" (OTZOY 1996, p.141). To this extent weaving, clothing and textiles, it may be argued, function for Maya/Guatemalans as tools for political and ethnic assertion (FOXX, SCHEVILL & ASTURIAS DE BARRIOS, 1997, p.87). As OTZOY (1996) states, Mayas were exposed to ethnic discrimination when wearing Mayan clothing. So too, our informants' life-stories demonstrate how their words and actions may be related to traditional clothing and weaving and as material symbols of Maya cultural survival and solidarity in the United States. Our contention, along with TEDLOCK (1992), is that Mayan traditional-dress, and their religio-adherence to the sacred earth, as well as their ancient 260-day calendar are fundamental elements "and core symbols in the construction of a transnational pan-Mayan identity" (p.213). [55]

In the ethnography *Weaving Identities*, Carol HENDRICKSON examines the role of the *traje* "as a powerful and densely meaningful expression of social identity and a vital statement of life in the highlands [of Guatemala]" (1995, p.6). HENDRICKSON's work focuses on the evolutionary and dynamic aspects of the *traje* being a significant aspect of material culture. Without being able to go into the complexity of the author's work, it can be said the *traje* is a marker for ethnic and communal belonging as well as a visible boundary from the *Ladino* population. The stories of our informants support HENDRICKSON's work whereby the *traje* is symbolic for emphasizing their collective identities as (highland) Mayas more than their national belonging to Guatemala. [56]

Sergio, at this point the only male participant, for obvious reasons cannot relate in the same way to the Mayan dress as the women we interviewed. As we have shown, for Sergio's life in South Florida the famous "melting pot" metaphor seems more fitting than attempting to find a strong sense of Mayan-ness. However, what can be seen with all informants is their sense of emphasizing their Mayan-ness over their national belonging to Guatemala. This emphasis, which sometimes to a stronger and sometimes to a lesser extent manifested itself as "we-ness" cannot but remind us of BARTH's (1969) notions of ethnic boundary-

definitions and boundary-maintenance. The social environment in the United States, which separates the Mayas from the horrors of the civil war both spatially and temporally, allows them to safely (re)create themselves as the peoples. [57]

## 6. Summary and Conclusions

For many Maya/Guatemalan migrating to the United States was the only way of saving themselves from political oppression, ongoing brutal violation of human rights and genocide. The immigrants, often facing severe trauma from the indescribable violence they witnessed and had to endure, entered a capitalistic, fast paced society with foreign customs, languages, etc. Among the diverse challenges they faced, one was/is that of being lumped into the category of "Hispanics." The Maya/Guatemalans in our study actively resist this mis-categorization of being part of the Hispanic community by emphasizing their indigenous heritage. Our informants underline their Mayan collective-identity by celebrating differing aspects of Mayan culture, such as speaking one of the 22 indigenous languages, wearing Mayan clothes, participating in traditional weaving and embracing their indigenous forms of spirituality. [58]

In this article we discussed how the protracted civil war in Guatemala caused unutterable pain and suffering to civilians. While not the only ones affected, the atrocities of the war most strongly impacted the Mayas of Guatemala. For better lives or simple survival, Mayas migrated/fled the country often ending an odyssey through refugee camps and countries such as Mexico to make the United States their new home. Today, South Florida has a significant Maya/Guatemalan population that, according to census data, is falsely labeled as Hispanic. Thus controversially discussed public policy matters such as integration, acculturation, assimilation or diversity fail to address this indigenous population group in an adequate manner. The stories we heard reflect how Mayas in South Florida emphasize their ethnic identity in a clear, self-chosen boundary over national belonging to Guatemala. We have selected the parts of their life stories highlighting their construction of a Mayan mentality. Even within the context of a social environment far removed from their natal cultures, the United States, we found through our informants' perspectives how Mayan-ness can be strongly developed and re-created in everyday life. Moreover, we have shown how the construction of a collective Mayan identity for a younger generation of immigrants who were born in the United States or who left Guatemala in their early childhood is filled with desire and inquiry respectively. [59]

Underscoring our premise of understanding "the importance of ethnicity *in people's lives*" (ERIKSEN, 2002, p.135), we went into depth in exploring the female participants' materiality of ethnic assertion through traditional Mayan dress and weaving. We found out why the perceived safe environment in United States allowed for and even fostered expressions of ethnic identification. Furthermore, we discovered not only about the everyday aspects of ethnicity but also their formations as social processes in terms of situational levels. The latter, according to ESPIRITU (1992) and LESSINGER (1995), revealed the hybrid and plural character of modernity. [60]

By situating the Maya/Guatemalans in Florida together with all other immigrants from Latin America under the homogenizing category of "Hispanics," some scholars as well as some public policy-makers are contributing to integration processes which are also premised upon essentialized assumptions about immigrant populations. As a counterpoint to such fabulations about the immigrant-Mayas, our study provides a new analysis for examining these migrants' "positioning" or "self-localization" (SACKMANN, 2003) as indigenous peoples seeking refuge in the United States. [61]

To this end, Maya/Guatemalans must not be seen as archaeological objects or living remnants of a defunct and ancient civilization. Nor should they be studied as such. This indigenous population is very much alive and engaged in everyday struggles to maintain their culture and to situate themselves in the respective contexts of the United States and Guatemala. [62]

In sum, the Mayas of South Florida are a proud people who live in exile, and are adapting to a new way of life. The narratives of our Mayan informants explain how most of them migrated as children to the United States and situated their identities to a newly adopted homeland after surviving genocide and by facing different forms of discrimination. Theirs are stories, not only of resistance, but also as examples of re-asserting their ethnicity. [63]

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