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A Week in Guatemala: Assorted Mental Souvenirs

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHERI SUPALLA AND JOY HEMMESCH

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Décor at Universidad Rafael Landívar: Delicate flowers in volcanic stone bowl — good description for Guatemala!

The Group and the Setting

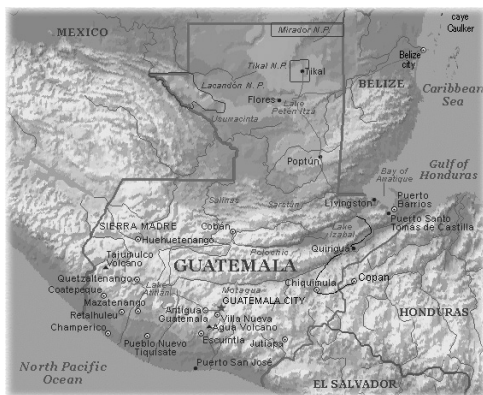
Ernie Diedrich

Breaking through a relatively low ceiling of ragged clouds, our plane passed verdant mountain ranges frosted with dense, urban layers with their metal roofs and glazing glinting in the afternoon sun. From the plane, it seemed only the steepest hillsides didn't have a road, house, or garden plot on it. The wheels thumped on the tarmac and soon we were outside, slightly dazed and taking in the juxtaposition of shiny barbed wire on top of walls, the ever present smell of car exhaust and the knots of people speaking animatedly. We stood against a wall — close to our baggage — and waited for our mini-bus.



La Aurora International Airport, Guatemala City

Led by Eleonora Bertranou, our group of professors and staff had flown in to Guatemala to visit the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University's Guatemalan language program site in Quetzaltenango from May 24–31, 2009. We arrived at that bus stop mindful of Guatemala's poverty, sensitive to the lingering pain of the recent violent guerilla war, listening for the linguistic diversity, aware of the repressive colonial past that informs Guatemala's class differences and curious about the rich Mayan heritage interwoven in everyday lives. We weren't in Wobegon country anymore!



The setting: Guatemala

Guatemala, slightly smaller than Tennessee and closer to the Tropic of Cancer than the Equator, is surrounded by Mexico to the west and north, Belize to the northeast, Honduras to the east, and San Salvador to the southeast. Much of the country is mountainous and subject to earthquakes (we experienced tremors from one while we were there), volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and tropical storms. Spanish is spoken by about 60% of the population, while the remaining 40% speak 23 officially recog-

nized Amerindian languages. Guatemala is the most populous of the Central American countries with a GDP roughly one-half of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Income and wealth is very unequally distributed and, according to the *CIA World Factbook*, more than half of the population lives below the poverty line. We expected a poor, mostly agricultural country with challenging geography and with many places where our highly skilled Spanish profs, much less the rest of us, wouldn't have a clue what the people were saying.



¡El Grupo Fabuloso!

Our group included Spanish language and literature professors (Elena Sanchez Mora, Eleonora Bertranou, Corey Shouse-Tourino, Nelsy Echavez-Solano, Alexis Howe, and Bruce Campbell), a psychology professor (Michael Livingston), a philosopher (Dennis Beach, OSB), an economist (Ernie Diedrich), a dietitian (Cheri Supalla), and an Education Abroad advisor (Joy Hemmesch). We all saw many of the same things as we wound our way around mountains in our little bus, or strolled past stalls in markets from another time, or admired the bright Mayan colors on churches, but we filtered these views differently given our different jobs, academic interests, and life experiences. The following are brief vignettes of individual perspectives on Guatemala from members of our group.

Recognizing Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala

Eleonora Bertranou

Our program in Guatemala allows students from the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (CSB | SJU) to live in indigenous communities around the Quetzaltenango area of Guatemala and to learn of the history, culture, religion, and literature of the Maya. Such opportunity to witness a process of unmaking an old rac-

ist state model, responsible for genocide practices against its Maya population (1982–83), may be the most valuable aspect of our Guatemala Study Abroad program.

In 2006 I led our first group of students to Guatemala to understand its peoples, its diverse geography, its controversially violent history, and challenges ahead. My second trip to Guatemala in May 2009 was also a memorable one. I took a few K'iche' lessons with a language instructor just as our students do to learn Spanish during our spring semester program there. K'iche' is a Mayan language spoken by about one million people in the central highlands of Guatemala. My instructor, Gladys, teaches Spanish and K'iche' at CELAS Maya, the language school for foreign students where we took our classes. She works a double teaching shift; in the mornings she is an elementary public school teacher of a bilingual education program in Zunil, a small community nearby Quetzaltenango.



Celas Maya

Although at least fifty percent of Guatemalans are indigenous, they have been victims of discrimination from colonial times through the nation building efforts of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the last ten years, however, the state has gradually allowed for the introduction of long overdue changes to transform into an inclusive society. Gladys, for example, was one of the first graduates of a multicultural teaching program that allows her to teach in K'iche'. Education is one of the means to allow the right of indigenous peoples to retain their language. In urban areas like Quetzaltenango, K'iche' as a second language is now a mandatory part of the curriculum.

Indigenous people have also gained recourse to file complaints with the government in cases of discrimination. Women like Gladys, for example, who wear typical Maya dress, were not allowed into places such as restaurants or banks. Although discrimination against indigenous people has not been entirely uprooted yet, there is a strong affirmation of indigenous identity in many stories I heard. The Maya cultural

revitalization movement is clearly measurable. Gladys embodied for me the progress made in Guatemala. She is an educated professional Maya woman who is proud of her ethnicity, teaching K'iche' to Guatemalan children and foreign students.

In keeping with this option for our students we are, as the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states, *recognizing the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies*. May we encourage more of our students to participate in that project.

Guatemala, Revisited

Bruce Campbell

I last visited Guatemala in 1989, accompanied by my (now) wife Jessica on a two-week trip. The trip was more human rights education than tourist escape: we visited a friend who was working for Peace Brigades International, a non-governmental organization whose activists serve as human shields for individuals under threat of kidnapping and/or murder by paramilitary death squads; we shared a meal with a middle-class Guatemalan family that had received death threats as a result of their participation in student organizations and union activity; and we traveled to the Ixil Triangle, a western highlands area comprised of three indigenous Mayan *pueblos*, one of which, Nebaj, was the site of one of the Guatemalan army's infamous rural "development poles," where local Mayan populations were cordoned off under the watchful eye of military authorities during the country's civil war.

I remember the arresting vision of the bright red *huipiles* of the women of Nebaj as they moved about their daily chores in the early morning mountain mist. I remember a very well-fed and physically fit man who followed us throughout the streets of Nebaj, all the while pretending to be an impoverished peasant. I remember visiting a small Catholic church in a Mayan hamlet on the narrow mountain road into the highlands, and seeing that soldiers had dressed the wooden saints around the altar in combat fatigues, signaling the omnipotence of the military. I remember the palpable fear of that educated, middle-class family in Guatemala City.

The country's seemingly endless civil war was the inescapable backdrop for my 1989 visit. Initiated in 1960 as a junior army officers' revolt against the military rule instituted after a 1954 U.S.-backed coup brought down Jacobo Arbenz's reformist government, the guerrilla war against Guatemala's military rulers lasted until the 1996 Peace Accords finally re-established civilian rule.

The civil war was long, but also extremely lopsided. The *Nunca Más* (Never Again) report published by the Archdiocese of Guatemala in 1998 found that the violence was overwhelmingly official: “The cumulative government responsibility (including army, police forces, civil patrollers, military commissioners, and death squads) is a staggering 47,004 victims, or 89.65 percent of the total violations.” (p. 290) Less than 5% of all human rights violations were attributed to the guerrilla organizations by the *Nunca Más* report. (Guatemala Never Again, Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, 1998)

There was a guerrilla component to the civil war; but most conspicuously there was an all-out war on the civilian population carried out by the Guatemalan state. As I witnessed, everyday life in that context was shot through with surveillance, fear, and top-down social control.

Officially, the violence of the civil war ended with the 1996 accords. In truth, Guatemala has yet to emerge entirely from the militarization it suffered for much of the 20th century.

The still feeble condition of civilian rule is underscored dramatically by the fact that the man responsible for the *Nunca Más* report, Bishop Juan Gerardi, was brutally murdered immediately after its publication in 1998, bludgeoned to death with a paving stone by members of the military inside his own Parish. Prosecutors believe the murder was organized by high-ranking army officers possibly with the support of the presidency. Francisco Goldman’s *The Art of Political Murder* (Grove, 2007), a detailed chronicle of the now more than decade-long effort to prosecute Gerardi’s killers, is a chilling reminder of the impunity enjoyed by Guatemala’s military criminals.

During our 2009 faculty trip, it was hard to miss the signs of an anemic civilian government and civil society, its constitutional order and social and cultural institutions left rickety by decades of military rule under a Manichean Cold War concept of national security.

Upon our arrival to Guatemala I read in the local newspaper about the “accidental” death of Colonel Roberto Antonio de la Cruz, latest in a series of army officers to turn up dead after prosecutors decided to interview them about involvement in the Gerardi murder. The next morning, I read news of private security costs in the country reaching 2.3 billion quetzales (roughly \$280 million US dollars) in 2008, the national economy’s clearest growth area. As if to explain this datum, another article reported on urban vigilante groups who patrol their neighborhoods armed to the teeth and wearing ski masks because, they allege, the national police are understaffed or corrupt. I also read about rural indigenous communities lynching suspected rapists and drug traffickers in the absence of official prosecution.

the concert's audience. One could see the embarrassment on the part of the concert's emcee when he lamented the declining interest among Guatemalans in the national musical form.



Marimba concert in Guatemala City

Unsustainable Guatemala?

Ernie Diedrich

A broad understanding of sustainability is how well nature can maintain human well-being over the long-term. Looking at it from Nature's view, you can decide that sustainability is also about how well we link resources to human needs over time at the least cost to nature. In either case, and in all ideas about sustainability are the notions of limits and resilience. How far can you go using nature in search of well-being, before nature doesn't bounce back or allow future humans the same use and benefit of the environment that present humans had? Further, how far can you tear away at habitats before future generations can no longer enjoy the plant and animal species that present Guatemaltecos enjoy? All that I saw while travelling in Guatemala left me quite pessimistic about Guatemala's maintenance of even its present, very unequal level of human well-being over the long-term.

As our bus snaked through Guatemala's hilly and mountainous country and as we travelled in and around Quetzaltenango where the CSB | SJU language program is based, there were many visual (and olfactory) cues signaling that Guatemala's future generations would not enjoy the natural benefits that people enjoy today. Farmed lands on steep hillsides, areas denuded of ground-anchoring forests, eroded valleys, and unimproved landfills that contribute to surface and ground water pollution were common sights. Because we didn't go there, I didn't see the very rapid rate of defor-

estation in the north and northeast (the “green reserves” of Guatemala) and the utter lack of state efforts (with accompanying resources) to stem the poaching (lumber, illegal exportation of endangered species, etc.) and incessant tearing away of the natural fabric. From what I read and saw, Guatemala is a country burdened by a history of colonial exploitation, a recent bloody civil war, and a crushing poverty structured by its rigid inequality. It reasonably could be said to come close to being a failed state (as a writer for *The Economist* did in a May 21, 2009 article) and it appeared to be hanging on by its fingernails!

Once I got back to Minnesota, I looked at a few numbers to see if holding this bleak view was justified. The Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy (YCELP) and Columbia University’s Center for International Earth Science information Network (CIESIN) have collaborated over the past decade to generate a type of sustainability index that ranks countries according to a set of variables that include environmental systems, environmental stresses, social and institutional capabilities, among others called in its early years an Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) and more recently, an Environmental Performance Index (EPI). The EPI is a way of quantifying and benchmarking the environmental performance of a country’s policies. This index was developed from the Pilot Environmental Performance Index, first published in 2002, and designed to supplement the environmental targets established in the U.N.’s Millennium Development Goals.

From the beginning, Guatemala has scored relatively low (61 out of 122 in 2001). Recently and with adjustments to the Index, Guatemala’s ESI score went from 44 in 2005, to an EPI score of 68.9 in 2006, to 76.7 in 2008. Its rank fluctuated from 116 out 146 in 2005, 58 out of 133 in 2006, and 69 out of 149 in 2008. Given that the EPIs are not entirely comparable, one might conclude that Guatemala is somewhere in the middle of the pack and that its EPI score appears to be climbing just a little.

You can see attempts at building sustainability in Guatemala with the many individual sustainability projects that focus on projects such as organic-grown coffee, solar and wind power, micro-hydro, reforestation projects, or the introduction of more efficient cooking stoves. A good number of these are sponsored by non-Guatemalans and what is troublesome, however, is knowing whether efforts to improve human well-being are staying ahead of population growth (2.066% — growth rates commonly range between .1 and 3% overall; 4% is very high) and income inequality (Gini coefficient for 2007 was .551 — perfect equality is 0). Corruption, as measured by Transparency international’s Corruption Perceptions Index, is high. Guatemala ranked 111th out of 180 in 2007 and the judiciary is seen as weak and corrupt. Laws and rules to ensure sustainable outcomes would likely fare poorly in this sort of environment.

In conclusion, Guatemala may not be at the bottom of the sustainability rankings and may have more than a fingernail grasp of a chance at a transition to a sustainable and resilient future, but the prognosis is not good.



Unimproved landfills that contribute to surface and ground water pollution are common sights in Guatemala

The Current Linguistic State of Guatemala: A “Brief” Overview

Nelsy Echávez-Solano

Language is the most important trait that links the Mayas with their great past (Brown, 1996). In particular, Mayan languages “... represent a uniquely authentic cultural possession for their speakers. As a banner for ethnic pride, ... unlike many other cultural elements, they have remained largely intact throughout the centuries of foreign incursions and upheaval in Guatemala” (Fisher, 1996:14). Despite many hurdles and uncertainties, it can be said that Guatemala has experienced a cultural and linguistic reaffirmation in the last three decades.

In 1996, this nation formally recognized twenty-one historically Mayan related languages that belong to five of the six branches of the Mayan language family; K’iche’ (Quiché) being the largest one with approximately one million speakers. However, even till today, Spanish remains the country’s only official language, spoken by 60% of the population (Encyclopedia of Nations). According to Jiménez-Sánchez “being the ‘official’ language and the language used most extensively, Spanish continues to

be dominant, resulting in the segregation of Mayan languages and likening them ‘to essential cultural content’ ” (4). If the linguistic complexity of Guatemala has been considered by Guatemalan Ladinos (*mestizos*) to be an obstacle for development (4), what efforts have been made to validate the importance of these languages and their positive role in the entire Guatemalan social and cultural contexts? Who has taken the initiative to struggle for the official recognition of this linguistic cluster?

Even though the hegemony of Ladino culture in Guatemala has contributed to the decreasing practice and preservation of Mayan culture and languages for more than five centuries, during the last three decades several influential groups and/or movements and events have been playing important roles regarding the linguistic state of Guatemala, and seeking their cultural and linguistic recognition and reaffirmation. Among them are the formation of the Maya movement, and the acknowledgment of various Mayan organizations formed during the 1980s; the human slaughter carried out between 1978 and 1984; the beginning of the democratic period in 1985; the “official” end of a thirty-year-long civil war, in 1996; and the two most influential elements, the creation of the Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages (ALMG) in 1986, which developed standardized orthographies for the Mayan languages in 1987, and the 1996 peace accords. These last two elements have been labeled as the regulatory authorities on Mayan languages.

In a general sense, Guatemalans, and more specifically Mayans, have carried out more than a linguistic examination in this territory; they have initiated a synthesis of language variations through a consolidation of the diverse fragmented codes spoken by its population. In addition, the Mayans have been trying to expand the use of their languages. Due to this goal, it is more common to witness Guatemalan languages on the radio, television, books, and so on. The governmental and non-governmental arenas — universities in particular — have also contributed, in their own way, to the preservation of the twenty-one Mayan languages co-existing in Guatemala, by publishing linguistic works and training more young Mayan leaders. As a final note, “Mayas are willing and are getting prepared for the new era for Mayan languages” (Jiménez-Sánchez). But, when can we celebrate the officialization of not only the native language of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú (Quiché), but also the remaining twenty groups?



Market Day in San Francisco

Memory of Armed Conflict and Genocide in Guatemala

Alexis Howe

Due to my personal and research interests in human rights, one of my goals on this trip was to observe first-hand the memory of the so-called civil war (see endnote) and genocide in Guatemala. I knew the basic facts regarding the years of political violence — that the 36-year period of internal armed conflict (1960–1996) between state and guerrilla forces resulted in genocide, claiming over 200,000 lives (most of whom were Mayan Indians) and erasing some 400 indigenous communities from the map — and, like many US scholars, I had read Rigoberta Menchu’s testimony on the atrocities suffered by indigenous communities during these years. While I was unsure of what to expect in terms of historical memory, I was both astonished and disheartened by what I found, which seemed to me to be more like a collective amnesia of the country’s recent past.

During our time in Guatemala, I observed little official memory of the conflict, and it became clear to me that memory has been left up to individuals and communities. I saw no monuments dedicated to the victims of the violence. I did learn that a Peace Statue was erected in the National Palace in Guatemala City, but this was dedicated to the signing of the peace accords rather than those who lost their lives. While some villages have taken on the task to erect paintings or murals as visual representations of memory, little has been done officially to commemorate the victims in a public way. Also, survivors, victims’ families, and human rights organizations observe the 29th of December (the day, in 1996, when the Peace Accords were signed) as a day of remembrance, but as for the rest of the population (those who were not personally affected) this is a normal day. Similarly, February 25th (the day on which, in 1999, the Commis-

sion for Historical Clarification published its final report) has been named the “Day of Dignity” for victims of violence, but again, in general this is only observed by those who suffered directly.

Perhaps the most disturbing sign of historical amnesia was that, according to one of the language instructors at Celas Maya, Thelma, Guatemalan youth know little to nothing about the conflict or the genocide. During one of our conversations, Thelma stated that her children (who are between the ages of 12 and 20) and their friends have inquired to her about the “war,” saying that they had heard of it in school but knew very few details since it was covered only briefly and in minor detail. She claimed that this was a common experience for individuals of younger generations.



School children in Quetzaltenango

Unable to get Thelma’s story out of my mind, I decided to dig further, requesting a more formal interview from Vivian Martínez, a history professor at Rafael Landívar University, who was very generous in sharing her insight and helping me to understand the issue. Martínez said that in her experience many students come to the university with little to no knowledge of the conflict or the genocide (which means that if they do not attend college, as is the case for many Guatemalans, their only knowledge of the subject is what they gain in primary and secondary school). She clarified that there are two very different groups of students with respect to memory of the conflict: students who come from rural areas and who are primarily indigenous, and those who come from urban zones and who are mainly mestizo. The difference between these groups is that the first group has an awareness of the war because they either lived through it

or have family members that did, while the second group knows little to nothing of the conflict, and expresses little interest in learning about it. This second group often expresses a perception that learning about the conflict and genocide is unimportant because it has little to do with their current lives.

Since there are no regulations regarding how or to what extent this piece of history should be taught in schools, each teacher approaches the topic in the manner she or he feels most comfortable. In most cases this means that only a short time is spent covering the war, and there is often no analysis of the conflict.

Whereas the government has made little effort to ensure the memory of the conflict — neither commission that worked towards recuperating historical memory was formed by the government; the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) Project was put together by the Archdiocese of Guatemala, and the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) was formed by the UN, human rights groups have made significant efforts. Some NGOs have published reports or made documentary videos that include interviews and victims' testimonies on the violence lived in indigenous communities. Others continue to pursue investigations and trials of those responsible for violations of human rights, while still others aid in the search for family members, whether they be disappeared or displaced, and offer psychological support to survivors and other affected individuals. All of these efforts help to keep the memory of the war and genocide alive and show that it is still a part of present-day life.

Although several organizations have investigated the years of political violence and produced lengthy reports in an attempt to remember this dark period, learn from it, and prohibit it from being repeated, it seems that a generation of youth today has little to no knowledge of this part of their country's history. What can this possibly mean for the future of Guatemala? In regard to the need for the recuperation of historical memory in Guatemala, the following quote comes to mind: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again" (Maya Angelou).

Note

While the term "Civil War" is often used to describe this period in Guatemala's history, I was urged by Guatemalan professors to use terms such as *conflict* rather than *war* due to the fact that the nature of the violence was not equally reciprocal; according to the Commission on Historical Clarification, the state was responsible for 93% of the human rights violations during this time, while the insurgent groups were responsible for only 3%. In reality, the term genocide best describes the violence that took place during these years, since the vast majority of the victims (83%) were Mayan Indian civilians. While no one term seems capable of defining this time period, I will use the terms *conflict* and *genocide*.



Soldiers in Parque Central, Quetzaltenango

The Sadness of Memory

Michael Livingston

When we landed in Guatemala City on May 24, I was filled with mixed emotions. It had been 31 years since I had last left Guatemala, crossing over the frontier near Melchor de Mencos into Belize in 1978. I had been to Guatemala three times in the 1970s while a Peace Corps volunteer working in Honduras. I had spent weeks in Guatemala and was even given the keys to the city of Antigua at one point, by the mayor.

The airport is named Aurora, “dawn,” and the first jolt I received was at how much more modern the airport, and the city, had become. A number of tall buildings had bloomed in the cityscape, the airport could have been a modern airport anywhere in the world, and traffic congestion, always a problem in *Zona 1*, near the historic center of the city, now seemed to be a problem everywhere.

While memories washed over me on the bus ride to our hotel, I grew suspicious of my own recollections. Memory is a “fragile power” (Schacter, 1996), both the foundation of our sense of identity and ability to function in the world, while at the same time prone to a number of weaknesses that psychologists sometime refer to as “the seven sins of memory” (Schacter, 1999). The seven sins are transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence. Schacter (1999, p. 183) provides a concise definition of each of these sins:

Transience involves decreasing accessibility of information over time, *absent-mindedness* entails inattention or shallow processing that contributes to weak memories of ongoing events or forgetting to do things in the future, and *blocking* refers to the temporary inaccessibility of information that is stored in memory. ... *Misattribution* involves attributing a recollection or idea to the

wrong source, *suggestibility* refers to memories that are implanted as a result of leading questions or comments during attempts to recall past experiences, and *bias* involves retrospective distortions or unconscious influences that are related to current knowledge and beliefs. ... [*P*]ersistence refers to pathological remembrances: information or events that we cannot forget, even though we wish we could.

My memory is prone to all of these sins, and so as the trip unfolded I trusted neither my memories nor the emotions they engendered.

My memory of Guatemala City had always been of a drab place, with too many security guards or soldiers, and too few smiling people. Security guards were still in abundance. If anything, there were more than I remembered. The drabness was certainly there also, as we travelled to the giant relief map of the country the afternoon we landed. The *Mapa en Relieve* is a scale model map of the geography of the country located in one of the larger parks in town. This was my third visit to the *mapa*. It shows the mountains and valleys of the country, as well as the major towns. It is impressive (there are two viewing stands that help you get an overview) and shows the stark rugged terrain. It is also, to me at least, a bit symbolic. Without any historical markers or explanations, without any context, a bit run down and shabby, it is a metaphor for contemporary Guatemala.

The next day, Monday, we left by bus for Quetzaltenango. To my delight, I discovered that my Hispanic Studies department colleagues were all *chistosos* — people who love a good joke or pun, and tell great stories. The long drive gave me time to look at the countryside which, with its forests and cloud capped peaks, reflected the beauty of the Guatemala I remembered. It also seemed, to my distress, to be more crowded, littered, and eroded than what I recalled. Could these be instances of bias, my unconscious glorification of the country's beauty? Or perhaps transience, the fading of memories after 30-plus years? Or even absent-mindedness, reflecting the fact that as a twenty-something I really had not been paying attention?

I liked Quetzaltenango, or Xela as most of the inhabitants refer to it, from the moment we got off the bus. It reminded me a bit of Tegucigalpa, of which I have very fond memories, only with a much larger indigenous population. Classes began on Tuesday at Celas Maya, and again I felt a vague comfort, like holding a favorite book, when dealing with the teachers and staff at the center. Professional and friendly, they reminded me of my Peace Corps training at a similar place long ago.

On Thursday, my sense of comfort and memory started to unravel. A 7.1 earthquake off the north coast of Honduras was felt all throughout Central America and woke most of our group. I slept through it and learned about it the next day. I skipped

the group trip to Laguna de Chicabal to listen to a talk on environmental problems facing Guatemala. The talk, given at the Celas Maya by environmental scientist Vivian Martinez, was deeply disturbing, to say the least. In the thirty years since I had left the country, the population had almost doubled, from 7 million to 13 million, the amount of forests had decreased at a rate of 11% per year. The actual loss of acreage was twice that of Mexico and four times that of Brazil. Of the 333 municipalities in the country, only 125 (38%) had garbage and trash pick-up. Those that did have trash collection, like Xela, had massive dumps where the trash was left in the open and picked over by the poor, mostly children, looking for reusable material. Xela alone produced 150 tons of garbage per day, which was deposited on the slopes of the nearby Santa Maria volcano, where it contaminated the soil and seeped into the water table. Guatemala, Vivian argued, is drowning in garbage that is contaminating the water and soil, at the same time that the forests are being destroyed. I had a memory of visiting the massive dump in *Zona 3* in Guatemala City, where the *guajeros* picked through the trash to survive. I was taken there by a Guatemalan friend in 1977. The memory came unbidden — strange to me that I had hidden it away for so long.

I immediately knew I had to visit the dump, to see for myself, to see, in part, that my memories were real. Vivian agreed to take me on a visit the next day and I hired a driver to meet us at 7 AM. Our driver, Osman, chatted animatedly as he drove his pickup truck while I feared for his transmission. The road was rutted and dangerous, and was frequented by the large dump trucks lumbering up the hills. The dump itself, when we arrived, was a vast field of trash, much of it plastic. The smell permeated our skin and as we walked through the dump, bugs swarmed the air. I had a camera, something I don't usually carry. I always felt that cameras separate the photographer from the world, and so I had few pictures, for instance, of my time in Honduras (two of a group of friends, two more taken by friends of me, all of them now lost). I did want to document the dump, so I took photos of the trash as we walked through.

Eventually we came to a group of children, including a young teenage mother who was carrying a baby, picking through the dump. I asked several of them to take their photo; they all refused. As Vivian, Osman, and I turned back toward the truck, we heard popping sounds behind us. The *guajeros* were throwing bottles at us as we walked away.



Landfill near Quetzaltenango

Perhaps the strangest part of the visit itself was not what they had done, but my reaction to it. I was moved by their dignity. Their poverty and circumstances did not rob them of their dignity. They refused to be objectified by a tourist.

The trip now had a surreal character to it, in spite of my comfort and ease at being in Central America again. The last full day we spent in Antigua, a place I had been to three times previously. Antigua, the ancient colonial capital, is laid out on a grid pattern and has numerous old churches and colonial era buildings. Surrounded by volcanic mountains on all sides, it is the very definition of picturesque. Disturbingly, to me at least, it had also become a kind of Disneyland version of itself catering to tourists.

As we rode from Antigua to Guatemala City, first to drop Br. Dennis at a bus stop so he could travel to El Salvador, then to the airport where we would depart, I thought about my memories and the truth they contained. Memory is indeed a fragile power, as Schacter has said, but it is an authentic power. What Schacter did not say, which perhaps he should have, is that the power carries with it sadness as well. But then, the sadness of memory can also give us strength.

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Maya, Catholic, and Protestant Syncretism

Elena Sanchez Mora

I joined our May study group with a particular interest in spirituality. Before our trip, I had seen statistics showing that Catholicism and Protestantism each share roughly 50% of the people's favor in Guatemala, with only about 1% for the Maya cult. My observations during our field experience outings, my conversations with teachers and guides and my readings on the subject helped me confirm this blend of spiritual traditions.

The ancient Maya cosmology still pervades many aspects of current life in Guatemala. One example is clothing. Indigenous women continue to wear their traditional outfit, consisting of a "corte," a piece of weaving that wraps around the waist, set in place with a matching band, and complemented by an embroidered blouse. As the guides explained to the group at the Ixquic Museum of traditional garments, the patterns in the blouses follow designs from the Maya calendar. Another example is the natural surroundings. As we witnessed during our visit to Lake Chicabal, Maya people consider it sacred; for that reason, they don't fish or bathe in it, but perform religious ceremonies and leave offerings of flowers in its shores.

Jaime García, my teacher at Celas Maya, our language school, told me that in his family, his siblings, now young adults, did not learn Quiché, one of the Maya languages spoken in Quetzaltenango, because the parents spoke to them in Spanish. However, when he went to live with his grandmother as a child, he learned the language, through which she also transmitted to him her knowledge of the Maya worldview. That is how he became committed to the preservation of his heritage, with particular interest in the Maya cosmology, which is an important part of the culture. The Maya cosmology contains teachings that explain the connections between human beings and the rest of nature. The birth date of each person points to an elaborate system of intricate mixed traits tied to each person's nahual, an animal or nature related sign that marks one's individual personality. Jaime spent a long time during our study sessions going over my primary and secondary nahual signs to illustrate the complex characterization of positive and negative attributes carried by each. What stands out is that the Maya cosmology presents a comprehensive view of the world, where the religious and the psychological elements are not exclusive, and the good and the bad complement each other, seeking a balance.

Jaime, as well as another teacher and Mayan priest we met during our visit to Landivar University, where our students take classes, make an effort to rescue and preserve the cosmology together with the Quiché language and continues to study and teach it as well as practice it. However, Jaime also works at a Pentecostal church with groups

of children and shared with me some of the Christian songs that Hispanic Christian musicians have created. Pentecostal and Evangelical churches are scattered throughout urban and rural areas all over Guatemala. From the outside, they look like any building, but they have names like Source of life, God is love. The widespread influence of Protestant churches is evident also in the names of the so-called “chicken buses;” these are old American school buses turned into multicolor public transportation vehicles, loaded with passengers and their assorted cargo, including live chickens. Traditionally, buses have been given names of women or phrases connected to popular culture, but they have been replaced with phrases that clearly show the influence of those churches.

Protestant churches coexist with traditional Catholic churches, which show a mixture of Catholic and Indigenous art. We visited a small and a larger bright yellow church building at the top of a steep road with figures of leopards and angels dressed in shiny blue and red garb, mixed with the more recognizable Catholic saints and virgins. We also visited a more conventionally decorated colonial church, next to which was a Maya altar with a black cross, where we were told religious ceremonies are performed.



Church in San Andres Xecul

On the way down from our visit to one of the bright yellow churches, we went inside a house where people pay a fee to enter a room dedicated to Maximón/San Simón. This character is a local saint represented by a lifesize wood-carved seated figure, which travels periodically to be housed by other families, which take turns hosting him. Legends abound about Maximón, but Jaime told me that he was an Indigenous Maya man who went from village to village encouraging people to preserve their traditions in the face of the imposition of Spanish culture. His Maya name was later transformed into San Simón and his figure was carved from the wood of the tree under whose feet his body lay. This figure, from bigger than lifesize to miniature, appears at the altars in the homes that host him, as well as in the numerous crafts markets. The one we saw was dressed as a motorcycle rider complete with leather jacket, bandana and sunglasses, and at the same time as a cowboy with hat and boots. People dress him to acknowledge their appreciation for favors he made to them, and they also leave offerings like alcohol and cigarettes. The room he inhabits during his stay at each household has a bed where he sleeps during the night. Candles and portraits of Jesus, the virgin and other saints complement the scene.

The reasons for the strong appeal of the Protestant churches in the last three decades are complex and exceed the length of this account, but it is undeniable that religious syncretism, with its mixture of ancient Maya cults, Spanish colonial Catholicism and the more recent Protestant churches, is prevalent in the current daily life of Guatemalans.

A Week with *Nan Aurelia*: Reflections on Learning K'iche' in Post-War Guatemala

Corey Shouse-Tourino

Guatemala is a country approximately the size of Tennessee with a geography dominated by thick jungles, active volcanoes and densely knit mountains. Understandably, one of the K'iche' names for Guatemala is *siwantinimit* — literally “nation of cliffs.” Since the decline of the once prosperous Mayan city-states (roughly since 900 A.D.) the country's indigenous groups have lived in relatively static rural concentrations. In the five centuries since the Spanish Conquest they have also endured poverty, slave-like exploitation and systematic racial and ethnic discrimination, conditions which reached violent crescendo during the thirty-six year genocidal “civil war” of 1960–96 which claimed as many as 300,000 mostly indigenous lives. In this regard there are few places more important to the understanding of the ethical issues and historical challenges that surround language learning and multi-cultural democracy than Guatemala.

The faculty development trip to Guatemala in May 2009 provided me with a number of valuable (and often humbling) opportunities to reflect on my life as a language learner and Latin Americanist. During our stay I took twenty-odd hours of instruction in Maya K'iche,' the largest indigenous language spoken in Guatemala. My teacher was *Nan Aurelia*, a no-nonsense retired grade school teacher who had spent most of her career teaching in the Mayan highlands during the most violent years of the civil war.

On a perfunctory level *Nan Aurelia* helped me reach the humble limitations of my own ability to acquire foreign language. I will treasure my memory of being dumb-struck by the complex K'iche' nomenclature for family relations which depends both on the sex and marital status of the speaker as well as those of the person spoken about. Likewise I will work to keep present my frustrations with the basics of the phonetic system, gender rules and case structure of K'iche.' With any luck my futile struggles to master the glottal difference between a K' and a Q' will make me a better professor of Spanish.

As I worked with *Nan Aurelia* I also got to know her as a person and observe her as a peer. Like most Mayan women of her generation, she was encouraged to stay at home and 'learn to be a good wife,' while her brothers were pushed to learn a trade, speak Spanish and assimilate *Ladino* values as best they could. As a result, she maintained her K'iche' and self-identification as Mayan while her brothers did not. As a young teacher posted to a rural school in the Mayan highlands her language skills and Mayan identity would help her gain the trust of her host community, and survive raids by the Guatemalan army that claimed the lives of two of her co-workers and one of her brothers.

I also noticed that her explanations of K'iche' grammar, syntax and vocabulary sometimes contradicted what my colleagues were learning from their teachers. She also worked from a handful of notebooks and materials of her own confection, as did her colleagues. Even in the university town of Xela I found it nearly impossible to find a K'iche' dictionary, and publications from the state-funded Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala were all but unattainable. Certainly the material and pedagogical conditions for multi-cultural education in Guatemala still leave much to desire.

Despite the Guatemalan state's public promises to establish a multi-cultural democracy, my own privileged access to K'iche' instruction suggested unfulfilled promises and conditions of instability which sadly seem to be repeating themselves in environmental, political and economic spheres. Guatemalan leaders understand that the future of their tenuous peace hinges on the transformative power of multi-cultural education, and since 1996 the state has made substantial pledges to recognize the heritage and guarantee the human rights of its indigenous populations. Today the country

recognizes 23 official languages (21 of these are indigenous). The National Indigenous Language Law of 2003 was written specifically to foment “the acquisition, conservation and transmission” of the “cosmivision, values and customs” of the Mayan, Garífuna and Xinka peoples in Guatemala. This decree also established the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala and committed the state to pluri-linguistic education as a cornerstone policy of its democracy. In a twist of cruel irony this legislation was signed into law by the president of congress General José Efraín Ríos Montt, the same military dictator responsible for the bloodiest campaigns to annihilate Guatemala’s guerrilla groups and forcibly assimilate its indigenous populations during the 1980s.

Thinking about my week with *Nan Aurelia* I am struck by the gravity of her country’s situation and mindful of the ethical imperative that orients her work as a language instructor. Perhaps in a less-dramatic fashion this same imperative exists in this country as it struggles to come to terms with its largest ethnic and linguistic minority.



Selling to tourists in Antigua

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