LAS PREGUNTAS | Research Questions
- How is the indigenous voice being preserved in modern society?
- Is indigenous representation accurate, glorified, or ignored?
- How important is cultural sensitivity and representation to indigenous Mayan culture?

PORQUÉ | Motivations
In the summer of 2012, I visited Guatemala for the first time. That was the first of three – soon to be four - trips to Guatemala to work with a children’s home outside of the capital.

Because of this trip, I added a Spanish double major, I applied for a Fulbright Grant, and decided to finish my degree in Hispanic Language and Literature with a self-directed study of the most widely spoken indigenous language in Guatemala: K’iche’.

The Mayan people and culture have become an integral part of my education and experience as a global citizen.

OVER the past fifty years, films portraying Central America have increased. However, many represent only the crime, drugs, or stereotypical presumptions of Mayan society. To address these being said, there are three films that represent the struggles, beauty, and truth of indigenous life in Mayan communities.

Hombres Armados (Men with Guns) - This film by John Sayles from 1997 tells the story of an aging doctor who goes into an unnamed, militia-infested jungle to find his son who was an American deliver medicine to the indigenous people (Image 4). Throughout his journey, the doctor meets a young boy (Image 2). The representation of the Mayan in their constant quest for life in ever-present armed adversity.

El Norte - The journey through Central America to the United States is a passage that most Americans choose to ignore. Immigration and current political climates simply warrant study, but also culturally sensitive preservation in the forms of United States filmmakers. That being said, there are three films that represent the struggles, beauty, and truth of indigenous life in Mayan communities.

The Resilience of the Mayans | Presented by Savannah Dixon | Assisted by Dr. Millie Gimmel

LA VOZ INDIGENA | The Indigenous Voice

In the Western Highlands of Guatemala, the Quiche’ people sustain their culture in dress, food, and language. The K’iche’ language is spoken by over one million people in Guatemala making it the largest indigenous group and spoken language at the foot of the Mayan populations. The Mayan people make up the largest indigenous group in the Americas with roughly six million people identifying as one of the twenty-three Mayan groups. Today, five million Mayans reside in Guatemala, and the largest group is the nation of Quiche’.

The Quiche’ nation was made famous in the 1980’s by the story of Rigoberta Menchú (Images 3, 5) – a Nobel Peace Prize winner and indigenous land rights activist. Her story of the treatment of indigenous peoples during the thirty-six year Guatemalan Civil War brought the Mayan people and the preservation of their culture to the attention of a global audience. Her testimony, along with other cultural artifacts in film – Hombres Armados, El Norte, and Ixcanul – and text – Popol Vuh, Chilam Balam, and Balún Canán – work together to create a picture of indigenous expression. Juxtaposed in Spanish and indigenous languages, the story of indigenous resilience shifts slightly, but through these cultural artifacts, the indigenous voice – in both the mother tongue and colonial tongue – and language sustain the tradition, history, and expression of the Mayan people.

The representation of Mayan culture is changing. In film, their representation is growing exceedingly more realistic, and their struggles are being brought into reality instead of glorified into American exoticism. In text, their histories are growing exceedingly more realistic, and their struggles are being brought into the forefront because of the calendar and the account of Rigoberta Menchú. In 1997, the Nobel Peace Prize winner discussed her brutal public burning of her brother and the deaths of her parents during the Guatemalan Civil War. In the last 90s, after being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, her account was brought under review by an anthropologist and historian David Stoll. Even if one piece of her story was false, her story represents a dark, bloody, and accurate testimony of a time of violent massacre towards the indigenous people of Guatemala.

"After I had read a page or two from the account of the creation of the earth [of the Popol Vuh], I stopped and waited for their reaction. No one spoke for some time. Finally, the elderly man with the sick boy asked if he might hold the unbound pages of the manuscript copy for a moment. He gently took it from my hands and with great care turned its pages. "These are the words of my ancient fathers!" he asked. "Yes," I replied. "Do you know what you have done for them? I wasn’t quite sure what he meant, so I didn’t answer at first.

You make them live again by speaking their words.
- [Allen J Chumadross]

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