

# LA RESILIENCIA DE LOS MAYA

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

## 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?

## PORQUE | 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.



## EL CINE | Film

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

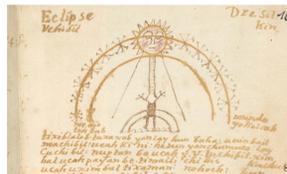
**Hombres Armados (Men with Guns)** - This film by John Sayles from 1997 tells the story of an aging doctor who goes into an unnamed, militia-infested jungle to find his students who were sent to deliver medicine to the indigenous people years before (Image 4). Throughout his journey, the doctor meets a young boy (Image 6), a deserter, and a priest. While they are wandering through the countryside, in the background of the film is a beautiful woman and her talkative daughter speaking about a coming visitor who will help cure the mother's leg. However, these women are not speaking Spanish, they are speaking an unidentified native language. This tone of mysticism and idealism, tied to the conservation of indigenous community hidden away from the "Hombres Armados," represents the resilience 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 make it difficult to think about the realities of those who come to the United States seeking refuge and safety from the oppression and violence of home. *El Norte* tells such a story, but it tells this story truthfully: brother and sister, Rosa (Image 2) and Enrique, who start their journey north after the murder of their father and the arrest of their mother. In order to go north, they have to abandon much of their Quiche' culture for survival in this new world. However, they quickly learn that the image of The North and the reality are not equal. After months of



"Kojb'e chi qamaq'...  
Kojina' k'ut.  
Mojisacho.  
Mojimes k'u taj puch."

"We go to our people...  
Remember us.  
Do not lose sight of us.  
Do not sweep us away. - *Popol Vuh*"



trying to adjust, Enrique loses his job as a respected waiter and Rosa dies suddenly of typhus contracted from rats on their journey. Before his death, Enrique's father tells him, "To those in power, we are only arms, we are not men." At the end of his journey, after his father passes, this message becomes true as Enrique begins his life as a day laborer, as "only arms." This representation of the reality of the immigration journey is also a reality of how the assimilation to new country can lead to the loss of indigenous roots.

**Ixcanul (Volcano)** - A Kaqchikel language film that premiered last year introduced the world of cinema to the most realistic view an indigenous woman's life through the themes of unplanned pregnancy, sexuality in a traditional community, and the existing colonial power of the Spanish over the Indigenous. During the

film, Maria (Image 1), while in an arranged engagement, becomes pregnant with her boyfriend's child. Out of fear, her mother tries to help her abort the child – going directly against traditional belief. When this does not work, Maria's mother begins viewing her the Virgin Maria embodied. This mystical belief tied to Maria's pregnancy leads the family to use her perceived invincibility to go into the family farm to chase off snakes overtaking their fields. She is immediately bit and rushed to the hospital for an emergency birth. After she has lost and buried the baby, her grief turns to madness which leads her to exhume her child's

body. It is not there. In its place is a brick. When the family decides to investigate, the language barriers cause them to misunderstand that after her childbirth, Maria had signed away her child to the government not being able to read the form. The film ends with the lingering tensions of post-colonial powers and the mystical future of Maria at the foot of the volcano of the gods (Image 7).

## 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 of the twenty-three indigenous 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 testimonial 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 and colonial tongue – and language sustain the tradition, history, and expression of the Mayan people.

## LAS OBRAS ESCRITAS | Written Works

rediscovered an ancient Mayan text in the Yucatan - a collection of works from Mayan priests. These texts, recorded by Spanish priests and monks, tell the histories of the Yucatec Maya. These texts discuss the meaning of time and the calendar to the Mayan people - aspects of their civilization which baffle and amaze modern historians. While the text itself is descriptive and historic, the possibly added connections to western civilization and religion make this text a reflection of the attempted overhaul of indigenous culture. Even with these religious and moral additions, the culture of native Mayans bleeds through demonstrating their constant resilience (Image 8).

**Balún Canán** - Compared to the two previous works, *Balún Canán* was published in 1957. Fast-forwarding 500 years into the future the power of the indigenous people is beginning to rise in southern Mexico. Due to land and social reform, the aristocracy is falling and this novel highlights this event through the perspective of a young, nameless girl. Through her journey of identity and misidentity, the power and powerlessness of the indigenous people waxes and wanes highlighting the post-colonial class tensions in a changing world.

**Yo, Rigoberta Menchú** – In the last twenty years, Mayan history has been brought to the forefront because of the calendar and the account of Rigoberta Menchú (Image 3, 5). She discusses the brutal public burning of her brother and the deaths of her parents during the Guatemalan Civil War. In the late 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.

## LOS RESULTADOS | Conclusion

"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."

"Do you know what you have done for them?" I wasn't quite sure what he meant, so I didn't answer at first.

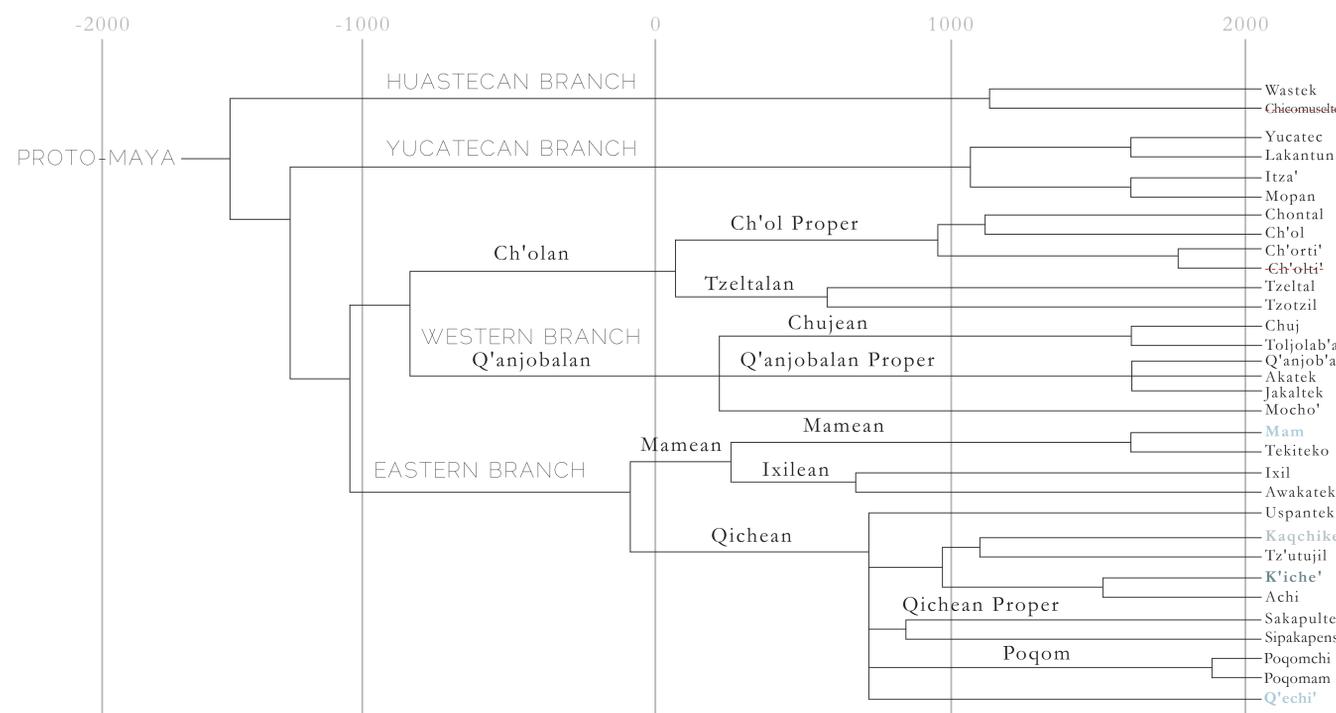
"You make them live again by speaking their words."

[ - Allen J. Christenson]

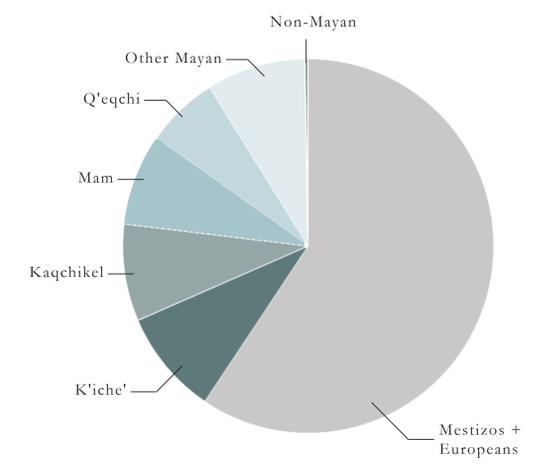
The representation of Mayan culture is changing. In film, their representation is growing exceedingly more realistic, and their struggles are being brought into reality instead of glorified into American exoticism. In text, their histories are being maintained in testimony, mythology, and novel and presented back to the people. Representation will continue to change, but is this enough to maintain the identity of the Mayan people to the outside world?

In the United States, the Mayans are seen either as Indians, "Mexicans," or simply extinct. The Mayan people from ancient history not only continue to exist with a distinct identity, but they are also growing. After the decimation of 90% of all Native Americans between the 13th and 19th century, the Mayan people are one - if not the only - group to have far surpassed their pre-Columbian population. Their existence, resilience, and history do not simply warrant study, but also culturally sensitive preservation in the forms of respect, accurate representation, and not simply glorification. It is not the right of the educated American to keep them alive, but it is a responsibility of the educated American to remember those who occupied this land before, and pay them their due respect.

## EVOLUCION DE LA LENGUA MAYA | Timeline



## LAS LENGUAS HABLADAS | Spoken Languages



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