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Guatemalan Migration to Los Angeles: Struggle for Survival

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I am Guatemalan-American. I came to Los Angeles at the age of eleven in 2009. My family left Guatemala for economic reasons, and as far as I knew the same was true for some of my uncles, who had moved to Los Angeles decades earlier. I had not been taught about the Guatemalan Civil War during my school years in Guatemala, nor was it on the curriculum in my middle or high school social studies classes in Los Angeles. In other words, Guatemalas' Civil War, spanning more than three decades from 1960 to 1996, and the massive human rights violations that were committed in particular against indigenous Guatemalans were completely unknown to me. In my research for this paper I learned about a succession of Guatemalan military regimes who, in collaboration with the government of the United States in the name of fighting communism, reduced indigenous peasants to communist insurgents who rightfully needed to be hunted down.[1] Pushed to the limits, some indigenous groups chose to organize primarily around their demand for access to land and ultimately resisted military repression through guerrilla warfare. Other indigenous groups tried to maintain neutrality in the on-going and ever intensifying civil war and as a result often found themselves caught in the crossfire between the military and the guerrillas. This paper first explores the brutal consequences of the war on indigenous communities in Guatemala, which ultimately resulted in an unprecedented number of indigenous Guatemalans fleeing their homeland and finding their way to Los Angeles, California. Secondly, I document how the Mayan groups arriving in Los Angeles transformed the city, as they faced new challenges and struggled to survive in a cultural climate that saw little value in their contributions.

Guatemala's political instability began in 1954, the year the CIA supported a coup against the president Jacobo Arbenz, during a time the USA was making efforts to combat communist influence. The coup of 1954 accelerated the violent 30-year civil war that saw thousands of indigenous people killed and led to the migration of thousands of indigenous people to Los Angeles. This political turmoil challenged the physical survival of many indigenous groups, but these communities still continue to face challenges for their survival in Los Angeles. As Guatemalan myself, the history of the civil war was an unknown topic, for it has been a heavily censored topic in Guatemala. To this day, the government continues to hide the story of the civil war, the research done to write this paper allowed me to discover the atrocities committed by both guerrilla and army groups, and the conditions that led many indigenous people to escape the violence occurring in Guatemala.

By 1944, Guatemalans sought to protect labor, introduce land reforms, and consolidate democracy, inspired by the decolonization movements occurring across the globe. Guatemalans hoped to also liberate themselves from the military regime they had been under the past fourteen years, the dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico. In 1944 a growing group of skilled people and teachers challenged Ubico's regime, asking for a free election. The groups saw the ideal candidate to win the election in Dr. Juan Jose Arevalo, a teacher living in Argentina after being exiled for writing works criticizing Ubico's regime. Historian Stephen Schlesinger states in his book, *Bitter Fruit*, that Guatemalans saw him as "the embodiment of the nation's hopes and dreams, living proof that the long years of dictatorship might be ending."[2] Arevalo won Guatemala's first democratic election and immediately took upon his responsibility to restore democracy in Guatemala. Arevalo also proclaimed that, "agriculture and popular education are the two fields that have been the orphans of official interest in Guatemala," and they would be

among his priorities.[3] One of Guatemala's main problems was the lack of land available for indigenous communities; only a small percentage of people owned the majority of the land; according to Schlesinger, "two percent of the landowners held 72 percent of the land."[4] One of Arevalo's first actions was the gradual redistribution of land the Guatemalan government had confiscated from Germans and Nazi sympathizers. Arevalo's presidency ended in 1951 after Jacobo Arbenz won the election of 1950.

Arbenz received massive support from peasants who hoped that he would continue with the policies that Arevalo introduced to transform Guatemala. Like Arevalo, Arbenz recognized that one of the main issues Guatemala still faced was the lack of land for indigenous communities. Arbenz sought to introduce agrarian reform, he claimed that, "agrarian reform is a vital part of our program so that we can rid ourselves of the latifundios (giant privately-owned farms) and introduce fundamental changes in our primitive work methods, that is to cultivate uncultivated lands."[5] Throughout his first year, Arbenz devoted all his energy to the passage of a genuine agrarian law reform. Under the reform, the government was empowered to appropriate only uncultivated portions of large plantations. Farms smaller than 223 acres were not subject to the law, nor were farms of 223-670 acres, which were at least two thirds uncultivated. They confiscated land and distributed it to landless peasants in, as Schlesinger states, “plots not to exceed 42.5 acres.”[6] Arbenz’s plan to confiscate and redistribute land to landless indigenous communities enraged the American company The United Fruit company. Arbenz's problems began when he confiscated uncultivated land from the United Fruit Company who responded by working quietly to convince the American government that he was a threat to freedom, labeling him as a communist and arguing that he must be overthrown. The USA sought to stop any liberation movements occurring in the Americas and supported Carlos Castillo Armas to

overthrow him. The coup marked the beginning of US interventions across the Americas, the beginning of political instability in Guatemala, and growing discontent amongst Guatemalans which ultimately led to Civil War.

During the 1970s and 1980s the insurgent movement led by the Government intensified and led to the decimation of indigenous communities, who who migrated outside Guatemala trying to escape the political turmoil. The government began its repression program in 1976 to discourage the growing tide of peasants and organized labor protests. As guerilla activity in the rural areas of Guatemala increased, the president's brother General Benedicto Lucas Garcia, drew a new plan for a "massive campaign of strategic warfare against civilian populations thought to be collaborating with guerrillas."[7] The plan was first implemented in 1981, but it would be put in full motion in 1982, the year Rios Montt came to power after a coup d'état. The army planned to attack every indigenous community, even the remote communities in the Highlands of Guatemala also known as Cuchumatanes.

Indigenous communities in the crossfire of the Civil War

Indigenous authors have shed light on the violation committed by the Guatemalan Government. Rigoberta Menchu, a Mayan woman from El Quiche, one of the devastated communities from the government's ethnogenocide, was amongst the first Mayan figures to tell the story of the indigenous communities in their struggle for survival. In her book, *Yo Rigoberta Menchu,* Menchu states that some indigenous communities decided to fight the oppressing government and join insurgent groups, other communities decided to remain neutral.[8] However, the communities that remain neutral still encountered brutal fates. The book *Voices from Exile* by Mayan author Victor Montejo recounts the horrors that indigenous communities experienced

during the civil war.[9] One of the most affected indigenous were the Kanjobal. In one story Montejo recalls that on January 6, 1982 the villagers in El Limonar, a village near the Mexican border, faced a brutal fate. At 7:00 P.M. The army arrived at the community, and one group of soldiers went to a house where people were praying. The soldiers gathered all the men then took them outside and them ordered to kneel on the ground. As the men kneeled, the soldiers opened fire, aiming at their heads. The rest of the people from the community tried to escape to the ravines during the shooting, and the soldiers in response started firing their weapons in all directions. Eighteen people were killed that night. Montejo states that the darkness of the night helped entire families escape. The next day the villagers returned to retrieve their possession and examine the damage from the previous night. However, all they could find were bodies everywhere. A villagers stated that, "the victims' blood was spilled everywhere."[10] Montejo narrates that hundreds of families started migrating to Chiapas and others to Los Angeles, escaping the war. He claims that most indigenous people that migrated were Kanjobal; they counted for the biggest group of indigenous communities that migrated to Mexico and Los Angeles.

Anthropologist George Lovell in his book, *A Beauty that Hurts,* writes the story of Genaro Castaneda, a Mayan Kanjobal who migrated to California during the ongoing civil war in Guatemala.[11] He was born in 1970 and raised in the community of Yula. Genaro would often leave his family to work on nearing plantations because his family did not own any land. By the age of twelve, he decided to go to "*la capital*," to sell the coffee he had collected from the previous plantation he worked on. Upon his return, his life changed. Even though Yula tried to stay neutral in the conflict between the army and the guerrillas, upon returning his village was under the control of guerrilla groups that continuously arrived at the village to collect goods and

leave propaganda behind. His village was fearful that at any moment, military groups could arrive and see the guerrilla propaganda and associate his community with insurgent groups. Genaro wrote that although the army never arrived at his village, "an order from the regional commander did."[12] The order called for "all able-bodied men between sixteen and sixty years of age to form a civil defense."[13] Although Genaro had not reached the age of eligibility, he was still forced to join as a standing guard at the outskirts of Yula. Genaro claims that the most frightening part of the service was "when he had to leave the checkpoint at the entrance to Yula and comb surrounding hills in search of guerrillas."[14] He was fearful of running into any guerrilla group that could identify him as a civil defense patrol member and kill him on sight. However, his greater fear was reaching the age that qualified him for regular duty in the civil defense patrol, and so he decided to escape before reaching the qualifying age. Genaro sold all his belongings to raise enough money for his expenses, and he set out first to Mexico, then the US. At the age of fourteen, Genaro made it to "*El Norte"* in 1984.

Indigenous communities across the highlands suffered from the atrocities committed by the army as well as the guerilla groups. Tomas Guzaro, an indigenous Ixil, writes his story about leading people out of the village to safety. Guzaro states that around 1982, guerrilla groups entered his community; like military groups, guerrilla groups also enforced military duty and, "every able-bodied person to join them."[15] Tomas claims that as protestants, his community was in extreme danger for the guerrilla often told them, "you *evangelicals* are all liars because God does not exist, and you are thieves because you are taking up offerings from poor people. You deserve to die."[16] Guzaro claims that guerrilla groups sought his support because he was a predominant figure within the Ixil community, however the guerrilla groups tried to kill him when he declined supporting them. Tomas' community was also fearful of the army because the

constant guerilla presence led the army believed all the Ixil community were *guerrilleros*. He states that the guerrillas gave them orders to run from the army, an action they did out of fear. As a result, the army believed they were *guerrilleros* that were running from them. Tomas states that as a response the army, “unleashed all their fury on us, sweeping through villages, massacring innocent men, women, and children, and sometimes burning families alive in their homes."[17] He escaped by going to the mountains along with “227 people.”[18] In her book, *Paradise in Ashes,* Beatriz Manz also writes about the forced recruitment the indigenous communities faced, and she states that before 1979, guerrilla groups only asked for food and resources from the indigenous communities.[19] However, that changed after 1979, when the "recruitment became far more aggressive and the standards for joining the insurgency were considerably loosened."[20]

Manz recounts the stories of several indigenous communities, and how they were affected by the cross-fire of both the military and insurgent groups, and ultimately the destruction of their villages. She claims that as a result, people started seeking refugee outside of Guatemala, with many people escaping to Chiapas. Manz states that although many indigenous Guatemalans migrated outside of Guatemala, some indigenous communities decided to escape to the mountains in the highland region where they created resistance communities. She also mentions that some, upon arriving in Chiapas, decided to move further up into Mexico and even the United States. Over time, the number of indigenous Guatemalans arriving in Los Angeles increased. The second part of this research paper will focus on the story of the settlement and the challenges the indigenous communities that arrived in Los Angeles faced, in particular the Kanjobal, an indigenous community located in Huehuetenango near the Guatemalan border with Chiapas, Mexico.

Guatemalan settlement in Los Angeles: 1980-present

As the counterinsurgency movements intensified after 1982, the number of indigenous communities leaving Guatemala increased as well. Although many opted to escape to refugee camps throughout Mexico, others opted to move to Los Angeles instead. Scholars Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, in their book, *Seeking Community in a Global City,* mention that Guatemalans had been arriving in Los Angeles in small numbers throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, by the 1980s, the number of Guatemalans in Los Angeles had drastically increased and became heavily concentrated near the West-lake and Pico-Union area. Among them, were the Kanjobal. For indigenous communities keeping their culture intact is important because for them keeping their heritage alive is an essential aspect of survival as a group. The Kanjobal had to find ways to help those who continued to arrive in Los Angeles to settle and protect their culture. In the process, the Kanjobal significantly transformed South Los Angeles.

The Kanjobal were drawn to areas with relatively low housing costs and therefore moved into predominantly black neighborhoods. By the 1980s, the once black neighborhoods of South LA were becoming increasingly Latino with Guatemalans comprising an ever larger number. The number of Kanjobals living in the Pico-Union drastically increased with several thousand Kanjobal from the Guatemala highlands, many of them from San Miguel Acatan and the nearby villages of Huehuetenango. Once settled, many Guatemalans living in Los Angeles helped their family members in Guatemala to migrate as well. Sometimes, two or more families would rent

one apartment together and share the rent. They opened up family-owned markets, bakeries, and restaurants. These practices helped the Mayan Kanjobal succeed financially in Los Angeles.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Los Angeles underwent a dramatic economic change, as the city workforce experienced both deindustrialization and reindustrialization.[21] Many of the manufacturing firms moved abroad, while there was an increase of professional managerial jobs and technical employees in the commercial sector. This economic restructuring led to increased activity at the other end of the economic spectrum, such as jobs in highly labor-intensified industries like garment factoring. Guatemalan immigrants benefited from the shift in the labor force as well as from friends and family connections, which helped them find jobs in the garment industry. The garment industry also became a popular job within the Guatemalan community because employers did not ask for legal documentation from the workers, and language barriers were not an impediment to perform the job well. By the 1990s, according to the census, the garment factory employed a total of 4.5 percent Guatemalan and Salvadorian men, and 10.3 percent women.[22] The low-paid Kanjobal were vital workers in the garment industry's survival and growth in Los Angeles, while the garment industry was declining across the USA. The number of garment factories in Los Angeles continued to increase throughout the 1990s, when "there were over 5,000 apparel firms in Los Angeles county."[23]

Most of the garment factories were located near the West-Lake and Pico-Union area. Living close to the factories also made it easier for Guatemalans to work in the factories. Some Guatemalans became so efficient in the garment factories that they decided to open up their own businesses. Figure 1 is a picture from the UCLA archives showing a Mayan Kanjobal named Efrian working in his garment shop in 1984.[24] Efrian arrived during the second wave of migration to Los Angeles in the late 1970's and is pictured next to his daughter Ernestina. Efrian

led his daughter and 17 of his relatives out of the indigenous genocide occurring in San Miguel, Guatemala. After working in the Los Angeles garment factories, Efrain decided to open his own shop where he and his family could work.

Figure 1. *Access to this collection is generously supported by Arcadia funds., Efrian, who led a group of 17 relatives out of the chaos in San Miguel, and his daughter Ernestina in their small garment shop. "Kanjobal Indian Immigrants from San Miguel, Guatemala, Working in Their Garment Shop in Los Angeles, Calif., 1984," UCLA, accessed December 10, 2020, https://dl.library.ucla.edu/islandora/object/edu.ucla.library.specialCollections.latimes:4562.*

Food became an essential aspect for Guatemalan immigrants to maintain their culture far away from home. Food also helped the Kanjobal feel more comfortable settling down in Los Angeles. Many Guatemalans put their cuisine/culinary skills to work by opening up an ever increasing number of Guatemalan restaurants. In an article from July 27, 1989, The Los Angeles Timesstates that "Guatemalans keep in touch with the cultural life of their country simply by shopping and eating in Westlake and Pico-Union, where dozens of businesses cater to the Guatemalan immigrant community."[25] Similarly, a Kanjobal woman comments, "We come here to eat the food of our country, so that we don't forget about our Guatemala."[26] The restaurants near MacArthur park were easy to recognize, as many displayed the Guatemalan flag in their windows while others chose an image of the Quetzal, the national bird of Guatemalan. One of

the most recognized Guatemalan restaurants in Los Angeles proudly claims to have been serving the Guatemalan community for the past four decades. The “Guatemalteca Bakery and Restaurant” opened their doors at 4032 Beverly Blvd in the 1980’s to cater to the large community of Guatemalans living near the Pico-Union area. The bakery remains as the most recognized Guatemalan restaurant in Los Angeles today and has since opened satellite branches throughout Los Angeles county.

Music also has played a vital role in the survival of the Kanjobal culture in Los Angeles. Antonio Lopez, a Mayan Kanjobal, explains in an interview for the Los Angeles Times that music played an important role in the survival of the Kanjobal heritage. “The marimba is the national instrument of Guatemala," Lopez says, "it's what we use to express ourselves, to communicate our emotions.[27] Almost always, we play sad melodies. Maybe it's because of our experience of being dominated by the Spanish and now exiled from our country."[28] Lopez and his friends would play the marimba at the apartment complex where they all lived near the Pico-Union area. The music, he claims, transports him to his village, to his place of birth. Throughout MacArthur park, you could see Guatemalans playing their marimbas and dancing, Lopez recalls. Restaurants would hire marimba groups to play outside their locations to attract more people during the 1980s. Music for the Kanjobal community provides a channel to, “express their identity and culture throughout music."[29] When escaping their communities, the main possession the Kanjobal took with them was their marimbas, which they played at the refugee camps in Mexico and later in the streets of Los Angeles. The Kanjobales utilize music to preserve their culture and confront the anguish of exile, but also to celebrate the feast day of their communities’ patron saint.

To preserve their culture, the Mayan Kanjobal also hold celebrations of their patron saints and villages. The earliest Kanjobal celebration in Los Angeles was recorded in 1980, when the Kanjobales from San Miguel Acatan were one of the first Mayan communities to celebrate the *fiesta* of their patron saint, Santa Eulalia, in Los Angeles. The celebration "was characterized by voting for a queen, following her coronation, dancing, marimba music, and traditional Guatemalan food."[30] The celebration was held in a combination of Spanish and Kanjobal. Other religious celebrations were also held throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These celebrations give women, "a space where women can wear traditional dress and eat traditional Guatemalan food."[31] Religion also played a predominant role in the Kanjobal struggle to keep their culture alive.

Religion played a predominant role in the Kanjobal settlement in Los Angeles, and churches started to make accommodations for the many Guatemalans and Central Americans arriving in Los Angeles. Churches increased the number of masses in Spanish to accommodate the Spanish speaking audience and also provided counseling not only to Guatemalans but also to other Central Americans. The churches also provided literacy training, immigration counseling, and refugee assistance. Churches all across the West-Lake region joined the sanctuary movement that sought legal protection for the Guatemalans escaping the political violence happening in their country. The Kanjobal community during the 1980s opened the largest Kanjobal evangelical church, the *Centro Biblico Kanjobal,* the first Kanjobal church in Los Angeles. The church opened in the West-Lake area and shared its place of congregation with a Lutheran church. When the church first opened it had services in the native language of Kanjobal, but as the congregation grew and people outside the Kanjobal community joined the congregation, the services were changed to Spanish. The pastor of the church claims that the church's primary

purpose was to help Mayan Christians find a congregation where they could worship their God in their native language. Eventually, the church relocated to South Central Los Angeles and boasts about 200 to 300 members.

The Catholic church also became a key ally for the Mayan Kanjobal. With the help of missionary groups, the Kanjobals and other Mayan groups were able to create organizations within the Catholic church. One such organization was "IXIM," the organization sought to preserve and celebrate the Mayan Kanjobal culture.[32] IXIM continues to this day, celebrating the Kanjobal culture and encouraging the Kanjobal people to feel proud about their heritage. The Catholic church also helped the Kanjobal community at the celebration of their patron-saints. One of the Kanjobal traditional celebrations in Guatemala was to visit the shrine of the Black Christ of Esquipulas on January 15. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles recognized the Mayan celebration and helped the Kanjobal with a rosary procession and mass at the Immaculate Conception Church. The event occurred in 1999 and still happens once every year to this day. Bishop Stephen E. Blaire led the mass in English, which was translated to Spanish and Kanjobal. The Kanjobal, "brought their blend of indigenous religious ritual and Christian belief to their new home," and celebrated the day all across the Pico-union area.[33] The Catholic church recognized that the day was important for the Kanjobales, as it signified to them "an emerging tolerance for their native practices."[34] The celebration helped them preserve their culture and continue with the celebrations they hosted in Guatemala. Soccer also became an important tool in the survival of the Kanjobal culture.

The Kanjobal communities created all-Mayan soccer leagues sponsored by the Kanjobales from Santa Eulalia to preserve their identity and interact among each other. In an interview for the Los Angeles Times a Kanjobal Maya claimed that during the late 1990s, people

from Santa Eulalia hosted competitive tournaments completely sponsored by them. "For the first time, the former townspeople of Santa Eulalia sponsored their own soccer tournaments in Los Angeles."[35] The leagues not only helped the Kanjobal in terms of social interaction, but also served as an "occasion of social meetings as well as exchange of information regarding jobs and other matters."[36] Often, the teams from these leagues would compete against other Central American teams or form teams with players from other Central American countries, particularly El Salvador and Honduras.

Despite the many practices the Kanjobal adopted to keep their culture alive, they faced a gradual erosion of their identity. Language and clothing were the two most important forms of identity that the Kanjobal had to change when arriving in Los Angeles. Kanjobal women wore colorful and vivid clothing the was a way to represent their identity. Mayan women claimed that for them, “their unique dress and their language are the physical manifestations of their identity, their nationhood and of their refusal to integrate into the white, European-derived establishment that rules the country.”[37] Kanjobal women wore their *trajes* (Mayan clothing) to celebrate their identity, but the clothes also caused problems. Women who wore *trajes* were often targeted by immigration, putting them at risk to be noticed by immigration patrol and deported. Deportation for the Kanjobal meant returning to the ongoing violence occurring in Guatemala. The Kanjobal women had to stop wearing their *trajes* and adopt western clothes, which signified a significant departure from their identity. For many of the Kanjobal arriving in Los Angeles, Spanish was not their first language, Kanjobal was. Francisco Simon, a Mayan Kanjobal, narrates that when he arrived in Los Angeles the biggest problem he faced was the language barrier.[38] Francisco had to first learn Spanish, then English. He claims that he lived in the Pico-Union area, so he was speaking Spanish most of the time and, he “finds himself speaking Spanish more than any other

language."[39] He only spoke Kanjobal with his family, and Kanjobal slowly became his second language. Like Francisco, other Kanjobal became accustomed to speaking Spanish and English and Kanjobal became a second language for them as well. The Kanjobals in Los Angeles, despite trying to protect their identity, were forced to give up key aspects of their identity in order to fit in with the communities they lived in.

Conclusion

Guatemala's 36-year Civil War resulted in massive losses of life, in particular among indigenous Guatemalans, forcing those who survived increasingly into exile. Many of those who fled the horrors of war found their way to Los Angeles, where they strove to build new lives for themselves and their families. Arriving in Los Angeles presented new challenges for Guatemalan migrants, in particular indigenous Guatemalans like the Kanjobal, but they found ways to keep their culture alive and help each other settle in Los Angeles. Presently, the majority of the Kanjobal community still lives in the same neighborhoods of Pico-Union and Westlake, where they first settled in the 1980's and 1990's, while some moved to neighborhoods in South Los Angeles. My family owns a barbershop in South Central, and the Kanjobal community are our main clientele. When they go into the shop, one of the first questions they ask is if we speak Kanjobal, because many shops located around my family's barbershop are Kanjobal-owned. We are starting to get familiar with the language as we hear it daily from our neighbors, and I'm curious to understand the language of the Kanjobal, a community that were physically and culturally challenged but survived and continue to influence those around them.

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