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On the Road to Discover My Mayan Voice

Dina Hernandez

Abstract: A young Maya woman recounts her story about growing up “Latina Maya” in Morgantown, NC. As she shares her quest to “discover her Mayan voice”, she reveals insights into the strength of her family and community, and the enjoyment of living.

Keywords: Maya, Latina, identity, Mayan Languages, immigration

For most of my life I grew up believing I was just Latina or Hispanic. I never knew I was also Mayan until my dad talked to me and my siblings about our Guatemalan and Mayan culture. I grew up eating *pepian*, *tamales o chuchitos*, *t'ix tamal*. Drinking *mox* and *pi'chi'* during the cold seasons. Listening to the marimba and dancing the same steps that my ancestors danced long ago. My mother would often dress my sister and me in our *chanes* for special occasions or holidays. The *faldas* were woven with blue and green with subtle touches of purple. The *cintas* woven from the colors of the rainbow. Our *blusas* or *huipiles* with the *mangas* decorated with embroidery or lace. The collar adorned with flower appliques. Despite all that, the one thing I didn't inherit from my parents was their native language.

In middle school, I began to question who I was, my identity. I knew I was Latina, or so I thought. I was also *una Chapina orgullosa*. It helped that there was such a big Mayan community in my small town of Morganton. It was nice to be exposed to not only people who came from Huehue, but also people from Toto, Marcos and Q'uche. It was interesting to hear them talk and to see the different clothing they wore. Maureen was a friend and advocate for the Guatemalan community at our parish. I remember one year during our youth group meetings, she mentioned Rigoberta Menchu, a Mayan woman like me. She talked about Rigoberta's accomplishments. She began educating the church's “hispanic” youth group, telling us we were not Latino or Hispanic like many label us but that we were in fact Mayans. A whole different ethnicity than being Latino/Hispanic. My dad then began to encourage us to not label ourselves as Hispanics or Latinos. I recall one school year when I was filling out school paperwork, as many of us younger generation did rather than our parents, that we were required to fill out at the beginning of the school year. My dad and mom said don't mark Latino/Hispanic because we were neither. I did as I was told, I checked “others” and wrote Maya on the line. However, year after year

I struggled with how to correctly label myself. Do I succumb to just being called Latina since that is how other people see me anyway? My brown skin and long black hair and brown eyes! How could I to prove to them that I was indeed Mayan if I could barely speak our Maya language?

My family is very close, in the sense that we're tight knit family who do many things together and as a unit. My parents, mainly my dad, would often times sit us down at night before our nightly prayer. We would talk about whatever was on our mind. My parents were big on communicating and often engaged us in dialogue about our religion or what was discussed at church. My parents would also talk to us about their harsh childhood and their journey coming to the US. On special occasions we would gather around a radio cassette player and listen to my grandparents on the cassette updating my parents about family back in Guatemala. You could hear children in the background playing and giggling. They only spoke in Akateko and it was hard for me to understand them. Nonetheless, I enjoyed hearing them talking and envisioning them in front of me. To this day I have never seen my grandparents in person. I've only seen them in pictures they send to us. I dream of going to Guatemala at least once before my only living grandfather dies.

During childhood, as time went on and the more I was exposed to Akateko, I became aware of the language. I began to understand a few sentences. Eventually I began to understand conversations my parents were having with each other and with family and friends. Yet, I still couldn't speak the language. My spoken vocabulary did grow a little but not by much. Much like Spanish some Latinos question their Latinidad simply because they can't understand and/or speak Spanish. They equate their Latinidad to their comprehension of the language; whether they can speak it or even understand it. That's how I feel about not being able to speak Acateko. I feel like I'm not Mayan enough because I don't speak Akateko. When I see younger kids speaking to their parents with ease, I become self-conscious. I feel embarrassed that someone much younger than me is able to speak with their parents and do so fluently. I, on the other hand, speak like a child just learning the language. My parents spoke Acateko around me a lot and because of that I'm able to understand it fairly well. Yet when it comes to speaking the language, it's a whole different story, and carrying on a conversation with others, forget about it!

While studying at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I enrolled in a course called Immigrants Stories. I began to wonder more about my roots and about the history of Guatemala and my parent's history. In that class we were required to create a project that dealt with an immigrant's story. We were given free reign to do whatever we wanted. A major topic in class discussions dealt with name and identity. It had been

discussed at the beginning of the semester and by the end of the first month I had already come up with ideas on what I wanted to do my project on.

I had decided to interview my father about the civil war that took place in Guatemala. This topic interested me so much because, when I was about 12 or 13 years old, my dad told us just a little about his experience during the war. He remembered one night in his small village in San Rafael when people began warning them of the guerrillas. Mostly everybody fled the village and went to hide in the woods. While they were hiding in the woods he heard gunshots and had noticed he was missing a few of his cousins. He could hear people shouting and fire consuming the humble dwellings they called home. He and those who escaped spent the night in the woods hiding from guerrillas and the soldiers. When he told this story to us his voice cracked and he would try his best to keep his composure. You could hear how much this event broke him. A part of me knew there was more to his story, but we knew how painful it was, so we never pushed him to finish or tell us that story again.

Now that I was in this class on immigration it gave me the chance to learn more about my father's story. I did preliminary research at the Jackson Library. I Googled about Guatemala's civil war. Then, I returned home one weekend to conduct the interview with my dad. I set up a small camcorder that I had checked out from the library and had it facing my dad. I sat in the background to make sure I was off camera because this interview was about my dad's story, not mine. In the beginning he was nervous but little by little he began to open up, almost as if he felt empowered. Through this interview I had uncovered more about that terrible night he had endured and the days that followed. He told me of a few times where he had guns pointed to his head but for some miracle the guerrillas set him free. After he turned 19, he made a huge sacrifice and left his "mom" (his grandmother who had raised him) and family, to escape the war and its aftermath. That was when he crossed *la frontera* in hopes for a better tomorrow than what Guatemala could offer him. After the interview I had an even greater appreciation of my parents sacrifices and what they endured growing up in Guatemala.

It wasn't until my last semester and my last class as an undergrad, that I started to question why I never practiced the language but also questioning my parents and why they never bothered to teach us the language of our ancestors. The course I had enrolled in was called Spanish Syntax: Language and Identity. We discussed in depth about the Spanish language and the sociology behind it, more importantly how it is used as an identifier. For example, Spanish in general is spoken in Latin America, Spain, and parts of the US. Yet the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico is not the same Spanish spoken in Mexico or even in the US. This course was just four weeks long and by the second week

our professor brought up our final project/essay. She wanted us to conduct research and write about our findings much like the essay we had been reading in the course.

Again I knew almost immediately what I wanted to do. I wanted to write about the children who had parents that knew an indigenous language and how or if they used that as an identifier. I drew this from my own experience. I began to wonder why didn't my parents teach us Akateko, why instead did they have us speaking Spanish all our lives. I began researching my required articles and looking at the books in the library, and formulating questions for my survey. If it wasn't for social media, my essay would've been difficult to complete. I reached out to all my "friends" on Facebook and individually sent them the survey I had created and asked them to complete it. For example, I had two-part multiple questions, one would ask "How do you identify yourself in regard to languages" and the options I had given were "monolingual, bilingual, or trilingual/multilingual". The second part to that question was to name the language(s) they knew.

What surprised me was that many participants would label themselves as bilingual or trilingual but would write that they didn't know how to speak their Mayan language. They understood the language when listening, or anyway they knew a little, but often didn't want to label themselves as trilingual. It surprised yet comforted me that there were others like me who felt a little conflicted about that. Another question I had also related to identity in the sense of ethnicity. I had participants choose from the following "American, Latino, Hispanic, Guatemala-American, Guatemalan, or Mayan. Then the following question asked to explain why they chose what they chose. I just wanted to see how others would identify themselves knowing or not they were Mayans. For the most part the survey made me realize that I wasn't alone in feeling like I wasn't Mayan enough just because I couldn't carry on a full conversation with others in Akateko. A majority of those who took the survey were bilingual, only knowing Spanish and English. In continuing my research project, I then visited my dad to ask him some questions which then turned into a small dialogue about languages. I simply asked him "*Porque no nos enseñaste Akateko cuando eramos niños? O desde el comienzo?*"

In short, my father wanted us to assimilate to the Latino culture and to thrive in it, which we sort of did. Although they would occasionally speak Akateko to us, we were never encouraged to speak or learn it. They spoke to us in Spanish while growing up. According to my mom's standards before I entered school, my Spanish was perfect. Yet as the years passed, she would comment on how I was losing my Spanish. She wasn't lying. I had trouble speaking comfortably in Spanish, and I would often choose to speak only in English or Spanglish amongst peers and my family. I was embarrassed for my Spanish because I didn't speak it correctly like many of my Mexican friends. I didn't

have an identifying accent like one would notice with Puerto Rican, Mexican and even Hondurans at my school. Like my dad always said “*aprendí el español de la calle*”. He didn’t learn Spanish until he was in Mexico on his way to the US and when he arrived in Florida. Even before then my dad didn’t have any formal education when he was younger. So he just learned by talking to others he worked with in the fields. My mother on the other hand had some schooling. She only completed two or three years of schooling before she was taken out of school in order to help her parents *en los campos*. She knew how to read and write better than my dad. Nonetheless the Spanish I learned growing up was more of an informal and slang Spanish. To give a little perspective, I didn’t start using “*usted*” until I got to the university and let alone know much about tildes. Even then I struggled in my classes because I was already programmed to speak and write a certain way, I had to learn how to speak Spanish “the proper way”.

Growing up and even to this day I mix up all three languages. It might take me awhile to spit out what I’m trying to say or sometimes I just don’t think. For example, this past summer my husband, my *suegra*, and I were setting up for a cookout with my family. For as long as I can remember my family always called coolers, *yoga*. So my *suegra* was asking me what else we needed for the cookout and without thinking, I immediately said “*yoga*”. She gave me a puzzled look not having the slightest idea what I just said. Then my husband was like “Dina, that’s not Spanish”. I began thinking to myself “what is cooler in Spanish”. I laugh now every time I think about it. The words I grew up knowing how to say in Akateko substituted those in Spanish so I’m not very familiar with them sometimes. On some occasions when my siblings and I were chatting we would sometimes throw in some Akateko words here and there without thinking. Words like *q’ejin*, *sa’ xil*, *ka’ jin*, *ix*, and *cha*. It was almost like our way of trying to connect ourselves to our Mayan roots linguistically with the limited vocabulary we had.

I still hope that I will learn my Akateko language. Finding language resources has been a challenge. The only thing I had growing up that somewhat helped was a Bible my mom had brought with her from Guatemala. The Bible only contained the New Testament but was completely written in Akateko. At first glance when looking at the pages in the Bible it looked intimidating and all gibberish. Luckily, I caught on quickly and made the connection of how the words sounded with how I thought they were written. During my last semester during my final project I discovered a book that was like an Akateko for Dummies. I got the book on loan from a library from one of the universities in Georgia and was able to borrow it for a month. I did my best trying to create flashcards from it but didn’t get much done because of school and assignments. Times have changed and we’re in a technological era, and I’m gradually having an easier time finding some resources

online. I hope to one day speak with my grandfather without having to use an interpreter. And now that I'm working in healthcare, I want to be able to help "my people" because just as my parents struggled learning Spanish, the Maya people I see in healthcare struggle too and at times "*le cuesta mucho*". I don't want them to struggle like my parents did if I can help them. My journey to find my Mayan voice continues.

Author Bio: Dina Hernandez is from Morganton, NC where she lives with her husband of three years and their dog, Bandit. She recently graduated from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Spanish (June '19). She currently works as a Spanish interpreter at the Good Samaritan Clinic and as a Tele-behavioral Health Coordinator for the Migrant Farmworker Health Program. Her parents are originally from Huehuetenango, Guatemala and speak Akateko. They migrated to the United States in the 70s and from there have created a family here in the US with their five children. Dina is the youngest of her siblings.