A street market in Guatemala
The Modern Maya

by Casey DeLima (‘15)
Photographs by Casey DeLima

Seeing Guatemala through the lense of American privilege.
I was holding on for dear life.

Zooming down a mountainside while standing in the back of a pick-up truck, I was pressed against the back window of the cabin.

The person doing the pressing, a Guatemalan mother wearing the traditional Mayan “traje,” or long skirt worn by women, stands a head shorter than me. Her two children—a baby slung on her back with a piece of cloth and a toddler wedged between her skirt and my leg—peeked at me over the bed of the truck. Behind the mother, a grandmother, a high school student and many other Guatemalans were all hitching a ride into town. The bed of the truck was packed with as many people that could fit. However, if there were people waiting at the next “parada,” or bus stop, we would be expected to suck in and make room for a few more people.

Passing a waterfall, we speed down a dangerous curve, just narrowly missing a chicken bus that is obviously going much faster than the speed limit. Finally, we arrive at the bottom of the hill and enter the town of Panajachel. This is public transportation in Guatemala.

_Years before my visit to Guatemala, I learned about the fall of the Mayan empire in Mrs. Johnson’s sixth grade social studies class. Whether it was from disease, famine, war or some form of natural disaster, no one was entirely sure of the cause. However, all the textbooks confirmed that the Mayan empire fell and with it, a culture was lost. Despite my sixth grade belief that the Maya were as good as gone, the summer of 2014 taught me that though the classical Mayan empire had indeed fallen, the Mayan people were alive and well in Central American countries such as Honduras, Mexico and Guatemala. Despite colonialism, natural disaster and other factors, the Maya remain rich in culture._

“Saqyr, uts awych?” meaning “good morning, how are you?” my host grandmother asks me every morning as I gulp my “atol.” In response I mutter back, “Uts nu wych, matiox,” meaning “I am good, thank you.” Despite my rehearsals every night at dinner, my pronunciation of
Kakchiquel never seems to improve. Kakchiquel is one of the 22 Mayan dialects spoken in Guatemala, and my host family’s first language. My grandmother always responds with a chuckle and “Ay,” or in Kakchiquel, “you’re welcome.” One of the more common dialects in Guatemala is Kakchiquel; it is spoken by nearly 500,000 people in Guatemala. Like the other dialects, Kakchiquel stems from the Proto-Mayan language spoken by people of the Mayan empire. Due to how widely spread different groups of Mayan people are, my grandmother may not be able to communicate as well with my friend’s grandmother across the lake in Santiago Atitlán who speaks Tz’utujil. Due to the variety of Mayan people in the area around Lake Atitlán, one could hear many different dialects throughout the streets, markets and shops, each one more intriguing than the next.

Just as interesting and intriguing as the indigenous languages was the food. When first arriving in Guatemala, I expected the food to go more along the line of Mexican food with cuisines of savory tacos and spicy enchiladas, though you could find many “taquerias” on the streets, the traditional Guatemalan food consisting of rice, beans, eggs and corn tortillas. Tortillas are the ultimate staple of Guatemala. Each home I visited had a basket filled with hot tortillas on the table for every meal. Though these Guatemalan dishes were most of what my host family prepared for me, I had many other dishes such as “pulique,” a popular dish in the Western highlands of Guatemala, that features a piece of chicken served in a stew-like sauce with some vegetables thrown in for good measure. Another popular food you’ll find in Guatemala, as well as throughout many countries in Latin America, is plantains. My host mother often served them up diced and fried with yogurt or cream cheese and sugar sprinkled over the top.

Coffee is grown throughout Guatemala, so I assumed I’d be having a hot cup of coffee every morning, but on my first breakfast, my family poured me a cup of oatmeal with a more liquid consistency and told me that it was atol. Atol is a thick, cornstarch-based drink that is served hot and is emblematic of Guatemala. Unfortunately for me, however, “atol” does not contain caffeine, and despite its rich, sweet taste, did not help in keeping me awake every morning. Coffee was most often served with lunch and dinner and was served incredibly sweet.

Because my host family was fairly wealthy, I always had access to clean and fresh produce like watermelon, pineapple, papayas and corn. Due to poverty, this was a luxury not many families in Guatemala have. Poor families eat mainly beans, rice and eggs rather than the fruits that one might assume are plentiful in Guatemala. Many families also eat a lot of processed food similar to the cheap processed food found in the United States. This lack of affordable, nutritious food means that families living in poverty have poor nutrition, and many children living in poverty are extremely malnourished.

Most of Guatemala, especially in rural areas, is very religious. More than 80 percent of Guatemalans are Christian, with the population almost evenly divided between Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity. Catholicism was brought to Guatemala during colonization, and, in order to escape persecution, many indigenous people disguised their Mayan religion as Catholicism. This led to many Maya adopting various aspects of Catholicism and attending Catholic masses. Catholicism and the traditional Mayan practices blended into each other, resulting in a unique combination of different religious traditions.
I had not known that the Mayan religion was still practiced in Guatemala until I befriended Jorge, a Mayan priest who lived down the mountain from me. He eagerly agreed to tell me more about his life in the Mayan priesthood.

“It’s not a practice,” Jorge described to me. “It’s more of a science.”

What Jorge meant was that being a Mayan priest did not just pertain to the Mayan religion but also to the Mayan calendar and the Mayan way of life.

On a clear Saturday, Jorge led me and a group of my classmates up a steep hill in San Jorge and into the forest where he had set up his altar. The altar was speckled with lit candles, coins and even a bottle of Quetzalteca, a raw cane liquor that is common in Guatemala and is often used as an offering to the spirits and San Simón. San Simón, commonly called Maximón, is a folk saint of the Mayan people. There were also crosses, crucifixes, idols such as Our Lady of Guadalupe and symbols of Latin American Catholicism. When I asked Jorge why he had so many Christian relics on his altar, he replied with many reasons.

“The Mayas do not deny the existence of other gods or spirits,” he told me. “Many people who come to me for help are Catholics and Christians. I can’t deny what they believe in.”

When asked about the end of the Mayan calendar that many thought was predicting the Apocalypse, Jorge laughed.

“The end of the great cycle was not the end of the world,” he explained. “The Mayans did not predict the end of the world. When a cycle ends, a new one begins. In December of 2012, it was a rebirth.”

According to the Holocaust Museum in Houston, more than 200,000 indigenous Maya were killed or disappeared during the Guatemalan Civil War. Over 1.5 million people were displaced and many fled Guatemala to take refuge in Mexico. The Guatemalan government saw leftists come to power in the late 50s, which worried the United States government, who had many fruit companies and corporations in the country. The United States government determined that “communist revolts” backed a coup d’etat in 1954 that placed Carlos Castillas Armas in power. This was followed by many conservative military dictators, and a military government was installed. Social discontent led to many leftist armies, or guerilla armies, fighting against the Guatemalan army in the 1960s, causing the Guatemalan Civil War. Due to both sides’ belief that

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the indigenous people were aiding one side or the other, many indigenous people were tortured and murdered.

Guatemalans understand the effect that the United States has on Guatemala, but there is a mixed reaction toward people from the United States. When people found out that I was from the United States, many people became excited, asking me about bands, celebrities and famous cities like New York or Los Angeles. Others immediately asked me why the United States has such strict immigration laws.

My host father looked at me one night after dinner and said, “You know, people from the United States call themselves ‘American,’ but they don’t seem to understand that we’re American, too. We’re Central Americans.”

Though the United States contributed to some of the horrors that happened in Guatemala, many Guatemalans open their homes and hearts to people from the United States and many of the younger generations continue to idolize popular culture in the United States. I felt guilty walking through the streets of Guatemala and receiving better treatment than those who have lived there their whole lives. If there is one thing that I learned while living in Guatemala, it was that with my light skin and my American passport, I carry a lot of privilege on my shoulders.

Traveling throughout Guatemala was one of the most life-changing experiences that I’ve encountered in my life; it gave me an incredible amount of knowledge about a culture that seems to have been forgotten by most of the world. Even though Guatemala is one of the most beautiful countries in the world, it was the Mayan people that welcomed me into their homes and taught me about their culture and their lives. As a white person from the United States, there is so much I still don’t know about Guatemala, but I am so thankful for the opportunity to have lived there with the vibrant, creative and loving people that are the Modern Maya.