

**Xujal runa'öj: The Cultural and Linguistic Consequences of Kaqchikel  
Maya Migration to the US  
By Joyce Bennett**

*Yo no soy Latino.* – David, Kaqchikel-speaking migrant in the US

David, whose first language is Kaqchikel Maya, is from a small town in rural Guatemala where Kaqchikel is the lingua franca. On this particularly day in 2010, I was talking with David at a social event for an English as a Second Language class in New Orleans, LA. We were in a group of people discussing the US census, which asks individuals to identify as Latino or non-Latino. David became more animated than the otherwise quiet man he usually is. He plainly and forcefully insisted “I am not Latino.”<sup>i</sup> His statement confused many of the other participants in the conversation, including three others who identified as Latino. “Yes, you are,” said Julia, a woman from Colombia. “You are from Guatemala, and you speak Spanish. That means you are Latino,” she said to him. David replied to her:

Spanish is not my first language. I do not like speaking it, nor do I identify with it. I am from Guatemala, but I am *indígena*. I speak an indigenous language. I eat hand-made corn tortillas, not those thin pressed things they sell here in “Latino” markets. I might watch Sábado Gigante, but I do not understand why women dress like that. I wear Western clothing, but it is not mine. I am *not* Latino (original emphasis).

In that conversation, David asserted that while he comes from a Latin American country, he does not think of himself as Latino because of the cultural traits he listed: language, food, and clothing.

Our conversation that evening brings into question what it means to be Latino. Often the word is used as if people automatically know what it means, and its perceived interchangeability with the word “Hispanic” has perhaps caused more confusion than brought about clarification.<sup>ii</sup> Both terms have generally been understood, in scholarship and by the American public alike, as referring to individuals of Spanish or Latin American origin or descent who speak Spanish. While the US Census now recognizes that an individual could be of many different racial backgrounds and still identify as Latino, little progress has been made in understanding indigenous migrants from Latin American countries to the US. For the vast majority of discussions, indigenous migrants have simply been absorbed into nationality-based identities and understood as “Mexican” or “Guatemalan” instead of as indigenous.

This article seeks to understand the context from which David’s rejection of Latino identity originates by examining how indigenous people in Guatemala talk about migration to the US and its impact on the performance of indigenous identity. I refer to migrants instead of immigrants because the term immigrant implies acculturation to the destination community whereas the term migrant makes no assumption about the migrant’s cultural practices as a result of their mobility (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1995). While there has been much work on culture and language change among migrants in the US as a result of shifting identities, such discussions have been framed in Spanish-to-English and Latino-to-American frameworks of acculturation. This article discusses how indigenous Kaqchikel individuals

conceive of migration to the US as a process resulting in indigenous-to-Latino acculturation. Particular attention is paid to returned migrants in Guatemala as well as to the opinions and ideas of those who have migrants in their families and neighborhoods. Using fieldwork, surveys, and interviews gathered from Kaqchikel speakers in Guatemala, I will show the ways in which indigenous individuals conceptualize migration to the US as a process of becoming Latino through changing how one performs identity, a process and performance often condemned by indigenous communities and individuals. Specifically, I will provide nuanced examples of the categories that David and other Kaqchikel speakers indicated are central to indigenous identity in his statement: language, dress, food, and cultural traditions known as *costumbre*. Throughout the analysis, I discuss why such shifts from indigenous identity to Latino identity are particularly fraught for indigenous women.

### **Latinos and Guatemalan Migrants**

Much scholarship exists on Latino populations in the US, but few works recognize the presence of indigenous migrants who are often categorized as Latino. Studies by The New Strategist Editors (2007), Fraga et al (2012) and Monsivais (2004) all discuss identity among Latinos in the US, but they discuss diversity in terms of how many national identities are subsumed under the label “Latino.” For them, diversity means recognizing that people from countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras also migrate to the US in addition to their Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican counterparts, who have long been understood as the backbones of the Latino population. Such authors do not indicate that within or even across national boundaries there exist ethnic identifications, such as indigenous Maya, Mixtec, or Zapotec to name a few, by which migrants might prefer to identify instead of a national label.

While literature on Latinos in the US often does not recognize the possibility of indigenous migrants, scholarship specifically on Guatemala-US migration has made significant strides in the last two decades. For example, Foxen (2007) discusses K’iche migrants to New England and speaks of their identity as a “transnational Maya identity” instead of a “transnational Guatemalan identity.” Foxen is joined by other scholars who address the concerns of indigenous migrants to the US, such as Burns (1993), Burrell (2005), Fink (2003), and Foxen and Rodman (2012). Jonas and Rodriguez’s recent work (2014) has made a considerable contribution in recognizing and considering indigenous and non-indigenous, or Ladino in the Guatemalan context, Guatemala-US migration simultaneously.<sup>iii</sup> While such works have made crucial contributions to the literature on indigenous migration, they focus on issues in the destination community, such as how Maya migrants adapt to US culture, without questioning the cultural and linguistic ramifications of migration for non- and returned-migrants in Guatemala. Some such progress has been made in the literature addressing Mexican-origin indigenous migrants with contributions from authors such as Stephen (2007) and Worley (2010). I expand the discussion and implications of US-bound migration to include indigenous Guatemalan migrants and question indigenous Kaqchikel speaker’s conception of how a person’s identity changes upon migration to the US.

### **Setting and Methods**

Indigenous languages in Guatemala correspond to ethnic identities, making for more than 20 ethno-linguistic groups across the country. Kaqchikel Maya is one of the more widely

spoken indigenous languages with approximately 500,000 speakers. Ethno-linguistic groups of Maya descent share many cultural traits, such as food, spirituality, and styles of dress. For example, Maya peoples throughout the country base their diets on homemade, hand-patted corn tortillas.<sup>iv</sup> While such similarities exist across ethno-linguistic communities, municipalities within the Kaqchikel region have their own identifiable weaving design for clothing (Hendrickson 1995) and their own dialects of Kaqchikel (Brown, Maxwell, and Little 2006, 1-12).

Given the variations among towns in the Kaqchikel region, I located this work in three different towns to establish a comparative framework: Santa Catarina Palopó (Santa Catarina), San Juan Comalapa (Comalapa), and Tecpán Guatemala (Tecpán). Between 2010 and 2013, I spent a total of 18 months in the region conducting participant-observation research focused on returned migrants' use of language and culture. I also collected 245 surveys about migration experiences, language use, clothing use, and other cultural practices. I gathered 43 surveys in Santa Catarina, 101 in Comalapa, and 101 in Tecpán. More than one hundred individuals volunteered to participate in a longer interview session regarding migration, language, and culture change. All research was conducted in Kaqchikel Maya, which I speak fluently. Speaking the language is critical to gaining the trust of participants and to understanding how Kaqchikel speakers conceive of migration's consequences.

Santa Catarina Palopó is a small town of approximately 5,000 individuals located 5 kilometers from Panajachel, a major tourist center on Lake Atitlán (Administración de Santa Catarina Palopó 2008-2012, 2). Kaqchikel is the lingua franca of the town. Most women of all ages and men over 50 are frequently seen wearing *traje*, indigenous clothing. Despite being close to Panajachel, Santa Catarina has remained culturally and linguistically conservative when compared to Tecpán and Comalapa (Carey 2001, Little 2004). Migration to the US is not commonplace here, particularly because of the exorbitant costs of travel, regardless of documentation. Through my work in town, I have found only a handful of individuals who have migrated to the US either permanently or temporarily.<sup>v</sup> Nonetheless, town members perceive migration to the US as a major threat to indigenous identity and discuss it as such.

Comalapa lies about 65 kilometers from Guatemala City and has a population of approximately 43,000 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Guatemala 2013). Kaqchikel and Spanish are both commonly used in town; Kaqchikel use tends to prevail among close acquaintances and family members while Spanish is used in more public settings. Most women in town wear *traje*, but younger women are quickly adopting Western clothing. Few if any men use the town's *traje*. Migration to the US from Comalapa is much more common than from Santa Catarina. Almost every family with whom I spoke had been affected by migration in some way.

Tecpán is the largest town included in this study with a population of approximately 55,000 residents (Municipalidad de Tecpán 2012). It is located 78 kilometers from Guatemala City, and because it is directly on the Pan-American Highway, it is faster to travel from Tecpán to Guatemala City than it is to travel from Comalapa to Guatemala City. Given its easy access to national culture, commerce, and influences in Guatemala City combined with a historically significant Ladino population practicing Ladino lifestyles in town (Fischer and Hendrickson 2002, 4-5), Tecpán is arguably the most Westernized town in this study. Spanish is often heard in the streets. Kaqchikel is still used in various places and among many individuals, but its use is often confined to close acquaintances or the open-air market. Tecpán's location close to the Kaqchikel-capital's ruins at Iximche' have made it a center-point for pro-indigenous activism,

meaning that there is much support for indigenous language and culture in town despite the aforementioned Westernizing influences. Migration to the US is arguably most common in Tecpán of all the towns in this study. Despite the fact that each town has different frequencies of migration to the US, individuals from all three towns were equally opinionated and eager to discuss the cultural and linguistic impacts of migration.

In the Kaqchikel speaking highlands, the term Ladino is more frequently used than the term Latino, and their meanings and uses are related but different in significant ways. While most Central American countries use the term Latino to refer to individuals of mixed descent or Latin Americans in general, Guatemalans tend to use the term Ladino. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, academics, the national government, and residents alike thought of the country as having two cultural groups: indigenous peoples and Ladinos. From the perspective of Maya-speaking peoples and particularly from the perspective of Kaqchikel speakers, Ladinos are non-indigenous people who speak Spanish, wear Western clothing, and generally act as Westerners (Fischer and Hendrickson 2002, 4-5, 25). Often there are distinct class differences between indigenous people and Ladinos with Ladinos having higher socio-economic status, although it is important to recognize that there are upper-class and wealthy indigenous individuals (ibid). How Kaqchikel speakers think of Ladinos is similar to discussions of Latinos (as Spanish-speaking Westerners). While the ways in which many participants in this study talked about Latinos is similar to how some Kaqchikel speakers discuss Ladinos and the assimilation into Guatemalan national society, participants here are specifically responding to my questions about migrants who have gone to the US. In general usage, the term Ladino refers to non-indigenous Guatemalan nationals in Guatemala, while the term Latino, when Kaqchikel speakers employed it in my conversations with them, referred to non-indigenous Spanish-speaking individuals of Latin American origin in the US.

Of critical importance to most Maya communities and to the three included in this study is what is known as *costumbre*. *Costumbre* can be thought of as a handbook to life passed down from the ancestors: it provides organizing moral principles and societal structures for traditions surrounding language, food, dress, and spirituality. In this way, *costumbre* informs how people celebrate, mourn, and realize major events. For many years, *costumbre* even established the means by which people made a living (Hill 2002). Following *costumbre* has historically been of the utmost importance and potentially explains why Maya communities in the highlands have resisted complete assimilation to the dominant Ladino society for so many years.

While *costumbre* and traditions are important, global forces such as technology and neoliberalism are profoundly changing Kaqchikel towns today. Technology now provides access to other cultures and languages at unprecedented levels. Neoliberalism is rapidly shifting how people make a living from subsistence agriculture to export-oriented agriculture and wage labor. Fischer and Hendrickson (2002) and Fischer and Benson (2006) discuss how the employment shifts in the region have meant increased interaction with Spanish-speaking individuals. England (2003) has noted the rapid increase in bilinguals (indigenous language-Spanish bilinguals) in the region since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century due to such global forces. Migration is an example of global forces that challenge *costumbre* because, as I argue in this article, migration to the US is a process through which indigenous migrants can learn to perform Latino identity.

## Language Changes

Language has long been an important marker of identity in highland Maya communities, and this is true for Kaqchikel speakers (Brown 1996, Fischer and Hendrickson 2002, 100-109). Language loss and the shift from Kaqchikel to Spanish has also been of much concern in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cojtí Cuxil 1987, England 2003, Brown 1996). The idea that migration was increasing language loss was the first issue many Kaqchikel speakers wanted to discuss when speaking about migration to the US with me. Countless individuals remarked that upon return, migrants no longer valued Kaqchikel Maya; they spoke funny Spanish; and they brought too many words from English into their everyday speech. Mariano, an elderly man from Santa Catarina whose son had migrated, explained that “When they leave, they always change. They learn things at work or in study; when they learn Spanish they act like they don’t speak Kaqchikel anymore. They go and learn, they act like they can’t talk anymore” (2010). Similarly, Juana, a middle-aged woman from Comalapa described her sons who had migrated: “They do not use our language anymore. They just leave it and don’t want to talk that way anymore” (2011). Both Mariano and Juana noted that their children, whom they taught to speak Kaqchikel as children, often choose not to speak Kaqchikel after migrating to the US.

Alan, a non-migrant from Santa Catarina, expressed similar concerns. He said “some people feel big and important because they migrated. They start speaking Spanish, and they compare themselves to Latinos even though they’re not. That is not good because we need to keep up our language and not lose it” (2010). Alan indicated that when people migrate, they adopt characteristics he associated with Latinos, namely speaking Spanish and seeing oneself as more important than indigenous people. Implicit in this statement is a reference to class distinctions, particularly between non-migrants and returned migrants from the US. In many areas of Guatemala, there is a stark contrast between those with access to remittance dollars and those without (Adams and Cuecuecha 2010, 1368-1369). In this way, Kaqchikel-speaking individuals in Guatemala see speaking Spanish instead of Kaqchikel as a means of expressing class distinction and adopting a Latino identity through migration to the US.

How returned migrants talk about migration and language shift indicates that migration is itself a process that impacts how individuals perform their identity at different moments. For example, many participants in the study asserted that migrants only pretend to have forgotten Kaqchikel. As Filiberto, a returned migrant from Tecpán, said, “There are some who leave our language behind. There are some who leave it behind, but that is not good. Well, they act as if they forgot, but they just do not want to speak it anymore” (2012). Similarly, Juan, a returned migrant from Comalapa, said “I see people who just use Spanish now. They have to say “Hi” to each other in Spanish. But there is no way they forgot. You cannot just forget your language” (2011). Both Filiberto and Juan suspect that some returned migrants from the US have not forgotten their native Kaqchikel but that they instead choose not to use it. In this way, they see ethnic identity as a performance. After all, both of them told me they migrated to the US and resisted the pressure to assimilate to speaking Spanish all the time, but that not all migrants are strong enough morally to withstand that kind of pressure. Both Filiberto and Juan continued, saying that some migrants adopt a negative understanding of Kaqchikel because of the prejudice in the US Latino community towards indigenous migrants, a facet Stephen documented in California and Oregon (2007, 11-20). Indeed, Filiberto commented on such racism himself, saying “There [in the US] they do not value indigenous languages” (2012). Filiberto and Juan thus saw returned migrants who no longer choose to speak Kaqchikel as

having internalized such negative stereotypes from the Latino community. Both men presenting themselves as having resisted speaking only Spanish because of their strong commitment to *costumbre* and living an indigenous lifestyle.

Individuals like Filiberto and Juan resent what they identify as a choice of no longer speaking Kaqchikel because it is profoundly political in the context of language shift in the Kaqchikel region. Spanish, and more recently English, have been taking over domains in which Kaqchikel was traditionally spoken. Such domain shift has increased since the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (England 2003). From an indigenous perspective where indigenous peoples have historically learned their language first, Spanish is often associated with foreign, Latin-based identity. Returned migrants choosing to speak Spanish over Kaqchikel indicates a shift in identity performance. Speaking Spanish couples with other aspects of language use and culture change discussed below to distinguish returning migrants performing Latino identity from other indigenous individuals in Guatemala who are intentionally passing as Ladino.

Switching to Spanish is not the only indicator of linguistic change for returning migrants that Kaqchikel-speaking individuals discussed. For example, Pedro from Comalapa whose neighbors had migrated said “They don’t speak like this [in Kaqchikel] anymore. They just use words like ‘okay.’ When they come back, it’s all Spanish. They don’t use Kaqchikel anymore. When I talk to them, who knows what they say. But it’s a lie” (2011). Here, Pedro points out several issues. Not only did he too take the stance that not understanding Kaqchikel is a show put on by returned migrants, but he also mentioned the specific use of English-origin words from the US, such as “okay.” Indeed, his imitation of how returned migrants use “okay” was priceless: he sat up very straight in his chair, stuck his nose in the air, and said “okay” as if it were a means of showing how well-to-do one was. For him, using such words is a marker of having learned English through the migratory experience. Pedro associated the use of such slang words with an elevated social status that migrants actively tried to display. Herminia, a returned migrant also from Comalapa, echoed Pedro’s concerns, particularly surrounding the use of the word “okay.” As she said, “For example, those that go to the United States, when they come back, they just say “okay” to you. And that is ugly for here. For example, I know people that now talk like they talk over there. And I tell them that they should talk like it is here” (2011). A returned migrant herself, Herminia found the use of the word “okay” to be a disrespectful speech feature that migrants acquire in the US. She saw their continued use of it upon returning home as one which threatens and questions their identity as indigenous individuals. The use of “okay” among returned migrants is also an example of how English’s linguistic imperialism plays out through global processes like migration.<sup>vi</sup>

Manuel from Comalapa whose son migrated also identified returned migrants’ use of “okay” and other discourse markers as indicative of a shift in identity, but for him these changes are temporary. He said, “Those who have traveled to the US come back with their speech modified, right. They come back with ‘uh oh’ and ‘okay.’ But then slowly they lose these things and go back to normal” (2011). He too said that migrants acquire new discourse markers while in migration. However, the destructive cultural practices of having become Latino through speech are not permanent. Instead, he saw returned migrants as slowly losing their Latino identity markers and reintegrating into normalized Kaqchikel ways of speaking. In this sense, Latino-ization is not permanent and depends on what identity a person chooses to perform.

Not only is the use of the word “okay” an important marker for many, but so too can a

changing accent indicate a shift away from indigenous identity. For example, Ortulio, a returned migrant from Tecpán, said “They come back different. They even come back with Mexican accents. And sometimes I tell them that they are not Mexican. They are Guatemalans, pure men of corn. Mayas. They should feel proud of that identity I tell them” (2012). When Ortulio was in the US, he lived in a mostly Mexican community, where he constantly felt pressure to assimilate to the “normal” Latino way of speaking (Mexican Spanish in his case). He viewed other returned migrants who adopted a Mexican accent as having given into such pressures and assimilated into larger Latino society with disregard to their own indigenous heritage. Ortulio’s experience and interpretation is reified by other scholarly work on indigenous Guatemalans in the US that has also showed performing a Latino identity sometimes means performing a Mexican identity (Arias 2007, 184-200).

Finally, many interviewees expressed particular concern over women’s change in language use as a result of migration to the US. For example, Everilda from Tecpán specifically mentioned women’s roles when she said “There are those [migrants] that do not want to talk in our language anymore. They do not like our language. Just like that...because there are young women now who just do not want to talk in our language. Just in Spanish. Even if they know Kaqchikel but they do not speak it anymore” (2012). Everilda began by speaking about migrants in general, but then she focused specifically on young women who no longer want to speak Kaqchikel as a product of their migration. Such anxiety likely stems from women’s traditional roles as culture bearers in the region. Women have long been seen as those who pass on the use of indigenous language, culture, and clothing to children (Carey 2001, 40-81, Fischer and Hendrickson 2002, 17-18). As such, women’s migration poses a threat to the very mechanism by which most Maya communities reproduce their language and culture.

### Clothing Use

Residents of the Kaqchikel-speaking region also discuss clothing use as something that migration impacts in important ways, but this discussion centers almost entirely on women because women are those who mostly wear *traje* today (Hendrickson 1995, 62). For example, as Regina from Comalapa, whose female neighbor migrated, said, “there are families where they don’t use our clothes [after returning]. They take off the *corte*, the *huipil*. They use pants now” (2011). She continued to explain that women changing clothes was “shameful” and “against tradition.” Carolina, a returned migrant, also discussed the impact of changing clothes in a similarly poignant way when she put it this way:

Our way of life is very valuable. Our clothes, our whole way of being here. Our clothes, our festivals. It is valuable. It has significance. It is very powerful. [Elders] taught it to you, so you cannot leave it behind. But they do not know to value it. They feel good in the other clothes. They forget ours; they live another way of life. (2011)

As a returned migrant who wore *traje* after returning, Carolina saw not using indigenous clothing as disrespectful. She stated several times that indigenous clothing and culture are important and have value; significantly, she only names pieces of women’s apparel (*corte* and *huipil*) in her discussion of *traje*. She lamented that returned migrants lose their ability to appreciate it and use it, but her criticism is clearly focused on women given the articles of clothing she names. In her view, women mistakenly leave behind indigenous culture for what

they acquired in the US.

Women were not the only ones to criticize other women's change out of *traje* and into Western clothing. Eduardo, a man from Tecpán whose niece migrated to the US, expressed similar opinions about returned women migrants' clothing use. He said:

That is what changed women's clothes [migration]. They changed their clothes but those were clothes that God had given them. Those clothes He gave. God did it, and He gave our language too. God gave *gringos* theirs. He gave it to them. It was God who did it. Each group of people has a different way. God gave it to us. ...That is why our clothes need to continue to be used. We cannot stop using them like [migrants] are. We cannot give them up. (2012)

For Eduardo, God gave Kaqchikel language and clothing to the people, and Kaqchikel individuals should therefore not change clothes (or language). According to his thinking, each ethnic group, Latinos, *gringos*, and Kaqchikeles have their own way of being. As he later told me in our interview, the problem is that Kaqchikeles want to be Latinos when they are in the US, and Latinos want to be *gringos*. The issue with migration then, is that Kaqchikeles, and specifically women who are supposed to reproduce cultural traditions, are by extension trying to be *gringos* and bring back such ways of performing identity when they return to Guatemala.

While many returned migrants do change clothing styles, it is important to recognize that not all migrants do so. Many individuals with whom I spoke recognized the diversity in clothing styles of migrants upon return to their home communities. For example, Cecilia from Comalapa, whose neighbor migrated, said, "As for the clothes, there are some that change and some that are just like when they left" (2011). Maria, also from Comalapa and a returned migrant herself, concurred: "Maybe there are some who change, those who speak our language. They don't change out of our clothes but there are some who do because they are too proud to wear it now" (2011). Both Cecilia and Maria acknowledged that some returned migrants change clothes while others do not.<sup>vii</sup> The pressure to assimilate to the Latino community in the US differentially impacts migrants' decisions about how to dress and, by extension, display ethnicity.

## Food

Food is another important marker of indigenous identity for Kaqchikel Maya, and just as we have seen with clothing and language, what people eat is often discussed as a marker of having migrated. The staple food in indigenous regions in Guatemala is the thick hand-patted corn tortilla, known in Kaqchikel as *way*. Typical meals include what many Americans would consider a small main dish accompanied by many tortillas. Main dishes might include an egg with some tomato sauce, a few ounces of pasta with vegetables, or perhaps some dried fish. On the weekend, one might have stew, which typically includes a few ounces of meat, several pieces of vegetables, and broth. For some, salt on a tortilla is dinner, and this is often considered the most basic Maya meal.

Many Kaqchikel-speaking individuals I interviewed discussed that returned migrants did not eat such indigenous food anymore. For example, Jeremías from Comalapa, whose brother migrated, said, "They change. All of their food" (2011). Similarly, Caramela from Comalapa whose cousin migrated said "What do [migrants] change? Everything they eat. Like we say here, they are not the same anymore. We here are simple. Our food is simple. Greens, tomato sauce, roasted squash seeds - that is your dinner. Or maybe we got an egg and that was



a meal. But where migrants go, it's just meat. That's how they are. All things cooked in oil, just in oil. That is what I have seen" (2011). For Caramela, returned migrants are "too good" for the simple food that indigenous people eat. Instead, they require more expensive, fancier food. Again, class distinctions between indigenous peoples and Latinos, and in this case between non-migrants and returned migrants, are implicit in her statement. Both meat and oil are expensive, and if served at a meal, they connote a special occasion or a splurge. However, Caramela saw returned migrants as always eating such special-occasion food and interpreted such an act as a display of being "too good" for and above indigenous food and identity.

Implicit in the way both Jeremías and Carmela discussed returned migrants' food choices was the idea that the food one eats is a choice. In our conversations, both emphasized that migrants to the US learned to eat such different kinds of foods while there but that upon return to Guatemala, migrants would decide not to eat such indigenous foods anymore. As Carmela put it, "They can eat it. They did before. But not now" (2011). She saw returned migrants as being physically able to eat what she considered indigenous foods but as actively deciding not to after returning from the US. As Carmela saw it, returned migrants' negation of indigenous foods was a performance aimed at making a statement regarding one's ethnicity and socio-economic status.

### **Respect and *Costumbre***

Finally, another way in which Kaqchikel-speaking individuals discussed changes in returned migrants was about their use, or lack thereof, of *costumbre*. As discussed above, *costumbre* refers to the guiding principles of life passed down through tradition, including prescriptions for language, dress, food preparation and consumption, occupations and the gendered division of labor, and social hierarchy. Often, respecting and following *costumbre* is a means of performing indigenous identity (Fischer and Hendrickson 2002, xi-xii). However, as Peter, a returned migrant from Comalapa noted, "[Migrants'] way of being is not the same because from the time they leave, they do *costumbre* but when they go to the US, they learn another set of customs. They are different. They are not the same" (2011). For Peter, going to the US meant learning a new set of customs and organizing principles of life, an entirely new *costumbre*. Indeed, he told me of his own struggles to understand and adapt to the different cultural system in the US during his four years there. Peter thought of migrating to the US as "un-learning" indigenous culture and learning Latino culture. He referenced learning to eat bread with dinner instead of thick hand-patted corn tortillas, living in Spanish every moment of the day, and watching TV shows that promoted Latino identity through the use of Spanish, the style of dress, and kind of topics discussed.<sup>viii</sup> He also emphasized the increased consumption of meat and foods made with oil, an increased reliance on prepared food or fast food, and a lifestyle where extra time is spent not with family or in the neighborhood but with others in acts and spaces of consumption like shopping malls and restaurants. Again implicit in his statement is a recognition of class distinction. Beatriz from Comalapa whose brother migrated also noted that returned migrants do not always show respect for *costumbre*: "We still show respect. We have respect. But they [migrants] do not. They use bad words, things like that." She continued, "They have no more respect for things. You do not hear nice things from them. They speak like that and lose our *costumbre*" (2011). Beatriz focused specifically on what she perceived as migrants' increased use of curse words in Spanish. Speaking politely, particularly around elders and in public spaces, is important in *costumbre*. Beatriz saw the use of Spanish curse words as threatening the respect that *costumbre* demands

because migrants not only stop speaking Kaqchikel but also use words and content that is disrespectful to *costumbre*.

While many interviewees noted that migrants often lose respect for and the practice of *costumbre*, Kate from Santa Catarina, whose brother was a migrant, explained that such a thing is acceptable while migrants are in the US. The problem is when they come home. For her, “when [migrants] come back, they don’t have *costumbre* anymore. When they go to work, they get used to it, and when they come back they have no *costumbre*. They do not care about the clothes. It’s okay there, but it’s not okay here. They have no *costumbre* there, but it’s important here” (2010). Kate thought of Latinos in the US as not having any moral compass, which is why she said they have no *costumbre* in the US. As she noted, learning the way of life for somewhere else is important when there, but for her it was equally important to re-integrate into indigenous lifestyles upon return. In this case, the problem with migrating is migrants imposing their acquired Latino lifestyles upon the indigenous home community when they return.

Similarly, Víctor, himself a migrant from Tecpán, also asserted that while many migrants lose his town’s *costumbre* in migration, he optimistically informed me that they slowly adjust upon return. He said, “It is like they turn it off immediately [when they leave]. They pick up *costumbre* from there [in the US] and bring it here. It is like they bring those *costumbres* here. Because they were there. But slowly, slowly they give up those ideas. They give it up. They pick up our *costumbres* again from here. And that is really good and important” (2012). Víctor saw migrants as acquiring the customs of Latinos in the US by speaking Spanish and respecting other cultural norms and even returning home with them. But he saw migrants later re-adjust to indigenous values upon returning. His optimism is likely related to his experience of having transformed his own identity through migration to the US, where he resided for seven years. He told me that returning to Tecpán was difficult because of the cultural re-adaptation work he had to do. While Kate from above saw the continued practice of US-based Latino norms from migrants as questionable, Víctor saw the slow re-integration of indigenous migrants as part of the return migration process as return migrants shift their identity performances. Víctor was not alone in his understanding of reintegration; several other returned migrants and their family members spoke of slowly re-adjusting to life and customs in Guatemala after returning.

As with language and clothing, interviewees expressed intensified concern over women’s lack of respect for *costumbre* as a result of migration. Just as women are seen as those who carry on the use of indigenous clothing, women are also often seen in the Kaqchikel-speaking region as culture bearers, or those who protect indigenous *costumbre* through their continued practice of it and their instruction of it to children (Carey 2001, 40-81, Fischer and Hendrickson 2002, 17- 18). Some participants in this study expressed the sentiment that it is women’s duty to uphold *costumbre*. Demetrio from Santa Catarina, whose neighbor migrated and returned, said “Sometimes the girls go, and they do not do well. They don’t have respect for *costumbre* anymore” (2010). Here he specifically targets young women, saying their lack of respect for *costumbre* is problematic. In our conversation, he did not have similar or specific criticisms of young men’s migration to the US and its results. Whether or not there are even large numbers of young women migrating to the US and whether or not they actually assimilate to Latino language and culture is not the point. The significant part here is that Demetrio and other indigenous individuals perceive migration to have particularly strong impacts on young women, which threatens cultural and linguistic reproduction in ways that it

does not among men, as young men are not expected to reproduce indigenous culture in the same ways as women.

## Conclusions

While scholars have contributed a great deal of work on Latinos in the US, there has not been a widespread recognition of the diversity in the Latino community. Much scholarly work discusses Latinos' ethnic origins based on national identity, as if nationhood and ethnicity are equivalent categories. Such is not the case for many indigenous migrants, who may at times identify based on national origin, but often do not share cultural and linguistic traits with the majority of Latinos in the US. This is certainly the case of the Kaqchikel Maya of highland Guatemala. As demonstrated through the quotes in this article, many Kaqchikel speakers see ethnic identity as something that one maintains through behavior and the use of important ethnic markers such as language, dress, food, and following *costumbre*. In this way, indigenous individuals can transform their identities and become Latino by speaking Spanish, eating different foods, wearing Western clothes, or not following *costumbre*. Perhaps ironically, Kaqchikel speakers view Latinos in much the same way that the American public views Latinos: as Spanish-speaking individuals from Latin America. Significantly, many Kaqchikel speakers do not envision themselves as Latinos and understand migration to the US as a potential means by which one can and does learn to perform the markers of Latino identity: they adopt the use of Spanish along with bits and pieces of English; they change accents, clothes, food, and attitudes. Migrants often return bearing the markers of Latino identity, but for Kaqchikel Maya speakers, this represents a change in identity and an affront to indigeneity.

The shift away from indigenous identity towards Latino identity is especially complicated for women, who have long been seen as culture bearers in the indigenous regions of Guatemala. For them, to stop performing indigenous identity through language and clothing is particularly reprehensible given the cultural weight of their identity performances. While many Kaqchikel speakers do not approve of men's shift to a more Latino-based identity, such reproaches are intensified for women who adopt such identities through migration to the US.

Scholars are making important strides to address the complexities of identities among indigenous migrants in the Latino population in the US, and this article is meant to provide a context from which we might understand David's rejection of the label Latino at the beginning of this article. Indigenous migrants to the US like David might not claim Latino identity because of the ways in which many Kaqchikel speakers discuss migration as a means by which one changes ethnicity by adopting Spanish, wearing Western clothes, eating non-indigenous foods, and no longer following *costumbre*. Understanding the home community's culture and the ethnic relations within those communities is critical to understanding indigenous migrants' identities in the context of the US. As for David, he continues to reject the label Latino, and at the time of publication assures me that he has not nor will he ever become Latino.

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<sup>i</sup> All translations are done by the author. With the exception of the quotes in this opening paragraph, which were originally in Spanish, all translations are from Kaqchikel Maya to English. All names used here are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

<sup>ii</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the terms and their usages, see Oboler 1995 "Introduction" (xi-xxi).

<sup>iii</sup> Ladino is a term typically used to discuss non-indigenous Guatemalans. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even into today, the categories of indigenous and Ladino are dialectical: a person can be one or the other, but not both and not in between the two. Some of this is changing as the word "mestizo" increases in usage and as the conception of what it means to be indigenous shifts. For an in-depth discussion of the term Ladino, see Hale 2006.

<sup>iv</sup> While many Ladinos also eat corn tortillas, the corn tortilla is an essential aspect of Maya identity. For many individuals, one cannot be Maya if one does not eat corn tortillas (Hendrickson 1995, 156, Nelson 2001, 332).

<sup>v</sup> I was able to learn of individuals who had not returned to Santa Catarina by talking to their family members who still reside in Santa Catarina.

<sup>vi</sup> For more discussion on English and linguistic imperialism, see Pupavac 2012, p. 120-143

<sup>vii</sup> It is not clear if any of the women migrants in this study wore *traje* while in the US. Often, it is difficult to acquire *traje* in the US because it is produced in Guatemala, difficult to carry on the long journey to the US if one is undocumented, and costly to ship from Guatemala to the US. It is also important to note that *traje* is expensive in comparison to Western clothing, with the *huipiles* from the towns in this study ranging in price from \$150-\$350USD. In this sense, displaying indigenous identity through the use of *traje* can be a statement about economic resources and class. Through my participant-observation work, I documented migrants' families using remittance money to purchase *traje* as a means of displaying migrant wealth.

<sup>viii</sup> For example, talking openly about such topics as pregnancy and sex.