

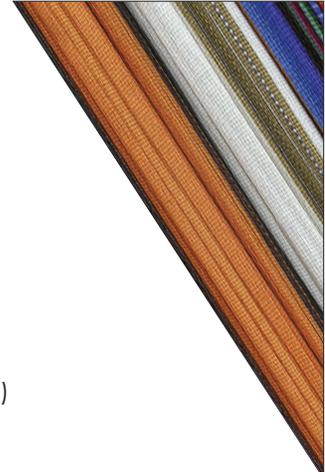
## Section 2: Cultural Profile

Section two is compiled from academic sources and Maya testimony. Great variety exists among the Maya, and not all Maya, nor all scholars, agree on best descriptions of Maya culture and world views. But among our Maya consultants and focus groups, and consulted literature, we have found a deep sense of tradition and religious spirituality that profoundly influence concepts of health.

### THE MAYA

Contemporary Maya are descended from the Classic and Pre-European Maya civilizations that thrived in Southern Mexico and Central America for thousands of years. The ancients developed accurate systems of mathematics, a written language, and building capabilities that led to the creation of amazing architectural structures and some of the world's largest cities of the time period. Highly successful at farming and food development, the Maya evidently enjoyed healthy diets and good health. Along with their other accomplishments, the Maya also had an intricate system of diagnosing and curing illnesses. While their healing practices placed a great emphasis on the power of prayer and rituals to cure individuals, they also used plants and herbs as medicines. For example, the Maya have used apasote (or sk'aj) to relieve stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea, for untold generations. Modern healthcare providers in Guatemala recognize that this plant has amoebicidal properties and that the Maya continue to use it to this day.

When the Spanish reached the lands of the Maya during the early 16th century, the Maya were subjected to foreign diseases to which they lacked immunity. Many died in widespread epidemics and neither traditional Maya medicine nor European medicines would cure their diseases. European ideas influenced Maya religious and scientific beliefs, but overall the isolation of the highland villages enabled the people to maintain their traditions and cultural knowledge throughout the colonial period and into the modern day. Traditional Maya healers, such as bonesetters and midwives, continue to practice in rural communities throughout Guatemala; often times they are the only source of medical



care within reach, although increasingly Maya healers (midwives especially) are synthesizing modern bio-medical practices into their ancient traditions.

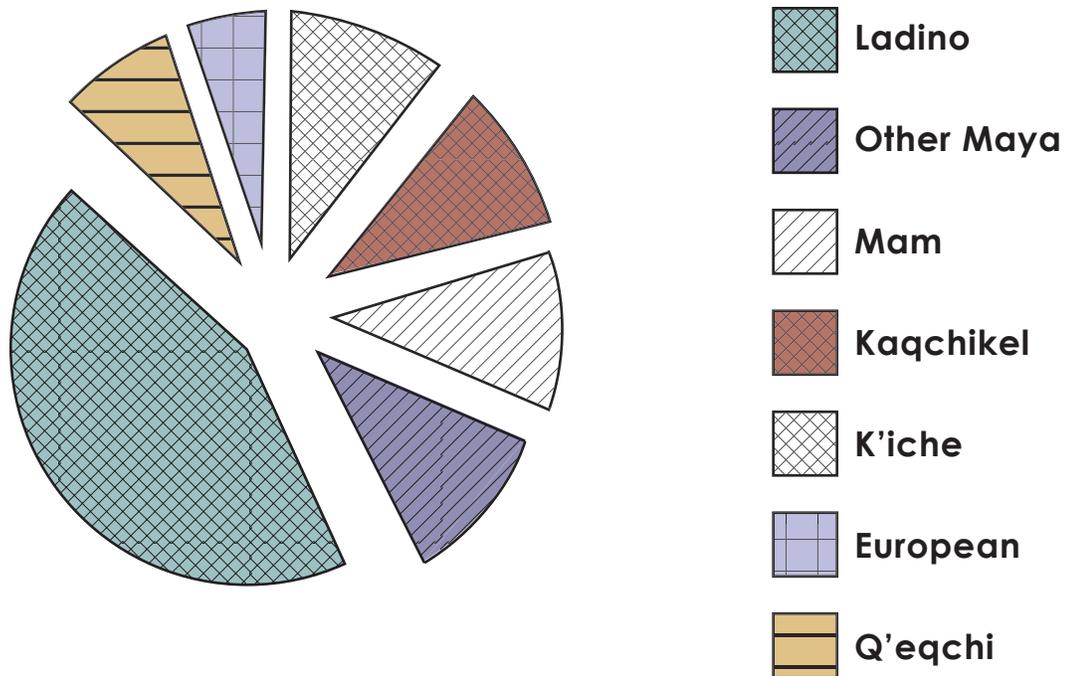
In Guatemala, health standards differ greatly between urban and rural areas. Because most Maya live in the rural parts Guatemala, they suffer greater health disparities than non-Maya living in urban communities. The majority of Maya towns have small clinics but they often lack essential medical supplies and critical care services. In the Guatemalan countryside where most Maya live, the limited access to healthcare results in higher cases of malaria, typhus, dysentery and measles. These conditions are further aggravated by poor nutrition and sanitation. Plantation workers suffer from ailments caused by the pesticides and fertilizers used on crops. In jungle areas, snakebites and skin mites are common.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Maya have fled the violence and poverty of Guatemala to seek a new life in the United States. Because many have witnessed the deaths of loved ones, the trauma of war and migration, and great uncertainty in the U.S., they might suffer from anxiety and depression.

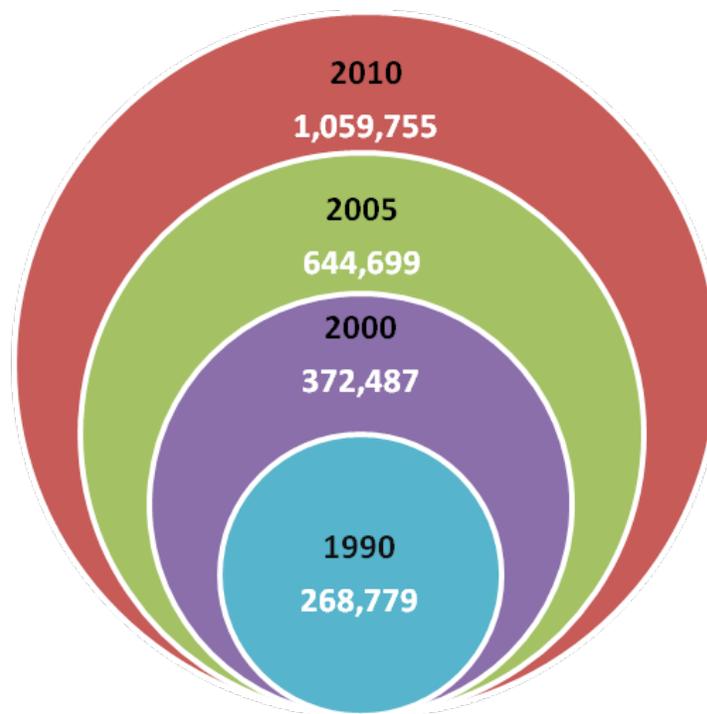
## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

The Maya make up about half of the Guatemalan population. The census categorizes the Guatemalan ethnicity as Mestizo (mixed Amerindian-Spanish - in local Spanish called Ladino) and European 59.4%, K'iche 9.1%, Kaqchikel 8.4%, Mam 7.9%, Q'eqchi 6.3%, other Mayan 8.6%, indigenous non-Mayan 0.2%, other 0.1% (2001 census). The age structure in Guatemala is 0-14 years: 39.4% (male 2,664,058/female 2,573,006), 15-64 years: 56.8% (male 3,655,184/female 3,884,331) 65 years and over: 3.8% (male 231,652/female 268,286) (2010 est.).

## GUATEMALA POPULATION 2001



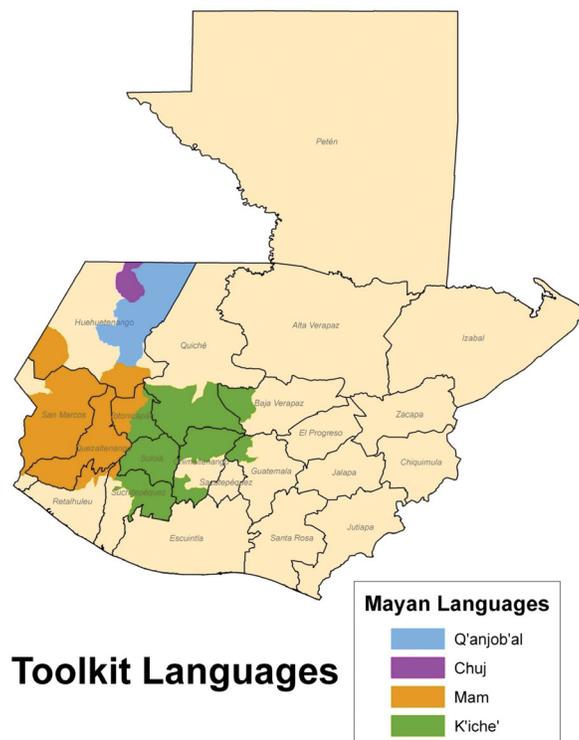
Growth of Guatemalans Living in the United States: at least one half of the Guatemalans living in the United States are Maya, many speak Spanish as the second language or not at all.



The above diagram depicts the growing population of Guatemalans living in the United States from 1990 to 2010. Figures are based on information gathered from the Pew Hispanic Center at <http://pewhispanic.org/data/origins/> and the United States 2010 Census data at <http://2010.census.gov/2010census/>. Furthermore, according to Pew, the percent of Guatemalans in the United States without health insurance was 47.9% in 2008.

## MAYA LANGUAGES

Spanish is Guatemala's official language but many Guatemalans in the U.S. report their first language to be Maya. Although Guatemala has 21 official Maya languages, there are nearly 50 Maya dialects that further complicate communication. Maya languages are largely mutually unintelligible. Some Maya understand and speak a special Spanish language called "la castilla", a non-standard Spanish. For those who do speak Spanish, they would not easily understand Spanish from other Latin American nations. The toolkit provides resources in four Maya languages that are recognized as having significant numbers of non-Spanish speakers in the United States. We took into consideration that modern medical terminology oftentimes cannot be translated directly, thus care was taken in making sure concepts and meaning are conveyed accurately. Some illnesses, treatment methods, and terminologies are unique to specific cultures and therefore, need to be broken down and adequately explained.



**Toolkit Languages**



## **COMMUNITY, RESPECT, AND HARMONY**

Maya consultants explained that traditional worldview is centered on the community rather than individualism, and that community supplies values and well-being for the inhabitants. To maintain knowledge and traditions, elders are valued and play a crucial role in passing down knowledge to subsequent generations. Ideally, Maya should view their lives as interwoven, and look to each other for advice, knowledge and wellbeing, as they strive for harmony within the community and the greater world.

## **RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY**

As part of the Maya worldview, imbalance results from the common illnesses of humankind such as hatred, envy, materialism, and disrespect. Health and disease might be understood as the search to maintain or restore balance within this relation; that is, to restore balance to the relationship between the self and the whole. The Maya believe that their physical and emotional health conditions are directly related to social behaviors; and to achieve a healthy body and spirit, the Maya seek to restore harmony and maintain balanced energy. Many see their spirituality as a fundamental component of daily living habits, health practices, and wellness.

Widespread testimony shows that Maya usually wait to seek hospital or clinic care until the illness is serious or indigenous medicines are unattainable. Providers should be aware of the likelihood that the Maya may have taken herbal medicines prior to seeking hospital care and therefore, may be at risk for possible drug interactions when combined with modern medicines.

## VIEWS ON ILLNESSES AND HEALTH

### **CONCEPT OF DISEASE**

A common Maya belief is that illness is caused by an imbalance between hot and cold elements in the body. Health is maintained by avoiding exposure to extreme temperatures and by consuming appropriate foods and beverages to maintain a balance of temperature. Examples of "hot" diseases or states of being are pregnancy, hypertension, diabetes, and indigestion. "Cold" disease examples include menstrual cramps, pneumonia, and colic. The goal of treatment is to restore balance. "Cold" diseases are treated with "hot" remedies and vice versa. Inter- and intra-group variations exist with regard to beliefs about the hot and cold theory of disease.

### **HEALING REMEDIES**

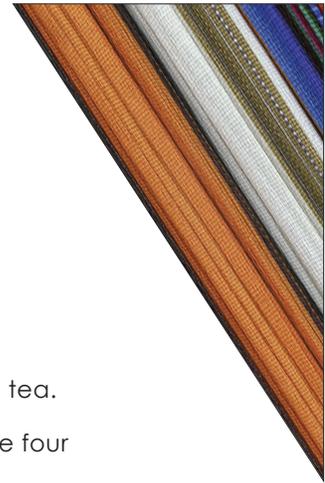
Traditional herbal medicines are commonly used by Maya who live in Guatemala and in the United States. Examples include using garlic to treat hypertension and cough; chamomile to treat nausea, gas, colic, and anxiety; a purgative tea combined with stomach massage to cure lack of appetite, stomach pains, or diarrhea; and peppermint to treat dyspepsia and gas.

### **EL EMPACHO**

El Empacho was described by the communities as a sickness resulting from not eating at regular meal times, eating too much after hours of fasting, eating too fast, or eating without drinking something to help digest the food.

### **SUSTO**

Susto is a common illness that can be found in both children and adults and generally appears after witnessing accidents, violence, abuse or any other traumatic events. Maya community members said Susto happens while someone is sleeping, daydreaming or distracted and then is suddenly awoken by screaming. The symptoms of Susto may include crying upon awakening, body convulsions, and general fear. It often begins as nightmares or night terrors.



Cures for Susto include Rue (an herb). One description of a cure called for hot Rue tea. After the tea is made; red coals are collected from the four sides of the fire (from the four cardinal points that stand for fire, air, water and earth) and placed into the Rue tea, which is then drunk. Other cures might include herbal baths mixed with rue, basil, orange leaves, and marigold. Sometimes the curandero chews the rue then suddenly blows it on the face of the patient.

### ***MAL DE OJO***

Mal de Ojo might be caused by a pregnant woman looking at a child affectionately or with love. It can also be caused by seeing a walking drunk, or seeing a sweating horse or other animal. Symptoms of Mal de Ojo include vomiting, fever, and/or diarrhea that smell of eggs. One of the cures for Mal de Ojo is for a pregnant woman or a person with cold blood to pass an egg along with dry chili pepper and black pepper across the whole body. Then the egg might be taken to a river, and the chili and pepper are burned in a fire.

### ***DOLOR de OIDO (Earache)***

Dolor de Oido can be prevented by feeding the baby breast milk and cured with a couple drops of breast milk.

### ***PREGNANCY***

If a woman is having a hard time getting pregnant, it is believed that her uterus is too low. The woman therefore looks for a midwife to adjust the position of the uterus. Women generally look for a midwife as soon as they are pregnant and stay under her care until the birth of the baby.

### ***DOLOR DE MUELAS O DIENTES (Toothache)***

Dolor de muelas o dientes can be cured with tobacco or garlic because both kill the bacteria that cause infection or pain.

### **CALAMBRES O ARTRITIS (Cramps or arthritis)**

Cramps or arthritis might be cured with a mixture of tobacco and liquor, which is placed on the part of the body that hurts. Sometimes it helps to drink a bit of the medicine as juice or tea.

### **DOLOR DEL ESTOMAGO (Stomachache)**

It is common during the cold months for children and elderly to have stomach pain. The cure is to take la Yerba buena (good herb), la verbena, la mirta and drink it to minimize inflammation.

## **HEALERS AND PROVIDERS**

- Partera (midwife)
- Comadrona (midwife)
- Curandera (curer)
- Huesera (bonesetter)
- Cura los ojos (healer of eye problems)
- Promotores de salud (community health educator)