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As I stared into the depths of my cheap plastic cup, I wished that I didn't have to be so polite. But even sipping around the colony of ants swimming in my hot chocolate and facing the pile of wilted lettuce clinging to my plate, I enjoyed dinner. My hosts had prepared the food with the same camp stove used to heat the water for my shower. Afterwards, an armadillo hunt in the nearby citrus grove provided the evening entertainment before the hammocks were hung for the night.

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MAYA MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Even though I was in Mexico and have good Spanish skills, communicating was a challenge: I was staying with a Maya family in rural Mexico. Many people do not realize that the Maya descendants who live in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico are a vibrant, present-day ethnic group with a distinct language and culture. Learning the Yukatek Maya language did not involve any hieroglyphics in archeological ruins — just turning on the radio to a mixture of ads in Spanish and in Yukatek Maya did the trick. During my summer in Merida (the capital of the Yucatan) and in surrounding villages, I investigated the Maya migration to the Western United States; worked with INDEMAYA, a government organization that supports the indigenous communities; studied the Yukatek Maya language; and became fascinated with the Maya communities now located in San Francisco, CA, and Portland, OR.

There's been migration to the United States from northern Mexico for decades, but the migration from the Yucatan is much more recent. Many of the small rural communities in the Yucatan are highly marginalized, and families still live in one-room, palm-thatched huts with limited access to electricity and potable water. Because it is very difficult to make a living farming—the minimum wage is about 45 pesos per day, or less than U.S. \$5 — the migration rate to the United States has soared. In some towns, counting the men who have remained requires just one hand.

When I visited a Maya home, there would often be fifteen minutes of chatting in Maya beforehand — I could tell they were talking about me, but I could only pick out a few words (often including references to a “yankee”). Many of the elderly speak only Maya and cannot read or write in any language.

Monetary remittance from the

United States has made a higher standard of living possible. Right next to their traditional palm-thatched



homes, many Maya families have built a “modern” concrete home. The most striking feature: the homes have a huge, American-style refrigerator right smack in the middle of the living room, like one would display a good piece of art. Inside, there's often not more than a single two-liter bottle of coke because food is purchased and prepared daily. It's not uncommon for families to have a new concrete home, yet choose to live in the adjacent traditional home because it is more comfortable.

But these American refrigerators do not come without a hefty price. The residents of Santa Elena, a town of 3,600 people, told me that migration to San Francisco began just twelve years ago. Intending to stay for only three years, a handful of young men were lured by the 30,000 pesos (US \$3,000) that they could earn monthly by working 10-14 hour days. To cross the border, the men from Santa Elena borrow 26,000 pesos (\$2,600) from a relative who is already working in the



U.S. After a “training session” in the case of being caught, they travel with the local coyote (human smuggler) to the U.S.-Mexico border. The men leave on Thursday, arrive in San Francisco on Sunday, and — according to the village people — are working on

Monday. Door-to-door delivery, they say. Perhaps that's why of the 3,600 people living in Santa Elena, more than 800 are estimated to be in “El Norte” — clearly a substantial portion of the working-aged male population. The migration has been so successful that within the past few years, even



woman with young children have begun making the journey. Every few years, the men return home to visit, usually for no more than two to three months. At home, they find a community divided. Family relations are tense. Returned husbands get sick

from their wives' cooking. Children are scared when their father's in-person voice does not match the phone-voice. These Maya families may have televisions, stereo systems, refrigerators, and wireless phones. But an entire segment of the population has voluntarily disappeared. And once they return, describing and contextualizing their experiences to those who have remained is next to impossible. Continued hefty migration rates risk the loss of the rich Maya culture and language.

Now, some who have seen the other side have returned to the Yucatan to support their culture, to teach Yukatek Maya to children, and to foster opportunities for livelihood in these rural communities. But their return underscores the delicate balance between eliminating poverty and preserving the culture. Certainly it's a challenge, but after centuries of perseverance, the Maya people will persist.

Traveling to the Yucatan helped me understand both the thriving San Francisco Maya community and the growing Portland Maya community. While I had lived in Oregon for eighteen years, I had never before grasped the depth, richness, and vibrancy of the Maya people. And so, dyos bo'otik—thank you—for the Burch Fellowship experience.