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*Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections*

## **Cultural Conservation Narrative Stage: Mayan Indian Culture in Guatemala**

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WEBVTT

00:00:09.000 --> 00:00:15.000

[[singing]]

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: Well, Gerónimo, is that good for you? Say something.

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Okay [[speaking native language]] [[Speaker 1 laughs]] Okay.

00:00:27.000 --> 00:00:33.000

<i>Speaker 1</i>: Well, I think we'll start now even though people are still filing in.

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This is the first in a series of discussions about Maya culture

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of the American Folklife Festival on Guatemala and it's going to be on--

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focused on the indigenous culture or Native American culture

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of the Maya Indians, the Maya Native Americans.

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A lot of people, when I talk about Maya-- well let me introduce myself.

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I am an anthropologist from Dartmouth College

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and to my right I have Gerónimo Camposeco, who is a Jakaltek Indian,

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one of about 20 some-odd different language groups from over 250 municipalities

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in mostly the Western part of Highland Guatemala.

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He is here as an exile

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and we wanted to bring to you something of his personal story

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about why he is here and about also what is the nature of Maya culture

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past and present and its possibilities for the future

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since this whole discussion is within the context of cultural conservation

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and perhaps no example of endangering of Maya culture has-- is more severe than in--

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or of any culture is more severe than the case of the Maya

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where many, many have been killed in the last few years.

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But before we-- before we get to this and to Gerónimo's own story,

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I just wanted to give a little bit of background.

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A lot of people when you mention Maya culture

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say "Oh yes, that was something that existed in ancient times and then died out."

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A lot of people believe

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because of being aware of the archaeology of the Maya but not of their current culture

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that somehow the culture flourished in ancient times and then died out,

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which it very much has not.

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Right now between Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize and a little bit of Honduras,

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there are over 8 million Mayas.

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They speak about 28 different Mayan languages.

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Often people say dialects but they're not dialects;

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they're different languages as different as French is from Provençal or Italian.

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They're all related languages but most of them are not mutually-intelligible.

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For example here, the people here are all speak Jakaltek, no, Gerónimo?

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Yes and Q'anjob'al.

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: And Q'anjob'al. Two languages which are fairly intelligible between the two, wouldn't you say?

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Yes, that's right.

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: But our weavers here over to our left in the cultural pavilion here

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speak another language, Kaqchikel,

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which is not intelligible to either of the languages spoken by the Mayas here.

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And so, it's a very rich and very much alive culture

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that although we have been made aware, perhaps, of the classic Maya and its collapse in the jungle area,

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much less press we might say or much less attention has been given to the fact that

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the Maya culture continues today with many of its aboriginal,

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original cultural patterns still very much intact.

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I did research on one group, yet a different language than either of these two

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although we do communicate with each other in Spanish as the colonial language

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of Guatemala and it's a special Spanish which is a little bit Mayanized,

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certain special expressions that we share.

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Some of the features of the Maya culture which have continued right down to the present,

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some may have noticed from the program books if you read them

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are the double calendar,

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the calendar of 260 days,

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which calendar diviners still use in many Maya towns

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to decide the fates, to predict births, to decide when to plant,

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to settle family disputes, to decide what's the best day to go to the market and so on.

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This calendar which began before the time of Christ was once the--

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a mainstay of all Mesoamerican cultures

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and those are the cultures that came from about the middle of the Sonoran area of Mexico

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all the way down into Honduras.

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But today, it only-- they only survive in Highland Guatemalan communities.

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Within Guatemala, there's about 4 million--

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or were about 4 million Mayas as of the last census,

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making them the largest population of Native Americans in one area

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anywhere in all of the Americas

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and they're also the dominant population in Guatemala,

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representing over 60 percent of the population,

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making them the only country in the North American continent

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in which a Native American population is the dominant.

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As we will see, however, that despite the fact that they are the majority of the population,

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they have little-- very little or no say about the nature of the government

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as a whole and have, ever since the conquest of 1524,

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had a great deal of difficulty even preserving their--

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their culture at the most local level.

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Well, before talking any more about this,

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I thought I would turn the mic over to Gerónimo Camposeco

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who is an extraordinary individual

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in that he, having come from a humble indigenous community

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of the highlands of Guatemala, went on to get an education,

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went on to the university in Guatemala

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and became essentially Guatemala's first indigenous anthropologist.

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In other words, a native person studying his own people

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from an anthropological perspective,

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something very hard to do in Guatemala anyway

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just to get an education as an Indian but to do so focused on his own people

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is something very, very special and something very applaudable.

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Unfortunately, that was a lot of the reason why he had to leave his country of Guatemala,

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which is why he's here.

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But without going into further details,

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I thought I would just let you tell a little bit of your own story, Gerónimo.

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Good afternoon.

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Thank you for sharing with us these thoughts

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about Guatemalan and Mayan culture.

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We are here because not by our our desires because we prefer to stay in Guatemala,

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working our lands and living in our own villages and homes there.

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It's difficult for us as Indians

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to leave our homeland because we are related very close to our lands

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but we had to leave.

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The problem of the civil war took the Mayan people

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outside their homeland and that's the reason we are here.

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We are Mayan exiles for the first time in the history,

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we travel out of our lands and the situation is this that in Guatemala,

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besides we were colonized more than 400 years ago,

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we still trying to survive and have a restan- cultural resistance.

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That's the reason we still speaks our-- our own language

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and we are still living our own special way of life like Mayan.

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We have our own organizations and our own Mayan calendar

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and our own numbers and all those that our Mayan ancestors gave to us and-

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: and music.

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: And music. Now we are presenting with my three fellow brothers here

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the Mayan marimba instrument. This is a Mayan traditional instrument.

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We are going to start performing today about 3 pm.

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So you are going to listen music, very ancient music

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even we don't know the names of the music.

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But the way we do music is just someone

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--one to two-- putting on the marimba what they are thinking

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and that's what they teach us and we learn to--

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to play the marimba music, and the special music of Indian, Mayan Indian is called a son.

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: It's a S-O-N, a son as they call it.

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Son, S-O-N, yes.

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So, we are here, a group of about 4000 Mayan Indians

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mostly living in California, others in Arizona

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and 600 of us we are living in Florida.

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: In a town called Indian Town, ironically.

<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Indian Town.

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That's-- this town, Indian Town was called

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because the Seminole Indians but long time ago.

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There is no Indians living there. [[Speaker 1 laughs]]

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: But now the name is very appropriate

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because Mayan Indians are living there

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and plus the reason why we are in Florida and other places like Arizona and California

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is because we are traditional people working our lands.

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We don't have other skills like to grow plants and corn and vegetables, beans and squashes.

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And that's the reason the labor contractors brought

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the Mayan Indians to these places to work and to sell the labor forces.

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Now we don't have anymore our own houses, our own land.

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We need to work every day in order to survive

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because that's the difference from our place in Guatemala.

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There we live in our-- as I said, we have everything.

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Of course, because the European impact of the Conquistadores

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they took our best lands from us and sent us to the top of the mountains.

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The mountains they're-- these lands are not too good like the lowlands, you know?

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The mountains are very cold. We only have once maize crops one, once a year.

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<i>Speaker 1</i>: Corn crops.

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Corn, yes. So, that's different.

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In the lowlands, we used to have 2 or 3 crops,

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so we had enough to feed our families, our children.

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So despite of that we wanted to survive and we wanted to live as Indians.

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We wanted to live that we are a nation with culture,

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with rights, and we are ruled with other rights that the laws of the conquistadores and their--

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[[asking a question about how to say "descendants" in English]]

00:13:07.000 --> 00:13:12.000

<i>Speaker 1</i>: Their descendants--

<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: Their descendants, and despite of that

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we are struggling to live.

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In the recent years the war,

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the civil war took us outside

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and now the Indians are being forced to live in other places, not their own places.

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They are forced to live like in model villages,

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living with other people,

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and that's the way we are losing very fast our culture, our rights.

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The people are living outside the country,

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we are losing many things, as I said.

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We need to work for other people, we are not practicing any more our family reunions,

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we don't have the community anymore outside Guatemala.

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So, what we are trying to do now is have some kind of legal status

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not only in the United States, in Mexico and other countries like Costa Rica, Nicaragua,

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in order to keep in some way our culture like community.

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If we don't have those legal status we cannot keep our culture,

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because we are struggling to hide ourselves from the laws that I said

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are saying that we are here as illegal aliens, and that we have to live in other places,

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because we don't have the right to live here.

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We are refugees that came to the United States without any papers,

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but now the lawyers are working for us trying to submit political asylum for humanitarian reasons.

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For the reason that we need to survive as a people in exile, that's our situation now.

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We don't want to lose nothing,

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that's the reason we brought our marimba, we have our weavers here, we have our crafts,

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and we are speaking each other our own language.

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I don't know if there's more to explain, but we can go ahead--

<i>Speaker 1</i>: Maybe you could just say a few things in Jakalteq and I could go back to the closing reading.

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<i>Gerónimo Camposeco</i>: [[greeting in Q'anjob'al]] I am going to talk in Q'anjob'al and sometimes in Jakalteq

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because now I am working with refugees from a special place

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called San Miguel Acatán from the mountains of Huehuetenango and I learned the language

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is called Q'anjob'al because two of them are Q'anjob'al so I am going to talk to them and to you also.

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[[talks in Q'anjob'al]]

00:17:02.000 --> 00:17:04.000

<i>Speaker 1</i>: Thank you very much, Gerónimo.

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You're doing very well at another Mayan language,

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I wish I was doing that well. [[laughter and applause]]

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Mind you that's not his native Mayan language,

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his is another one. But we're all learning in this experience.

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One of the hard things for, that has been for me as an anthropologist

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having studied these people, is to face the fact that many of the people

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that one is working with, many of the cultures, many of the traditions that one is working with,

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or which I was working with in the 70's for example are no longer there in the 80's.

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Not because of the normal reasons such as people migrating out of it,

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people through education or contact with the outside world deciding to change,

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but people actually having been driven out of and off their lands or actually been killed.

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And an example and point is there are signs around here of two men,

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one playing a drum and another playing a little flute.

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They're all around here, they're the announcers

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announcing panels for the cultural conservation program here.

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Well, all of those three people in the poster are now dead,

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and they were all killed by the army in 1982.

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They were all machine-gunned in their homes,

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along with their wives and their children, and most of the rest of the people of their whole little village,

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one sunny afternoon in October of 1982.

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And people will ask me when I tell them about this

00:18:46.000 --> 00:18:49.000

"Well why, why are they doing this?"

00:18:49.000 --> 00:18:51.000

and it's very hard for me to explain,

00:18:51.000 --> 00:18:59.000

because it's a dilemma of cultural conservation of the worst sort.

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Are we getting near the end of time? [[Staff member confirming in the BG]]

00:19:01.000 --> 00:19:03.280

<i>Speaker 1</i>: Okay-- yeah.



## Smithsonian Institution

*Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections*

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