



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Accession Numbers:

LO-02-01-FN

Fieldnotes

Audio recordings

Photographic documentation

Additional materials

Date(s): February 14, 2002

Related Accession Numbers:

Individual/Group/Event: Ann Sheehan

Fieldworker(s): Laura Orleans

Location of Interview: Ms. Sheehan's home

Street Address:

City:

Zip:

Co:

Contact person (if different from above):

Title:

Sponsoring organization (for event or group): n/a

Address (if different from above):

Phone: Daytime:

Evening:

E-mail:

Website:

Special Needs (including translation):

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): Guatemalan Mayan community

Traditions noted for follow-up: foodways, music, dance, traditional healing/shamanism, weaving, pottery, storytelling.

Other Possible Contacts: Mayan Weavers (Newbury Street in Boston), Rene Moreno (dance), Miguel Lucas (music), Tienda y Panaderia Quetzal Dos, Tienda Centro Americana y Antojitos

Summary Description: Ann Sheehan has been involved in working with the New Bedford Mayan community for 5+ years. Prior to that she and her husband did medical work with Mayans in Guatemala. This meeting was intended as a way to get background information on the local community.

Background Information:

Most of the people living in New Bedford come from the Quiche region and primarily from two villages: San Andes Sacabaja and Chinique with others from the village of Joyabaj and other smaller aldeas. Most worked the land as migrant farmers travelling seasonally from the mountainous region of the interior to the coastal fincas to work the sugar plantations. While she was not certain how long Mayans have been living in New Bedford anecdotal reports suggest that there have been Mayans here since the 1970s though most people have been in the area for closer to 10 years. Although the community is quite transient, there are more and more families. People are getting married (mostly to other Mayans) and having children. And more women are coming (many of them are "ladino" of Spanish heritage rather than Mayan, though this is a complex identity defined on many levels--racially, ethnically, culturally, linguistically, etc.). Most likely people came to New Bedford as a spillover from the community in Central Falls Rhode Island. Most are employed in the fishing industry (especially fish processing) and landscaping. Most are young men, many come between the ages of 14 and 16 almost as a rite of passage. Very few arrive with any English. Most speak some Spanish as well as their native language Quiche. Some (due to a lack of schooling) do not speak Spanish and must first become proficient in Spanish before they can begin to learn English. The events of September 11 have had a devastating affect on the local community. Many people have lost their jobs. Drinking and gambling (esp. the lottery) are growing problems for the community as many are desperate, lonely and depressed. Because of political violence and corruption in their own country, many of the Mayans are very timid about interacting with authorities and this fear is much greater since 911. It is much more difficult to get out of Guatemala and into the United States. And it is much more difficult to get political asylum, though many are afraid to attempt this and live here as undocumented "illegals". Many people have returned to Guatemala, afraid to remain in the United States and not wanting to be separated from their families. There are many pressures which make the perpetuation of traditional arts very difficult. Financial pressures are especially strong as most people arrive with a significant debt to pay for the funds needed to make the trip from Guatemala to New Bedford. People must acculturate, find a job and then earn enough money to both eek out a living and repay this sizeable debt. Soccer is probably the most public thing the Mayan community is involved in presently. Many Mayan men are part of soccer leagues in New Bedford. Other gatherings of Mayans take place almost entirely in invidual apartments. The Mayans are prey to street crime. They are easy targets because they do not own cars and travel on

foot, bike or via public transportation and are typically very small in stature. Most live in neighborhoods in the north and south ends of the city close to the river. A recent exhibit at ArtWorks was an important opening for the local community both helping to validate the culture and giving the community an opportunity to see that they could be in the public eye without coming to harm as a result. It was a beginning of developing trust with institutions and individuals outside of their own community.

Traditional Culture:

Many traditions were lost as a result of the war. In many parts of the Quiche region, traditional clothing or traje which was once woven was replaced by clothing made on a sewing machine. There is a local woman who makes the traditional huipil (woman's blouse) on a sewing machine. She made some huipiles to be displayed as part of a recent exhibit of Mayan culture at a local gallery (ArtWorks). Mayans in the local community subsequently asked her to make clothing for them. While most local Mayan women do not wear traje on a daily basis, these garments are hung on the living room wall of one family's apartment and serve as a constant reminder of the culture. There is a gentleman who has been here for less than a year who recently worked with the Sheehans to construct a backstrap loom (used to do the traditional Mayan weaving) and is planning to begin making morales (woven shoulder bags which are typically carried by the men). Rather than using undyed wool, he makes the bags out of brightly colored, acrylic yarn which is readily available. Ann Sheehan would very much like to see the MCC facilitate this.

The Elders Dancers is a local dance troupe which was formed less than a year ago and performed at the ArtWorks exhibit. The leader of the troupe, Rene Moreno, has been dancing for seven years and had a dance troupe when he lived in La Antigua Guatemala. The troupe has 8 members, six men and two women. They are dedicated to performing the dances which are part of traditional Mayan festivals. They do not have a practice space and rehearsed for the ArtWorks performance in Ann's backyard. They perform to taped marimba music. They would like to have more women in the troupe (most traditional dances have equal numbers of men and women) but most of the women are unwilling to participate. This group is probably the most public cultural group of the community. They have been invited to perform as part of the National Park Service summer concert series in 2002.

As far as Ann knows there is no organized celebration of any of the traditional festivals or saints days. People mark these on their calendars and watch videos of the events sent to them by family and friends back home. These are traditionally celebrated with music and dancing and the community does not feel comfortable enough to be that public at this point.

Music:

A local man, Miguel Lucas is the leader of a band called Grupo Caliente (literally "hot group"). The band is comprised of six members all of whom come from the village of San Andres Sajcabaja. The two founding members played music together while growing up and the others have joined the group, learning by playing (without formal musical training). The band plays popular music from Central America (which is very different from the other Spanish music which is available on the radio) as well as some original music, sung in Spanish. The instrumentation consists of keyboards, drums, guitars, bass and percussion. The group has two CDs. They play for various social functions including fundraisers and parties which take place in various rented halls in the local area. They would very much like to purchase a marimba, the national instrument of Guatemala, which would take the place of the keyboards and allow the group to expand its repertoire to include more traditional music. Members of the group include: Miguel Lucas/Singer; Fernando Lucas/keyboard; Miguel Ixcuna/guitar; Oscar Lucas/bass; Andres Sam/drums; and Rolando Lazaro/tamborine. According to Ann Miguel Lucas is quite reticent and may not be willing to be documented.

Foodways:

There are two Guatemalan bakeries in New Bedford, both are located in the north end on Acushnet Ave. Tienda Centro Americana y Antojitos is located at 1527 Acushnet Avenue and run by Edwin Enrique Navas Mendez [REDACTED]. The shop sells baked goods and some specialty grocery items. It is newly opened.

Another bakery, Tienda y Panaderia Quetzal Dos (run by Fernando) has been open for about 2 and a half years and is located on Acushnet Ave. in the same neighborhood. In addition to selling food this shop also sells CDs and videos and serves as a bit of a social hangout on Sunday mornings.

In addition to these shops, some of the local women make and sell traditional fare out of a van which travels around the neighborhoods on Friday nights. Traditional food is also delivered from the Providence area. People still make and eat corn tortillas three times a day and because there are not many women in the community, unmarried men are doing much more cooking than they did in Guatemala.

Other traditions:

Ann is also aware of two men in the community who are "Shaman" and are called upon by people in the community to perform various ritual functions. She did not feel that either of them would be open to being documented. She knows of a man who has a fairly extensive repertoire of Mayan folktales, though she felt that he was probably too shy to perform in public, but might be willing to be documented.

Recommendations:

We spoke at some length about ways in which the MCC could be of assistance to the community. There are some specific "needs". The community would benefit greatly from the purchase of a marimba which could be used to enlarge the repertoire of Miguel Lucas' band to include more traditional music, it could be played to accompany the dance troupe and it could eventually be played at celebrations of traditional festivals. It could also be used as part of an apprenticeship program. Ann seems to think that there are two needs: one being to nurture the budding interest in the local Mayan community to express itself and share its culture and the other in educating the general public about the "art of the native american". She suggested that a symposium or speakers series would be very helpful. She thought that such as symposium could be linked to the textile program at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and could focus on weaving with comparative presentations about weaving in several Native American cultures. Performance opportunities would also be helpful. She wanted to know how performing groups and artists could find out about such opportunities (festivals, etc.). We also talked about the possibility of technical assistance for the creation of publicity materials and to assist groups and individuals in presenting their culture to outside audiences. But before the community can focus on presenting its cultural traditions it needs to begin to feel comfortable expressing its culture.