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Ancient language, modern voices

Local students find indigenous Mexican dialect a key to their heritage

By Gil Griffin
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How do you say, 'Mama'?"

The teacher smiled as he posed the question to about a dozen men, women and children sitting with him in a circle on the floor.

After a pregnant pause, an answer came.

"Nantli," answered one of the students in the circle.

"How about 'Papa'?" the teacher asked.

"Tahtli," replied another.

The informal quizzing continued as the group of native Spanish and English speakers who had gathered on a recent weeknight at the Sherman Heights Community Center heard, then recited, the words.

These words – unfamiliar, yet central to the students' heritage – form the basis of the ancient and complex language spoken by their ancestors – Nahuatl.

Less than 2 percent of the Mexican population – about 1.5 million people – speaks Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-waht). The language and its various dialects are also spoken by pockets of indigenous people in Central America. But, scholars say, it is far from being a dying language.



DAVID MAUNG

A student plays in front of a Tijuana school that teaches indigenous languages as well as Spanish. Behind her is the translation of numbers in the Mixtecan language.

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At these classes – held in Sherman Heights and San Ysidro – the members of Danza Mexi'cayotl ("The Dance of the Mexican people") are drawn to the language to help preserve it, while enriching their understanding of their heritage and discovering their ancestors' worldview.

"Learning Nahuatl gives me tools to interpret the world around me in a different way," said Veronica Enrique, a 45-year-old National City homemaker who described herself as a child of the Chicano movement of the late-1960s and early 1970s. Each week she attends the community center classes, bringing her sons, Graciano, 17 and Adrian, 5.

"It's still very much part of the life and culture of Mexican Indian communities, even though it's not common here. The indigenous Mexican worldview is that things are centered on nature, family and community. Nahuatl words show that their sense of time is cyclical rather than linear. That adds to the complexity of being a Chicana in the 21st century."

Today, more Mexican poets and playwrights are writing in Nahuatl. In the Mexican states of Morelos, Hidalgo and Puebla, it's common to see street signs in Nahuatl. Here in North County, many migrant workers, of Yaqui, Zacateca and Mixteco ancestry, speak Nahuatl as their first language.

Teacher Mario Aguilar started Nahuatl classes more than 20 years ago, as part of his Aztec dance group. The classes also have attracted many Mexican and Mexican-American college students, who are part of this growing movement to embrace elements of their indigenous lineage.

"The European aspect of Mexican culture (in Mexico) had been pushed, but the indigenous part had been crushed and almost obliterated," said Aguilar, "even though it's been present on this continent for 60,000 years."

That condition bothers Bettzi Jimenez-Barrios, a 23-year-old SDSU student and Tijuana native, another Danza Mexi'cayotl member learning Nahuatl.

"In Mexico, there's a lot of racism toward the indigenous people and there are a lot of people there who don't care about their Indian heritage," she said.

"I went to school in Mexico before coming here and the schools never encouraged me to do research about my own culture. The Mexican government wants us to learn American or European ways. I don't want to get caught up in that. I want to learn Nahuatl to get to know who I am."

One day, Jimenez-Barrios said, she'd like to travel around Mexico and get to know the

indigenous people and be able to speak to them in their own language.

Aguilar, who is 49, took up Aztec dance when he was 19 and eventually earned the title of *danza capitán* ("dance captain") from tribal elders in Mexico. He has been studying and speaking Nahuatl – the language the ancient Aztec dancers spoke – for 22 years. Aguilar said his parents – of Otomi and Tarasco Indian heritage, and participants in the Chicano rights and consciousness movement – pushed him to learn about his roots.

Aguilar, now an assistant director of an early academic outreach program at the University of California San Diego, did so by taking Chicano studies and anthropology courses at SDSU. Today's Chicano college students learning Nahuatl, he said, have a different mentality than when he was their age.

"Back then, there was a revolutionary fervor and feeling like we could make a difference in the world," Aguilar said. "Today, young Chicanos studying their roots are more pragmatic about life and history as opposed to the idealism we had in our youth. It's nice to see people getting interested in Nahuatl again."

This summer, Aguilar said, he may pursue teaching Nahuatl in Mexico at the University of Zacatecas. In the fall, he said, he hopes to teach the language at an academic setting in San Diego.

But in colleges and universities across the United States, the teaching of Nahuatl is gaining momentum in some unexpected places.

One of North America's foremost Nahuatl scholars, John F. Schwaller, teaches the language at a branch of the University of Minnesota in the small town of Morris, near the South Dakota border. He previously taught Nahuatl at Indiana University and the University of Montana.

"It's a factor of the growing Mexican-American population in this country and in its universities," said Schwaller, who has no Mexican heritage, but has degrees in Latin American studies and spent years traveling throughout Mexico.

Other colleges and universities, Schwaller said, such as Yale, Tulane and Vanderbilt, are offering formal Nahuatl classes or study groups.

Jimenez-Barrios and other college students say they find learning Nahuatl extremely challenging.

"Learning English is easier," said Jimenez-Barrios, who studiously takes notes during the Nahuatl instruction.

"Here, you hear how people speak English. I have some friends at home who speak some Nahuatl, but there aren't many other speakers. But I wanted to join a group where I could learn it. I'd love to become fluent."

Other Nahuatl learners, like Elias McGann, say studying the language gives him a greater sense of self-awareness.

"You realize who you are and where you come from," said McGann, a 21-year-old trail keeper at the San Diego Zoo and visual artist who lives in Serra Mesa. He has been a member of Danza Mexi'cayotl since he was 14.

"My family is from the Tarasco tribe in Michoacan and my family members speak Nahuatl. My uncle first got me into it. It's a very hard language. The grammar and grammar rules are complicated."

Yet, many words in Nahuatl are similar to Mexican Spanish. To make it easier, Aguilar regularly gives the members of the group handouts reflecting how many modern-day words spoken in Mexico have Nahuatl origins. Recently, Aguilar gave his students copies of the lyrics of the Mexican national anthem in Nahuatl.

"One of the beautiful things about classic Nahuatl is that people spoke in allegories and couplets," Aguilar said.

"The Nahuatl word for 'poetry' is 'in xochitl incuicatl.' That means, 'the flower, the song.' That's the kind of worldview they had. They looked at things in a spiritual way, so that even the most mundane object or experience became sacred to them."

Using the Nahuatl word *ollin* – which loosely means "movement" – as an example, Aguilar compared learning Nahuatl to peeling onions.

"Every time you peel a layer off of one word, there's another one to peel," Aguilar said. "Ollin is the center of the onion, but it relates to the heart moving, the earth moving and the stars moving. In Native American tradition, nothing is ever literal, unlike the European model, which puts words in black-and-white terms."

Augustine Rodriguez, a 38-year-old U.S. Navy retiree, attends the classes with his wife, Angie, daughters Jessica, 13, and Amalia, 6, and infant son, Augustine. The family drives to Sherman Heights for class, all the way from Perris, in Riverside County.

"It's a sacrifice, but it's worth it," he said, while packing up his and his family's dancing gear and gearing up for the 80-plus-mile drive home.

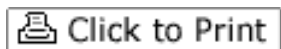
"The language is important. It's influenced a lot of everyday words. We don't want the tradition to die. It's forgotten in a lot of ways here, but for it to still be around gives us hope that it won't."

With the kind of dedication to Nahuatl shown by Rodriguez and Enrique, the National City woman who regularly brings her two sons to the classes, the future of the language seems secure.

"I have my children learn it because it's part of who they are," Enrique said. "It's a responsibility and a privilege to provide that for them. It's important to keep Nahuatl alive in our next generation."

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