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# Immigration, Ethnicity, and Marginalization: The Maya K'iche of New Bedford

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# Immigration, Ethnicity, and Marginalization: The Maya K'iche of New Bedford

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*Yo se que una Latina le habló a la migra para  
que me sacaran de la fábrica, y ahora ella tiene mi trabajo.*

—Member of K'iche community (focus group 2009)

## **The Raid**

On Tuesday, March 6, 2007, more than 300 armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested 361 presumed undocumented immigrant workers at the Michael Bianco Inc. factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts. More than half of the workers detained were from Guatemala, the majority belonging to the Maya K'iche (we will use K'iche) community, an ethnic group originally from the mountains of western Guatemala whose members began arriving in the New Bedford area from Providence, Rhode Island, where there is an older K'iche community, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the height of a violent confrontation in Guatemala between an increasingly militarized state and predominantly Mayan guerrillas and civilians. Once a number of male K'iche became established in New Bedford, the immigration flow began to include women and children.

Poor and unskilled immigrants have few options but to take low-wage jobs and settle in declining urban areas. In the case of the K'iche, as it became clear in our fieldwork, their undocumented status in addition to a lack of formal education compounded their marginal status and led to their acceptance of poor working conditions and dead-end jobs in the fish-packing and apparel industries (the Michael Bianco factory being an example) that have survived a prolonged economic decline in New Bedford.

It is important to underline that the K'iche social network, composed of kin and friends in the Providence–New Bedford area, did provide shelter from the desperate circumstances of civil war and genocide that prevailed in Guatemala. But the network was formed, for the most part, by individuals trapped in the same precarious economic conditions as the newcomers, with limited understanding of their new social environment in the United States.

The detainees in the ICE raid were charged with using false identity documents for purposes of employment. A total of 168 were deported, but in the case of the K'iche, most of the detainees were young women with children (identified as sole or primary caregivers) and elderly parents, and were released shortly after the raid. Others were flown to detention centers in Miami and Texas and then brought back to Massachusetts after they received support from the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), and subsequently legal advice from such organizations as Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS), ACLU, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, and the law firms Dechert and Foley Hoag.

Thus, in addition to the trauma of having left Guatemala in civil war conditions, and the feelings of powerlessness and alienation due to their social and economic marginality in New Bedford, the raid further impacted the K'iche community—not only its members' economic well-being, legal standing, and intergroup relations in the city, but also their mental health.

Shortly after the raid, a group of faculty and students affiliated with the University of Massachusetts Boston contacted the Organization Maya K'iche USA (OMK)—the only organized expression of the Maya K'iche community to emerge over the last decade and a group that took a leadership role in the aftermath of the raid—to arrange a meeting. It

took place in May 2007 and was organized around the following goals: (1) clarify objectives of our research and mutual expectations; (2) map basic relations between the Maya K'iche community, OMK, and other organizations and municipal authorities before and after the raid (patterns of social solidarity and coexistence); (3) document the size of the K'iche community, educational/economic attainment (social capital) and different times of arrival in New Bedford; and (4) make an inventory of OMK's institutional capabilities, including personnel, basic budget, computer, and communicational capabilities, and legal documentation regarding its 501(c)3 status.

We incorporated a collaborative component as a central element of our methodology. In other words, from the outset a key objective of our project was to connect our research plan with the goals of OMK, which gradually became a partner institution. This means that in addition to sharing all findings and relevant data with OMK, and inviting its members to participate in all related academic and/or community events, our partnership has included evaluation of fundraising strategies, public relations, and day-to-day operations.

This is the first report that we write about our ongoing research, and we have focused our analysis on the development of OMK as a grassroots organization in New Bedford and its relevance in understanding the identity-formation process that the K'iche community has been experiencing in this new environment. Another key objective of our project is to explore the historical and ongoing operant factors in New Bedford and Massachusetts on one part, and within OMK and the K'iche community on the other, that shed light on different types of social exchanges and identity-formation processes that promote or militate against the development of organizational strategies fostering intergroup cooperation, broader community decision-making, and public policies for social change.

Even though there is no question that the context of the exit from Guatemala briefly described above (civil war, economic-political marginalization, and genocide) is central to understanding the present situation of the K'iche community simply because national frameworks of sending countries are key to understanding how racial and ethnic identities are formed in the United States, in this paper we give more weight to the context of reception, focusing on the situation of the K'iche community

before and after the ICE raid, because we believe that over time the culture, economy, and sociopolitical environment of the receiving country takes over both the mind-set and daily lives of immigrant individuals and groups.

This research project was awarded three grants (Sociological Initiatives Foundation, UMass Boston Healey Grant, and the Mauricio Gastón Institute) and is part of a broader project on immigrant communities supported by the Trotter Institute at UMass Boston. As mentioned before, this is an ongoing project that began in the spring of 2008. Our fieldwork included focus groups, semistructured interviews, participant observation, data gathering and analysis, and literature review.

### **OMK: Between Culture and Advocacy**

*Mi mamá no se puede comunicar en español o inglés, yo le leo la correspondencia y compro los boletos para transportarnos por bus. Solo hemos visitado el médico una vez y yo le dije a la enfermera sobre la salud de mi mamá.*

—Member of K'iche community (focus group 2009)

One of the first problems we encountered was the almost complete lack of information about the Maya K'iche community in New Bedford. Even though many members of this community had been living in the city more than a decade (the earliest arrivals, some of the members of the leadership of OMK, close to two), there was very little documentation on their arrival and present situation. Thus, we consider this group as an excellent example of what is called an “invisible community,” the result of the undocumented status of most of its members as well as their marginal economic and social standing.

This “invisibility” makes the task of estimating the total number of K'iche men, women, and children in New Bedford a daunting one. There are isolated police reports on members of the community, health evaluations from a health center in the city, and personal accounts of the K'iche by a priest and individuals close to the Catholic Church, but not enough information to give us any idea of their approximate number. We heard from OMK's leaders and found in a few newspaper articles (informed by

OMK) that there were between 3,000 and 6,000 K'iche in the city, but we did not find any institutional or other type of documentation that supported these numbers.

Through participant observation we did learn about the areas and situations in which they live in New Bedford. The several visits to K'iche households by the researchers showed that they lived in the lowest-income areas of New Bedford, where they are continually exposed to crime, prostitution, AIDS, and other social ills. They live in crowded two- or three-bedroom apartments usually shared by two families consisting of young women and men caring for very young children, but sometimes even three families. In a couple of cases we counted ten individuals—men, women, and children—sharing one small two-bedroom apartment. In the focus groups it was mentioned that one of the main problems they encountered was robbery, this due in part to the known fact that they carry cash with them at all times and that they rarely deposit it in banks.

As father Mark Fallon—a Catholic priest who has been working with the K'iche for many years and the only non-Mayan or Central American who was until recently a member of OMK's board of directors—pointed out in an interview for this study, “The authorities do not recognize that this community is different from the rest of the immigrant community.” A good example is that K'iche children have been placed in special programs, “simply because the Department of Education does not know how to deal with them and cannot communicate with the parents.” Because of the barrier of language “they diagnose the K'iche children as having learning disability,” and thus discrimination ensues (Mark Fallon, Interview, 2008).

The largest K'iche gathering, as far as we know, reported to us by Scott Lang, mayor of New Bedford, took place in Saint Anthony's Church in 2006, with close to 800 K'iche men and women attending. We did participate in community events, most of them organized by OMK, with forty to fifty members of the K'iche community in attendance. The largest K'iche gathering we have encountered up through October 2009 was in honor of Rigoberta Menchú, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and a Guatemalan K'iche, who came to talk with the New Bedford community one Sunday afternoon in April 2009. The talk took place inside a Catholic church, with close to 200 K'iche men, women, and children in attendance.

In short, invisibility and socioeconomic marginality are two key components of K'iche everyday life, and the origins of OMK can be traced to efforts to counter their impact on the community. In the late 1990s, one of the earliest members of the K'iche community to arrive in New Bedford (we are withholding names in order to maintain confidentiality), and a recognized community leader, broadened his contacts outside the community with the objective of exploring the possibility of establishing an ethnic organization mainly focused on promoting Mayan language and culture.

According to our focus group with OMK's leadership, the efforts by the core leaders and other K'iche interested in the project were sparked by two interlinked components. The first was directed at the interior of the community. It revolved around the shared concern with maintaining a measure of K'iche culture in the community, especially when few K'iche were thinking of returning to Guatemala after peace was achieved in the mid-1990s and their stay in New Bedford was becoming permanent. In other words, a key objective was simply trying to cushion the impact of cultural change and protect the K'iche from outside assimilation forces.

The second component was directed more at the external environment, and it had to do with promoting pride on Mayan heritage and projecting to the outside world the fact that the K'iche is a distinct community (more on this in the following section) and not merely another Latino grouping. This second component, the projection of K'iche culture and society, can also be considered a reactive response to the perceived invisibility and marginality mentioned above.

K'iche culture, as in the case of other Mayan groups that survived the Spanish conquest, is a syncretism of colonial Catholic practices and beliefs with its indigenous Mayan counterpart, the latter known as *costumbre*. This hybridity is the result of centuries of cultural subordination by the white and Ladino mainstream culture of Guatemala. In fact, as Lisa Knauer points out, the K'iche have a "problematic relationship" with Guatemala as a nation-state, "although they might carry Guatemalan passports this is not their true allegiance . . . [they] tend to have a more localized identity, identifying more with their village or municipality than with the country as a whole" (Evans, 2008).

In any case, in addition to such Catholic holidays as Christmas and

Easter, which many K'iche continue practicing, they also practice such *costumbre* or hybrid feasts as the Day of Saint Luke, the Feast of the Moon, and other traditional thanksgiving ceremonies around the harvest and respect for nature that incorporate into rituals incense (or copal) and wax candles, and offerings of chocolate, sugar, bread, and alcohol. They also follow the sacred Mayan calendar and, of course, speak their K'iche language mostly at home and in community events.

In fact, language maintenance was a central concern for the above-mentioned leader and other early members of the core group that later became OMK, since they were worried that their children were learning English and even Spanish at school, but losing their own Mayan spirituality and values—their culture—by not speaking K'iche. Their idea was to establish an after-school program that would be taught by a K'iche-language instructor brought in from Guatemala. As one male K'iche put it: “We don't want our children to be only *gringo*.”

While the threat of losing the K'iche language provokes fears of rapid assimilation, as we can see in the preoccupation with K'iche children becoming *gringo* (English-speaking foreigner), the opposite pole—that is, speaking only K'iche, or mostly K'iche, in addition to very little English or Spanish—was also considered problematic. According to our fieldwork, this other pole was heavily marked by gender differences. This fact came out clearly in the focus group we conducted with K'iche women. In general, K'iche men did speak both English and Spanish with a higher degree of competency than women, with some older women speaking K'iche only.

This fact was a mark of women's subordinate status within the community, and the continuance of patriarchal and traditional culture that was carried to New Bedford from their towns in Guatemala. OMK was led by men only, with women doing support tasks like cooking and cleaning. Men saw as natural the fact that women voluntarily withdrew from the labor force due to marriage or child-bearing or -rearing, and at the most had part-time employment for supplementing the wages of their underpaid husbands.

Gradually, the project envisioned by the OMK leadership began to take shape, thanks to the support of various institutions, especially the Catholic Church and other religious organizations, and such local activists as Luis Rodriguez, Catholic priests such as Mark Fallon, and members of



such community-based organizations (CBOs) as the Center to Support Immigrant Organizing (CSIO).

In 2000 OMK achieved 501(c) 3 status as a nonprofit organization, and with the funding of such organizations as United Interfaith, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Burgess Urban Fund, Haymarket People`s Fund, Southeast Mass Community Foundation, and Polaroid, by January 2004 OMK had acquired sufficient resources to pay for the rent of its present office, located in downtown New Bedford, and a salary for a director. In an interview for this study, Kevin Whalen of CSIO explained in detail his work with OMK:

As the lead person from the CSIO (Center to Support Immigrant Organizing) staff, I meet with the OMK staff regularly to organize board meetings and other support activities. Sometimes they come to Boston, and we help them with work plans, organizing events; talk with them about workers` rights and their finances. We provide guidance on how to work with computers and define responsibilities for office staff. We help them organize major events . . . the goal being not just the event itself but to build up their capacity, create a database which has lots of information on organizations that can be approached for economic support in the future. (Kevin Whalen, Interview, 2008)

According to our interviews and focus groups, in the three years between the establishment of the downtown office and the ICE raid, OMK served the K`iche community as a sort of community center. That is, while it emphasized the organization of cultural events for the K`iche community and even organized a few broader events that were attended by members of outside groups (Latinos, Portuguese, Cape Verdeans, and others in New Bedford), its members also learned to speak out and denounce police neglect, and the lack of both health care and respect for their culture in the public schools. There was also a growing awareness among OMK members of workers` rights. One success before the raid was that they "changed the police department`s treatment of the Maya" (Kevin Whalen, Interview, 2008). But the lack of economic and educational resources (funds, personnel, equipment, and professional skills) and institutional

capability in general, sharply curtailed OMK's sphere of influence. We should highlight that lack of English-language skills was, without question, the biggest obstacle that the K'iche of New Bedford encountered from the very beginning.

This gradual process of institutional consolidation and acculturation was interrupted from one day to the next. With the ICE raids of March 2007, OMK was forced to take on responsibilities that its members were not prepared to assume and were not part of its plan for growth in the immediate future. The K'iche morphed from an almost "invisible" community to a group that was front-page news, and OMK became the only representative grassroots organization with the authority to speak to others on behalf of the embattled and vulnerable group.

In other words, the ICE raid derailed the direction that OMK was taking, as an ethnic organization interested primarily in such cultural aspects as the maintenance of K'iche language and culture, and redirected the organization—or, better said, forced the redirection of the organization toward advocacy, activism, workers' rights, and community organizing. In the aftermath of the raids, many organizations contacted OMK and offered support, among them Catholic Social Services (CSS), Centro Presente, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), the Center to Support Immigrant Organizing of Boston (CSIO), the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA), the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts (CEDC), the New Bedford government, South Coast Legal Services (SCLS), the Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS), the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the United Way, and the Guatemalan Consulate in Providence.

From one day to the next, the core group of OMK, who numbered fewer than ten, had to deal with lawyers, the children of detainees in need of care, and members of the community who required transportation to make court appearances in Boston. In addition, OMK leaders had to deal with the news media, academic institutions interested in studying the community's plight, and, of course, the above-mentioned organizations, each offering a different kind of support and advice.

Some offered financial support but insisted on specific information from the organization that it did not have or was unable to produce in the

time period it was requested. On the other hand, the traditional/paternalistic structure in OMK's leadership, with the founder assuming an authoritarian stance regarding all relevant aspects of everyday operations, was not reassuring to potential funders. His personality and his views permeated the organization as a whole.

In fact, the absence of internal democratization not only had a negative impact on the growth of the nascent OMK but also led to a conflict in the fall of 2009, with a schism taking place at the top and a new organization emerging. Thus, in addition to OMK, which stayed under the firm control of the founder, there is a new organization, Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores (Workers' Community Center) under the leadership of a former core member of OMK's leadership who had been developing the area of workers' rights inside OMK since the ICE raid two and a half years ago. This organization's focus is on the promotion of workers' rights not only for the K'iche community but for all Central Americans living and working in New Bedford.

In any case, the ICE raid had the effect of accelerating the process of acculturation, simply because OMK and members of the K'iche community of New Bedford were forced to actively engage federal, state, and local public institutions, as well as CBOs, media outlets, universities, and other components of American civil society. The most pressing task at that moment was legal, so the OMK leaders had to engage lawyers from a number of supporting organizations (GBLS being the most visible one) and quickly learn some basic principles from them. They also had to learn administrative and fundraising strategies to acquire and administer financial resources to support the fight on behalf of the detained members of their community. As mentioned above, a few OMK members got involved and learned from unions the different strategies to defend workers' rights.

There was a sense of urgency and of struggle for community survival in the air, and little time to talk about culture. It is important to underline that the process we are talking about is acculturation, that is, greater contact with and understanding of mainstream culture, but not assimilation, since one part of this greater measure of sociopolitical understanding included the reality of discrimination.

## Identity Construction

*Me siento más cómoda con mi gente y mi marido me compra las prendas para usar. Yo compro ropa para los niños y la ropa de invierno.*

—Member of K'iche community (focus group 2009)

In the prior sections, we touched briefly on key elements of the context of exit from Guatemala and a bit more on the context of reception in the United States. In this section we will center our attention in sketching an initial interpretation of the components of the particular identity-construction process that the K'iche community of New Bedford is experiencing at the present time.

It is also important to highlight that we recognize in our analysis above the value of the Marxist approach to draw a picture of alienation and economic marginalization of the K'iche community, but in this section we rely more on the racial-ethnic disadvantage point of view, and more specifically what Portes and Zhou (1993) call segmented assimilation, that is, that structural barriers, such as dead-end jobs, poor housing and schools, and cut-off access to employment and other opportunities—obstacles that often are particularly severe in the case of the most disadvantaged groups, such as the K'iche. Segmented assimilation focuses on identifying the contextual, structural, and cultural factors that separate successful from unsuccessful types of assimilation or acculturation. In order to address this last issue we have inserted into our discussion the notion of “reactive ethnicity” developed by Portes and Rumbaut (2006) and explore if it can be applied to the K'iche or, due to this community's singular development in the United States, it does not fit the case.

One aspect that caught our attention from the very beginning of our research was that the leadership of OMK defined the K'iche community not as Latino but as Native American or Amerindian, even though its origins were in Guatemala and nearly all its members spoke Spanish in addition to K'iche (and some spoke English and even some Portuguese). The K'iche share pre-European histories in the American continent with indigenous groups in the United States, as well as pride in that fact. Indigenous heritage is a central element in the K'iche construction of group

identity, as can be seen in the growth of the Pan-Mayan movement in Mexico, Central America, and more recently the United States and Canada. According to Harry Sanabria (2007: 381), since the beginning of the Central American civil wars in the 1980s, “a million or more Guatemalans have emigrated to the United States and Canada, most of them Mayan war refugees.”

But, on the other hand, there is no denying that for most of the past 500 years the Maya along with other pre-Hispanic groups that survived the Spanish conquest have been influenced by Spanish secular and religious institutions and then by the culture of the Latin American states that emerged in the early 19th century. Our point here is that the K'iche do share social, political, and cultural elements with other groups that come from Latin America that are adopting, if gradually and at different paces and modalities, the Latino/a identity in the United States.

Still, it is important to bring back the concept of cultural hybridity and the degree of K'iche allegiance to Guatemala mentioned above. In fact, the K'iche, like other Mayan societies in Mexico (the *Zapatistas* of southern Mexico, for example), Guatemala, and other parts of Central America, have been treated for many centuries as strangers in their own lands. And now they are being treated like strangers in the receiving country. They were “pushed out” by coercive political conditions in their home country more than being “pulled in” by perceived opportunities for economic advancement.

In other words, a balanced understanding of the K'iche process of identity formation should take into consideration both the context of their exit from Guatemala, characterized by a systematic repression of their identity, and the context of their reception, characterized by discrimination, socioeconomic marginalization, and, of course, persecution during and after the ICE raid of 2007.

Their identity is being constructed in what can be characterized as “an extreme situation,” in the sense that they are being forced to navigate between their decision of not going back to a country that has subordinated their communities for centuries (not unlike Native American groups) and a receiving country that not only discriminates against them but actually detains members of their community and initiates a deportation process.

It is important to remember that migration can call “into question existing racial, ethnic and national identities,” producing what can be a “traumatic experience of self-definition” (Duany 1998: 165). Identity-formation processes within K’iche towns in Guatemala are varied, due to different degrees of mixing with other groups and acculturation, processes that involve a complex mix of myths, stereotypes, and ideologies about Indianness (Mayanness) and citizenship. As mentioned above, the civil war of the 1980s and 1990s was yet one more expression of suppression of K’iche identity in their country of origin, and also the key element that sparked the mass migration to the United States. The K’iche group that arrived in New Bedford brought with them the memory of that traumatic experience and their suppressed cultural heritage. They also had to deal immediately with a negative reception characterized by alienation and marginalization, and on top of that, the ICE raid of 2007.

This unique background gave greater complexity, in our view, to their definition of group identity and, for us, to the task of inserting the K’iche of New Bedford within the ethnic spectrum of the United States. It made more complex situating the group within an established and recognizable ethnic map and at a particular point in socioeconomic incorporation.

Our study recognized that the K’iche’s quest for “ethnic distinction,” rather than moving in the traditional in-between or “whitening” categories, is evading brown (Latino), black (African American), and white categories altogether. It is moving instead toward the “Native American” category, a trajectory that needs to be explored in greater depth. We are not suggesting here that this trajectory is unexpected, for the simple reason that the K’iche share similarities in history, systematic suppression of identity, and brutal colonization with Native American societies.

But a question that kept coming back was Why did the K’iche reject Latino identity, taking into consideration the above-mentioned similarities in geography, history, and culture? At this time, we can offer only a preliminary explanation. One reason is part of their heritage. On various occasions OMK leaders talked of Latinos in the same way that they talked of Ladinos. This last group refers to westernized Guatemalans of mixed heritage (indigenous and European) that traditionally have made a clear-cut distinction between themselves and *Indios* (Indians), holding political and economic power over them.

Ladinos have traditionally been the ones sent to Mayan villages to implement government laws and regulations that historically have been racist and violent. And, of course, the Guatemalan army, which attacked and destroyed many Mayan villages during the civil war, was seen by Mayans as a Ladino institution. Both Mayans and Ladinos that have migrated to the United States bring these perceptions and histories of the other along with them and project them onto their new environment. Thus, the K'iche still consider Ladinos to be people who look down on them and hold greater socioeconomic power in such key places as factories, social institutions, government, and so on. After the raid, the K'iche also resented the fact that Ladinos (or Latinos) were speaking on their behalf, depriving the community of leadership and voice. In short, they (Ladinos) were repeating their historic oppression of the Maya.

The second reason has to do with group perceptions in the receiving country. That is, the K'iche constructed their own identity in marked contradistinction to the perceived social and cultural defects of Latinos in the United States. Through our participant observations and interviews we became aware that the K'iche view themselves in economic, political, and social competition with Latinos, as can be appreciated in the quote that appears on the first page of this article. In other words, the K'iche have drawn a symbolic distance, or remoteness, from Latinos, that can be defined by a sense of being in competition and conflict with them rather than sharing a linked fate.

Another key question was the change in or permanence of key cultural characteristics and strategies of incorporation in both OMK and the community at large before and after the raid. Was there a change in institutional opportunities and barriers? Did they become more or less politically engaged with their new environment? Was there a change in the perception of the Maya K'iche by other groups in New Bedford?

Before the raid, the path toward integration and/or incorporation of the still-growing Maya K'iche community of New Bedford could be situated between underengagement (lack of participation, and retention of nonmainstream understandings of politics and culture) and withdrawal (a more active stance of refusal to participate, such as a conscious retreat to one's own group and reluctance to engage with other groups). This underengagement or even withdrawal was a key factor in the invisibility of the group in the New Bedford area.

The emergence of OMK in the late 1990s as the group's interlocutor with the exterior did signal a movement toward greater incorporation. Nevertheless, the organization's main purpose at this early stage was pre-eminently to project, defend, and maintain their own Maya heritage, and not to open the way to greater participation and/or explore the possibility of entering into coalitions with other groups.

The March 2007 raid at the Michael Bianco factory, in our view, did have an important impact both on OMK as an ethnic organization and on the Maya K'iche community in general. The community went from invisibility to front-page news, and OMK from an organization interested in the promotion of Maya culture to an organization that had to defend not only the rights of affected members but also the survival of the K'iche community, in some cases taking care of families and even babies.

In other words, OMK had to transit from promoting culture, organizing events, and learning about the new country to becoming immersed in mainstream America, becoming the group's advocate and service provider of legal and labor rights, food, and transportation. This new role pushed OMK from underengagement to increased political participation and, arguably, to becoming an influential agent that could guide the K'iche community as a whole toward a greater measure of social incorporation.

This reflection on the changes caused by the raid can help us in situating more precisely the type of identity-formation process that the K'iche community of New Bedford is undergoing at the present time. According to the theory of "reactive ethnicity" elaborated by Portes and Rumbaut, in the face of perceived threats, persecution, and exclusion that highlight the hostile context of reception, the rise rather than the erosion of ethnicity is the reaction of the group in question. Indeed, this type of collective identification has been seen in such large minority groups as African Americans (during the civil rights era to the present day) and Latino groups (for example in response to attacks to bilingual education, the implementation of English-only in the workplace, and stepped-up immigration enforcement.)

But we cannot really place the reaction by the K'iche of New Bedford within the "reactive ethnicity" category. It seems that to successfully engage in "reactive ethnicity" the group in question needs national recognition, large numbers in key states and/or cities throughout the nation, and



political, economic, academic, and social representation in different organizations and social levels. In short, it needs a measure of social capital.

These components are present in both Latinos and African Americans but not the K'iche. Their situation falls within Portes and Rumbaud's (2006: 201) notion of "disadvantaged contexts of reception," which are those in which governmental institutions "take a dim view of the newcomers, the native population discriminates against them," and, in the case of the K'iche, the ethnic community exists but is too feeble or vulnerable (due to economic/political marginalization, cultural isolation, and a relatively short history in the United States) to generate a concerted response.

Taking into consideration their marginal situation, it seems more likely that the K'iche had two types of collective identification available to them after the raid. The first is active resistance, which goes beyond "reactive ethnicity" simply because they have no institutions available through which to express themselves and to express opposition to the hostile social context, which could entail protests, riots, and possibly even acts of terrorism.

The second type of identification would transit in the opposite direction, toward greater incorporation as the response to the hostile action. This type includes the consolidation of organizations, promoting mobilization based on immigrant, racial, or ethnic identity; and opening the group and its representative organization to influence and communication with other social groups, organizations, and institutions in the surrounding social landscape. This second type fits better the course that OMK and the K'iche of New Bedford are taking.

The ICE raid and the lack of social capital contributed to creating a very high degree of group vulnerability and are the key to understanding the singular identity-formation process of the K'iche of New Bedford. It is important to highlight the contrast of the K'iche with other Guatemalan Maya groups in the United States—for instance, the Kanjobal migrants in Los Angeles analyzed in Popkin's groundbreaking study (1999). This latter group has developed wider social networks in that city, where Guatemalans are the third-largest Latino group, and matters to representatives of the Guatemalan government and various Guatemalan churches.

The Kanjobal in Los Angeles had to adapt to a predominantly Latino community, and had continuous communication with their families back

home and possessed their own consolidated organizations, whereas the K'iche of New Bedford from their arrival have been a relatively small and isolated group, with less transnational communication, little organized representation, and the challenge of adapting to a much more diverse New Bedford society that has Portuguese, Irish, French, Cape Verdean, Puerto Rican, and Central American communities.

The greater difference, in our view, is that the Kanjobal of Los Angeles did not experience a massive raid on members of their community as the K'iche did, and had time to acculturate at their own pace and consider the appropriate degree of collaboration with Latinos and non-Latinos. A “forced” process of identity formation was not imposed on the Kanjobal the way it was on the K'iche.

### **A Disadvantaged Context of Reception: New Bedford**

Because very few data about the K'iche were captured in the 2000 Census and the government of New Bedford has not implemented a systematic study of their numbers and needs, even after the raid, in this final section we are limited to presenting basic historical and socioeconomic data on the city from the 2000 Census, the Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development, and the 2005–2007 American Community Survey three-year estimates. While these data are not strictly about the K'iche community, it is valuable information because the statistics paint a picture of the socioeconomic context of reception and the people among whom the K'iche are living.

Rich in cultural history, New Bedford has been home to an array of racial and ethnic groups in the course of the last four centuries, many of whom, like the K'iche, were seeking the opportunity for a better life. While opportunity was great during the peak of the whaling, textile, and fishing industries, the city's economy has deteriorated and never fully recovered from the decline of its traditional industries in the last hundred years. Its population has continuously declined since peaking at 121,217 in 1920 to a historical low of 91,849, as estimated in 2007. Instead of investing in research of new technologies, the city has relied on a labor force willing to accept lower wages. This labor force was and is made up of individuals who accept the choice to work in poor conditions as an alternative to limited opportunity in their homelands.

The local economy continues to struggle in all sectors, with only modest gains. Fishing, manufacturing, services, and small businesses face a variety of challenges, including but not limited to restrictive regulation, decreasing population, infrastructure in disrepair, and limited investment. Until the mid-1990s, New Bedford was home to a thriving commercial fishing fleet that worked the Georges Bank, but in 1996 action was taken to reduce overfishing, devastating the fleet.

According to a Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development report of March 2007, the Greater New Bedford workforce had the highest level of unemployment in the fourth quarter of 2006, at 6.1 percent, of all areas of Massachusetts. This level was up from 5.9 percent in fourth quarter of 2005. The City of New Bedford, where most of the K'iche live, had the highest unemployment level, 7.7 percent, of all cities and towns in Greater New Bedford. The city's and area's unemployment worsened during the 2008–2009 recession. According to Scott Lang, the mayor of New Bedford, it is currently around 12 percent.

The manufacturing sector in New Bedford, which replaced the whaling industry a century ago, is now also a dying industry. In 1985, manufacturing employment totaled 43 percent of all employment in New Bedford, twice the level in the state's workforce. Between 1985 and 2005, manufacturing employment in New Bedford decreased by 67 percent to 8,045 workers, down from 20,528.

Overall, the demographic data highlight that New Bedford is one of the more depressed cities in Massachusetts. The K'iche and undocumented workers in other immigrant groups face a harsh reality. The only job opportunities open to them are in low-wage service occupations. According to the 2000 Census data, New Bedford had lower labor force participation (58 percent), lower employment (53 percent), and higher unemployment rates (5 percent) than the state average. The median family income was \$35,708, with 68 percent making under \$50,000. In the city, 17.3 percent of all families and 20.2 percent of all individuals were living below the poverty level, as were 25 percent of families with children under 18 and 35 percent of families with children under 5. All these poverty rates were well above those for Massachusetts as a whole, and, again, surely worsened in the recent economic downturn.

The educational attainment of New Bedford's adult population is

quite low, substantially lower than the state average. A little under half (42 percent) of adults have not graduated from high school, while 58 percent have at least a high school diploma. Of all students, 67 percent are from low-income families, compared with an average of 29 percent across Massachusetts.

New Bedford stands out in Bristol County and Massachusetts as a whole for its relatively high share of foreign-born residents and Latinos. According to the 2005–2007 American Community Survey, 20,150 individuals in New Bedford were foreign-born. When comparing the foreign-born population in New Bedford (21.5 percent) with the percentage nationwide (12.5 percent), we begin to get a more accurate picture of the city, with large numbers of foreign immigrants replacing native-born residents who are gradually leaving. An estimated 31,904 individuals, or 36.7 percent of the city's population, speak a language other than English at home.

When reviewing the data on Latinos in New Bedford, we found that this group shares similar backgrounds and family structures with the K'iche and are also located at the lower socioeconomic levels. Then too, as mentioned above, Latinos are perceived by the K'iche as natural competitors for jobs, housing, and services. It is for these reasons that we focused a bit more on analyzing this group—that is, because its situation and experience in New Bedford can shed light on possible scenarios for the K'iche community today and in the near future.

The Latino population is the largest racial-ethnic minority group in New Bedford: 12.3 percent of all residents are Latino. The city is home to the highest proportion of Latinos in Bristol County and has the 15th-highest percentage of all Massachusetts towns and cities. Important differences exist between whites and Latinos or the foreign-born. Not surprisingly, the white population is the most advantaged.

Latinos arrived more recently to the city and have a much younger (and therefore potentially more vulnerable) population, with a median age of 22 compared with 36 for the general population. Latino home ownership (14 percent) in New Bedford is particularly low, especially when compared to the white rate (48 percent) and the citywide average (44 percent). Latinos tend to have larger household and family sizes.

Latinos have poverty rates three times that of whites: 15 percent of whites compared to 47 percent of Latinos were below the poverty level

in 2000. For Latino families with children under 18, more than half (54 percent) were living below the poverty line. The Latino population had lower levels of educational attainment than whites: 44 percent attained at least a high school degree and only 5 percent attained a bachelor's degree or higher. When looking only at the foreign-born Spanish-speaking population, 59 percent reported speaking English "not well" or "not at all." Unlike the Puerto Rican population, which has U.S. citizenship, the vast majority of Latin American immigrants in New Bedford, like the K'iche, are not citizens and are oftentimes undocumented, a factor that adds to this population's precarious status.

### **Assessing the Future in a Declining City**

Taken together, the historical economic decline, the high rates of foreign immigration coupled with high rates of local emigration, and the negative socioeconomic data presented above depict a city that is quite different when compared with other cities and towns in the rest of the state, undergoing drastic socioeconomic and cultural change, and with differentiated internal population groups that are rather fragmented.

Following Putnam (2007), it is possible to suggest at this juncture that the increase in ethnic and social heterogeneity in New Bedford challenges social solidarity and inhibits the formation of social capital (social networks, whether intergroup friendships, or religious or neighborhood associations that are key indicators of social well-being), at least in the short and medium run.

While the increasing diversity could, in theory, foster interethnic tolerance and foster out-group trust, our study, while preliminary, seems to point in the opposite direction: that economic decline, which lowers investment in public goods, reduces governmental involvement in community projects, and creates contention over limited resources—as can be seen, for instance, in the K'iche-Latino relations—fosters out-group distrust and reinforces in-group solidarity, the latter being reinforced even more by socioeconomic marginalization and alienation.

As mentioned at the outset, this is an ongoing research project, and we are presently involved in the second phase, where we will focus more on the world outside the K'iche—that is, on the organizational structures of collaboration that have played a key role in their establishment in

New Bedford. We have identified various state, municipal, community, and immigrant organizations, as well as individual agents that are relevant to our study.

This second phase will strive to understand different types of social exchanges and identity-formation processes that promote or militate against the development of organizational strategies that foster inter-group cooperation, broader community decision-making, and public policies for social change.

Part of this effort will be to explore how the characteristics that we find in the first-generation K'iche could affect the likelihood of socioeconomic and political incorporation of the 1.5 and 2nd generation in the future. This is of course of crucial importance, because it can give us relevant clues about the possible trajectory (or possible scenarios) of the group in the years to come.

A key objective at the end of our study is to offer an analytical framework that impacts the area of public policy—that is, to inform service providers, whether they are municipal agencies or nonprofits, about the context and needs of the K'iche community of New Bedford in order for them to most effectively provide adequate services and attention.

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