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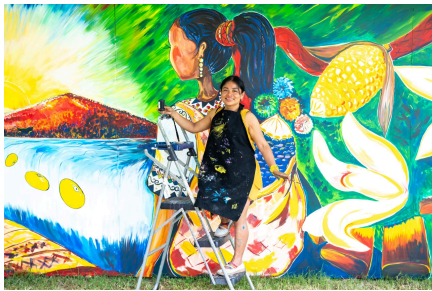
Goats and Soda

GOATS AND SODA

Folklife stars: Maya artist, Bolivian rappers, Dolly Parton's guitar restorer

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By Michal Ruprecht, Photos by Ben de la Cruz



Evelyn del Rosario Morán Cojoc, an artist from Guatemala, creates a mural that depicts traditional foods from her Mayan culture — like that floating ear of corn and three yellow beans. She teaches art to kids across the country, encouraging them to depict their indigenous traditions.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

A Guatemalan artist dips her brush into crimson red paint, the color of the rising sun in Maya tradition, as she paints a mural as big as two parked cars.

A 26-year-old rapper from Bolivia brings his own touch to Spanish hip-hop, adding in words from his dad's indigenous language.

A Mexican-American dad and his two daughters, a teen and a tween, demonstrate techniques for shaping a guitar that were passed down from their great-grandfather in Mexico — the same methods their dad now uses to restore guitars for Dolly Parton and her band.

Two refugee weavers, one in her 60s and one in her 20s, make a traditional bag. They're on a mission to revitalize their ancient art form.

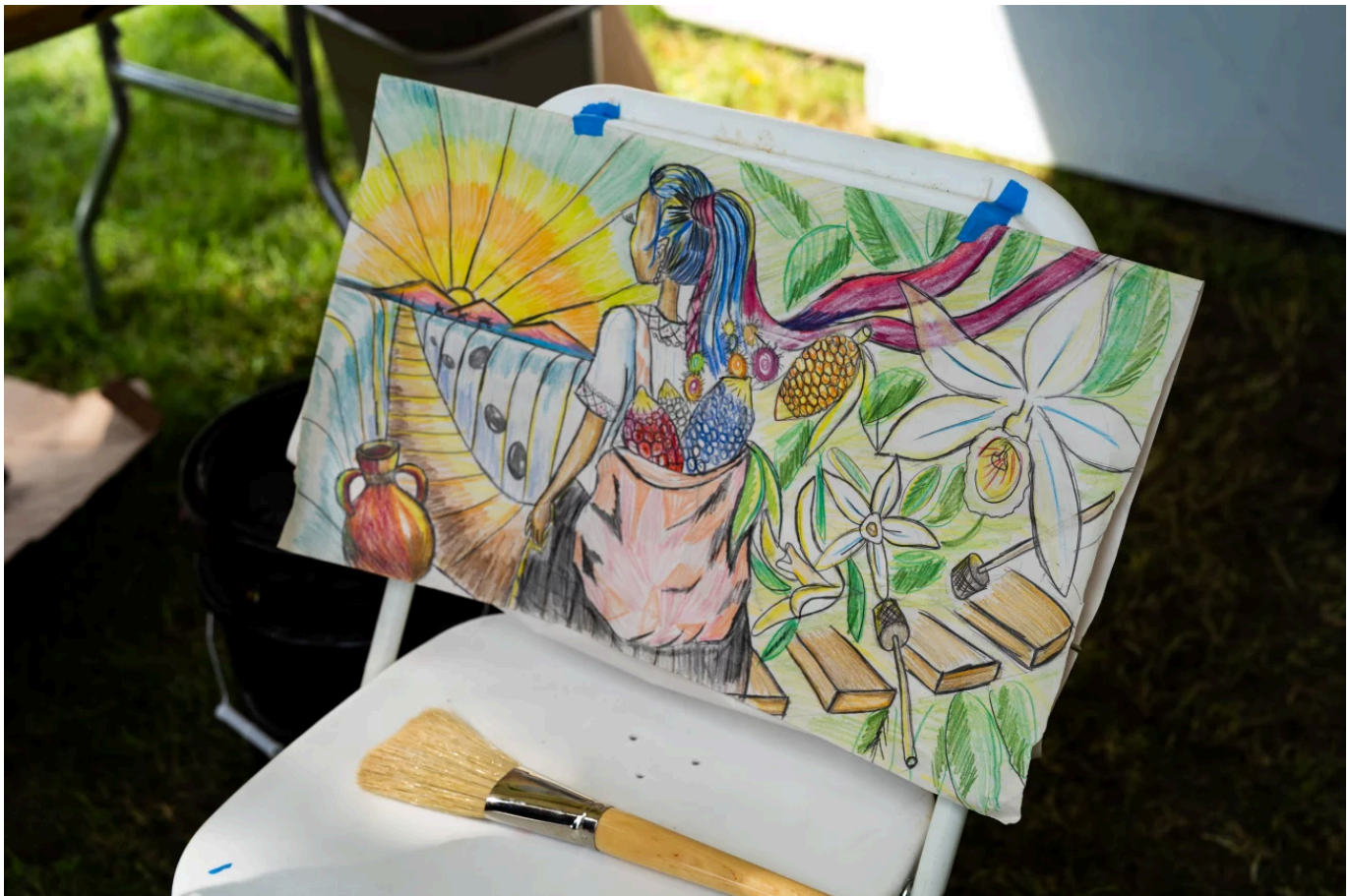
They were among the artisans at this year's Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. The theme was youth and the future of culture.

The Goats and Soda team sat down with four ensembles rooted in the Global South to talk about their craft, the youth they mentor and the familial and cultural traditions they're keeping alive.

Keeping Maya identity alive with paint

He wanted a pencil.

That request from a little boy in a remote village in Guatemala convinced Evelyn del Rosario Morán Cojoc that her art lessons were really resonating.



A small-scale study for the mural painted by Guatemalan artist Evelyn del Rosario Morán Cojoc and three student artists at this year's Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C.

"I have art classes in the villages where they don't have enough to eat," Evelyn del Rosario Morán Cojoc says, wiping away tears of joy as she spoke through an interpreter. "A young boy came up to me and approached me. I thought he was going to ask me for food but he asked me for a pencil. He had a hunger for knowledge."

The 42-year-old painter from Guatemala has been an avid teacher since 2012, leading art sessions across the country that explore her indigenous Poqomchi' Maya roots. Though indigenous culture is often marginalized, Morán Cojoc embraces her identity and passes that pride on. She encourages kids to depict elements from their indigenous culture, such as cacao — the raw bean the Maya considered a sacred gift from the gods (and that's the source of chocolate).

She helps her students reclaim what others try to dismiss.

"Discrimination exists because of others. It's their sadness, it's their ignorance, it's their willingness to not comprehend that results in racism," Morán Cojoc says.

"Humans came into this world naked, and if we were to someday be naked again, we would understand how much more we are alike."

At the festival, her mission was to create a mural reflecting the indigenous culture of Guatemala. She was joined by three eager area high school students originally from Latin America. She says that working with youngsters makes her feel whole.



Morán Cojoc poses in front of the rough outlines of her Maya-themed mural.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

"My work is because of the youth. Kids are like sponges and really want to learn so much."

Their assignment: to incorporate at least one part of their Maya identity into the painting.

Kevin Cabrera Sanchez, 17, who lives in Virginia, is an avid marimba player and added Guatemala's national instrument to the piece.

"I'm just really happy," he says. "[Our] culture is dying, so it's really important to preserve it and spread awareness of people's different backgrounds."

Another student, Selvin Vail Diaz, 18, painted four colorful varieties of *maíz* (corn) – sapphire blue, crimson red, golden yellow and ivory white. Each color relates to one of the four points of the compass: for example, white is the north, representing the afterlife.

Reflecting on the symbolism – and the belief that the Maya culture vanished after colonization – Morán Cojoc observes: "People say that the Maya don't exist anymore, but that's not true. We are a part of history. We have existed before, and we are continuing to live."

South American hip-hop with an indigenous twist

"I combine my language with hip-hop so that, via hip-hop, my culture could continue living," says Eber Quisbert, a 40-year-old Bolivian rapper.

Quisbert performs with his mentee and fellow Bolivian rapper, Carlos Orellana, 26, whose stage name is Andes Mc. The performers mix Spanish lyrics with Quechua and Aymara, two indigenous languages. Orellana's dad grew up speaking Quechua but did not pass the language onto his son. In a country where Spanish dominates, native tongues are regarded as inferior by some Bolivians.



Bolivian rappers Eber Quisbert (left), who performs as Eber Miranda, and Carlos Orellana, whose stage name is Andes Mc, rhyme in Spanish mixed with Quechua and Aymara, two indigenous languages.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

Orellana now embraces Quechua as part of his heritage — along with tattoos of ancient creatures, including a swirl of animals encircling a war god known as the decapitator, whom he discovered in an archaeology book about the pre-Columbian Tiwanaku civilization. Clutching a weapon with a human head affixed to the end, and adorned with condor wings and deer antlers from his dismembered victims, the mythical creature conveys strength and transformation.

"My father comes from a town that speaks Quechua, but he never taught me it because there was a lot more racism at that time," Orellana recalls through an interpreter. "As I got older, I started to connect more to Quechua. I actually sometimes sprinkle in some Quechua words into my Spanish without even realizing it."



Quisbert and Orellana wear their indigenous heritage with pride. Quisbert sports a baseball hat that reads "Aymara" in graffiti-style font — that's the name of an indigenous people and their language. Orellana has tattoos that depict characters from pre-Columbian Tiwanaku civilization.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

Quisbert performs under the stage name Eber Miranda, which combines his name with his grandmother's surname. He wears his indigenous pride on a purple flat-brim baseball hat that reads "Aymara" in graffiti-style font. He's part of Bolivia's group of hip-hop artists who began integrating indigenous language into their music in the early 2000s.

"Languages are like living beings. They are born, they grow and then they have families," he explains through his wife, who interprets for him.

One of the songs they performed, "Jina Jina Mayma," tells the story of tensions between Bolivia's indigenous regions, blending their

Quechua and Guarani languages. The title means "Let's go, everyone."

"We created a song like this because everyone just wants to live peacefully," Quisbert recalls. His lyrics aim to inspire unity and peace: "I'm from here, you're from there. Let's join hands, ready to move forward. Shout for liberty to the beat of equality. Leave behind prejudice, we are just one."



The Bolivian rapper who goes by Andes Mc says he is inspired by American rappers Wu-Tang Clan.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

On Monday, the two invited young festival participants to join them on stage and perform original pieces. Veronica Cvar, 17, of Fairfax, Va., was the first to perform, rapping in Spanish. "[My rap] was all about being able to find your true self and not letting anybody change who you are," she explains.

Reflecting on the mentorship he received from Quisbert, Orellana says interacting with the youth continues to make his work meaningful.

"I'm very excited to at least plant a seed in one person," he says. "Community and culture can start with one person and expand from there."

Weaving a bond between old and young

"I can't speak English or drive, but what I can do is hold onto my culture and tradition, and pass it down to young people," says Rosie Say, speaking through an interpreter at the festival.



Rosie Say, right, is a master weaver who shares her knowledge with younger members of the Karen community in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is with Ku Say, who has been weaving since she was 15, learning the craft from Rosie and her mother.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

She does it by weaving. Strung taut between a wooden pole and her waist, red and white threads stretch to form a long strip of cloth with a striped pattern. Take a few steps back, and the loom looks like a miniature suspension bridge – one that carries centuries of history across a span no wider than a yoga mat.

Rosie and Ku Say share the same last name, and although they're not related, Ku, 24, says Rosie, 65, is like family.

"We have been working together for so long," Ku explains. "She reminds me of my aunt who lived in the refugee camp because they have been through hard times."

Rosie and Ku are both part of the Karen Weaving Circle, a group of multigenerational refugee weavers from the Karen (pronounced kuh-REN) ethnic group.



A detail of Ku Say's blouse. It took her three days to weave the garment.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

After facing decades of conflict and discrimination in Myanmar, many Karen people fled to refugee camps along the border with Thailand in the 1980s. Rosie was part of the exodus and eventually immigrated to St. Paul, Minn., where she is recognized as a master weaver.

While her title might suggest decades of experience, the art is fairly new to Rosie. She picked up the hobby 10 years ago and doesn't sell her work.

"When I immigrated to America, I struggled with depression, so I decided to join the weaving group," Rosie recalls. "It helps keep me busy and forget about the past."

Ku, who was born in a Thai refugee camp, started weaving at 15, learning the craft from her mom and Rosie.



Rosie Say (seated left) weaves a bag. Her weaving student Ku Say stands by her side. They are joined by members of the Karen Weaving Circle, a group of multigenerational refugee weavers.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

"I didn't get a chance to learn my history at all," Ku says. "The Karen people in Myanmar weren't allowed to speak their native language or study their history. They had to hide their true identity."

"I feel proud when I weave because I feel like I have an opportunity to learn about my tradition," she adds. "One day, I want to pass it along to a new generation."

These guitar makers keep Dolly Parton — and a nearly century-old family tradition — in tune

Manuel Delgado's family business is a key player in the rhythm of Music City, making and restoring guitars. It's in his blood — his family first started the craft in 1928. And now his daughters, Ava and Lila Delgado, 17 and 11, carry on the legacy as fourth-generation luthiers.

The sisters embrace the ways their great-grandfather built and repaired instruments.

"Everything is old-world, traditional techniques from Mexico," Ava emphasizes. When crafting a Mexican guitarrón used in mariachi music, they use tacote wood for the top of the instrument. Once the wood is cut, they carve the neck and heel from a single block using tools like hand saws, chisels and sandpaper rather than modern power tools — and believe that this traditional method improves the tone of the instrument.

Their store has a three-year waitlist for instruments that take months to create.



Sisters Ava, left, and Lila Delgado stand next to a photograph of the instruments they made by hand under the tutelage of their father, Manuel Delgado.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

The family's artisanship has attracted stars like Los Lobos, who own custom guitars made by all three generations of the Delgado family.

For the sisters, involvement in the family business started at an early age. They each built their first instruments at age 9. Manuel, who's 53, emphasizes that they built the guitars *on their own* with some guidance from him. "I have hours and hours of video of them building the instruments because I didn't want someone to say they just posed," he adds.



In the photo, Manuel Delgado is pictured (at right) with his father and grandfather — three generations of guitar makers who've been making the instruments since 1928.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

While the sisters love the family guitar-making company, they're not sure if they'll go on to run it or pave their own paths.

"There's definitely an urge and a desire to want the business to continue," Ava says. "We're losing so much culture and stuff like that, so to keep this raw, handmade thing alive is important."



Manuel Delgado says it takes 200 hours to complete one of his hand-crafted guitars.

Ben de la Cruz/NPR

Manuel is content with the business ending with him if his daughters choose to go their separate ways. In the meantime, he remains committed to his work — and using his skills to emphasize his cultural identity.

"I'm seeing people that look like me, have names like me getting thrown to the ground and arrested," Manuel says. "Now I feel a greater sense of responsibility to make sure I continue [my family's] story through our craft. I think when

you do that, people meet you on a different level, and they start to see you for who you are rather than who they think you are."