



All Relative: Defining Diego

Bonus Episode: What Brought Me Here

A Production of Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment

MUSIC: Repetitive gentle plucking of acoustic guitars with sounds that are filled with innocent wonder begins.

Diego: Previously, on All Relative: Defining Diego...

Laurie: So she didn't get much money from the people who took Diego. And Dan and I had to pay a lot of money in order to do the adoption. What does she think about that?
Isabel: [Speaking in Tzutujil.]

Diego: I don't know, I feel like honestly, he's a changed dude.

Laurie: From what to what?

Diego: From some hardass dude who fought in the war and stuff to just someone who is trying to survive.

Rachel Nolan: The truth commission found that 5,000 children were forcibly disappeared during the war.

Dan: I always knew that, you know, when we adopted you, it was a temporary thing. And then we were going to send you out into the world and you were going to be your own person.

MUSIC: Repetitive gentle plucking of an acoustic guitar with tones that are filled with innocent wonder ends.

MUSIC: Dreamy and hypnotic melody of strings fades in.

Diego: On all my trips back to Santiago Atitlán, I'd never stopped before at the memorial on the edge of town.

Xicay: Right now we're at Parque de la Paz. And ummm...yeah. It's, uh, kind of an eerie place. It's very gray. I mean, dark things happened here, so I'm not surprised, but um...

Diego: Going there — paying my respects — it was important to me. Because the men who died here were casualties of Guatemala's 36-year civil war.

Xicay: There's small steps that lead up to, kind of, three pillars and crosses. I believe the memorials and the names are laid out, really not how you think of a cemetery. And I think that's because they are in the exact place that the bodies were.

THEME MUSIC: An uplifting and inspiring electronic beat begins with a strong guitar underneath begins softly.

Diego: The Guatemalan Civil War claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Including many Tzutujill Maya — that's what I am.

Families were ripped apart, children were left without parents, and mothers without options.

In many ways, the war is what led to me being taken all the way from Santiago Atitlán to Saint Paul, Minnesota.

I think I will always be on this journey. It's not the kind of trip that has a clear beginning or end.

In Minnesota, people assume I speak Spanish. In Guatemala, with my adoptive family, people assume I'm a tour guide. No one really guesses right.

Now that I'm an adult, I'm learning how to represent myself. To me, that means talking about where I come from. And where I come from is a beautiful place...and people that have survived centuries of oppression.

THEME MUSIC: Swells with intensity and fades.

Diego: From Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment, this is Defining Aa Tiko'. Episode 9: What Brought Me Here.

ACT ONE

Diego: The people I come from, the Tzutujil Maya people, have been living in the area we now call Guatemala for thousands of years.

The ancient Maya were one of the great civilizations — like the Romans. The Mayans knew how to tell time, purify water, and build cities — and they also gave us hot chocolate.

But things changed for the Maya people when the Spanish came. In the sixteenth century, the colonists brought disease and threatened a way of life.

Ale Colom: There were these religious arguments about whether indigenous — the Maya — had souls. Whether they're human or not. And there were these big debates in the Vatican and in Spain about whether they deserved rights because they were humans and they had souls like, like white people.

Diego: That's Professor Ale Colom. She's a Guatemalan anthropologist who mostly works in indigenous communities.

She said that the Spanish tried to convert the Maya to Catholicism. And they also forced European views of property.

Ale Colom: Laws were passed that took all that land away from communities under the guise that they weren't the rightful owners because they didn't have formal titles like European-style land titles.

Diego: The Spanish seemed to be obsessed with keeping the Maya under their control.

Ale Colom: So there's this fantasy too, that the moment we give rights to the Maya, they'll take them and they'll revolt and then they'll massacre us.

MUSIC: Exuberant fog horn and rhythmic drums.

Diego: Guatemala declared its independence from Spain in 1821. But for indigenous people, nothing changed. The descendants of the Spanish owned most of the land and just about everything else.

They made the rules, including laws like the ones in the U.S. after the American Civil War. Laws that affected both formerly enslaved people and their descendants.

Ale said that in Guatemala, these kinds of laws kept indigenous people enslaved too.

Ale Colom: If you couldn't prove you were employed, you had to work for free or taken prisoner to build roads or to build or, like, harvest coffee.

MUSIC: Exuberant fog horn and rhythmic drums fades away.

Diego: As much as they could, indigenous people kept to themselves — eating the corn, beans and squash that had always sustained them, and making their own clothing and pottery. Harvesting wood from the mountains and fish from the streams and the sea.

Some did seasonal work — without pay. Picking cotton or sugar cane.

But that was before bananas took over. Because in a lot of ways, bananas made Guatemala what it is today. They even launched a civil war.

After the break, more bananas.

AD BREAK

ACT TWO

Diego: Look, I love bananas. And I used to eat them all the time without thinking about where they came from. But if you go take a look, you'll see your bananas might be from the same place as me.

Sometimes it even says “Guatemala” on their little stickers.

Announcer: Officers in trim white uniforms pick up their golden cargoes from a place we call Bananaland...FADE UNDER

MUSIC: Slow pulsing hypnotic percussion with tambourines and rattles.

Diego: You can't study the history of Guatemala without bananas. In the twentieth century, the land of the Maya became a bunch of banana republics.

The writer O'Henry came up with that term to describe countries with governments that catered to big private companies. Companies like United Fruit.

At the turn of the century, United Fruit sold bananas in the United States. It had a near monopoly.

MUSIC: Slow pulsing hypnotic percussion with tambourines and rattles fades out.

Diego: Now, United Fruit was a U.S. company...these days, you might know it as Chiquita. But it got all its bananas from *other* places.

Panama. Honduras. Guatemala. Companies like United Fruit controlled *everything* — from the trees to the governments. They built railroads and operated communications systems.

They made sure the laws were friendly to its exports. And that worked for United Fruit. For a long time, they usually got their way.

But big change was brewing...and in the 1950s, Guatemalans elected a president who wanted to give land back to poor farmers. Many of whom were indigenous.

By the way? This was all right in the middle of the Cold War — when the Soviet Union and the U.S. were competing to run the world.

United Fruit and the Eisenhower administration decided giving land back to farmers would be bad for U.S. foreign interests.

And thanks to the Cold War, and how much Communism scared the West, they could say that this new Guatemalan president was a part of the Communist agenda.

So they sponsored a coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Guatemala.

Announcer: For United Fruit, it's business as usual as all company land seized by the Communists is returned.

Diego: But it wasn't *business as usual*. Guatemalans had seen a glimpse of what change could look like.

Some people started to organize, many with the blessing of the Catholic Church. Others began fighting against the U.S.-backed military dictatorship.

The dictatorship saw organizing as a threat. It cracked down hard, especially in Mayan villages. The crackdown led to a 36-year civil war.

The war claimed countless lives. Thousands of families were displaced. Including many children. The Civil War ended in 1996 — just two years before I was born. And it left scars on my village...and the people closest to me.

Stay with us.

AD BREAK

ACT THREE

Diego: From 1960 onwards, there were several factions vying for power in Guatemala. But it boiled down to the military dictatorship and the guerilla groups that opposed it.

Many were forced to take sides, while others just wanted to protect their families.

By the '80s, the violence was especially brutal in the mountain villages near Santiago Atitlán. The government was cracking down — mostly on indigenous people...like they say in this 1982 report:

Announcer: In recent years, Guatemala has witnessed scores of massacres. Its army has been accused of waging terror against the Indian people in order to prevent them from joining the guerillas.

Diego: In Santiago Atitlán, the memories are still fresh. Everyone I know was affected. Including me.

Diego: What do you call this? What do you call this?

Laurie: Él quiere saber qué es.

Dolores: [Unintelligible.]

Laurie: It's corn.

Diego: That's me when I was three years old, running my hands through a pail of corn kernels. We were at Dolores' parents' house. Dolores is our friend and translator from Santiago Atitlán and she's been helping us pretty much my whole life.

Dolores: He's born here. And we can see — we think he's our little nephew. And my mother, she thinks it's one of her grandson because we have the same blood. I mean, that's his home here. Nobody can change, nobody...the root is here.

When you see him playing, he's just one of our family playing here.

Diego: I was running around with a toy truck in their courtyard. Dolores' mother, Mercedes, was kneeling on a mat, weaving cloth on a backstrap loom. Dolores' father — his name is Diego, like me — was braiding threads to make a bracelet.

Dolores said that's how they survived the civil war — staying in, making their own things, and keeping their heads down.

Diego was a young man then, and he was lucky to survive the civil war.

MUSIC: Dark low synths with a grinding and slow throbbing feel.

Diego: By the time the war ended, 200 thousand people were dead. Most of the known victims were Maya. In the Americas, it was the 20th century's bloodiest conflict.

After the civil war, Guatemala's own investigation called it genocide. But it wasn't just in Guatemala. The United States backed the dictators who committed these atrocities.

Last time I was in Guatemala, I visited the Parque de Paz with Dolores and my producer, Mia. We arrived in the afternoon...a warm and sunny day. We were there to meet Dolores' friend.

Mia and Diego saying hello to Andrea and Dolores.

Diego: Andrea Mendoza looked like she was about Dolores' age — in her sixties, maybe. She wore a purple huipil with embroidered birds and leaves, and a long patterned skirt.

When we walked up, Andrea was standing with her arms crossed, over a stone marked with a plaque.

Mia: Does she want to sit somewhere more comfortable?

Dolores: This is her son.

Mia: Oh my goodness, okay.

Dolores: This is son, here, where the massacre happened in 1990. December 2nd...and this is the shrine. And when the army, they opened up the fire, they laid here. Thirteen people died here.

Diego: Andrea motioned to the stone in front of her. Her son — just thirteen years old — was killed on this very spot.

MUSIC: Mystic melody on flute.

Diego: That's Pedro Cristal Mendoza. He was born on the 2nd of November 1977 and he died 2nd of December 1990.

Diego: Before Pedro's death, he and his family lived in Santiago Atitlán. It was a dangerous existence back then.

Dolores: The army, they just arrived here in 1980 and they started to control mens when they go up to the mountain and checking all of the bags where they are taking all of this food and they accused the people from Santiago Atitlán, they are guerilla people.

MUSIC: Mystic melody on flute fades out.

Diego: As Andrea remembers it, the army ran the village for the next ten years.

Locals suspected soldiers assassinated a U.S.-born Catholic priest, but it was never solved.

The army killed and kidnapped hundreds of villagers, accusing them of supporting the guerillas.

Dolores: We just let it go, just pray, that's all.

Diego: On December 2nd, 1990, tensions boiled over. A couple of soldiers had been drinking and harassing people in town.

But instead of taking this kind of treatment, the townspeople rallied. For an hour, church bells rang and people came together in the main square. Led by the mayor, carrying white flags, they marched to the army base. But when they got there, soldiers opened fire.

They killed thirteen unarmed civilians — some reports say fourteen — mostly young men. Andrea's son was one of them.

Dolores: He was a good student. He liked to do his homework. He wanted to be a priest.

Diego: Andrea visits Pedro's headstone every week. She's been doing that for more than 30 years.

Dolores: I don't know what's going to happen when I die some day...he thinks about me and I think about him. I bring him flowers and candles and I come to the mass.

Diego: The war didn't end officially for another six years, in 1996, but something shifted in Guatemala after that massacre in Santiago Atitlán.

Dozens of reporters came to the funerals. Congress called for an investigation. The Catholic Church called for compensation for the families.

But most importantly, the Army was kicked out of Santiago Atitlán and they've never been allowed back in.

Because Dolores speaks English, she works as a cultural guide in Santiago Atitlán, sharing Tzutujil traditions of weaving and crafts with tourists—but she insists that Mayan culture is so much more than that."

Dolores: But it's very important to know the history about the Mayan people...and how much the Mayan people suffered about this war.

Diego: Dolores' dad Diego passed away in 2021. He's the one who was making friendship bracelets and keeping his head down during the civil war. I wish now I could have asked him more about his experience, but when I met him, I was only three.

There were things he wanted me to know...so he told them to my mom Laurie.

THEME MUSIC: An uplifting and inspiring electronic beat begins with a strong guitar underneath begins softly.

Dolores' dad, Diego: [Speaking in Tzutujil.]

Dolores: My father think if this child, you give him good education and he gets to see the world and then...I think it'll be good for him. And someday probably you can live here with the people. Probably he can learn the language Tzutujil too.

Diego: Well, I'm all grown up now.

Learning about my heritage helps me appreciate everything I have here in Saint Paul and also my very deep connection to Guatemala. I want to say Matiosh. That means thank you in Tzutujil. Dolores taught me that. So — Matiosh to her and to everyone, especially Santiago Atitlán, who shared their stories with me.

And...you know, a lot of other Guatemalan adoptees have a story to tell. You'll be hearing about that next.

THEME MUSIC: Swells with intensity and fades.

MUSIC: Bright piano and guitar with synths pulsing with discovery begin.

Diego: Next time, on All Relative: Defining Diego...

Carlos: He has a sixth finger on each hand, which is not really like a 100% finger because it has no bones but it...

Rachel: Like, why don't I look like everyone? And like, I even contemplated, like, dying my hair to look like everyone around me.

Kahleah: I don't know how I would feel if I was to find out my birth mother has passed away. I think for me a question of, um, my mental health and, and being at peace with, um, my life.

MUSIC: Bright piano and guitar with synths pulsing with discovery ends.

MUSIC: A hopeful and optimistic melody of acoustic and electric guitar begins.

Diego: All Relative: Defining Diego is a production of Somethin' Else and Sony Music Entertainment.

It's hosted by me — Diego Xicay Luke. This episode was written and produced by Kyra Assibey-Bonsu. Senior producer is Mia Warren. Associate producer is India Witkin.

Executive producers are Lizzie Jacobs, Jude Kampfner, and Tom Koenig. Lizzie Jacobs and Laurie Stern were our editors on this episode.

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This episode was engineered by Sam Bair. Our theme song was composed by Gautam Srikishan.

Fact-checking by Natsumi Ajisaka. Translation by Dolores Ratzan.

Our adoptee consultant is Erik Mohn.

And special thanks to my dad, Dan Luke.

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MUSIC: A hopeful and optimistic melody of acoustic and electric guitar ends.

CITATION

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