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## Mexicanization: A Survival Strategy for Guatemalan Mayans in the San Francisco Bay Area

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores “Mexicanization,” a survival strategy for Guatemalan Mayans during the migratory and settlement process in the United States. This term describes the Guatemalan Mayans’ ambiguous relations with Mexico and Mexicans. The symbolic role of Mexico is present throughout the Guatemalan migration process, from the preparatory phase in Guatemala or in the Mexican refugee camps, through the perilous journey north, during which Guatemalans attempt to blend into Mexican society to avoid deportation or extortion by Mexican authorities. On entering the United States, this pattern continues as Guatemalans claim Mexican identity so that if detained, INS officials will send them only to the Mexican side of the border. As Guatemalans settle in the United States, they often live in communities dominated by Mexican businesses, products, food, culture, and social networks. The experience of Mexicanization varies according to gender and background.

*Key words:* 1. international migration, 2. Guatemalans, 3. identity, 4. Latinos, 5. San Francisco Bay Area.

### RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza la “mexicanización”, una estrategia de sobrevivencia adoptada por mayas guatemaltecos durante el proceso migratorio y de establecimiento en Estados Unidos. El término describe las relaciones ambiguas de tales migrantes con los mexicanos. El papel simbólico de México está presente desde la fase preparatoria del proceso migratorio, en Guatemala o en los campamentos de refugiados en México, hasta el peligroso viaje hacia el norte, durante el cual los guatemaltecos intentan mezclarse con la sociedad mexicana para evitar ser deportados o extorsionados por las autoridades. Al

entrar a Estados Unidos los guatemaltecos siguen utilizando la identidad mexicana, para asegurar así, si son detenidos, que los oficiales del INS los envíen solamente a la zona fronteriza del norte de México. Cuando los guatemaltecos se establecen en Estados Unidos, con frecuencia viven en comunidades dominadas por negocios, productos, alimentos, cultura y redes sociales mexicanas. La experiencia de la “mexicanización” varía según el género y la historia personal.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración internacional, 2. guatemaltecos, 3. identidad, 4. latinos, 5. Bahía de San Francisco.

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## Introduction\*

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The presence of Latinos<sup>1</sup> in the United States is becoming increasingly important, especially in states such as California, where Latinos currently constitute over 32% of the total population. By 2015, this population is projected to become the state’s largest ethnic group, reaching 15 to 20 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 1997). Despite these significant figures, the United States is still coming to terms with this heterogeneous population as a dynamic and permanent component of its society. This dramatic demographic change calls for a more comprehensive understanding of who “Latinos” are, taking into account the similarities, vast differences, and dynamics between distinct groups of Latinos.

We explore the experiences of an emerging Latino immigrant group, Guatemalan Mayans, during their migratory process, which begins with the preparatory phase, in either Guatemala or Mexican refugee camps, followed by the perilous journey north, and finally settlement in the United States. We will specifically focus on “Mexicanization,” which serves as a survival strategy for Guatemalan Mayans during this process.<sup>2</sup> We have developed this term to describe Guatemalan Mayans’ ambiguous relations with Mexico and Mexicans.<sup>3</sup> Mexicanization is a dynamic process that varies according to time and

circumstances and in intensity. For example, when crossing north through Mexican territory, the *coyote* (smuggler) advises Guatemalan Mayans to dress and behave as if they were Mexicans. Conscious of stereotypes, Guatemalan men use Northern Mexican-style cowboy hats and boots, and Guatemalan women wear makeup. As we will elaborate later, the process, embedded in complex power relations, intersects with aspects of ethnic identity, culture, and social networks. By emphasizing Mexicanization, we do not mean to say that migrant Guatemalan Mayans shed their identity. We propose, following Roger Rouse's ideas, that identities are multiple, multilocal, and fluid, "especially for those that challenge the idea of loyalty to a single sovereign state" (1995:353).

Guatemalan Mayans do not necessarily perceive a strong link to Guatemala as a nation but rather to their *aldea* (village), ethnic group, or family—to the local.<sup>4</sup> We will add to Rouse's idea: For Guatemalan Mayans living in the San Francisco Bay Area, the notion of a fixed ethnic identity is also challenged as they encounter other Guatemalan Mayans with whom they cannot communicate because they speak distinct languages. To survive, Guatemalan Mayans must learn Spanish, the Ladino language, which is also the *mexicano* language, the language of the "people who have made it here in the United States." Peter L. Berger stated that, "Identity is socially bestowed, socially sustained, and socially transformed. People build their personal identities out of the culture they live in" (1966:116). Clearly, then, the deconstruction of identity for a person who has lived dramatic and varied experiences, including extreme poverty and racial discrimination, will include multiple and overlapping processes. For the Guatemalan Mayans, anonymity and *clandestinidad* (secrecy) are central for their survival and self-preservation. They practiced these mechanisms intensively during Guatemala's war of the last four decades. However, *clandestinidad*, for Guatemalan Mayans, has a long history based on sophisticated and centuries-old forms of resistance to conquest and colonization. In order to exist and persist, indigenous Guatemalans developed such mechanisms historically.<sup>5</sup> Mexicanization, then, has its roots in the *aldea*, in ancestral experiences of survival, of *clandestinidad*. Below, we will address

different stages of migration, and how diverse meanings of Mexicanization intercept them.

In the analysis of our findings, we will elaborate on how Guatemalans' relations with Mexico and Mexicans are placed in both the concrete and symbolic spheres, are alternatively contradictory and complementary in nature, and are constantly readjusted over time and according specific circumstances.

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## Background and Context

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Increasing numbers of Central Americans, primarily from El Salvador and Guatemala, began arriving in the United States in the early 1980s, as they fled brutal military repression and counterinsurgency efforts in their countries (Hamilton and Chinchilla-Stolz, 199; Julian, 1994; Benz, 1996; Burns 1993; Jonas, 2000). The Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Commission for Historical Clarification, CEH) concluded that 200,000 people were killed or disappeared, and state forces and related paramilitary groups carried out 93% of this violence. The report also charged the Guatemalan military with genocide (CEH, 1999). During the most intense period of the military onslaught, from 1981 to 1983, as many as 1.5 million people were displaced internally or had to flee the country, including about 150,000 who sought refuge in Mexico (CEH, 1999). Other countries, such as the United States, also saw an influx of Guatemalans during this period.

Guatemalan migrants continue to arrive in the United States despite the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. This confirms that *structural violence* (Farmer, 1996), which includes economic hardship and political and social instability, remains prevalent in Guatemala and constitutes a contributing factor for out-migration. Structural violence is reflected in the malnutrition suffered by more than half of the children under the age of five, a figure that is even worse among the indigenous population. In March 2002, the United Nations World

Food Program (WFP) approved an emergency operation in Guatemala to assist 155,000 people, including 59,635 children under the age of five, who were suffering from acute malnutrition. Of those, 6,000 children were at risk of dying. To stabilize their condition, they were treated at therapeutic feeding centers for several months (WFP, 2002).

Numerous scholars have documented the factors contributing to migration, particularly, the critical connections between economic and political motivations (Richmond, 1988; Fagen-Weiss, 1988; Hagan, 1994; Vlach, 1992; Portes and Bach, 1985). Local conditions of poverty, violence, racism, and other injustices, including gender inequalities and limited (or complete lack) of access to basic services, have to be considered in this respect. For instance, in Guatemala, approximately half of the population is subject to racial discrimination (Salazar-Tetzaguic and Le Bot, 1998; Jonas, 2000). Guatemala has levels of poverty comparable to those of Bangladesh and Mozambique, and recent drought and dramatically low coffee prices have exacerbated the situation. Four of every 10 Guatemalans do not know how to read or write, a figure that increases in rural areas and multiplies in the case of indigenous women. More than 60% of the population lives in rural areas where often services are almost nonexistent (Betancurt *et al.*, 1998). "Of all countries, Guatemala ranks among the poorest in terms of its social safety net, and with Brazil, it exhibits the most acute forms of inequality. The level of mistrust of public institutions is high, revealing widespread disenchantment with the political situation" (Betancurt *et al.*, 1998:4-5).

These indicators partially explain why nearly 10% of all Guatemalans are living in the United States—according to official sources and estimates, between 370,000 and 1,200,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Manz *et al.*, 2000). Almost 60% reside in California, comparable to the percentage of Salvadorans but higher than any other Latino group other than Mexicans (California Policy Seminar, 1998). Los Angeles, which boasts more Guatemalan residents than any city other than Guatemala City itself, is considered the second capital of Guatemala.

Meanwhile, rural Guatemalan communities are showing the effects of the influx of American dollars and global culture, including technology. Remittances—the earnings sent back to Guatemala by migrants—now represent the largest source of foreign revenue for the country along with coffee (Orozco, 2001). As a result, economic and social links established by migrants not only create a system of interdependence among individuals, families, and communities but among nations as well. Guatemalans, however, add a unique sociocultural dimension to immigration flows. Unlike other Central American nations, more than half of the population in Guatemala is indigenous, members of various Maya ethno-linguistic groups that have historically suffered from racism, which adds complex issues of identity to migration.

The number and distribution of Guatemalan immigrants is difficult to measure accurately, whether in the San Francisco Bay Area, in California, or in the United States. Many Guatemalan immigrants are undocumented and thus fearful of official surveys. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Central Americans as a group comprise 5.3% of the Hispanic/Latino population in California. Salvadorans are the largest Central American group, comprising 2.5% of the state's Hispanic/Latino population, with Guatemalans as the second largest group at 1.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Census tracts in San Francisco's Mission district, Oakland's Fruitvale district, and the city of San Rafael in Marin County all have large Latino populations. The Guatemalan population tends to be drawn to these concentrations. In the Latino neighborhoods in these urban districts, migrants congregate so that they can support each other within their ethnic groups. Most Guatemalan migrants work in construction, landscaping, or domestic work. In Fruitvale, Oakland's predominantly Latino neighborhood, "Casa Oakland," coordinated by a local religious organization, hosts between 25 and 30 Guatemalan migrants at any given time, with frequent turnover. Casa Oakland's male residents work in construction or gardening and female residents are domestic workers. Farther to the east, the town of Stockton contains a small Guatemalan community, consisting of people primarily of Q'anjob'al and Mam origin. Nearly all these

Guatemalan Mayans lived in refugee camps in Southern Mexico for up to 17 years before coming to the United States. Most of these interviewees work in the fields and have loose but crucial links to institutions in the East Bay and in San Francisco, which make those cities a useful point of reference to an urban experience that contrasts with life in Stockton.

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## Methodology

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This article presents information gathered using qualitative methods during fieldwork from August 1998 through June 1999. Through ethnographic approaches, we explored the system of concepts, beliefs, and practices around migration, as well contextualizing and linking local specificities with global perspectives (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Schwandt, 1994). We did not seek to map a fixed, static group of people; rather, we sought to understand a fluid dynamic population. Grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was instrumental in answering questions concerning issues such as the experience of crossing the border(s), the implications of networks, the resources for surviving upon arrival in the United States, as well as some aspects related to work and savings.

We used several forms of interviews, including key-informant interviews, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. We began the research by speaking with individuals who had special information regarding Guatemalans in the San Francisco Bay Area: key informants who work with immigrants, belong to organizations focusing on Guatemala, or are scholars researching Guatemala or immigration. These interviews helped us to tentatively map the population and thus focus our efforts on areas with a significant concentration of Guatemalans. By cross-referencing key-informant responses, we developed a demographic picture of the pool of potential participants, including where immigrants reside, their living conditions, life histories, and typical employment.



This information shaped the interview guide and provided a foundation to discuss critical issues.

We also conducted focus-group discussions with 20 people, and we individually interviewed 20 men and five women, ranging in age from 16 to 50 years, most of whom were in their 20s or early 30s. The majority had attended primary school for a few years; only three had secondary-school or college experience; nearly a third had no formal education at all. The sample included both married and single people; more than half had children, and for the most part, the children had remained behind in Mexico or Guatemala. A range of Mayan ethnic groups were represented including Mam, Ixil, K'iche', Kaqchikel, and Q'anjob'al. All interviewees were at a low socioeconomic level and originally came from rural areas in Guatemala, primarily from the provinces of El Quiché and Huehuetenango. Nearly all are undocumented, with the exception of a few who have political asylum, work permits, or pending immigration cases. We used pseudonyms in order to protect their real identities. Given the difficulty of interviewing undocumented people and the preliminary nature of this study, we make no claim to a representative or randomly drawn sample. Rather, we sought a group that would embody many of the central experiences migrants face.

We paid special attention to issues that link migration and social structure. The testimonies underscore collective experiences that place the local Guatemalan community in the larger context of political persecution and economic hardship in Central America. We were aware that people who have suffered political persecution and racism, and who were undocumented, would likely be suspicious of participating in this type of study and, once involved, would often be guarded in their responses. Guatemalan Mayans' tendency to protect their own identity and community has its roots in colonialism and its legacy, as well as in the racism and instability of the internal armed conflict. These experiences have created a distrust and guardedness, obstacles we had to face during our fieldwork. We were able address this skepticism, at least in

part, by developing connections via key informants and relationships with the Guatemalan immigrant community in different capacities and over a long period.

Throughout the research, participant observation was a complementary source of data, immersing us in the communities, building new relationships, and establishing bonds of trust. Some of this engagement continues even though the research has ended. Several researchers, for example, continue to teach English at Casa Oakland, interpret in court, or appear as expert witnesses in political-asylum cases. By allowing us to gain insights not available through traditional research methods, these experiences added depth and texture to the findings from the interviews.

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### **A Preamble: Mexico, Long History of Encounters**

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Mexico is significant for Guatemala, as both a “Big Brother” and a neighboring country. Guatemala and Mexico have shared significant struggles historically, geographically, and politically.<sup>6</sup> Mexican media, especially television channels, have inundated the Latin American markets. In the case of Guatemala, stations and programs are overwhelmingly of Mexican origin. Guatemalans, especially those living along the Mexico-Guatemala border, find it easier to get the news about Mexican President Fox than about Guatemalan President Portillo. Mexico also has a more developed economy and is technologically more advanced than much of Guatemala. Mexico, because of its geographic location is also the path to the United States. Consequently, Guatemalan migrants include Mexico in their planning from the first moment, and Mexico occupies a large portion of the journey, in terms of both territory covered and expense.

The participants articulated several scenarios concerning their experiences with Mexico and Mexicans. In this article, we will explore two of the scenarios, which a majority of study participants reported having experienced. A significant number of informants had been refugees in Southern Mexico, who then decided

to continue their exodus north, using Mexican networks and “Mexican border specialists” (*coyotes*). Others traveled from Guatemala to the United States, either passing only briefly through Mexico or remaining for a short period to work and save money to complete their journey.

### ***Refuge in Mexico***

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, due to Guatemala’s 30-year civil war, the Mexican government granted refugee status to approximately 50,000 people. At least another 50,000 refugees were dispersed throughout Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo, and other states in Mexico. More than a million were internally dispersed in Guatemala (when its population was approximately 8 million people). The hardship and precarious existence Guatemalans suffered in their exile in communities of resistance and the Mexican refugee camps have been well documented (Jonas, 2000; Billings, 2000; Amnesty International, 1990 and 1998; Simon and Manz, 1992; CIREFCA, 1990; Manz, 1988a and 1988b, among others). Raul’s testimony is an example:

My people have suffered so much. First, in my village, there were fierce fights between the Evangelicals and the Catholics. Later, the army came and massacred; in just one night, everything was left deserted. We had to leave, running, with just what we had on, to seek refuge in the jungle. A year later, after surviving off of roots for food and using plastic to cover ourselves, seeing our children die, we finally arrived on foot in Mexico. Things weren’t better in Mexico. We suffered the cold, rains without a roof over our heads, hunger, and illness. We had to go from place to place, from camp to camp, be it because the army had entered or because the Mexican authorities decided to. Three times, we had to move from one place to another. We didn’t find work, we felt a great sense of desperation. Total poverty: cardboard houses, often at night our stomachs growled with hunger. I still remember that fire I felt in my mouth and stomach, my tongue dry, dry... Without work, without *milpa*, without

land. For a *campesino* to be without land is like not having blood in your veins.

Despite the continuing misfortune encountered in the camps, an awareness of the malleability of ethnic identity emerged for some people as they shared their destiny with other Mayans and learned a common language for communicating among themselves and with the local population. For some people, this was an initial step in the Mexicanization process. As María noted, “In the refugee camps, I began to learn Spanish because there were people from all over Guatemala who spoke their own dialects, and we could not communicate. Also, Mexicans spoke mainly Spanish.”

Across four countries—Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala—eight to nine million people speak a Mayan language. Twenty-three distinct Mayan languages are spoken within Guatemala alone. The acquisition of Spanish as a second language in Guatemala is most common among Mayans who are able to attend school; or live in, work in, or visit larger towns or cities, something usually limited to men; or who are exposed to the language either through the media or other influences that reach rural areas. For Mayan refugees in Mexico, Spanish language skills were either first acquired or strengthened further during the time at the camps. As many people acquired most of their Spanish language skills in Mexico and with Mexicans, it is not uncommon for them to speak with a Mexican accent and incorporate Mexican slang or sayings. This is an important facet of the Mexicanization process, which plays a role during the journey north and while living in the United States.

These transformative encounters with aspects of Mexican culture and linguistic expressions took many forms, from food to media, from technology to living in a diverse community. For many, the refugee experience in Mexico was an introduction to what they would later find in the United States. As Javier mentioned, “In Guatemala, we only had a radio and would listen only at night to the news or certain programs, but in Mexico, we started to watch television all the time. Mexico was so different...” Life in Mexico raised awareness and

sometimes served to prepare Guatemalans for the changes in culture, language, and environment. The move to refugee camps in Mexico involved significant cultural adaptation. For those who had lived in camps, the arrival in the United States was less of a transition than for those who came directly from Guatemala.

After being in Mexico, the opportunity and temptation to cross the U.S. border emerged as a subsequent phase. For many Guatemalans, migration to the United States was not always a one-step move (Chávez, 1998). Javier said, "While in Mexico, I decided to come to the United States. Many from the camp were coming. I also wanted to try my luck."

For people who lived in the refugee camps, Mexico engenders ambivalent feelings. It offered refuge during a dark period but did not offer a more permanent solution to displacement and poverty. In the refugee camps, the Guatemalan Mayans were also suffering in silence: They were the poorest, the *inditos*, the ones who received international aid and charity. The subliminal message was that being Mexican was preferable. Living among Mexicans, even if they, too, were poor, situated the Guatemalans a step lower in the socio-ethnic hierarchy. Refugees carried with them not just the direct consequences of the war and, particularly, the ethnocide but also centuries of racism. Despite exposure to Mexican culture and society, in the segregated camps, both internal ethnic restrictions and loyalties as well as relations and constraints with the local Mexican population ironically made it nearly impossible to Mexicanize.

## **FROM RURAL GUATEMALA TO THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA**

For Mayans who remained in Guatemala throughout the war and who did not have the initial experience of migration to Mexico, the transition from a rural village in the Guatemalan highlands or the Ixcán rainforest to the United States can be jarring. Whether migrating for political or economic reasons, these Guatemalan Mayans, although familiar with Mexican culture as transmitted

through the media and personal acquaintances, lack the real-life experience gained by those who fled to the Mexican refugee camps. One woman who migrated directly from Guatemala to the United States noted:

In Guatemala, we are unaware of many things. For example, I had never left my village. I only knew the nearby town where we had gone to deliver the coffee. But I had never gone anywhere before. I had only ridden in a bus two times. I had not even been to Huehuetenango [the provincial capital]. Just once, I went to Barillas and another time to Xalbal to deliver coffee. I had never seen anything, I had never seen what a city was like, or TV. In my village, there is no electricity. I never left with my parents together, my *mamá* has never left our village. I had never watched TV. I was very frightened; sometimes I still feel that I am in a dream. At first [when she came to the Bay Area], I couldn't even eat.

Especially for the younger migrants leaving Guatemala, migration represents more than just the home left behind and a destination. It encompasses rites of passage. Rites that enable the person to pass from one defined position or status to another usually accompany these moments (Van Ganep, 1960). The rites of transformation have different meanings for men and women. For example, some women mentioned that it was during their journey north that they cut their hair for the very first time. They also said that it was the first time they used clothes other than their *traje* (traditional ethnic clothes). With a voice choked with emotion, Carmen pointed out:

Can you imagine, that morning when I woke up in my house, I was still wearing my *traje*. When the *coyote* arrived, I had my tennis shoes and pants ready in a bag. I was waiting until the last moment to change into these clothes. In my town, only men use pants. If my family saw me dressed like that, they would laugh at me. I didn't want people to think badly of me. But I never cut my hair, as my cousin did. That was too much for me!

The stark transition from an insulated, rural indigenous community in Guatemala to Mexico and the United States stresses migrants and challenges them to adapt quickly to the demands of the new environments.

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### **Borders: Act Like a *Mexicano* to Cross the Border**

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The act of crossing the border, with all of its meaning and risks, is, in itself, a rite of passage that marks the transition from one way of life to another. Crossing the border, especially as an undocumented migrant, is a unique moment that marks the rest of one's life. Ricardo, 17 years old, explained, "I was really afraid because of all the things I had heard and all the things that the *coyote* had explained to us. It was one of the strangest moments I have experienced in my life. After doing that, I think I can do a lot of things."

## **CROSSING MEXICO**

Various persons reported that during their travel north, in order to survive and avoid deportation, they told others, including federal agents, that they were Mexican nationals. For indigenous Guatemalans, this usually meant saying they were from regions of Mexico that have large indigenous populations, such as Oaxaca and Chiapas. Guatemalan Mayans thus try to both claim the protection of Mexican nationality and explain their indigenous features and imperfect Spanish. Nearly all of the Guatemalan migrants with whom we spoke explained that they intentionally tried to appear Mexican in order not to draw attention to themselves and to avoid detection by Mexican immigration officials. Diego said:

We learned to use some key words such as "*chamarra*" instead of "*chumpa*" [jacket] or "*escuincle*" or "*chavo*" instead of "*patojo*" or "*chiriz*" [guy]. We learned how to measure our body in terms of kilos instead of pounds, as Mexicans do; or how to indicate the size of

shoes, [because] it is different in Mexico than it is in Guatemala. We even stand with the posture of Mexicans, with arrogance and not being ashamed all the time... The only thing I never learned was the National Anthem.

While Guatemalans employ these tactics in an attempt to blend in, Mexican immigration officials are aware of this strategy and often “quiz” suspected migrants to be sure they are Mexican rather than just outsiders who have acquired minimal proficiency in Mexican culture and politics in order to avoid detection. In spring 2002, Mexican immigration officers were fired after deporting seven Mexican nationals from Chiapas to Guatemala when the group could not produce satisfactory evidence of Mexican citizenship (*Los Angeles Times*, 2002). Because the group was composed of indigenous people, the officials assumed they were Guatemalan nationals. This incident shows not only the heightened level of patrolling by Mexican immigration officials but also the pervasive racial and ethnic discrimination that drives the Mexicanization strategy.

### STRATEGIC PLAYER: THE COYOTE

The *coyotes* play an essential yet ambivalent role. They rely heavily on networks of migrants and specific communities, and have strategies to ensure that their clients are likely to be successful in their journey. Antonia described her experience:

We came with a man who knows. It took five days. He is a *coyote*; others helped him cross us. He gave us some kind of papers, credentials, in case the Mexican police catch us. He was helped by other men and women here in the United States. My cousin paid for me only when I had been *entregada* (delivered) safely in Los Angeles.



*Coyotes* negotiate multiple languages, cultures, and geographic and social landscapes on behalf of their clients and for their own well-being. The language employed by migrants and others involved in the “border culture” reflects the myth-like status of the *coyote*, whether positive, negative, or an ambivalent combination. *Coyote* stories and legends abound, conveying fears, trust, and betrayals.

Two teenage sisters from Chimaltenango described how the *coyote* trained their group to “act Mexican”—how to dress, what to say in certain situations, and what to expect if detained by either the INS or the Mexican authorities. After leaving Guatemala, their *coyote* brought them to a safe house in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, where he coached them on basic facts, such as “the colors of the Mexican flag, the name of the Mexican president, and what Pemex is.” He also taught them basic Mexican slang to substitute for Guatemalan slang and words that have been “Ladinized” from indigenous languages, such as “*huarache*” instead of “*caite*” (sandals), “*feria*” instead of “*pisto*” (money), and so on. He instructed them to identify themselves as Tzotzil Indians, to name a town of origin in Chiapas, and to pretend they were sleeping if soldiers boarded the bus. To “be Mexican” is a form of protection systematized and incorporated into border culture. Almost all the informants reported that their *coyote*, whether Mexican or Guatemalan, had trained them to appear to be Mexican.

## ENTERING THE UNITED STATES

The number of Guatemalan Mayans entering the United States weekly is increasing. With Mexicans and other Central Americans, they share several points of entry all along the border. It is extremely difficult to calculate the total number of Guatemalans, in general, and Mayans, in particular. In the year 2000, the INS apprehended a record of over 1.6 million people along the southwestern U.S. border, and they formally deported over 4,000 Guatemalans (INS, 2002). Again, Mexicanization is critical in the strategy to circumvent deportation to Guatemala, and it undoubtedly leads to underreporting of the number of deported Guatemalans. When confronted by U.S. Border Patrol

agents, the goal is to be sent only to the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border, so that the money used to make the journey that far will not have been wasted and so that the migrant will be in a position to make another attempt to cross. Some participants reported being returned to Mexico “because we said we were from Oaxaca.”

Despite attempts at Mexicanization, certain features cannot be modified. Many Mayans from Guatemala have gold tooth-work, signifying wealth and status, a tradition dating back to pre-hispanic times. The migrants able to travel north and hire *coyotes* are not necessarily the poorest of their communities,<sup>7</sup> and, therefore, it is likely that those who are crossing have these golden crowns in their front teeth. These signifiers cannot be camouflaged for the journey north. As Sofia mentioned, “When Immigration stopped us, I said I was Mexican, but they didn’t believe me, because of my golden bridge. So, I told them I was a Guatemalan.”

While crossing borders poses huge risks for migrants, the conditions they leave behind often make it worthwhile to take those risks. For the Guatemalan Mayans who fled the country during the war, migration is perilous, but remaining in Guatemala would almost certainly mean death or a life lived under conditions of social violence and extreme poverty. Sofia described her panic when the INS detained her, and she faced deportation to Guatemala:

We ran through the mountains of San Diego at night. When the INS caught us, I told them I was Mexican, but they didn’t believe me. They told me to sign so they could deport me. I said I didn’t know how to sign my name, and that I didn’t understand what they were telling me. They separated me from the Mexicans. Then, they told me to call my lawyer, the court stuff. I didn’t even know what a lawyer or a court was. I didn’t understand anything, and I barely spoke Spanish. I told them my story, the truth, and I told them “What the army will do with me when you send me back, you can do here. Please, kill me here. Why would you prolong my crucifixion? Please, please, I beg you, kill me here. You can do it too. I prefer to die here

than with the army in Guatemala.” I told them, “Don’t send me back. It’s better if you kill me here; it’s the same thing. Why send me back to Guatemala?” Then the agent felt pity for me and told me that he would not send me back. I was so happy; it was like a ray of sun had entered my life. I was ready to die...

Increased patrolling and violence along the border make an undocumented crossing all the more dangerous. A special Amnesty International report, regarding the human-rights situation along the border, states that “between 1993 and 1996, it is estimated that at least 1,185 migrants died in the attempt to cross the border, and it is feared that the true number is much higher since many bodies are never found” (1998, 6).

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### Process of Settlement

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Once in the United States, detection by the INS remains a concern. As do other undocumented migrants, Guatemalans must pass several checkpoints within U.S. territory, and they fear the INS that patrols in the areas where they settle. While seeking daily work at “*la parada*,”<sup>8</sup> many Guatemalans make a big mimetic effort to appear Mexican, in order to avoid discrimination and protect themselves should the INS detain them. This appropriation of camouflage, to avoid scrutiny by bosses or INS officials, is designed to facilitate survival in the United States and avert deportation to Guatemala. Raul said, “It is cheaper [by almost \$1,500] to be sent back to Mexico than to Guatemala.” Men, who spend more time in public—waiting for work and at workplaces—are at greater risk for deportation because their heightened visibility. In San Rafael, for example, we witnessed how day laborers are exposed every day while waiting in public places to be picked up for work.

In our study, we observed that men pay close attention to clothing styles, language, and mannerisms, and strive to appear “Mexican,” particularly when seeking work. As mentioned, this shift in identity is complex and ambiguous. For

instance, in a nightclub where the majority of patrons were of Mexican origin, we observed Guatemalan Mayans emphasizing their “Mexican macho” style of appearance, by wearing boots, jeans, and silver *charro* belts. “Can you imagine being dressed in a traditional way here, with our colorful shirts or *faja* (woven belt)? No way! Everybody would make jokes about us, the little Indians,” Ernesto commented. Have these Guatemalan men internalized fears of appearing Mayan, so that Mexicanization is desirable? Has that translated into an internalization of Mexican values?

In the context of Mexicanization, we find a temporality of meanings exists, as well as a fluidity in terms of identity (Rouse 1995). Mexicanization, for many men, is associated with a “*norteño*” rural aesthetic. Mexicans (some of whom are from Mexican indigenous communities) often adopt this stereotype. This is true primarily of the people who are working in the fields or are “hanging in e/ *barrio*.” It is a model that has important meanings when de-constructing aspects of identity within a new context.

We have characterized Mexicanization as a survival strategy because it does not completely reflect individual feelings or attitudes toward Mexico and Mexicans. We spoke with several Guatemalans who have had negative experiences with Mexican employers, *mayordomos* (foremen), and co-workers, or who expressed resentment toward the well-established Mexican support networks. Felipe claimed, “Mexicans are lazy. They are not as good workers as we [Guatemalans] are. But, because they protect their *paisanos* [countrymen], they always have better jobs. I said I am Mexican, but it is an interesting lie. In my heart, I am a K’iche’.” While appearing Mexican has benefits in terms of employment and status, Guatemalan Mayans also expressed pride in distinguishing themselves in terms of their culture and values.

Despite the interest in being more Mexican, nearly all male informants readily identify themselves as Guatemalans and as members of their ethnic group. “[Living] here, I have become more like a *mexicano*, but inside me, I am also very indigenous.” Informants seem comfortable and perhaps resigned in having

to balance acceptance and pride in their own identity while at the same time having to incorporate new cultural traits, both by choice and out of necessity.

Some Mayan women experience and articulate issues of cultural identity quite differently. In contrast with men, they express a desire to maintain a strong connection with Guatemala, especially with their ethnic group, family, and cultural traditions.<sup>9</sup> When we asked women, “What would you have liked to bring with you?” the majority mentioned, “*Mi traje*” (my traditional dress). Sofia described the longing for her traditional dress:

[In Guatemala], we have nothing. We are simple country people. There aren't any big stores to buy things like there are here. One finds other ways to be entertained. My dad bought us clothes and shoes and school notebooks when we needed them. What I would like to do now is send for my *traje* that I left there. The shipping is very expensive, but when I have the money, I will have it sent to me. I miss wearing it, although I would only wear it in the house.

Antonia elaborated on these sentiments:

The first thing I'll do when someone goes there is have them get my *traje*. It's very lovely, and I miss having it. I am used to having my waist wrapped snugly in a sash. Without my *corte* [skirt], I feel like my stomach is loose. I'm going to wear my *traje* here, like Rigoberta Menchú. At least, I will wear it at home, and when I leave the house maybe I will change into other clothes. But I see the women from India, they wear their *traje* here, and they are very beautiful.

With an unusual passion in her voice, Margarita said:

I think in my *traje* I look different, perhaps prettier. It is so colorful that it brings light to my brown face. Since we were born, we were used to seeing ourselves surrounded by those woven, precious fabrics, not white shirts like this [*during the interview she was wearing a white t-shirt and blue sport pants*]. In my town, every

woman dresses traditionally, we don't use 'Ladino' clothes. For us, the *traje* has a lot of meanings. Each *aldea* [village] can be identified by their *traje*: colors used, woven patterns and the way we wear our hair. During the war, we had to change our *trajes* so as to not be identified by the army.

Different responses between men and women regarding the use of traditional clothes are in part due to contrasts that already exist in Guatemala, where most women continue to wear traditional clothing while most men wear Western-style dress. Women want to preserve something they do not have. However, if they did have their *traje*, would they wear it as a cultural identifier? They mentioned that they might wear it "at least in the house." In this sense, the *traje* serves as a refuge, as a personal and intimate sign of one's culture, as an artifact of one's identity in the symbolic order. However, we observed during our research the adoption of some class-culture stereotypes (such as using makeup, jeans, and high-heeled shoes) as a form of "Mexicanization" or "modernization." Curiously, informant discourse reflected some resistance to this process. Because of the type of jobs they perform (most work cleaning houses or in factories), women are less exposed to public settings and thus have less necessity to camouflage themselves as men do. To appear *mexicana* is not necessarily a survival strategy for women once they are in California. Hilda said:

I have always worked in houses. I don't have any friends, I don't know many people here. Once I worked with a Salvadoran woman cleaning houses, she didn't mind that I am from Guatemala... Of course, I will not use my *traje* while I am cleaning houses. I won't even use it for going out during the weekends, nobody does here. I prefer not to be noticed.

## EL BARRIO

Guatemalan Mayans tend to concentrate in particular neighborhoods, where they usually group with others from their ethnic group or region, and strong

support networks frequently develop. However, other Latino groups, usually Mexicans and other Central Americans, often live in these neighborhoods as well. Most neighborhoods we visited have a grocery store selling a mix of American, Mexican, and Central American products—mainly from El Salvador—and courier services, where migrants send correspondence and remittances back to Guatemala. During certain hours of the morning, groups of men, from all these different backgrounds, wait along main thoroughfares to be hired by an occasional—or sometimes regular—employer. This intermingling sometimes results in Guatemalans mimicking Mexicans in terms of accent and idiomatic expressions or food customs.

The migrant experience of Guatemalans cannot be divorced from the Mexican migrant population. The vibrancy of Mexican culture in California is rooted in history but is perpetuated by both the proximity of the two countries and the mature and extensive networks among Mexicans living in California and between those living there and relatives and friends living in Mexico. Unlike the Guatemalans who are geographically far from their homeland, Mexicans in California are able to visit their home communities or migrate in and out of the United States cyclically. Usually, Mexican networks are impressively solidified, extensive, and older than the networks of other immigrant groups. Throughout this region of California, the presence of well-established Mexican immigrant enclaves benefits the smaller, and relatively newer, Guatemalan community. In this context, the strategy of Mexicanization is also greatly beneficial to Guatemalan migrants.

Some immigrant groups, such as the Italians, the Irish, and more recently, Salvadorans have developed a group cohesiveness that distinguishes them from the larger population. Salvadorans, for instance, operate banks, restaurants, clubs, and health clinics. Their differentiation from other migrants represents their self-preservation, their cohesion, and their redefinition. In contrast, the conduct of Guatemalan Mayans has been atypical in that they do not want to stand out. One migrant explained: “We don’t like to stand out as other Central American do. They are less timid than we are. We prefer to pass

unnoticed. It is better that way. You are less exposed to being caught, to being sent away...”

This “low profile” approach to settlement exists partially because Guatemalans are primarily a recent migrant stream, and indigenous Guatemalans often come to the United States with little education and few resources. However, they appear consciously to prefer to be part of, and benefit from, the Mexican presence in the United States. As Guatemalans, they are more vulnerable than Mexicans, so their pattern of pragmatic accommodation can be interpreted as a survival strategy. As part of their diaspora, they brought with them their ability to preserve clandestinely some features of their indigenous identity while outwardly accommodating outside influences.

The immense poverty in which the majority of Mayan people live in Guatemala has repercussions in their adaptations. Maria recalls:

I don't know anything about Guatemalan food. I vaguely know how to cook *tamalitos*. When I was in my house [in Guatemala], we didn't have many things to eat. We usually just eat beans, tortillas, or herbs that we pick in the fields. Once in a while, we had some chicken or beef. And for special events, maybe *tamales* and *atole*. Here, I have learned about *tacos*, *burritos* and other kinds of Latino food from Mexico. I like them. It seems that there is one Guatemalan restaurant in San Francisco. Here there are a lot of places where you also can eat *pupusas*, but that is a Salvadoran food.

## Conclusions

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The meanings of Mexicanization for rural Guatemala Mayans are ambiguous. These meanings challenge aspects of ethnic identity and imply ongoing negotiation with class, gender, and culture. Initially, in the *aldea*, the *coyote* or other experienced contact teaches them how to act and react in order to not be recognized as Guatemalans while crossing Mexico; how to avoid the Mexican



authorities and what to do in case of detention; and how to “act Mexican” if detained by INS officials. During the journey and the settlement process, language and physical appearance for Mayan migrants is a critical issue. By minimizing indigenous markers, such as clothing and speech, many Mayan migrants believe they will pass more easily through Mexico and across the U.S.-Mexico border. If detained at the U.S. border, the Mayans from Guatemala attempt to appear to be Mexican and claim Mexican citizenship in the hope that they will be deported only to northern Mexico rather than all the way back to Guatemala, which would be economically devastating and expose them to enormous risk.

In the complex process of settlement in the United States, Guatemalan Mayans learn how to obtain jobs, housing, healthcare, legal services, and gain access to networks by “swearing to be *paisano* [Mexican].” They also learn mimetic mechanisms for appearing to be Mexicans, which helps them to survive in *el barrio*. Mexicans have been in this area for centuries and have conquered some domains that recent immigrants have not. Mayans are appropriating a territory that is already established. In this appropriation, individual and community alliances with Mexicans usually benefit Guatemalan Mayans. For instance, Guatemalan men pay close attention to clothing styles, language, and mannerisms, striving to appear “Mexican,” particularly when seeking work. The presence of Mexicans in California, their numbers, history, networks, and culture, has a strong meaning for many Guatemalan Mayans, for whom Mexicanization represents a survival strategy throughout the migratory process.

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### Notas

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acknowledge the valuable contribution of the people who were interviewed and shared with us their experiences, hopes and fears. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**1** “Latinos” is a political term designating heterogeneous Latin American and Caribbean populations that share some historical background and cultural perspectives. Among Latinos living in the United States, there are various political preferences for self-designations, such as “Hispanic,” “Chicano,” or “Boricuas,” which have specific historical frameworks. Over 35 million Latinos live in the United States as of 2002, making them the country’s largest ethnic/cultural group. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**2** The strategy of Mexicanization was apparent in the 1983 Gregory Nava film, “El Norte,” which chronicles the attempt of a pair of Guatemalan siblings to flee the brutalities of Guatemala’s military regime by migrating to the United States. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**3** In this article, we will use the term “Mexicans” mainly as a general abstraction, rather than to designate individuals or a national identity. We acknowledge that using the term Mexican/Mexicanization is an over-simplification of a complex phenomenon, which goes beyond the scope of the article. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**4** In a country of 23 languages, the sense of place, rather than being a form of self-identification based on the nation-state, is localized and rooted in the *aldea*. Becoming trans-local requires people to expand their notions of territorialization to larger geographies. Guatemalans might regard the *aldea*, or perhaps the municipality, as the key reference of their spatial identity. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**5** Officially, more than 40% of the population is indigenous (Betancurt *et al.*, 1998). ([Regresar al texto](#))

**6** Although there are numerous connections and perspectives regarding Mexican influence in Guatemala, for the purpose of this article we will focus on aspects that directly relate to migration. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**7** In 1999, the cost of the entire trip ranged between US\$2,000 and \$3,500. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**8** “*La parada*” is the name given to key places where undocumented men congregate so employers can find and hire them for diverse jobs. Being present at *la parada* puts them at risk of being caught in an INS sweep. Given that risk, this experience may be comparable to re-crossing the border repeatedly, but inside the United States. ([Regresar al texto](#))

**9** We are preparing another article that will focus on gender issues and differences between Mayan-origin men and women in the migration process. ([Regresar al texto](#))

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