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**GUATEMALAN REFUGEES AND RETURNEES:
LOCAL GEOGRAPHY AND MAYA IDENTITY**

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Abstract

The vast majority of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico are Maya Indians from various regions of the country. The aim of this research is to examine the pattern of displacement from these diverse regions in the early 1980s and contemporary avenues of return for the Guatemalan Maya, with particular emphasis on the refugees' choice of resettlement location and government and military intervention. Documents produced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Mexican and Guatemalan government organizations created to facilitate the return process, were examined along with reports and communiques issued by the representatives of the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. Also, human rights workers and members of non-governmental organizations working in Mexico were interviewed for their critical analysis of the return process and insight into the motivating factors influencing the decision-making by the refugees.

At every stage in the process of flight, exile, and return, expressions and representations of Maya identity illuminate the complex web of cultural continuity and change. One of the most compelling conclusion of this research is that the meaning of "being Maya" differs between individuals in different times and different places and that a metamorphosis of identity is evident according to two factors: (1) as the sites of representation shift from rural Guatemala to exile abroad; and (2) as time passes. The primacy of place in the construction and representation of Maya identity is highlighted to reveal the intimate connection the Maya have with ancestral land or land they have transformed by labour, a bond strong enough to pull Maya refugees home to often precarious resettlement conditions.

Introduction

The vast majority of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico are Maya Indians who fled their homeland during a brutal counterinsurgency war in the early 1980s. This paper provides an overview of the patterns of displacement from Guatemala and contemporary avenues of refugee resettlement, with particular emphasis on choice of resettlement location. Initial questions that stimulated research into this refugee situation centred around issues of place and identity.

Where had refugees fled from? Which regions of Guatemala were most affected by the violence? Where did refugees settle after they reached Mexico? How did life in exile affect Maya identity? Were people living, indeed do they continue to live, in somewhat similar conditions as they did in Guatemala? Or did they feel far removed from home when they might only be a few metres across the border? Is there still a strong connection with the land they fled? If so, what drives the refugees in their struggle to return to such a violent land as the one they fled? And for those who have returned, where have they chosen to resettle? Is it a site of their choice, or are they "redirected" to a destination of the military's choice? Who controls the geography of return?

Elsewhere, I have provided compilations of the vast range of Guatemalan refugee statistics on which much of this discussion is based (Nolin Hanlon 1995). Every statistic for each month varies from source to source. But I do not wish these particularities to deter readers from seeing the broader picture.¹ When taken together, the refugee statistics I have compiled convey general trends in movement and settlement that help us discern three complex, fluid scenarios: the Guatemalan refugee scenarios of flight, exile, and return discussed in Part One of the paper. In the end, what is revealed is a generalized reading of the Guatemalan refugee scenarios, as this analysis is not meant to be -- nor,

¹ For insight into the problems with refugee statistics from the perspective of the UNHCR, see UNHCR, "Refugee Statistics", in *The State of the World's Refugees: The Challenge of Protection* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 145-147. For statistical problems specific to the Guatemalan refugee situation, see Jacqueline Hagan, *The Politics of Numbers: Central American Migration During a Period of Crisis, 1978-1985* (MA Thesis: University of Texas, 1987).

unfortunately, can it be -- an detailed recounting of events.

The trends revealed in Part One allow the issues of place and identity to be explored in Part Two. The refugee scenarios highlight the intimate connection between Maya peoples and ancestral land or land they have transformed by labour. Due to this bond, a bond strong enough to pull Maya peoples home to often precarious resettlement conditions, the primacy of place in the construction and representation of their Maya identity is explored. At every stage in the process of flight, exile, and return, expressions and representations of Maya identity illuminate the complex web of cultural continuity and change. I contend that the meaning of "being Maya" differs between individuals in different times and different places and that a metamorphosis of identity is evident according to two factors: (1) as the sites of representation shift from rural Guatemala to exile abroad; and (2) as time passes.

PART ONE: REFUGEE SCENARIOS

Flight

The flight was unorganized, massive, and unprecedented. Maya peoples in highland Guatemala were the overwhelming majority of those who were forcefully and brutally displaced from their homes and communities during the counterinsurgency sweeps of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indigenous Guatemalans fled to a number of countries, but the primary purpose here is to discuss the situation of Mayas who fled to the southern Mexican state of Chiapas and settled there in United Nations (UN) refugee camps. Though camp refugees are a small proportion of the larger refugee population, this group has been chosen as the focus of study because data are more readily available on these refugees than on dispersed and officially "unrecognized" ones.

The majority of refugees hail principally from the Guatemalan departments of Huehuetenango, El Quiché, El Petén, and San Marcos (COMAR 1985: 13) in northwest Guatemala. Geographically, Huehuetenango and El Quiché are dominated by *indígenas*, indigenous people who

make up a clear majority of the population (approximately ninety to ninety-nine per cent in the rural areas). The extent and intensity of the use of force has varied over time and space. The military coup of 1954 was followed by more than four decades of brutal repression, culminating in the still continuing civil war and the unsettling, forced migration of Maya peoples into Mexico. Key to understanding this violent conflict, which forcefully displaced well over 200,000 Guatemalans - mostly Maya - out of the country, is the fact that the Guatemalan state was never able to incorporate its indigenous population into an "imagined national community" (Stepputat 1994: 3). The question of land ownership has always been tied to the displacement, exploitation, and massacre of Guatemala's indigenous peoples, events which are forever lodged in the collective memory of Maya peoples.

The human rights situation by 1980 was of considerable international concern, but much worse was to follow. Between 1980 and 1984 the Guatemalan army destroyed, by its own count, 440 villages, most of them Maya communities (Wright 1993; Smith-Ayala 1991). Based on the Guatemalan government's scorched earth policy (or counterinsurgency activity, in their terminology), wholesale terror drove one million Guatemalans from their homes. The overwhelming evidence of early surveys of assisted refugees in Mexico (Americas Watch 1984; Aguayo 1984; Hagan 1987) and more recent research conducted by Manz (1988a, b) and reported by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD 1987), Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA 1989), and the contributor to a special issue of *Refuge* (1994) is that the place of origin of refugees consistently corresponds to highland regions of Guatemala where military operations increased in the early 1980s. The plight of refugees, therefore, can be interpreted as a response to political, not economic, factors.

There are two distinct categories from which the majority fled. The first may be considered ancestral land - land held within family circles, generation upon generation, high in the mountains of Huehuetenango and El Quiché. Many refugees fled not from their historic "places of origin" but from

"frontier" areas they had colonized up to thirty years earlier. In order to appear to be dealing with the land distribution crisis in the 1960s and 1970s, the Guatemalan government promoted a number of colonization programmes which sought to resettle people in sparsely settled regions of the country, such as the Petén and the north of Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, and El Quiché.² In the 1960s, the area known as the Ixcán, a lowland rainforest that extends from the Ixcán River to the Chixoy River, was perceived as suitable land for settlement. The second category, therefore, may be considered land transformed by labour - land gained during the grand colonization schemes of the 1960s and 1970s in lowland regions near the Mexican border. It is from ancestral land and land transformed by labour that survivors of the backcountry massacres vanished across the border.

The brutal counterinsurgency programme focussed its activities in the western highlands and adjacent lowland areas which were predominately Maya life spaces. No region was harder hit by the counterinsurgency activity of the years 1981 and 1982 than the Ixcán. Manz (1988a: 127) and others identify the Ixcán as being the region which produced the most refugees. For many who fled, southern Mexico was the logical geographical and historically-rooted solution to their need for asylum.

Due to the nature of forced migrations, the specifics of place of origin in Guatemala and place of exile in Mexico are, unfortunately, unavailable. The geographical dimension to the decision of flight to Mexico from state terror should not be downplayed. For the Maya along the "frontier edge" of El Quiché and Huehuetenango, exile in Mexico was the logical "geographical" response to state terror by the survivors of the massacres.³

² The participants in these colonization schemes are principally indigenous peoples of the groups Mam (from Todos Santos, Huehuetenango), Kanjobal, Quiché, and Kekchí. See Association Guatemala Information Recherche, "El nuevo éxodo de los mayas", *Trace* 13 (1988): 28.

³ Peoples of the areas more central to the highlands, such as southern Quiché, Sololá, Baja Verapaz, and Chimaltenango, did not have this "geographical" option of flight to a neighbouring country. Here many people were trapped and caught by the military or had to flee to the mountains, the coast, or the capital.

But it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the exact route taken at an exact time by the refugees from Guatemala to their settlements in Mexico (Salvadó 1988: 18). The routes were usually complex, as many refugees did not take a direct path from their place of origin to their place of settlement in southern Mexico. Additionally, even when testimonials have been gathered by human rights organizations, names and specific places of origin are concealed for security purposes. This procedure is vital for the safety of the refugees and for their family and community members who may have remained in Guatemala, but it does not always allow direct links to be made between place of origin and place of exile. Generally, though, a pattern emerges of a great increase of Guatemalan refugees in 1982 and 1983, with regular movement into Chiapas well into 1984. The *Instituto de Relaciones Internacionales y de Investigaciones para la Paz (IRIPAZ)* (1992: 3) cites a 1984 report of the *Comisión Mexicana para la Ayuda a los Refugiados (COMAR)* report which disclosed that 85.4 per cent of the refugees originated from the Department of Huehuetenango, ten per cent from El Quiché, and 4.1 per cent from El Petén. On a general level, refugees arrived as individuals and families in southern Chiapas from departments in northwestern Guatemala. Likewise, survivors from the Ixcán and Petén cooperatives and the department of Alta Verapaz found refuge as whole communities in camps in the Lacandón rainforest. Having fled, life in exile began.

Exile

Many Guatemalan Mayas who were violently displaced from their ancestral lands and lands transformed by labour seized the geographical option of exodus across the frontier to Mexico. Life in exile for the refugees in Mexico has varied over time and space, as conditions vary from camp to camp and support for their plight has met with diverse reactions. Refugees have survived not only deprivation, malnutrition, mistreatment, and military attacks, but also have united as a group to negotiate the inhospitable political terrain of their desired return.

By 1983 it had become clear to all parties involved -- refugees, international workers, and governmental agencies -- that the situation for Guatemalans in refugee camps in Chiapas would not come to a rapid conclusion, as had been anticipated. Though the initial mass migration was over, small numbers of people were still spilling across the border. With individuals continuing to leave their land, safe return to the Guatemalan countryside could not be guaranteed. Consequently, the refugees agreed to wait for better conditions to return. A plan was created that called for the establishment of resettlements in the Mexican states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, located in the Yucatán peninsula. These initiatives finally led to an announcement by the Mexican government on 30 April 1984 that it intended to relocate the populations of the larger Lacandón rainforest camps. This meant another uprooting for the Guatemalan refugees - but this time with the protection of the Mexican government and the presence of the UNHCR, "with a sure and certain hope for the future" (COMAR 1985: 12).

However, resistance to resettlement plans were vigorous and almost unanimous. A number of factors surrounding geographical and cultural concerns were central to opposition to removal from the camps (Manz 1988a: 152). As ancestral lands or cooperative lands were left behind in Guatemala, most refugees had a strong desire to return when it was safe to do so. Relocation from a familiar landscape and environment to camps far removed from their homelands was unacceptable for many. Often refugees would cross back into Guatemala to check their lands and harvest food for those in the camps. This would no longer be possible. As well, the refugees knew that they would be losing touch with their Mexican hosts, family, and friends when transferred hundreds of kilometres to a distant life in the Yucatán.

The weeks between May and August 1984 saw the 'forced' resettlement of 12,500 Guatemalan refugees to the hot warehouses which served as transit centres in China and Hecelchacan in Campeche, with the plan of moving them to the more permanent settlements of Pich (later named Quetzal-Edzna) and Canasayab, which were further south in a sparsely populated zone of the state (UNHCR 1984a: 12). These transfers, though protested by many

refugees, continued throughout the year. By the end of 1984, 17,006 refugees had been relocated in the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo from twenty-six camps in Chiapas (COMAR 1985: 14).

In March 1984, as negotiations were underway for the removal of the refugees from the border lands of Chiapas to the Yucatán, the Guatemalan government presented a plan for the repatriation of approximately 30,000 refugees to their place of origin (UNHCR 1984b: 37). This platform of acceptance continued well into 1985, as the government promoted the process of "voluntary repatriation" (UNHCR 1986: 5). Taking office in January 1986, Vinicio Cerezo, like General Ríos Montt, extended an invitation to refugees "to return to their native villages or any other place of their choice in Guatemala" (UNHCR 1986: 5). But press coverage in Guatemala undercut these niceties, as UNHCR (1986) documents indicate that the press publicized reports that *all* returnees had been moved to "development centres" after crossing the border, rather than experiencing the anticipated freedom. What of Cerezo's invitation? As would be played out over the years, reality for the people of Guatemala rarely has reflected the textual and verbal representations the world receives from government announcements and agreements.

As will be discussed in the next section, the contradictory and highly questionable position of the Guatemalan government towards them fuelled the urgency with which refugees organized themselves in Mexico to negotiate their rights. By being or becoming politically savvy and politically active, the refugees have made substantial progress, in the Guatemalan context of the word, in their bid to return home as a recognized civilian population ready to participate in the democratic process of building a new Guatemala. Progress has been made since 1992, but obstacles continue to block the majority of refugee requests for collective and organized returns to areas of their choice.

Return

This section details the scenario of return from Mexico, the third of the refugee scenarios of flight, exile, and return. For the vast majority of Maya

refugees living in UN camps in southern Mexico, life in exile has always been considered temporary; hope of, and plans for, a return to their homes fill the camps with activity. Presently, there are two main avenues of return: individual voluntary repatriation and negotiated collective return. The geographical outcome of these processes is explored to reveal the patterns of return from exile.

Recent research into the on-going return of Guatemalan refugees makes a clear distinction between "repatriation" and "collective return" (Stepputat 1994; Simmons and North 1995). Repatriation, it is understood, connotes something that is done *to* the refugees by their governments and international organizations with minimal input from the refugees themselves. This process regularly plays out as the simple transport of refugees to their place of origin. But the UNHCR has long supported voluntary repatriations as the desired outcome of any refugee crisis and has published widely on the concept.⁴ As a solution to life in exile, voluntary repatriations have been the chosen option for a small, though significant, number of Guatemalan refugees since 1984.

For those refugees who were not satisfied with the process of voluntary repatriation and who felt their exile was not only a personal struggle but a highly charged political struggle, something more self-directed was required. And so, in addition to the concept of repatriation (*la repatriación*), the refugees themselves developed the concept of return (*el retorno*): a collective, voluntary, and organized return to Guatemala. No longer is the process strictly directed *at* the refugees; they are now intimately bound into the decision-making negotiations. With their participation in the negotiations, the refugees are actively seeking to return home under very different conditions from which they fled. As the refugees have been

⁴ For an overview of the UNHCR position on the changing nature of voluntary repatriations (*i.e.*, to less than safe conditions, as with continuing civil wars), see UNHCR, "Going home: voluntary repatriation" in *The State of the World's Refugees: The Challenge of Protection* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 103-120. See also UNHCR, "Promoting voluntary repatriation" in *Refugee Magazine* (New York: UNHCR, 1985), 5 and UNHCR, "Voluntary repatriation" in *Refugee Magazine* (New York: UNHCR, 1988), 7.

transformed by their experience in exile, so too might the returnees effect a transformation in Guatemalan society.

In order for the refugees in Mexico to return to Guatemala under their own initiatives, rather than solely under the direction of external agencies, they organized themselves in 1987 into representative negotiating entities called the *Comisiones Permanentes de Representantes de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos en Mexico* (CCPP). But it would take years of discussion for the CCPPs to be recognized as such by the Guatemalan government. It was not until October 1991, when the *Comisión Especial para la Atención a Repatriados, Refugiados y Desplazados* (CEAR) signed a joint statement with the CCPP, that the latter were acknowledged as an official negotiating body concerned with organizing gradual returns in 1992. On October 1992, after four years of negotiation and six years after President Cerezo's invitation to return, the *Basic Accord for Repatriation* was signed by the Guatemalan government and the CCPP. In the accord the refugees' six conditions for return were confirmed and validated, and they laid the foundation for all future returns to be "collective and organized" by the refugees themselves.

A number of sources have been consulted in order to piece together the still fragmented puzzle of the geography of the collective returns of Maya refugees to Guatemala. From these sources, evidence indicates that two-thirds of the returnees are returning to their lands, either ancestral lands or lands transformed by labour, while others are choosing to go elsewhere.⁵

As requested by the UNHCR and COMAR, the refugees are organizing for a collective return to permanent sites. But the sites chosen by the refugees for settlement in Guatemala tend to be in politically volatile areas with situations too uncertain for safe return and settlement. Of course, these are the very areas from which they fled. And so the UNHCR, COMAR, and the *Instancia Mediadora*

⁵ For those settling in new areas in Guatemala upon their return, their choice is influenced by such factors as the loss of everything and everyone to the violence of the 1980s and the desire start over in a new area. Others feel more compelled to stay together with the communities formed in exile.

(IM) insist that refugees wait in Mexico until lands in these regions are secured with titles, those living on the lands compensated and removed, and all paperwork is finalized. This arrangement has allowed the Guatemalan military and large landowners, who do not want to see the return of the very people they drove from the country years before, to create obstacles to the return process. And so, the pace of the returns has been, and continues to be, decidedly slow due to the two main stumbling blocks of land negotiations and provision of land credits for purchasing land.

Do patterns emerge in regard to the geography of the thirteen confirmed, organized, and collective returns? Surely, when the details are examined for movement from Mexico to Guatemala, many relevant points can be made. To begin with, there were approximately 13,200 official returnees to Guatemala between January 1993 and May 1995. Two groups with a total of 3,773 individuals returned in 1993, approximately 4,700 individuals participated in five returns in 1994, and six groups composed of close to 4,800 people returned in the months between January and May in 1995. What is the geographical variation of departures and destination sites? Generally, sixty per cent of returnees have originated from the camps of the Yucatán (forty per cent from Quintana Roo; twenty per cent from Campeche), while forty per cent of returnees departed from camps in Chiapas.

Table 1 illustrates the pull of the Ixcán cooperative lands for collective returns, similar to the case of voluntary repatriations. A clear picture emerges of the Ixcán region as the most favoured return destination from camps in all three Mexican states. The highest absolute numbers departed from Quintana Roo (approximately 4,471), but the highest percentage left from Campeche (seventy five per cent). Alta Verapaz is another important destination, receiving returnees from all three Mexican states. As with the returnees going to the Ixcán, many refugees from Alta Verapaz had fled to the large Lacandón rainforest camps that were eventually relocated to Campeche and Quintana Roo in 1984. It is logical that their return would now take place from these different regions in Mexico.

Table 1 Destination of Collective Returns, 1993 to 1995

Destination	% of Total	Individuals
Ixcán	58%	7,731
Alta Verapaz	23%	3,080
El Petén	8%	1,121
Huehuetenango	8%	1,000
Escuintla	3%	375

The sole return to the Department of El Petén originated from Campeche and Quintana Roo, as either the refugees fled directly to Campeche in the early 1980s or they were part of the relocation programme of 1984. In contrast to this, the vast majority of participants in the only successful return in Huehuetenango were from Chiapas. These refugees had settled further west around Comalapa and therefore avoided relocation. In this way, a return to lands close to their own in Guatemala was manageable.

Recent incidents in the Ixcán bring into sharp focus the criticisms long voiced by the CCPP, NGO staff, and international observers of the Guatemalan government's lack of political will to fulfil their obligations to the return process.⁶ Problems of

⁶ The cautious satisfaction of the pace and conditions of the returns that operated from September 1994 and March 1995 was shattered after the collective return to the Ixcán of 19 April 1995. Most transfers were carried out without incident, except for the returnees attempting resettlement in San Juan Ixcán and San Antonio Tzejá. Reports, Urgent Actions, and international coverage revealed the crisis situation in the Ixcán. The government's willingness to allow the Civil Defense Patrol (PAC), lead by Raul Martínéz and his organization, "Association Pro-Legalization of Lands / Zona Reyna", to block the return of approximately fifty-eight returnee families, to intimidate them, to threaten their human rights, and place in jeopardy the agreements of the return - is serious and disconcerting. Raul Martínéz continued his intimidation of the returnees through June 1995 and took hostage five international companions on 28 June 1995. This action not only threatens future returns to Zona Reyna, but the entire return process itself. If an individual or group opposed to the return of refugees can manipulate the government with violent and illegal actions, then there is cause for serious concern for the safety and security that can be offered by the Guatemalan government. See NISGUA, *Rapid Response Alert: Crisis in the Return to Zona Reyna* (14 June 1995); NCOORD, *Urgent Action: Hostages in the Zona Reyna* (30 June 1995); NCOORD, *Press Release: Two U.S. Citizens Held Hostage in Guatemala* (29 June 1995).

financing and access to land stall attempts of organized groups wanting to return their desired destinations. By controlling both the credit agencies and the land agencies, the Guatemalan government has the leverage of controlling refugee land purchases and therefore the return destination of the returnees. Pressured by the military and economic elites opposed to the return, the government closely controls the geography of the returns. For example, ICCHRLA (1995: 35) states in a recent, unpublished draft report, that the Guatemalan Association of Agriculturalists (AGA) "has made an internal agreement to not sell any lands to refugees in the south of the country". This type of activity is reinforced by military opposition and carried out with military intimidation of returnees.

The military's grand plan, in this epic struggle over land, seems to be to pit *campesino* against *campesino*, government-resettled Mayas against Maya returnees, people who stayed during the violence against people who fled to Mexico. As the current events in the Zona Reyna reveal, this plan appears for the moment to be working. The overall support offered by most local populations for the returnees is now in jeopardy as Raul Martínéz and his organization threaten the entire return process in their bid to control the lands of the Zona Reyna.

PART TWO: PLACE AND MAYA IDENTITY

What happens to our sense of place, to our sense of identity, when we are violently uprooted from a home we never imagined we would have to leave? Why, once forcefully displaced, do some of us hold on to a memory of a home we may never see again? What is it that causes some people to return home, and for others to stay well away, when certain guarantees for their safety are acknowledged? Why do some communities stay together during the processes of exile and return, while others do not? What bonds tie people to the land of their birth, a bond that lives on even in the darkest days of exile, and draws them back despite unchanged and uncertain conditions? What connections between land and life, between people and place, may be discerned in our three refugee scenarios of flight,

exile, and return? These questions and many others were the starting point for this research and continue to fuel considerable discussion about the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. Though a definitive answer to these questions may elude us, the questions themselves provide a starting point in the exploration of place and Maya identity.

The Maya, and their way of life, have been under attack for almost 500 years and yet "something" continues to be understood as "essentially Maya". Armed with such recognized categories of analysis as race, class, and gender, researchers are finding that there is much about Maya identity that complicates its description and representation. In addition to the internal negotiations of identity within Maya culture, external forces have ceaselessly confronted the Maya with their own constructions of "Indianness". In other words, Maya identity is both individually constructed and externally challenged, an outcome of self-affirmation and the affirmation of others.

Adding to the complexity, Mayas are on the move. Rural Guatemala is no longer a single, homogeneous domain of Maya culture, if indeed it ever was (Lovell 1995). Due to the historical circumstances, a rich tapestry of Maya self-expression is evident from Central America and Mexico to the United States and Canada - individuals and communities sustaining a "Maya identity". Given this, Maya identity must be seen as a product of some combination of continuities and transformations, resistance and oppression, present conditions and historical realities, community belonging and migrant disorientation. Analyses of various expressions and representations of Maya identity illuminate the complex web of cultural continuity and change.

The central argument is that the meaning of "being Maya" differs between individuals in different times and different places. There can be no definitive statement as to its meaning, for it is individually constructed and externally contested in the broader society. Rather, meaning and acknowledgement of this identity shifts on a continuum of acceptance. I would suggest that in the writings of Maya individuals, whether they take the form of autobiography, testimonial, fiction, storytelling, or informant correspondence, a

metamorphosis of identity is evident in relation to two factors: (1) as the sites of representation shift from rural to urban Guatemala, to migration or exile abroad; and (2) as time passes.

Place and Identity

Harvey (1993: 55) suggests that "no social group can be truly unitary in the sense of having members who hold to singular identities". Therefore, any survey of individual and group identity will be best understood as the exploration of contested categories consisting of heterogeneously constructed subjects, which internalize "otherness" by virtue of their relations to the world (Harvey 1993). Of importance for this discussion, identity is always an incomplete process - a process rather than an outcome. Any individual's identity is a composite of forces such as gender, class, religion, and ethnicity (Edwards 1992; Buijs 1993; Mohanty 1991), all of which have the potential to divide and unite in ways that evolve over time and space.

Bondi (1993: 98) suggests "the emphasis on *where* - on position, on location - is allowing the question of identity to be thought of in different ways". A focus not only on identity, but also on place and identity, allows attention to be given to "the crucible in which experiences are contested, a contest that is fundamentally cultural in an active sense" (Watts 1988: 32). Geography is often overlooked when considering the elements of identity, but for geographers the importance of place and location is of utmost concern.

Various conceptual definitions for place have been brought forward in recent debates in cultural theory about identity, as the terminology of space, location, positionality, and place figures prominently in literature (c.f. hooks 1981; Morrison 1987). But it must be noted that theories of identity and location derived from cultural studies and literature studies often centre on the themes of cultural belonging, of home and exile, of urban experiences (c.f. Carter, Donald, and Squires 1993), but suggest that place no longer matters, that the luxury of location of identities is no longer viable in our changing world. Clearly for many peoples, especially those exiled or displaced from their

homelands, places no longer provide *straightforward* support to their identities. But this should not indicate that places no longer provide *any* support for identity formation. Instead it can be argued that as people shift their places in the world, so too will places shift their impact on identities.

Place can be regarded as that segment of space which an individual or group inscribes with special meaning, value, and intentions (McKean Permenter 1994). Throughout this section, I suggest that as the *sites* of representation of Maya identity shift, so too, will the meaning of Maya identity shift along the contoured ideological terrain of acceptance. As the 1990s unfold, the Maya are rapidly becoming one of the most dispersed indigenous societies in the Americas. Exile or migration is now providing numerous external forces which will surely influence cultural change and reinforce certain essentials of the culture.

Identity acquires durability and permanence according to the stories we tell ourselves, and others, about our history. It is with this statement in mind that Harvey (1993: 63) develops the concept of "situated knowledge" -- the construction of our identities and our world based on our specific location, our "place". As each Maya life can be read as an individual biography, created of heterogeneous experiences, factors, and particularities, an influence of situatedness permeates. Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala City, Chiapas, Indiantown -- the representation of Maya identity, both individual and group, must be penetrated by what is outside of them. Clifford (1992) is disposed to explain this phenomenon with his theory of "travelling cultures"; others invoke the varying "ethnoscape" of Maya identity (Hesse 1993). Rather than a testament to a form of environmental determinism, this is a recognition of circumstance and its impact. This is reinforced by the analysis of Sexton (1981: 7) when he states: "Since many Indians speak Spanish and adopt *Ladino* material culture, the best description of an Indian is one who identifies himself or herself and is identified by others as being Indian". This, I would suggest, is the critical point to defining "being Maya" -- that even if this variability sounds ambiguous, in reality it remains far from arbitrary precisely because it must be recognized and affirmed by others, not simply self-asserted (Watanabe 1995:

14). It then follows that someone can express their Mayanness from Lake Atitlán or from Guatemala City, for this definition clearly allows the possibility of Maya individuals and communities to change their circumstances (i.e., locations or "place") yet still remain Maya.

The experience of exile must certainly be a considered dimension in the description of Maya identity, as it is conveyed by Menchú (1984). This utilization of memory of past experience in order to construct a textualized identity is not without problematic constraints. But it may also lead to a magnified and more forceful testimony of an identity that is in the process of growing and developing new layers. Most significantly, this powerful use of memory is evident in the writing of migrant Maya. Life-stories, whether oral or written, of those individuals and communities in the process of migration or exile, most often create an association with the concept of "imaginary homelands" (Rushdie 1991). As the community of Maya people becomes more differentiated, the challenge becomes one of continued redefinition of Mayanness "to preserve what is essential" (Farriss 1983), while allowing for the added dimension of migrant or refugee experience. Undoubtedly, a metamorphosis of Maya identity can be expected as members of the group shift from a place of "belonging" (i.e., home community in Guatemala) to a place of "refuge" or "migration" (Stepputat 1994).

As Maya identity is so strongly connected with the community -- most Mayas, when questioned about their identity, will most often relate the answer to their place of birth. "I am San Migueleño", rather than, "I am Mayan" -- what will the future hold for the Maya outside of Guatemala? Maya from many different communities, in addition to non-Maya individuals, are now sharing a "home". What will be the common ground for survival? Can there be a "collective Maya identity" (Stepputat 1994) sustained through this transition? Perhaps, best stated, Maya individuals in exile are creating an "imagined community" based on a collective memory and a collectively constructed sense of Mayanness (Anderson 1983; Stepputat 1994), which fits itself at some point along the continuum of acceptance.

To address this concern, attention will now

shift to the findings based on Part One regarding the repatriation and collective return processes of "Guatemalan refugees" from Mexico. This exploration will reflect the point that Hall makes about identity: "That every identity is placed, is positioned in a culture, a language, a history. Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular" (in Bottomley 1992: 132).

Maya Place and Identity

As can be witnessed by the current state of social science literature on indigenous ethnic identity, researchers are leaning towards a more historical view of ethnicity (Field 1994: 237) and away from an over emphasis on fixed ethnic markers. For too long, terms have been employed for the Maya that in no way corresponded with their self-identity and consciousness. When we listen to the voices of the Maya, to their myths and legends, to their world views, to their reflections on exile, a picture emerges that reveals clearly the strong association of traditional identity with a *municipio* (township) or certain village (Tax 1963; Smith 1990; Wilson 1993; Watanabe 1984, 1995; Hanks 1990).

As the first ethnographer to fix the *municipio* as the proper site of for Maya identity, Tax (1963) conveyed Maya world views as an articulation of Maya perceptions of themselves and their existence. This same connection to community is expressed by Smith (1990) as she emphasizes that Maya identity is rooted in place rather than in a general sense of "Indianness". Wilson (1993) articulates this relationship with the term "anchored communities" to illuminate the cornerstone of community identities, which is location, the local geography. Watanabe's doctoral thesis, entitled, *'We Who Are Here'* (1984: 12), reinforces this theory:

The *municipio* represents a holistic community that is at once part of a larger regional and historical context as well as a meaningful social reality for the individuals living within it.... Indian ethnic identity in Guatemala relates directly to the nature and meaning of this community.

Hanks (1990) provides insight into this relationship with a minutely detailed linguistic ethnography of Maya and their lived space. Hanks

explores the complex relationship the Maya have with the earth, revealing the Maya world view which holds that, regardless of its configuration, every kind of space has a *yuumil* ("lord, owner") to whom it belongs. This bond links space and place to sets of responsibilities among owners of different ranks and kinds. These spaces range from the cosmos, whose "lord" is God, to the smallest parcel of land transformed by labour (Hanks 1990: 388) where one can call it *tinwiknal* ("my place"). Hanks further argues that it is a matter of common sense for most adult Maya that all have relatively fixed positions from which they move habitually, yet they remain anchored to them and return there.

Following Watanabe's call (1984: 187), I would urge that my argument goes beyond simple sentiments about land and livelihood, of romantic statements of land and life. *Naabl* ("way of being") involves abiding attachment to the place first settled by local ancestors and the immediate "condition" of one's blood and its effects on how one behaves. Through this association with the blood, *naabl* "conventionally internalizes in each individual connectedness to ancestral place" (Watanabe 1984: 190). Clearly, then, any discussion of Maya identity must have an emphasis on place and location, as this reflects Maya world views and their own perceptions of who they are. Economic circumstances have led to more common movement from ancestral lands. One must therefore ask: How is a sense of "Mayaness" maintained in places of new settlement? And related to this, are returnees from Mexico choosing to return to these newly settled lands or to their ancestral lands? Do they have a choice?

Agnew (1992: 69) maintains that "cultural worlds are grounded geographically in the experience of place". His statement is most forcefully illustrated by Maya connections with birthplace, ancestral lands, and new lands transformed by labour. Place of origin shapes Maya identity, yet with the shifting of place and time, identity does not fall apart. It is re-vitalized and re-shaped in a metamorphosis of meaning. As Watanabe (1984) suggests, Maya distinctiveness appears not to depend so much on the retention of *what* is Indian, as it does on precisely *who* is an Indian in the social sense of belonging to a community where other Indians live. Identity

becomes not so much a question of outward as inward expression.

If this concept is extended outside of the traditional boundaries of Maya culture in Guatemala to the population of exile in Mexico, then as long as "something" grounds exiles and refugees in a sense of "Mayaness", location would not be a constraint. New layers of experience do not require the annihilation of the base or foundation of place-informed identity. Even though their place and homes can be denied *physically* by forced displacement, they still continue to resonate throughout the "imaginings" (Carter et al. 1993) of displaced Maya communities and inform the decision-making process for return. As the community in exile plan, organize, and demand safe return to Guatemala, they are in the process of cultural restructuring (Wilson 1993). Maya identities and communities are not, and cannot be, what they were. Experiences away from home, life in uncertainty, and refugee settlement with people from various communities and linguistic groups must influence expressions of Maya identity. It must always be remembered that culture is dynamic, not static; even if the violence of the early 1980s had not occurred, these communities would have inevitably changed on their own, albeit for very different reasons than have been witnessed.

Conditions in the refugee camps of Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo have created new communities of association. Over a decade of common exodus has produced strong bonds through the development of return organization committees and representatives. Results from Part One indicate that these new refugee associations are, to some extent, providing contemporary "imagined communities" for a common return to Guatemala, similar to that found in Indiantown, Florida (Burns 1993).

The initial Maya displacement was mainly into the Mexican state of Chiapas, which has a relatively similar social and physical environment to the regions of massive flight from Guatemala. On the other hand, the shift of thousands of refugees from UN camps in Chiapas to new settlements in Campeche and Quintana Roo forced the Maya into a setting markedly different than highland Guatemala. This second forced disconnection from a familiar

landscape was too much for many: some refugees left the camps to blend in with surrounding communities, others vanished, and still others demanded immediate coordination of returns to Guatemala. Communiques and reports from the CCPPs express the subjective experience in exile stressing "outsidedness" from both Guatemalan and Mexican life, and differentiating it from the "insidedness" of home.

Yi-Fu Tuan (1980: 3-8) distinguishes between the concepts of "rootedness" and a "sense of place", which relates nicely to the concerns of exile and displacement. Mayas in exile repeatedly allude to their sense of rootedness, of insidedness, of belonging while in Guatemala; they articulate their "sense of place" in relation to a homeland that is a "self consciously constructed attachment to local environment ... which requires distance between self and place" (Tuan 1980: 6) while in Mexico. Guatemala becomes a lived or remembered or imagined place for those who have survived the violence. These variations in perception create real problems as refugees return to lands in Guatemala where some people never fled from, to lands that new people have claimed as their own, to lands on which the army has resettled displaced peoples, and to lands set aside as nationally protected parks.

Refugees from "conflict zones" such as the Ixcán frequently were not allowed to return to their original communities but instead were routed to temporary or permanent camps or "model hamlets" (Earle 1991: 797). These settlements were planned, operated, and supervised by the army with severe restrictions against movement, assembly, occupation, and sometimes even the practice of religion. In the early years of repatriation, the desire to leave Mexico seems to have been a stronger motivating factor than the desire to return to a specific location. Research by Manz (1988a) indicates that for those who *did* return to their homes, a general state of "low-intensity violence" permeated their existence, as often this violence tended to single out returnees.

The organization of the CCPP in Mexico must be seen as a major turning point for the Maya community in exile. No longer were the communities to be pushed into unsafe and uncertain individual repatriation with little or no input into the decision of their return destination site. With the 8

October 1992 Accords signed between the CCPP and the Guatemalan Government, the refugees would have direct influence on their future. Individual repatriations still continue, though in fewer numbers than those who return collectively through the CCPPs.

All of the successful return groups have chosen their destination site, and according to the Basic Accord of 8 October 1992 this is a right of the returnees. This does not mean that there is no longer interference from the military or government. Clearly, when the lists of organized potential return groups are examined in relation to the list of successful return groups, various manipulations are evident. Why have so few actually returned? Many groups wanting to return to their lands located within areas still considered "conflict zones", or in areas where the military or large landowners do not want them to relocate, face indefinite negotiations. Obstacles such as denial of land credits and denial of access to former lands blatantly violate the agreements between the CCPP, CEAR, and the Guatemalan government.

As was suggested previously, contemporary situations have progressively blurred the boundaries of the experiential/home community. Birthplace can no longer be seen as a straightforward pillar of identity for the Maya, though it is a most vital component of identity. But problems of seasonal labour migration, colonization schemes, and now forced displacement are influencing and re-shaping this relationship. Therefore, as the results of Part One indicate, it is not so much whether refugees are or are not returning to their ancestral lands and home communities, but that they never cease to hold on to the memory of land that is 'part of their being', a part of what makes them Maya. This, then, would include newly settled lands in the Ixcán and Petén, most notably revealed in the case of those who left their ancestral land and homes in Huehuetenango for the Ixcán colonization programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. The desire to return to these lands illustrate the contemporary connection to land transformed by labour, to "their place" (Hanks 1990).

The return process is about the future that the Maya wish to create for themselves within the confines of this minority-ruled country. I would argue that the Maya are not returning to resurrect the communities

they left behind. They may return to the place, to the site, but not to the past. This process is about the future, about the re-creation of Maya life with some combination of traditional life-ways with contemporary dimensions of change. The patterns of return illustrate a desire to move back to Guatemalan soil, to either ancestral lands or lands transformed by labour, with some families choosing to follow members of their exile community to new locations. A new shift in strategy seems to coincide with the 1994-1995 instability in Chiapas and subsequent pressure from the Mexican officials on the Guatemalan government to bring an end to this horrific chapter in their history. Current troubles have led the CCPP to undertake more forceful measures in order to ensure all who wish to return to Guatemala may do so. At the same time the Guatemalan government is setting up obstacles at every turn to slow the process down. The CCPP feel they no longer have the luxury of negotiation for specific parcels of land for each group. Consequently, many groups are suggesting a return to temporary sites in Guatemala as a precaution against an irrevocable breakdown in negotiations for safe collective return.

Due to present circumstances, Smith (1990) has suggested that the primary goal for the Maya appears to be "the creation of a new and stronger general Maya identity" in order to provide a unified front to negotiate indigenous rights and claims to place, in what the URNG (1994) statement on indigenous rights calls "the Guatemala of the Future ... a pluricultural, multilingual nation". The fragmentation and diversity of Maya culture that has seen them through the centuries is no longer a source of strength. Unifying as a common refugee voice may be one key to a successful future in negotiations of land claims and other indigenous rights. Cultural diversity must be recognized and maintained, but unity as a political voice seems a necessary compromise.

Conclusion

As has been argued throughout, Maya identity is constantly redefined and recreated by Maya individuals with the passing of time and the shifting

of place/space (Watanabe 1995). Additionally, the image of the "Indian", as defined by the Guatemalan government and the dominant class, has been altered to suit the situation - whether for the benefit of the state in land issues or for tourist revenues. The result of the mutual reinforcement of these two dimensions will continue to challenge the meaning of Maya identity, which will reflect both self-definition and the perceptions and power of others.

I suggest that these contradictions will continue to shape the geography of the movement back to Guatemala and future dealings with returnee populations.

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