Becoming Maya?
The Politics and Pragmatics of “Being Indigenous”
in Postgenocide Guatemala

This paper contrasts the way “Mayan” identity is conceptualized by NGOs and intellectuals in Guatemala with the everyday practices and material conditions influencing perceptions of identity in the rural town of Guaisná. The “truth” of past genocide and the experience of ongoing harsh socioeconomic inequality take on different meanings from these two perspectives. And yet inhabitants of Guaisná and Mayan intellectuals share an awareness of past and ongoing oppression, and an understanding of flexible identity as crucial to cultural survival. Thus indigenous people can simultaneously claim some features of “Mayan” identity while also distinguishing it from aspects of local everyday practice.

The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. [Quijano 2000:533]

Between 1960 and 1996, Guatemala was the site of the bloodiest internal armed conflict in Central and South America: 200 thousand of its nine million inhabitants were killed. The 415 massacres committed by the army between 1981 and 1983 during the armed conflict were characterized as “acts of genocide” by the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, hereafter CEH] (1999), a truth commission formed under the framework of Guatemala’s Peace Accords1 with a mandate from both the Guatemalan government and the UN. The numbers, as laid out in the CEH report, bear witness to the genocidal dimension of these military operations: while indigenous people make up 40 to 60 percent of the Guatemalan population,2 83 percent of the people killed in the internal armed conflict were indigenous. Not everyone agrees, however, that the atrocities committed by the army should be properly termed “acts of genocide.”3 By the same token, questions of whether or not the conflict was genocidal and what exactly constitutes genocide are the subject of scholarly debates.4 It is not my intention to address these debates here, as my research was not conducted with an eye to uncovering “what really happened” in Guatemala during the internal armed conflict. Rather, my research deals with how what people think happened structures the present of the survivors. How does “the truth” of genocide, which some Guatemalan NGOs seek to make known through their legal activism, as well as their practice of
“Mayanizing” survivors in order to justify the qualification of genocide, transform people’s relationships to their “national,” “ethnic,” “class,” and “racial” identity?

Much of the recent literature on “identity politics” as they are now playing out in postwar Guatemala (Fischer 2001; Fischer and Brown 1996; Warren 1998) examines how individuals and collectivities become part of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) that subvert and recreate identity discourses in order to create new subject positions and social movements. The problem with this approach is that by focusing on collective identities as constructed through overtly political processes, public articulations of identity become overemphasized at the expense of the everyday practices and material conditions that influence the ways in which average indigenous people identify and recognize themselves (Foxen 2007). In this article, I hope to highlight the tensions at play between strategic claims to a Mayan identity in the postgenocide political field and everyday expressions of identity. Activists within the Mayan movement have adopted a self-conscious and strategic mode of self-representation in order to enter civil society as a political force (Fischer 2001; Fischer and Brown 1996; Warren 1998). But from the point of view of people who have been historically dominated and excluded (and more recently massacred), this shift from an age-old image of the colonized, dominated “Indian Other” to one of overt “Mayan pride” is a process fraught with tension. Here, I highlight these tensions by examining “national,” “ethnic,” “class,” and “racial” identities as they are articulated by differently situated social actors, be they Ladino (mixed race) human rights activists, militants of the Mayan movement, or the half-peasant, half-construction workers belonging to the indigenous Chuj ethnolinguistic group. How are these different actors relating with both Guatemala’s historical racism and its new ethos of multiculturalism?

Research for this article, conducted between 2003 and 2006, occurred in Guatemala City, the nation’s capital, and in Guaisná, a Chuj village where survivors of a massacre of the hamlet of Petanac now live. Guaisná is located in the municipio (municipality) of San Mateo Ixtatán, in the Department of Huehuetenango. After a brief historical overview of Guatemalan politics of identity, I describe how one Guatemalan NGO, the Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos [Centre for Human Rights Legal Action, hereafter CALDH], is encouraging 22 indigenous communities of massacre survivors to identify as “Maya,” and to remember and valorize their “Mayan culture.” An analysis of how one of these communities is now defining its culture and identity in the context of its members’ daily struggles to rebuild their lives, homes, and village follows.

From “Indio” to Maya: From the Colonization to the “Multiculturalization” of Guatemala

The colonization of Guatemala, as with Latin America in general (Mignolo 2005; Quijano 2000; Taussig 1987), occurred partially through imposition of the racial myth of “the inferior Indian” that served to justify the separate administration of natives and Spanish newcomers (Lutz 1994). This led to the residential segregation and economic exploitation of indigenous people to the profit of the Spanish colonizers. Guatemala’s
Independence in 1821—and most especially the Liberal Reforms implemented starting in 1878—put into question this residential segregation and separate administration, by advancing a “liberal” discourse of equality. However, the colonial distinction between Indians and non-Indians continued to be operative. Contrary to inclusive reforms occurring in Mexico, the affirmation of a national Ladina (mestiza) identity in Guatemala did not result in the promotion of a “real mixing” of indigenous and Spanish populations. Rather, it encouraged the “whitening” of the indigenous population through its ladinoization (Adams 1956), as the “white” political and economic elite (mainly Criollo) continued to consider indigenous peoples to be fundamentally backwards.

Ironically, Bastos and Camus (2003) remind us that the development of a movement that was first “Indian” and then “indigenous” before finally becoming “Mayan” owes much to assimilation measures targeting indigenous populations that were implemented between 1944 and 1954 by the administrations of Juan José Arévalo (1945–1951) and Général Jacobo Arbenz (1951–1954). Believing that true national development could only occur if indigenous people were to become integrated into the Ladina Nation, these two reformers implemented various policies to this end, such as universal suffrage (for men), election of municipal administrators, agrarian reform, and literacy programs (Handy 1994). These policies were intended to put an end to what Arévalo and Arbenz considered to be an outmoded “feudal system.” However, the literacy and political organizations of indigenous people that resulted went beyond facilitating connections between members of different linguistic communities. The shared experience of poverty, discrimination, and political exclusion became more and more politicized (Konéfal 2005), and a good number of indigenous labor and cultural organizations took shape as a result.

From its very beginnings, emphasize Bastos and Camus (2003), the Mayan movement was pluralistic and heterogeneous, with its actors combining elements from three modes of identity articulation: proletariat (class), citizen, and ethnic. The escalation of violence toward the end of the 1960s and the fragmentation of left-wing civil associations led to an extreme polarization between sympathizers of the army and those of the guerrillas. This situation marginalized calls for rights based on citizenship and, most especially, those based on ethnicity (Bastos and Camus 2003). It was only beginning in 1985, after social movements rearticulated and sufficiently distanced themselves from the guerrillas, that claims based on ethnicity reappeared. This was accompanied by the rise of a growing number of organizations dedicated to the revitalization and defense of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the “Mayan People.”

Mayan organizations were not alone, however, in appropriating the new language of “indigenism,” a language that had “gone global” according to Niezen (2003). Within a larger context marked by a growing sensibility to “cultural” oppression of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, diverse forums and international treaties were created denouncing this oppression (Brysk 1994; Tilley 2002). Many “populist” organizations from the Guatemalan Left, such as that founded by 1994 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the Comité de Unidad Campesina [Committee
of Peasant Unity, hereafter CUC], embraced this new political identity. This broad-based co-optation of the “indigenous” label did not particularly please the more explicitly “Mayanist” groups (Brett 2006). They saw it as opportunistic, given a context where the financing distributed by international organizations to “proindigenous” projects largely surpassed that distributed to “propoverty” projects. Nonetheless Brett (2006) argues that the rapprochement of the “populists” and the “Mayanists” at the negotiating table necessitated by the Guatemalan peace negotiations of 1991–1996 encouraged the “ethnic conversion” of the populist movement, forcing them to rethink their commitment to class identity as the only possible basis for creating common cause among “victims of oppression” (see Jonas 2000 on the peace negotiations). Bastos and Cumes (2007) call this conversion “Mayanisation.”

By Mayanization, Bastos and Cumes (2007) refer to a process of assumption (within the indigenous population) of the identity and political projects put forward by the Mayan movement, as well as the gradual acceptance (by an ensemble of nonindigenous actors and institutions) of the resultant cultural and political claims. In the current international context, “neoliberal multiculturalism” (Hale 2002) has replaced the previously dominant ideology of “liberal nationalism”—and indigenous and nonindigenous people alike have changed discourses and attitudes regarding that which differentiates them. In such a context, the racialized difference between “Indian” and “non-Indian” can no longer justify economic exploitation or political exclusion, nor is it perceived the main obstacle to the socioeconomic development of the Ladina Nation. The difference separating Indian from non-Indian has become “ethnicized,” something to valorize, revitalize, defend, and protect. This Mayanization of the public space is nonetheless unequal (Bastos and Cumes 2007), as the articulation of a positive “Mayan” identity has not completely succeeded in abolishing the colonial and fundamentally racist myth of the “inferior Indian,” among nonindigenous and indigenous people alike. Before examining how these two identities actually coexist amongst massacre survivors, let us first examine the reconstructive and valorizing work of the “Mayan Other” as it is implemented by the CALDH in its work with massacre survivors.

The Strategic Reconstruction, Political Decolonization, and Therapeutic Valorization of the Mayan Other

The goal of the CALDH is to hold the Military High Command legally accountable for the crime of genocide. This is not an idea that originated from the 22 communities of massacre survivors involved in their project; the lawyers of the CALDH proposed it in 1997—and a number of these communities hesitated at first before becoming involved in the CALDH’s legal cases for genocide. As I explain at more length elsewhere (Vanthuyne 2007), the main strategy employed by the CALDH to convince massacre survivors to join their project was to “repoliticize” their memories of the violent past. Through Freire’s (1970 [1968]) methodology of consientización (awareness-raising), employees of the CALDH brought survivors to re-read the massacre of their loved ones in terms of a fundamental violation of their rights. They were not guilty parties who had been justly punished for their association with the guerrillas, as both the army and many of their neighbors affirmed. Rather, they were victims of an unjustified
and unjustifiable policy of extermination, implemented by the then-government in Guatemala and financed by the United States in the context of the Cold War. Then, through regular biannual meetings of all the survivors implicated in the lawsuits, the CALDH aimed to “collectivize” the trials endured by survivors, creating a community of people connected through their suffering, a “community of destiny” (Bauer 2000 [1907]) upon which to found a common identity of “political victim” of the internal armed conflict.

CALDH’s repoliticization work among massacre survivors could have ended there. By transforming survivors into political victims, the CALDH actually fulfilled its objective of mobilizing a large number of them in the pursuit of justice. However, the lawsuit they are bringing against the Military High Command is for genocide, and the current administration refuses to admit this definition of the conflict. In this context, the CALDH has given itself the goal of fostering and mobilizing a common “Mayan” identity among massacre survivors.

It was in March 2004, at one of CALDH’s biannual meetings, that I became aware of this second aspect of their efforts to repoliticize massacre survivors’ memories. I attended three intensive days of legal workshops punctuated by workshops on Mayan culture and identity, including a Mayan ceremony conducted by a Mayan priest and a visit to Zaculeu, an ancient Mayan temple. Afterwards, in my field notebook, I determined that the primary objective of this meeting had been to encourage common identification as Maya amongst the massacre survivors. This observation was not purely deductive: after a brief recapitulation of CALDH’s administrative shuffling over the previous six months, the March 26 meeting began with a speech from Orlando – a forty-something Ladino lawyer from Guatemala’s capital, a long-time human rights activist, and then director of CALDH’s transitional justice program – on the importance of a common Mayan identity to the success of the lawsuits. The crime of genocide, he explained,

signifies that a state has the intention to destroy, totally or partially, the members of a group. And this group can be no more than a national, religious, or ethnic group . . . . In Guatemala, what happened was the extermination of an ethnic group. If we begin to think of who we are [those that are gathered here], we realize that here, there are those that speak Q’eqchi’, Achi, Q’anjob’al, Chuj, Kaqchikel, K’iche’ and Mam. . . . So, why do we affirm that we make up an ethnic group? If the languages are similar but not the same? Because the root, the origin, of each of these languages is the same. That is why we affirm that although you don’t all speak the same language, you share a common origin.

Orlando also went over the other cultural elements commonly held by members of the 21 linguistic groups of Mayan origin found in Guatemala: a spiritual relationship to the earth and with the maize plant; colorful, patterned clothing; the sharing of a common “spirit”; and the practice of Mayan ceremonies. Then, he repeated the conclusions of the CEH report: even though the armed violence targeted the “communists,” it was the Maya that were, in the end, the primary targets, having been perceived by the military as the primary support network for the guerrillas. He concluded:
So, what was I saying at the beginning [of my talk]?... I was saying that one of the most important proofs [for the genocide legal cases] is to prove that the victims of the massacres were Mayan victims. And that is proven through your stories, when you say what you ate, what language you spoke... That’s why we are going to ask several of you to give us your stories again. This doesn’t mean that we will ask you to say: “I am Maya.” No. We will rather ask several of you to do us the favor of telling your stories to us again. And then we will tell you what’s wrong with your previous depositions.

The following year, the massacre survivors were invited to participate in a series of workshops on “Mayan culture and identity.” In these workshops, which were led by Esmeralda, a young Kaqchikel woman and a long-time activist in the Mayan movement, subjects included the history of the Conquest of the Mayan people, the preservation of a unique cosmology dating to pre-Hispanic times, and Mayan strategic appropriations of modern technologies in order to ensure cultural survival. At the end of 2005 and into early 2006, some of these survivors were invited to give their depositions of the massacre of their people for a second time. I was unable to access these new testimonies, given the delicate nature of the genocide legal cases in the current political context. However, when I met with them in October 2006, employees of the CALDH confirmed that they wanted to ensure the presence of “Mayan identifying traits” in the new depositions.

According to one of the co-organizers of these workshops on “Mayan culture and identity,” their goal was more than merely influencing a collective identification as Maya; they also aimed to improve the “well being” of massacre survivors. Without a doubt, this is an objective that flows from the close collaboration that the CALDH maintains with the Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Accion Psicosocial [Psychosocial Action and Community Studies, hereafter ECAP], an organization offering psychological support to massacre survivors involved in the legal cases. This therapeutic objective could also be more broadly inscribed within a larger movement for “recognition” (Taylor 1994), as the recovery of one’s own identity and culture is increasingly perceived as “healing” (Adelson 2000; Santiago-Irizarry 1996). Before discussing to what extent the valorization of a “Mayan way-of-being-in-the-world” has “healed the wounds” of Conquest, colonialism, and the internal armed conflict amongst the massacre survivors, let us look more in depth at one of the communities of massacre survivors involved in the CALDH’s legal cases. How does this community appropriate these new discourses and practices of Mayan culture and identity?

Costumbristas or Maya?

When I asked inhabitants of Guaisná what characterized them, they all answered traje (the traditional female clothing) and la costumbre de los antepasados (their particular mode of prayer). Spirituality being a privileged field of activity for the CALDH and the Mayan movement in general, I will now examine how costumbre is defined and practiced in Guaisná.
Costumbre generally refers, within Mesoamerican studies, to the system of civil and religious beliefs and practices adhered to by indigenous people following the Conquest and their colonization. As Piedrasanta (2003) argues in the particular case of the Chuj people, this system represents a vehicle through which the Chuj came to conform to the dominant Catholic-Hispanic system, while adapting it to their own rules and conceptualizations of civil and religious power. Given their geographical isolation, the hilly and infertile landscape, and the particularly cold and humid climate of Chuj territory, no Spaniards moved into their lands, so the Chuj were able to maintain their traditional civil and religious institutions. The Liberal Reform of the 1870s changed that situation completely. The Chuj succeeded in maintaining their costumbre in the religious sphere, but became political subjects of the new Ladino authorities in the civil sphere. Acción Católica (Catholic Action), the Catholic Church’s aggressive religious conversion program that was implemented in the 1960s and the 1970s (Falla 2001; Warren 1978), as well as the Protestant missionary activities that the military authorities encouraged during the internal armed conflict in the 1980s and 1990s (Stoll 1993), drastically diminished the number of people practicing costumbre throughout Guatemala. However, while a majority of the parents of those who live today in northwestern Huehuetenango converted to Catholicism, Guaisná was one of the villages that strongly opposed conversion. And in 2004, in spite of the progressive conversion of inhabitants of Guaisná to Catholicism or Pentecostalism over the past decade or so, the massacre survivors in Petanac who were involved in the legal endeavors of the CALDH declared themselves to be costumbristas (practitioners of costumbre).

As I mentioned earlier, Mayan cosmology is a privileged field of activity for the CALDH with regards to the “Mayanization” of massacre survivors. However, although this cosmology corresponds to a large extent with the beliefs and practices unique to costumbre, according to Bastos and Cumes (2005), its introduction to costumbristas gives rise to a sentiment of estrangement among them. A process of standardization – even purification – resulted from the politicization of a Mayan spirituality in the larger context of a flourishing Mayan movement. This gave rise to the construction of a system of religious beliefs and practices noticeably different from the costumbre as it was, and still is, practiced. To reinforce the affirmation of a particular and uniquely Mayan way of being-in-the-world, Mayanists have “cleaned” these costumbres of their “Western influences” in order to preserve those elements judged to be “ethnically pure” (Bastos and Cumes 2005:10). Although common to all popular forms of religion in relation to their canonical ideal (Norget 2006), this purification process raises questions regarding the promotion, by the CALDH, of a religion that may lack the power to “speak to” massacre survivors, whether they consider themselves costumbristas or Catholics.
No inhabitant of Guaisná told me that he or she felt uncomfortable with the promotion of a religion that differed from local spiritual practices. But when I asked Pedro what he thought about the Mayan ceremony he had been invited to take part in during the last CALDH meeting, he first responded, “to each their own culture.” Then, after comparing this ceremony with the costumbrer rituals usually practiced in his village, he added that, “for me, this culture is ours, it’s very nice, and, even though I’m not sure, for me it could be indigenous culture” (interview with Pedro, Guaisná, April 24, 2004). While he is not saying that the Mayan ceremony was completely foreign to him, Pedro hesitated between the sentiment of being in the presence of an “other culture” and that of discovering the relations between his costumbr and this “indigenous culture.” Interestingly, many costumbristas, especially women who, for the most part, remained at the margins of the CALDH’s “mayanizing” work, responded “I am pagan” when I asked them what religion they were. This is an example of a “historical consciousness” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992) of domination that I encountered among many other massacre survivors in Guaisná.

“Somos indígenas”

When I returned to Guaisná in 2006 and asked Pedro and his elderly neighbor Lucas what they thought of the new administration, in power since January 2004, they both deplored the new government’s lack of interest in issues that were important to them. For his part, Pedro complained that the teachers did not really teach anymore and that the children were not learning anything. Lucas informed me that the government had recently held a meeting that brought together many businessmen, lawyers, and congressmen. In the meeting, continued Lucas, the president said the following:

Now, we can see that the indigenous people are in the process of screwing us, that they are no longer under our heels. Now, they are literate. Now, there are indigenous people who are Members of Parliament. There are indigenous people who are high ranking bureaucrats. And now our own children will no longer have any work. So, let’s pass a law.

“It’s just like the business men did in the past,” continued Lucas:

They invented a law. They decided to kill all the indigenous people so that only the Ladinos would remain in Guatemala. . . . [Oscar] Berger [president from 2004 to 2008] sent 1,500 soldiers disguised as civilians. . . . Why were so many indigenous students assassinated? Because they were going to become professors. This is one of Berger’s crimes. . . . The major landowners, the businessmen, the government, they’re all Spanish, and they’re not from Guatemala, they’re from other countries. They are the ones that invaded Guatemala hundreds of years ago. [Interviews with Lucas and Pedro Guaisná, October 18, 2006]

Without a doubt, the meeting described by Lucas and Pedro did not happen. However, as suggested by Das (2007) and Fassin (2007), this kind of “paranoid” interpretation of the social world in which they live should not be understood from a strictly objective point of view (as “false rumor,”) or from a strictly subjective point of view, as bearing
witness to an “age of anxiety” (Parish 2001). Rather, the point is to combine these two approaches in order to understand the power relationships as they are at work in the social realm, and the historical consciousnesses that these power relationships produce. In this sense, the “conspiracy theory” that Lucas and Pedro shared with me is indicative of both the continuation of historical racial inequalities (that take the form of the inaction and incompetence of the school teacher in Guaisná) and the entrenched networks of sense-making through which these inequalities are lived and interpreted today. For example, the inaction of the schoolteacher is explained by a conspiracy theory correlating two national news items: the bodies of indigenous youth found dead on the road, and the redeployment of mixed patrols. In other words, Lucas’s and Pedro’s memories of the Conquest are connected to the internal armed conflict, on the one hand, and their contemporary experience of racially based socioeconomic inequalities, on the other. This encodes the way they make sense of their marginalization: by identifying as indígenas (indigenous) in relation to a dominant Other that is Ladino/Spanish/“from another country.”

**Entrenched Practices of Identification and of Social Differentiation**

As the anthropologist John Comaroff (1996) justifiably stresses, identities are always relational: they are built up through daily power relations between different social groups. The above-mentioned rumor reported by Lucas invokes the “political imaginary” that is the “horizon of meaning” (Norval 1996) from which the indígena identity is always constructed in relation to a dominant Other (who is Ladino, Spanish, or “from another country”) in order to make sense of a marginalized socioeconomic and political reality. It does not, however, point to how this identity is negotiated and renegotiated on a daily basis in the face of concrete situations and multiple and heterogeneous social relations. The following narrative, recounted by Pedro (I brought up the rumor that Lucas had related to me the day before), gives insight into the process of identity negotiation happening on a daily basis:

One time when I was coming back from Nentón on a Monday, I got on a bus and saw that it was filled with maestros [schoolteachers]. They were not Spaniards, they were indígenas, from Jacaltenango. And so I asked them, “Please maestros, I would like to sit down here.” “No, you’ll have to continue your ride standing. You’re a peasant,” replied one of the schoolteachers. “You can’t say that to me... pure Jacalteco. You’re not a gringo,” I replied. “Sure, the Guatemalans sometimes obey the gringos [whites],” I continued, “but think about it, maestro, if there were not indígenas in every place you teach, you might not be able to eat. We may be indígenas, but we know work better than you do... You may be schoolteachers... and you know more than we do. Just so. Us, we don’t think much, but... we haven’t received an education... Just so. But if you’re here to speak down to the people from the villages where you work, it would be better for you to stay home... Much better that you don’t come [to our villages] to try and dominate us yet again. Before, I think this would be the way for you to move yourself [up the social ladder]. By
giving us orders, because we didn’t know how to speak [Spanish], because we were ignorant about everything. But now is not the time to be giving orders to the indígenas.” . . . There are now many indígenas who know how to write . . . who become chauffeurs, secretaries, schoolteachers, any kind of job . . . . So the government will probably tell the schoolteachers to stop teaching the children in the villages. The village children often don’t even know how to sign their name. That is the government’s fault, if the schoolteachers don’t hold classes. But that is the way it always goes with us. [Interview with Pedro Guaisná, October 19, 2006]

This excerpt from the interview with Pedro invokes a complex and hierarchical network of communities. The defining features of these communities are very localized membership (Mateano-chuj vs. Jacalteco-popti), socioeconomic (peasant vs. schoolteacher), racial (indígena vs. Ladino/Spanish), and national (Guatemalan vs. gringo). Identity is negotiated around these characteristics on a daily basis. At first, Pedro demanded his right to sit beside the schoolteacher, by identifying himself as indígena in relation to a dominant Spanish Other, and then by self-identifying as Guatemalan in relation to a dominant gringo Other. When the maestro tried to “put him in his place” by dismissing Pedro as a “peasant,” Pedro then differentiated the teacher as a Ladino. While not using this term, he references a time in the recent past when ladinoization constituted the sole avenue available to indígenas who, like the maestro in Pedro’s view, wanted to “move up the social ladder.” The result of this ladinoization for indigenous peoples, as Pedro seems to define the issue, was that they were disconnected from their roots in their indígena community, and that they used their peers’ “ignorance” as a way to exert power in their social climbing. “But now is not the time to be giving orders to the indígenas,” maintains Pedro, in this way valorizing his agricultural labor, pointing out to the maestro that because of it he can eat his fill. Nonetheless, this affirmation is quickly contradicted with, “But this is the way it always goes with us.” Even if “now is not the time” to dominate the indígenas, because now they know how to read and write, and even if it is now possible to remain indígena while occupying posts previously reserved for the Ladinos, the “Spanish”—if not “gringo”—government continues to dominate them by putting obstacles in the way of their socioeconomic advancement.

The Pragmatics of Ethnicity in a Globally Racialized World

Living in a world in which economic and political privileges are still distributed along the lines of skin color, massacre survivors in Petanac have not fully embraced their Mayan identity. The maintenance of a socioracial hierarchy in Guatemala seriously limits their progress towards “Mayan re-ethnicization.” The world the massacre survivors live in is nonetheless quite different from the one they used to live in, the world of before and during the internal armed conflict. Following the neoliberal restructuring of the regional economy, and the increasing migration al Norte (north, mainly to Mexico but more and more to the United States) of Guaisná’s inhabitants, the present world has actually become more complex than that of the past. The processes of identity renegotiation that massacre survivors are involved in on a daily basis no
longer takes place behind the closed doors of the Criollos/Ladinos/indígenas socio-racial hierarchy. It also increasingly implicates new processes of economic, national, and racial identification and differentiation vis-à-vis others: gringos, wealthy people, or foreigners. But before discussing whether these new processes of identification and differentiation have rendered Guatemalan indigenous people’s identities more flexible, let us first examine how these processes operate concretely, based on the following narrative Tomás shared with me in February 2004.

Mateano One Day, Chiapaneco the Next: A New “Flexible Identity”?

The first time I met Tomás, this thirty-six-year-old survivor of the Petanac massacre shared the story of his regular trips to Cancun, a Mexican tourist town (Guaisná field notebook, February 13, 2004). He travels there to do construction work on hotel building sites. Tomás told me how he bought Mexican identity papers in order to facilitate his trips to Cancun. He apologized for not being able to show them to me; he had recently lent them to another resident of Guaisná who was leaving for Cancun.

Tomás then described his voyage from Guaisná to Cancun: he did not ride in the luxury buses “for gringos,” instead travelling on those destined “for indígenas” because, he explained, tickets on the latter buses never cost more than 270 pesos (around $25 US), thanks to the absence of air-conditioning and toilets. Tomás hastened to explain that it is not the physical discomfort of travelling up to 30 hours in these conditions that is the most difficult aspect of the journey; far worse is the fear of being discovered by the Mexican authorities as an illegal migrant during one of the increasingly frequent identity checks en route. And so, to avoid being arrested, Tomás not only memorized the minutiae of his false Mexican identity, he also studied the “ways and customs of the Chiapan peasants,” along with their “particular dialect” and an ensemble of gestures and expression “typically Southern Mexican” that he takes care to adopt once he crosses the border into Mexico. He was happy to give me a brief demonstration of his “Mexican-ness.”

When I asked him if he ever thought of permanently migrating to Mexico, Tomás responded in the negative. He has his milpa (cornfield) here, along with his family. When in Cancun, he regularly calls his wife to check up on her health and the health of their children; he insisted that he is always ready to return home, immediately if necessary. Among migrant workers with whom I spoke, I did not always find as solid an attachment to land and family as demonstrated by Tomás. The “trick,” he explained to me when I shared this observation with him, was to not “drink your money”—to not spend it on alcohol and so not to “forget” your family in Guatemala. This was another “technology of the self” (Foucault 2001) that, he assured me, he easily mastered. When I asked him whether he considered himself more a “construction worker” or a “peasant” today, he responded that, although when in Mexico he is indeed a construction worker, in Guatemala he remains a peasant, even though the majority of his revenue comes from his work on construction sites. In continuing to identify as a peasant, he noted, he becomes eligible for several government programs specifically aimed at peasants.
A Historically “Socio-racially Limited” Flexible Identity

In anthropology, as Malkki (1992) argues, ethnic and national identities have been approached in profoundly “territorializing” terms for a long time. These have constituted a veritable “sedentary metaphysic” through which social actors are conceptualized as naturally rooted to their homeland and morally linked to their geographical identity. But as the “ethnic” societies under study become globalized, as “indigenous people” become employees of multinational companies within their own countries, or as economic migrants embark on new lives in the homelands of the anthropologist (or even anthropologists themselves), more “flexible” theoretical models of identity and culture have appeared. However, as Nelson (2004) argues in relation to Guatemalan indigenous people, and Malkki (1992) more generally, peoples’ identities and cultures have always been “highly mobile throughout the national territory and beyond” (Nelson 2004:127). Since the Conquest, Guatemalan indigenous people have continuously been on the move, either to escape from or submit themselves to colonial or postcolonial authorities, or in the hope of bettering their economically precarious situations. Having found it necessary to displace themselves frequently, Guatemalan indigenous people have accumulated a historical experience that resembles what others would qualify as a “new post-modern flexible identity” (Jameson 1991). It is a flexible identity that has, nonetheless, always been “socio-racially limited,” I would argue, given the long and ongoing history in Guatemala of political and socioeconomic domination based on racial prejudice.

Even though it may seem unnecessary to stress Guatemala’s history of racism, given the recent genocide, such an emphasis remains important, given social scientists’ tendency to turn a blind eye to historical racially-based discrimination (Brintnall 1979; Harrison 1995; Smith 2004 [1999]). Indeed, as those who strongly opposed a “racialized” reading of social interaction between Ladinos and Indios [Indians] have argued, Guatemalan indigenous people could, following the Liberal Revolution of the 1870s, “pass” for Ladinos (Colby and Van den Berghe 1969; de la Fuente 1964; Redfield 1943, 1956; Tax 1942). By leaving their villages, by giving up wearing their traditional clothing, and by ceasing to speak lengua (indigenous Guatemalan languages), they could “ladinoize” (Adams 1956) themselves and in this way climb one step up the national social-racial hierarchy. Nonetheless, to argue, as Sol Tax (1942) did, that for this very reason there was no racism in Guatemala, is to remain blind to the reasons why Indios have wanted to pass for Ladinos, as well as to ignore the discrimination faced by these temporary or new Ladinos once they had ladinoized themselves. Within the racialized space of the Guatemalan highlands, such as the municipio of San Mateo Ixtatán, where the urban center was considered Ladino territory and its surrounding villages, Indian territory, there was no other way for indigenous people to make their claims heard than to attempt to “pass” for Ladinos. It was only by articulating his requests in Spanish, and by leaving his traditional clothing behind, that a Chuj could dare to hope that the municipal authorities in San Mateo would grant him an audience. Furthermore, if an Indio decided to permanently become a Ladino, he had to leave his village for good, cease speaking his mother tongue, and stop wearing his traditional clothing (Wisdom 1940). Ladinoization was only
considered to truly take effect for the children of new Ladinos, who face continued discrimination for their whole lives.

That is why in light of a flexible identity that is historically socio-racially limited, it is necessary to analyze the capacity of Tomás to incarnate both the identity of a Chiapanecan (someone from Chiapas) as well as a Guatemalan peasant. First of all, this capacity is far from being new. Rather, it is part of the array of strategies that Guatemala’s indigenous people have developed incrementally since the Conquest, strategies used to accommodate themselves to their socioeconomic and political marginalization. Thus, it is clear that this capacity is far from being the pure product of free choice. While this strategy was made necessary in the past by the need to be heard by colonial authorities, today this strategy is made necessary by a socioeconomic conjuncture that practically forces Guatemalan campesinos (peasants) to take the road el Norte in order to sobrevivir (survive). Finally, it is important to emphasize that the success of this current incarnation of another ethnonational identity, which could only be attained a generation later, is now marked by the extremely arbitrary nature of the police interventions, which can change the destiny of those borrowing the other identity in an instant. This is a situation that in turn exposes migrants to more and greater dangers as they are likely to take any and all risks in order to reach Mexico or the United States (Viscidi 2004).19

Conclusion

CALDH’s principal motive in encouraging a common identification as Mayan amongst massacre survivors was, at first, essentially strategic. As a human rights organization involved in the coordination of a legal suit for genocide against the Military High Command, and within the larger context in which the definition of Guatemala’s internal armed conflict as genocide has continuously been challenged, this NGO hoped to give more weight to its case by bringing the Q’eqchi’, Achi, Q’anjob’al, Chuj, Kaqchikel, K’iche’, and Mam individuals involved to self-identify as one People. However, the re-ethnicization work of the CALDH increasingly took a dimension of self-liberation by virtue of two features: its close collaboration with ECAP, which conceives of culture as “healing,” on the one hand; and the implication of Mayan activists in this “Mayanizing” effort, on the other. Since then, the massacre survivors are now being invited to embrace a Mayan identity not only in order to win their legal cases, but also so they may free themselves from the chains of the internal colonialism which is considered to have produced their índigena-ness. In order to become Maya, they have to stop being indígenas.

Historically, Indios/Indígenas in Guatemala have been characterized as traditional, antimodern, and backward, while Criollos, and later on Ladinos, have been defined as Western, modern, and civilized. To challenge this racial ideology, the strategy of the Mayan movement has been to convert these differences into sources of pride, connotative of the rights of a People. Their traditions are no longer to be seen as symptomatic of a fundamental inferiority; rather, they should be read as proof of existence of an authentic alterity, one that legitimates their claims to the rights of a People: language rights, spiritual rights, socioeconomic rights, and self-determination
rights. The intellectual leaders of the Mayan movement recognize that from the point of view of a People that has suffered more than 500 years of racism, this valorization of what was previously used to justify their political exclusion and economic exploitation requires that members of their group undergo a process of “internal decolonization” (Bastos and Cumes 2007), a process these leaders call desindigenización (de-indigenization).

As other anthropologists’ (Bastos and Cumes 2007; Foxen 2007) and my own research demonstrates, the Mayan movement has encountered a lot of resistance from the very indigenous peasants that it seeks to desindigenizar. During my fieldwork, I noticed moments of pride in being indigenous and of identification as being Maya. In these moments, people from Guaisná consciously appreciated and valorized those qualities that were once the object of Ladino and Criollo scorn, even speaking with pride of their ancestral customs. However, because they live in a social universe that continues to be, in their view, arranged according to a socioracial hierarchy, the multiculturalist ideology of equality between the Criollos, Ladinos, and indígenas (Maya) that the Mayan movement is promoting is fundamentally undermined in their day-to-day experience. The elements of their lives that serve to destabilize the multiculturalist ideology are: the severe socioeconomic inequalities that mainly affect indigenous people; memories of their historical marginalization as Indios and of the more recent massacre of their loved ones; and the continued racial prejudice encountered by indígenas, emanating both from nonindigenous and indigenous people (as evoked by Pedro in his story of the indígena maestro on the bus).

One area where the respective identity discourses of inhabitants of Guaisná and Mayan intellectuals’ align is in their shared vision of a flexible identity as the key to their cultural survival. In opposition to Ladino intellectuals, who have long argued—and some argue still (Morales 2002)—that the Maya did not survive the Conquest and are now extinct, Mayanists have put forward a counter-history. This counter-history stresses Guatemalan indigenous peoples’ historical capacity to accommodate themselves to the Spanish-Catholic dominant order “on the surface” (through costumbre, ladinoization, or, nowadays, their chiapanization) while remaining Maya in “essence” (Warren 1998). When I asked Tomás about his people’s traditions, he explained that his ancestors at one time had had to cease wearing their traditional clothing, otherwise nobody at San Mateo’s municipal office would attend to them. I then asked, “Do you think that since you have transformed yourselves, you have lost your culture?” He answered, “No, we haven’t changed culture; we have only changed clothing” (interview with Tomás, Guaisná, April 22, 2004). While highlighting his awareness of the “effects of power” (Butler 1997) on his culture, this excerpt from Tomás also testifies to his belief in his people’s capacity to reproduce their modes of being-in-the-world while adapting themselves to the dominant political-cultural order.

The tensions at play between Mayan intellectuals’ and inhabitants of Guaisná identity discourses are a result of very different day-to-day experiences of Guatemala’s new multiculturalist ethos. While some Maya may have experienced great changes in the way their differences are appreciated in the public sphere, inhabitants of Guaisná continue to be the target of racialized, socioeconomic inequalities. This helps to
explain why the image of an excluded, even disposable, inferior Indian continues to hold power over attempts to articulate a positive Mayan identity.

To really appreciate the extent of that power, it might be useful to recall Reinhart Koselleck’s thesis on the authority held by the “history of the vanquished” over the “history of the victors” in the long-term: “It is a principle based on experience which is always verified, that history is always made in the short term by the winners who, though they may prolong their victory over the medium term, can in no case dominate over the long term” (1997:328). And as Fassin argues in comparing “paranoid” interpretations of the AIDS epidemics by South Africans with the optimistic discourse of a new a-racial post-apartheid society put forward by commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation committee:

This is not to say that history “from below” is necessarily truer than history “from above.” It is rather a matter of considering that the ordeals lived through one’s flesh and blood say more about the social world that the developments reshaped by the mind, because they connect the present to the experience of the past in order to build the future rather than connect the present to the project of the future in order to erase the past. There are things one does not forget. [Fassin 2007:169]

Black South Africans will never forget apartheid and may continue to regard “white power” with suspicion (as in, for example, blaming white power for the AIDS epidemic). Likewise, indigenous people in Guatemala do not forget their long history of domination when it comes to interpreting why they continue to be among the most destitute communities in the Americas. As Fassin (2007) notes, there are things that we do not forget.

Notes

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1. According to this commission, the army was ordered to eliminate subversives at all cost. As far as the military was concerned, indigenous peoples were all subversives. Those who were not outright members of the guerillas were assumed to provide them with material and logistical support, or at the very least to be deeply sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. The army thereby came to
conflate “subversive” and “indigenous” and proceeded to indiscriminately execute members of this population (CEH 1999).

2. The total population of Maya in Guatemala is the object of multiple debates. See Adams and Bastos (2003) and Tzian (1994) for an overview of these discussions.

3. None of the four government administrations that have come to power since the deposition of the CEH report have endorsed this characterization of the internal armed conflict.

4. While Stoll (1993, 1998) argues that soldiers did not intentionally single out indigenous people for killing, Sanford (2003), Perlin (1998), and Drouin (2006) maintain that the mass killings by the army constitute genocide. The debate around what constitutes genocide is polarized by Katz (1995), who affirms that there has only been one genocide (the Holocaust), and by Charny (1994), who considers any mass killing to be genocide (including Chernobyl). For a more exhaustive analysis of this debate, see Shaw (2007).

5. This more general trend is nonetheless gradually changing; for examples of studies that are more attentive to local appropriations of the Mayan identity, see Adams and Bastos (2003), Foxen (2007), and Bastos and Cumes (2007). For an excellent study of how Ladinos (Guatemalan mestizos [mixed blood]) are relating to the valorization and politicization of a “Mayan way of being-in-the-world,” see Hale (2006).

6. At the beginning of my doctoral research, I anonymized my informants and the villages names with pseudonyms, and Guaisná was then known as Wa’il (Vanthuyne 2007). However, as the names of the villages involved in the genocide cases became public, I revised my anonymization policy and kept pseudonyms only for the massacre survivors and human rights activists involved.

7. Departments are governmental/territorial subunits similar to states or provinces. Guaisná is an indigenous village of approximately 400 Chuj inhabitants. During fieldwork, I mainly focused on the smaller community of survivors of the Petanac massacre and their immediate family members who live in Guaisná. On July 14, 1982, the army massacred 86 of Petanac’s approximately 100 inhabitants (Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, hereafter ODHAG 1998). The majority of those who survived annihilation at Petanac did not flee to Mexico—the choice of many others in the region—the Guatemala-Mexico border being more than a day’s walk from the village. Rather, they opted to hide in the neighboring village of Guaisná, from whence they, in fact, originally came (Petanac is a twenty-year-old hamlet of Guaisná).

8. Starting in 1871, the Guatemalan state focused on developing the agro-exportation of coffee (McCreery 1994). Locally, this political program was lived as a second Conquest by the indigenous population (Davis 1997 [1970]). The liberal policy of assigning “vacant” land to foreign businesses (primarily German) or to Criollos people of Spanish descent born on the American continent) dispossessed a large number of indigenous people of their land. This situation led the newly disposed to work as mozós (agricultural laborers) in the fincas (large plantations) of their new German or Criollo neighbors or in the coffee plantations on la Costa (the Pacific coast). It is important to emphasize here that the indigenous people did not simply roll over and passively allow their lands to
be given away to strangers. For more on the case of the Chuj in particular, see Piedrasanta (2003).

9. See Alonso (2005) for an analysis of the segregationist practices that underlie the official discourse of mestizaje (racial mixing) in Mexico.

10. Since the politicization of Mayan identity in Guatemala, the term “popular” has come to qualify groups whose claims are essentially based on notions of human rights and State reform. The organizations called “Mayanist” are those whose activities consist in the valorization of Mayan culture through education reforms, the promotion of Mayan spirituality, recuperation and preservation of Mayan languages and knowledge, revitalization of Mayan historiography, as well as the promotion of Mayan collective rights (Stoll 1993).

11. See Grandin (1997) for a historical description of the formation of the CUC.

12. See Hale (2002) for a thorough discussion of the manifold ways in which neoliberal and multicultural policies and programs are intertwined in Central America. In this article, Hale underlines more specifically how powerful actors such as the World Bank would have “proactively endors[ed] a substantive, if limited, version of indigenous cultural rights, as means to resolve their own problems and advance their own political agendas” (2002:487).

13. Starting in 1997, the CALDH approached around 80 massacre survivors’ communities to invite them to get involved in its legal project; only 22 of them decided to participate.

14. For a description of the spiritual practices and beliefs of Chuj costumbristas, see Piedrasanta (2003).

15. The CALDH did not intentionally exclude women from Guaisná from participating in its workshops on Mayan culture and identity. Quite the contrary; the organization strived to have more women participate. Nonetheless, men still dominate the political sphere in the region, and only very few women were in attendance.

16. The increasing number of young adolescents found dead on the road, along with the various offenses committed by the mixed patrols (which continue today), regularly made headlines in 2006. These patrols are made up of military and police staff. According to the peace treaties, these mixed patrols should never have seen the light of day (Jonas 2000). They were authorized nonetheless, in 1999, at the time when the new Policía Nacional Civil Corps [National Civil Police Corps] was formed. Then, under pressure this time from the US Minister of Defense, armed intervention into internal security affairs was authorized anew by the Portillo government (2000–2004) in 2000, in order to more effectively fight narcotics trafficking and organized crime, as well as to insure a more effective protection of the population (Ruhl 2005).

17. In Guaisná, I also met with women whose husbands had migrated to Cancún but never called them. Sometimes their husbands stopped sending money and even married Mexicans. This situation often leaves women very vulnerable to abuse from their in-laws (where they usually reside), who accuse them of being responsible for the loss of a valuable source of revenue.

18. For a more in-depth analysis of this “spatialization of power” in postcolonial Central America, see Alonso (1994).
Viscidi reported that “tight border control has led immigrants to traverse more hazardous routes, for example through Guatemala’s northern Petén region, a thick and dangerous jungle” (2004:2). Moreover, if they hope to reach North America, “migrants face a long journey before reaching the United States. Some are mutilated or killed after falling from freight trains. Others are attacked and robbed by youth gangs, who last year [2003] killed at least 70 migrants in Mexico” (2004:2). Finally, those who make it as far as northern Mexico’s desert risk dehydration, exposure, hypothermia or abandonment by unscrupulous coyotes. If arrested the undocumented migrants often suffer mistreatment by Mexican border officials... [who] in some cases, have assaulted their captives or held them indefinitely in detention centres with notoriously horrid conditions. [Viscidi:2004:2]

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