

WEAVING THREADS: HOW THE MAYA-MAM IMAGINE THE COMPLEX FABRIC OF  
COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

by

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(Under the Direction of Patricia Richards)

ABSTRACT

Many indigenous peoples in Latin America span state borders, which are imposed over what were initially territories that belonged to the indigenous. Little research, however, has focused on such indigenous "cross-border nations." How do indigenous peoples who span state borders construct collective identities in relation to those borders? This thesis addresses how the Mam, an indigenous people spanning the Guatemala-Mexico border, construct collective identities. In particular, I focus on whether ordinary Mames in Guatemala discursively tie themselves to the Mam in Mexico, and how they define different boundaries of collectivity. Moreover, I explain how the Mam define individual belonging to the collective. I argue the Mam construct collective identities in relational contexts by weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of indigenous collective identity. These dynamic identities may challenge nation-state reifications and they may also complicate static understanding of identity.

INDEX WORDS: indigenous peoples; border identities; Mam; nation-state; collective  
identity

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“The border became for me no longer a boundary line between two countries but rather a space of identity, a way of being.”

-R. Aída Hernández Castillo (2001:6)

Many indigenous nations are fragmented—geographically, socially, culturally, and politically—by state borders. Yet spatial representations in the social sciences frequently tie societies, cultures, and nations to specific nation-states, failing to articulate disjoints between some nations and states. Conceptualizing *peoples* as nations bounded within state borders is especially problematic for indigenous nations who span state borders (such as the Mapuche across the Chile-Argentina border, the Tohono O’odham across the Mexico-United States border, and the Mam across the Guatemala-Mexico border), which can be characterized as “cross-border nations” (Warren 2009; Warren 2010). Moreover, state borders are imposed over what were initially territories that belonged to the indigenous. Little research, however, has addressed how indigenous “cross-border nations” construct collective identity narratives in relation to state borders.

How can we characterize the collective identity narratives of indigenous “cross-border nations?” More specifically, this project explores the extent to which ordinary individuals of an indigenous “cross-border nation” construct collective identities that transcend that state’s border, discursively tying themselves with the indigenous *across* that border, and how boundaries are constructed around different imaginings of collectivity.

The Maya-Mam are an excellent example of an indigenous people divided by a state border. The Mam live on both sides of the Guatemala-Mexico *frontera* (border) and have occupied western Guatemala for perhaps 2,600 years (Watanabe 1996). Some accounts say the Mam first came to the borderland between Guatemala and Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century (see Hernández Castillo 2001:1). After decades of territory disputes between Guatemala and Mexico, the *Tratados sobre Límites* (Boundary Treaties) were signed in 1882, wherein Article III plots the contemporary borderline between each republic ("Difficulties Between Mexico and Guatemala" 1882; "Tratado sobre Límites" 1882). Through the *Ley de Colonización* (Colonization Law) in 1833 the Mexican government encouraged the Mam and other indigenous peoples of western Guatemala to settle across the newly created *frontera* as a labor "import" strategy for harvest time in the expanding coffee-growing region of Chiapas, Mexico (Hernández Castillo 2001:34-35; "El Presidente Manuel González Expide la Ley de Colonización" 1883). The Mam also crossed the border into Mexico in significant numbers in the 1980s as refugees during Guatemala's civil war that lasted from 1960-1996, which left hundreds of thousands missing and killed (Wilkinson 2004). Through these troubled histories and nationalist projects, many Mam in Mexico now distinguish themselves from the Mam in Guatemala by referring to themselves as "Mexican Mames" (Hernández Castillo 2001).

However, not everyone believes the Mam began to settle in the borderland so recently. Some Mames in Guatemala contend that the Mam have been one people with territory across that region for many centuries predating the current borderline (personal interview, June 13, 2011). Additional accounts agree that some indigenous communities, including the Mam, were in the borderland region prior to the *Tratados sobre Límites* (Hernández Castillo forthcoming). Such collective memories and histories argue that both states did not take into account the

territories of indigenous peoples that would be divided by the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Documents of borderline negotiations between Mexico and Guatemala in the 1880s, which were mediated by the United States, cannot counter this claim since they almost entirely fail to mention the “Indians” in the region (“Difficulties Between Mexico and Guatemala” 1882).

Unsurprisingly, it is not historically uncommon for border treaties in the Americas to ignore the indigenous (Starks, McCormack, and Cornell 2011). Furthermore, these alternative collective memories and histories argue that the division of indigenous peoples by political-administrative borders was initially done by Spanish conquistadores and colonizers long before the current Guatemala-Mexico border was negotiated.

Highlighting these contested borderland histories, at least briefly, is contextually important for this analysis. But this research is not so much aimed at disentangling contestations of exactly *when* the Mam began to occupy the region that spans the current Guatemala-Mexico border. Rather, this research primarily aims to show how the contemporary Mam in Guatemala use narratives that discursively transcend the frontera. Indeed, this project aims to show whether the Mam in Guatemala tie themselves to the Mam in Mexico, despite the state border, and how the contemporary Mam construct boundaries around their collective identities.

My preliminary research questions, which were later developed into the present project, hinted at the problem of how collective identities of “cross-border nations” are constructed: What does it mean *to be Mayan* in Guatemala for those who view themselves as Mayan? What roles do ordinary Mames have in constructing their identities and what competing identity narratives exist? How are indigenous demands coordinated among the Mam across the Guatemala-Mexico border? How are indigenous identities fragmented by departmental borders within Guatemala? What role does *traje típico* (indigenous dress) play in making statements

about indigenous identities? What roles do other “traditional” cultural objects have in asserting an “authentic” indigenous identity? And what does “authenticity” mean to the Mam in terms of their identity? While each of these questions fell short, individually, of addressing the complex character of Mam collective identities, together they indicated a central focus: how are boundaries constructed around different imaginings of collectivity by ordinary indigenous individuals, and how do these imaginings relate to state borders?

Examining different narratives of how the Mam in Guatemala imagine themselves as a collectivity in the midst of state borders draws, to a certain extent, from Benedict Anderson’s (1991) conceptualization of nations as “imagined communities.” An important aspect of Anderson’s (1991:224) usage of *imagining* is the notion that many individuals will never know fellow-members of the collectivity yet in each mind lives “the image of their communion.”

Poole (1999:10-11) critiques some of Anderson's language, for suggesting that “face-to-face contact” may substitute imagination, but Poole also emphasizes the importance of imagination for identity. Poole (1999:12-13) says:

...When we imagine the nation we do not merely construct an *object* of consciousness, but *we also form a conception of ourselves as existing in relation to that object*. The nation is not just a form of consciousness, it is also a form of *self*-consciousness. As members of the nation recognise each other through the nation, they also recognise themselves. If the nation is an imagined community, it is also a form of *identity*. [...] As a form of identity, it exists as a mode of individual self- and other-awareness. (Italics in original)

Thus, through imagining we construct a cultural object (the nation), which in turn may make claims on us.

This passage also suggests that imagining the nation is a form of identity construction as we do what Nippert-Eng (2002) calls "boundary work." As a mental activity, boundary work consists of "strategies, principles, and practices we use to create, maintain, and modify cultural categories" (e.g., home/work, indigenous/non-indigenous, national/alien, nation/state), which involves drawing lines between realms (and identities), and maintaining such boundaries in a manner that we can jump back and forth over them (Nippert-Eng 2002).

But imagining is also always relational—both in how it is constructed and how it is situated in time. It frequently involves looking back and looking forward in relation to the present. In conjunction with Anderson's conceptualization, by *imagining* I mean two additional things. First, I mean the remembered experiences (often like mental images and stories) that form an integral part of one's personal and, by extension, collective identities. And secondly, I mean the *aspirations* of fellow-members for collectivity. In the latter sense, while borrowing from Anderson (1991), the imagined community is something that we are striving for; the imagined community is a "horizon" (Nelson 1999:132). Therefore, my usage of *imaginings of collectivity* throughout this analysis refers to two interrelated things: the mental images of what it means to be Mam and understandings of collective identity boundaries, which rely on the memories and experiences of Mames; and the aspirations of Mames for how the Mam *should* understand themselves as a collective people, which may not be universally held by all Mam.

Different experiences, memories, and aspirations among the Mam contribute to different imaginings of collectivity. Indeed, the lives of many Mames "challenge any definition of 'the culture' as an integral, unified, and homogenous whole" (Hernández Castillo 2001:11). Experiences, memories, and aspirations even within an individual are often in conflict too. Thus, not only do imaginings differ between individuals, but even within individuals. These different

imaginings manifest themselves in narratives and everyday interactions that address indigenous identity in the contemporary world. Imaginings in this sense are always shifting, relational, and in formation. This research highlights the complex character of these imaginings as the Mam weave in and out of various collective identity narratives. As such, I will show how ordinary Mames define themselves as a collectivity in a range of ways, even within individual narratives.

In their discussion of ethnodevelopment in the Andes, Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe (2009:53) explain that ethnodevelopment discourses can be formulated by "rigid concepts of culture and bounded notions of space" or by "more flexible understandings of culture and dynamic notions of space." Likewise, indigenous identity narratives in borderlands and elsewhere may be constructed with "rigid concepts of culture and bounded notions of space" or "flexible notions of culture and dynamic notions of space." I suggest that understanding indigenous collective identity constructions today entails grappling with how and why indigenous peoples weave in and out of *more rigid* and *more flexible* imaginings of indigenous collective identity within and across *more bounded* and *more dynamic* space(s).

I make the aforementioned argument in two manners: first, by showing that the Mam do boundary work by weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity (an imagining of collectivity that is bound within municipalities; an imagining of collectivity that more flexibly extends throughout western Guatemala but ends at the Guatemala-Mexico border, and an imagining of collectivity that even more flexibly extends across the Guatemala-Mexico border); and second, by showing that the Mam weave in and out of rigid and more flexible meanings around essentialism and authenticity. The next section discusses methods used in this analysis. Finally, I conclude by introducing theoretical concepts that will aid in my analysis.

## METHODS

This research was conducted from May-August, 2011 in two Guatemalan municipios, Comitancillo and Tacaná, of the Department of San Marcos, which borders Chiapas, Mexico. However, this is not a comparative analysis between the municipios. Rather, this single-case study analyzes how an indigenous people spanning a state border constructs collective identity boundaries in relation to that border. Specifically, this project addresses whether the Mam in Guatemala tie themselves to the Mam in Mexico and in what ways they do so.

Research in Comitancillo took place in a rural community<sup>1</sup> where most people speak Mam and most women wear traje típico. The community is also close to the municipio San Lorenzo, which many define as always having been a “*ladino*” (non-indigenous) municipio. Most people are actively involved in a number of NGO and state groups as workers and leaders that focus on several tasks, such as community organizing, mobilizing against local mining, producing indigenous textiles for selling in the international market, planting trees, and building irrigation systems for crops. Research in Tacaná took place in a rural mountainous community within 45 minutes of the Guatemala-Mexico border and in a mountainous town that straddles the state border. Only a handful of people in both of these Tacaná border communities speak Mam or wear traje típico. Unlike Comitancillo, *being Mam* is not as much of a salient characteristic in how most people self-identify. Most people in these communities in Tacaná will, however, say that they have “indigenous roots,” as will be discussed later, and then if pressed to describe what they mean by “indigenous roots” will explain that their ancestors are Mam so they are Mam too.

Communities in Comitancillo and Tacaná were ideal settings for understanding how Mam collective identities are constructed and how such identities relate to the Guatemala-

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<sup>1</sup> I have elected not to use the names of places (particularly *aldeas* and *caseríos*) within Comitancillo and Tacaná to protect the anonymity of participants. However, above I describe each place in a manner that both protects participants and contextualizes the setting.

Mexico border. Although Comitancillo is not a border municipio, and not referred to as being in the borderland, it was purposefully selected as a research site because many people, including those in Tacaná, consider it to be “cien por ciento Mam” (one hundred percent Mam). Most inhabitants of Comitancillo speak Mam and display other cultural characteristics, which are regionally associated with *being indigenous*. In the borderland, though, most inhabitants do not exhibit such characteristics. Research in Tacaná, on the other hand, was conducted in border communities close to Amatenango de la Frontera and Motozintla, Chiapas, Mexico. I was motivated to investigate Tacaná because several Mames in Comitancillo expressed that along the border Tacaná was once Mam but is “now no longer Mam” or has “never been Mam,” while some Mames who live on the border in Tacaná told me the borderland “is Mam” and “has always been Mam.”

Participants were included through a snowball sampling method (Singleton and Straits 2005:138). After gaining access to key informants I sought references who may have been interested in participating in this project. After meeting with those participants, in the same manner, I sought additional references. I initiated research in Comitancillo since I had already developed networks there, and I spent about a month and a half in each municipio. Access to the two border communities in Tacaná was facilitated by interviewing teachers from Comitancillo who have been living on the border and teaching at a borderland school for the last eleven years.

Gaining access and rapport in communities in both municipios is partially a result of years spent in the borderland and my own privilege as a white, male, university student from the United States. Throughout my research I strived to always be aware of my positionality in these regards. While I recognize a lot of my ability to access rich data stems from this unequal privilege and power, I hope my own reflexivity throughout my research, somewhat akin to Diane



Nelson's (1999) "gringa positioning," transparently accounts for such imbalance. While merely recognizing my privilege and power does not dismiss my hegemonic role in this research, transparency in research at least fosters a certain degree of honesty and accountability.

Power always plays an active role in the ways that interviews are conducted and analyses are presented. The dynamics of power are omnipresent in social research, particularly qualitative work. The power relationship in this project shares similar characteristics with that in Richards' (2004:21) work as I, too, "had the power to make myself present, design the research, and ask the questions, respondents had the power to determine the extent to which they would respond and the content of what they would reveal." With this power relationship in mind, I aim to distance myself from what Narayan (1997) refers to as a "colonialist stance" that further perpetuates inequalities. I aim to do so primarily by recognizing my power and problematizing nations, histories, and "traditions" in this analysis.

Research consisted of semi-structured interviews and fieldwork observations, all of which were made more accessible by my privileged positionality. Only one person, a leader of a Mam NGO, during all of my fieldwork seemed reluctant to participate in this research. This individual's reluctance was based on his observation that most US scholars researching the indigenous in western Guatemala in the past have rarely shared their analyses with communities in the region. Other scholars have also noted "how little research is repatriated to Maya communities..." (Warren 1998:21). Most participants, however, seemed to believe my assurance that I would share my research in community workshops and meetings in the region upon completion, which they may choose to accept, modify, or reject for their own socio-political goals and interests.

Since this project focuses on how people actively construct identities in their narratives and day-to-day lives, interviews and observations were ideal methods. Interviews allowed me to hear how Mam identity is discursively constructed in everyday conversations. Fieldwork observations allowed me to perceive how Mam identity is embodied in different places and at different times. On many occasions my interviews and observations could be read in relation to each other to show how people shift between identities. For instance, I heard some individuals describe themselves as ladinos in interviews and then in meetings portray themselves in such a way that others would perceive them as Mames. The interviews also captured that shifts between identities were both conscious and unconscious maneuvers.

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews ranged from brief conversations to lengthy dialogues lasting hours regarding what it means to be Mam in the contemporary world. I conducted the interviews in Spanish, although most participants also speak Mam. Occasionally we inserted common words in Mam too. Interviews and conversations also took place in a variety of settings, such as state offices, pathways to indigenous NGO meetings, living rooms, kitchens, corn fields, and barns. Participants were men and women who ranged in age from 18 to 47, and who ranged in education from not completing any schooling to university graduates. Additionally, participants had several distinct occupations and occupation statuses, including farmers, university students, state officials, primary school teachers, NGO leaders, NGO workers, and unemployed.

All participants either self-identified as Mam or were considered Mam by others. There were instances when some people explained that they are not Mam, however, others (either indigenous or ladino) identified such people as Mam. When an individual was considered Mam

(even though they did not identify as such) by someone else, in most cases the person who extended that Mam identity also self-identified as Mam.

While substantively this is a study of Mam collective identities in relation to the Guatemala-Mexico border, more formally this is a study of indigenous “cross-border nation” collective identities. With this direction in mind it is important to remember that the Mam are very different than the Mapuche, who Sarah Warren (2009) is particularly referring to when discussing “cross-border ethnic nationalism,” the Tohono O’odham, the Kumeyaay, the Kickapoo, the Tipai-Ipai, and other indigenous “cross-border nations” of the Americas (see Starks, McCormack and Cornell 2011). While the contemporary Mapuche and the Tohono O’odham, for example, regularly engage in political cross-border meetings (Warren 2009; Warren 2010; [www.tonation-nsn.gov](http://www.tonation-nsn.gov)), the Mam are not as politically engaged across a state border. The Mam also have very distinct historical experiences across the Guatemala-Mexico border than other “cross-border nations,” with different periods and conditions of forced assimilation into nationalist projects, forced migrations, land reductions, and also resistance. Indeed, indigenous peoples who span state borders cannot be understood as a monolithic group with singular experiences, and even among “cross-border nations” different historical trajectories are experienced within each country (Warren 2010). In spite of these differences, and although this snowball sample of Mames in Guatemala cannot be generalized to other indigenous peoples, we may generalize on the theoretical dimensions of this project to better understand the collective identities, as well as some identity problems, of indigenous “cross-border nations.”

### A Word on Language

While words convey different meanings, it is important to attempt to minimize misunderstandings and representations that may occur. This subsection takes into account some of the problematic nature of certain words and phrases encountered in this analysis by explaining why I selected specific usages.

At least since the drafting of ILO Convention 169, debates have stirred regarding the terminology used to describe indigenous peoples (Nelson 1999; Warren and Jackson 2002; Viatori 2009). For example, many have feared that the term *peoples*, as it is used in international laws, will inevitably lead to the dismemberment of states (Nelson 1999:295-299). Both *indígena* (indigenous) and *peoples* are contested in character for various reasons, however, many indigenous scholars and activists with affinities toward indigenous rights have deemed *indigenous peoples* acceptable and I will follow that convention (Warren 1998; Nelson 1999; Warren and Jackson 2002; Richards 2004; Viatori 2009).

The Mam are one of many indigenous Mayan peoples near the Guatemala-Mexico border. Indeed, there are many indigenous peoples beside the Mam in Guatemala.<sup>2</sup> However, most Mames and ladinos/as in the department of San Marcos will use the terms Mam and *indígena* interchangeably. I will occasionally follow this convention, as the usage of such terms is situated in the department of San Marcos, however it is important to keep in mind that both Mam and *indígena* may convey different meanings in different contexts.

Being *indígena*, more generally than being Mam, aligns with the more recent tide of Pan-Mayanism in Guatemala, which is based on historical social exchanges that predate the

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<sup>2</sup> Several academics and activists working within Guatemala refer to the Maya more generally as one of three indigenous *peoples* in Guatemala, along with the Xinca and the Garifuna, while referring to the Mam and others as ethnic or linguistic groups. However, in this analysis I refer to the Mam as an indigenous people, following the convention participants use in everyday interactions.

contemporary movement (see Warren 1998; Warren 1998b). The rise of the Pan-Maya movement by indigenous organizations and Mayan intellectuals in recent decades may certainly be one of the reasons that so many Mames today identify as being *indígena* in more broad terms than being Mam.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, in everyday interactions participants defined being *indígena* as being Mam. Participants would frequently situate themselves as indigenous in their narratives, but when asked what being indigenous means they would say it means to be Mam. No one I spoke with denied that the K'iche or the Sipakapense, for example, are *indígena* though. Some occasionally would refer to an indigenous friend or acquaintance who is not Mam (these instances were rare), but they would immediately clarify that they are not Mam—for example, one woman described her sister who had moved to Totonicapán and married another *indígena*, then immediately she said he is K'iche. In sum, in the micro-social contexts of the Mam in this research, *indígena* and Mam are used synonymously. Accordingly, I will use indigenous and Mam interchangeably in this analysis to preserve the voice of the participants.

I recognize that constructing identities dichotomously as either *indígena* or *ladino* is problematic. This binary discourse also brings to mind epochs of forced indigenous assimilation by the state through the myth of *mestizaje*. In fact, many citizens struggle with how to self-identify within this binary. In spite of these complications, the *indígena/ladino* dichotomy persists in Guatemala. I will also follow this convention by occasionally describing people as *indígena* or *ladino*, while articulating the complexities in this dichotomy, as both terms are always in formation (Nelson 1999:380). In fact, much of this analysis is dedicated to portraying more nuanced understandings of what it means to be *indígena* in the contemporary world.

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<sup>3</sup> Addressing the relationship between Pan-Mayanism and the Mam may be an important aspect of Mam collective identities, well-deserving of further exploration, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. In future research I plan to address this aspect.

The term *problems*, which will be used in this analysis in reference to identity problems, is also conflicted in character. The two identity problems primarily addressed in this project focus on boundaries and authenticity. However, not all Mames who I spoke with find such issues problematic. Some find these issues to be consequential and deserving of scholarly and public attention, while others express that these are not issues at all. If I were to affirm that these are, indeed, problems that all Mames should be aware of and invested in then I may be insisting on some sort of “false consciousness.” An insistence that these issues are universal problems assumes that Mames without that perception have been duped or alienated from their *true* interests. I want to avoid that theoretical assumption by taking seriously what I hear to be the interests of those who I interviewed. To highlight the problematic nature of problems, I emphasize that these are problems for some but not problems for others.

Finally, by saying this analysis focuses on ordinary Mames in Guatemala I mean that this project analyzes everyday people, and not just indigenous leaders and scholars. However, I recognize that *ordinary* and *everyday* are slippery words since many people occupy multiple roles. Some Mames are community leaders and state workers, some are scholars and farmers, some are leaders in one organization and just members in another, etc. My intent in this analysis, however, was to avoid intentionally seeking out references who best “represent Mam culture.” This does not mean that I refused to interview some of these references (for example, several people told me to interview Danitsa, a leader in a Mam NGO who “knows a lot about Mam culture,” and I did), but primarily I was interested in hearing how ordinary Mames, who may not be leaders in movements, understand and construct their identities.

## COMPLEX FABRIC OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

Substantively, this thesis considers two interrelated identity problems that the Mam, like other indigenous peoples, address in everyday interactions. The next two subsections, which will be considered in chapters two and three of this thesis, respectively, present theoretical concepts that will aid in my analysis. The first concerns how the Mam define the boundaries between Mam collectivity and the rest of society. The second focuses on what it means to belong to the collective, but it also centers on how those who do not exhibit characteristics typically associated with the collective assert themselves as authentically belonging. Together, these chapters will portray complex fabrics of various Mam collective identity constructions in relation to the border.

### **Weaving In and Out: Imaginings of Collectivity**

Although the indigenous are holders of individual rights, many indigenous identities and demands inhere in the collectivity (as with claims to territory and self-government autonomy), rather than solely in the individual (Richards forthcoming; Richards and Gardner forthcoming). Indigenous peoples frequently articulate claims that tie collective identities to territorialized, outward looking places, rather than defining “indigenous identity and territoriality as a bounded space,” as many governments and development agencies do (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:231). A recurring identity problem indigenous peoples must confront, therefore, is that of boundaries. Assuming the existence of a collectivity raises a question about the boundaries of such collectivity: where does the notion of “us” end and the notion of “them” begin? In other words, how are boundaries defined between the collective *self* and the more generalized *other*? The problem of boundaries is further complicated when we recognize there is not a univocal

imagining of collectivity (i.e., there is not a singular imagining of boundaries that surround a collectivity), but numerous competing imaginings of collectivity. Individuals may also belong to several collectivities. Furthermore, these imaginings are relational to each other and they do not occur in a vacuum because they are framed in socio-historical settings. How can we address the collective identity problem of boundaries?

One convenient way of addressing the problem of boundaries is by using state borders as the dividing lines between collectivities. This solution reifies a notion of clear boundaries between societies, often conceptualized as *nation-states*, as if one society ends and another begins at each state border (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:6-7). Although the problem of boundaries is more general than the problem of conflating nations with states, the usage of state borders to define the boundaries of the (singular) nation—the "national border"—is one solution for defining the boundaries of collectivity. This solution is typically manifest in state discourses on nationalism. A state's promotion of nationalism, in turn, reinforces this singular imagining of collectivity. The value behind using state borders as the dividing lines between collectivities is that since nation-states are already assumed to exist, then the boundaries of collectivity do not seem to need further justification.<sup>4</sup>

Although the solution of using state borders as the dividing lines between collectivities in Latin America is valuable for its parsimony in addressing the problem of boundaries, such a solution fails to account for many people's daily experienced, perceived, and imagined "realities." This solution is tainted by at least three fundamental issues: first, this solution overlooks the porous and complicated characteristics of state borders; second, this solution cannot account for multiple imaginings of collectivity within states, thus this solution fails to account for plurinational states (e.g., it fails to account for states such as Bolivia and Ecuador

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to David Smilde for this insight.



that recently constitutionally defined themselves as plurinational); and finally, this solution does not account for imaginings of collectivity that transcend state borders. In line with the critique of the conflation of state borders with the boundaries of collectivity, Dewey (1946:151) argued that aggregation alone (such as aggregation within a bounded territorialized space) does not constitute a community, or public. On many levels the conflation of state borders with the boundaries of collectivity may be understood as a more rigid understanding of identity situated within a more bounded notion of space. Despite the shortcomings of conflating state borders with the boundaries of collectivity, seeking explanations for how and why such rigid understandings of collectivity are used by ordinary individuals remains an important and under-examined endeavor for indigenous identity research, and identity research more broadly.

Addressing the problem of identity boundaries in general is not an entirely new or unexplored task (e.g., see Lamont 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1999; Nippert-Eng 2002; and Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010), but the problem remains consequential for many indigenous peoples. The American theoretical tradition in sociology (Levine 1995), with sociologists such as Mead and Dewey, has concerned itself with the problem of boundaries since the mid-twentieth century. Although it is difficult to grasp what society actually means according to the American tradition, and it tends to focus on the *individual* self rather than a *collective* self, the tradition seems to evoke more micro-level analyses that may problematize the rigid concreteness of societal boundaries or more rigid imaginings of collectivity within more bounded notions of space. What is important to mention here is that at the micro-level a sense of self arises that, by definition, entails recognition of *otherness* beyond the individual or collectivity. Even though the meaning of "society" may not be articulated in the American tradition, society

as a reified unit becomes problematized by the complexities of the "generalized other(s)," which may or may not correspond with territorialized "nation-state" boundaries.

Mead (1964) argues that through language, play, and game, reflexivity produces a sense of self. He says, "We get then an 'other' which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process. The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self can be called 'the generalized other'" (Mead 1964:218). According to Mead society seems to be rather fluid, especially since there can be several organized communities or social groups ("generalized others") that contribute to distinctions between "I" and "Me" (i.e., the creation of the "self"). Mead's usage of the word "society," as a sense of the "generalized other" made manifest through relationships with communities and social groups, does not seem to suggest that there are clear boundaries between societies (i.e., between generalized others). Moreover, it would be a mistake to conceptualize generalized others as fixed nation-states that must be bound within a territorial space defined by rigid borders.

Yet it is important to remember that Mead's focus is on the *individual* self, even when discussing its embeddedness within collectivities. However, as mentioned, indigenous identities tend to focus on the collectivity. While I am partly interested in how indigenous individuals interpret their belonging to a collectivity, which is where Mead is useful, I am also interested in how the collectivity as a whole and individuals and groups within it imagine their collective future, anticipated in the present in relation to the past, which is where Mead falls short. Nonetheless, Mead is also useful in portraying how identities are constantly constructed as individuals, and I would argue (by extension) collectivities, and generalized others continuously (re)define their boundaries. Thus, while there are limits to using Mead for explaining indigenous

collective identities, aspects of his work that portray identity as flexible and in motion, since “defined” boundaries are always relational and shifting, are useful.

Not only does the generalized other change individuals, but "The individual...is constantly reacting back against [the] society" (Mead 1964:235). Therefore, the generalized other is constantly evolving, as "Every adjustment involves some sort of change in the community to which the individual adjusts himself" (Mead 1964:235). This more flexible notion of society challenges the reification of rigid societal borders mapped within a bounded space.

For example, Anibal,<sup>5</sup> a university student in his 20s, described how frustrating it was as young classmates teased him for being indígena when he was a child. Anibal, whose father is Mam and mother is ladina, was annoyed because he describes himself as ladino. In these confrontations with bullies at school who teased Anibal for being Mam, his "I" reacted against the particular "Me" that had been given form, and Anibal worked to make it known that he was ladino. He reacted back upon society to adjust his self-image. In turn, his ladino peers reacted back upon him accordingly. Later I saw Anibal stand in front of a room of elderly Mam women and men in a community meeting and describe himself as Mam. In this setting Anibal distinguished himself from other ladinos/as and this distinction formed a new "Me" for him that fit into the collectivity present at the meeting. Whether these navigations were conscious decisions or representative of changes in consciousness over time is less relevant here than highlighting that the flexibility of the generalized other allows for more nuanced visions of the self and society.

Nuanced visions, such as those encountered in Anibal's narratives, portray the flexible imaginings of collectivity across dynamic spaces as well as the more rigid understandings of identity. Weaving in and out of the *more rigid* and *more flexible* imaginings of collectivity within

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<sup>5</sup> All participants are protected through the use of pseudonyms.

and across *more bounded* and *more dynamic* space(s) is one way that indigenous peoples, collectively and individually, may confront the problem of collective identity boundaries.

Smilde (2007) builds a theory of cultural agency on the concepts of *imaginative rationality* and *relational imagination* that view people as rational actors who can make or borrow meanings to confront problematic experiences. While the problem of boundaries may not be consciously thought of as a "life problem" to address (e.g., a struggle with substance abuse, health issue, or economic difficulty) as in Smilde's fieldwork, the problem of boundaries is an existential problem in the narratives of ordinary Mames, including those who are less concerned about Mam collective identity. Imaginative rationality is a process whereby "People encounter problems, create new projects to address them, and then reflectively evaluate the success of these projects" (Smilde 2007:52). Frequently, preexisting projects are communicated by members in the same social environment that can be borrowed and built upon. Indeed, imagination is relational (i.e., relational imagination) in that people may borrow and build upon "preexisting packages of meanings" circulating among their personal networks and social environments, keeping in mind that not all imaginings are equally accessible across all contexts (Smilde 2007:52, 153). Moreover, personal networks do not guarantee certain imaginings will deterministically flow in a given direction; rather, networks frame the settings of agency (Smilde 2007:155).

Imaginative rationality and relational imagination can be used to explain how the Mam in Guatemala construct, borrow, and build upon distinct imaginings of collectivity to confront the problem of collective identity boundaries. Different contexts (space, time, networks, social ties, economic constraints, etc.) often structure the ways the Mam individually and collectively construct, and weave in and out of, different imaginings of collectivity. In her analysis of

indigenous and gender identities, Richards (2004:157-58) makes a related point when she explains that the Mapuche women in Chile "define themselves and their gender identities differently in distinct contexts." Imaginings of collectivity are communicated among the Mam, some imaginings more than others, and some imaginings are more successfully borrowed and built upon than others because of these distinct contexts. Moreover, these imaginings are historical and contemporary, and they may shift over time as they simultaneously borrow from other cultures and maintain certain relatively consistent characteristics. Ann Mische (2008:47) clarifies, "Identities are multiple and shifting, as individuals move between social settings and as those settings themselves are transformed over time."

Chapter Two uses these theoretical insights to help analyze Mam collectivity. In Chapter Two I show various ways that the Mam in Guatemala weave in and out of more rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity in their narratives. As will be described, some Mames are more passionate about certain imaginings of collectivity than others; however, passion does not signify such imaginings dominate the identity narratives circulating in the borderland. Moreover, not all of the Mam think that imaginings of collectivity are important to focus on; nonetheless, the Mam who do not seem to value imaginings of collectivity still tend to use certain imaginings that are dominant in the identity narratives circulating in the borderland. Chapter Two demonstrates how the Mam in Guatemala discursively move between imaginings of collectivity within bounded notions of space and across more dynamic spaces.

### **Weaving In and Out: Essentialist Markers and Authenticity**

Discourses that conflate essentialist markers with an "authentic" indigenous identity can be categorized as a more rigid and static understanding of identity. By *essentialist markers* I mean

outward characteristics claimed to convey a primordial indigenous essence (such as speaking an indigenous language, wearing “traditional” indigenous clothing, failing to “modernize,” and adhering to other outward characteristics of “cultural difference”).<sup>6</sup> Identity discourses that are centered on essentialism may be, perhaps rightfully so, criticized for lacking depth and ignoring the many indigenous who do not display essentialist markers (see Nelson 1999).

However, scholars have also recognized that essentialist discourses are not always viewed as “essentialist” by indigenous peoples (Viatori 2009), indigenous peoples may assert “cultural difference” *and* constructivist identity approaches (Hernández 2001), and essentialist discourses are mobilized by some indigenous leaders who seek funding from international organizations that favor essentialist representations of indigenous authenticity (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:71; Hale 2002, 2006). To simply classify essentialist and authentic identity discourses as *rigid* or *static* and, therefore, less useful for explaining identity constructions is a fairly fruitless endeavor. I agree with many of the critiques by scholars and movements who take issue with the usage of essentialist markers in identity constructions, however, I contend that casting aside such narratives without understanding when and why essentialist markers are used is also problematic. Merely labeling a discourse as too rigid and then normatively devaluing that discourse does not contribute much to our understanding of its usage.

My research, on the other hand, shows that indigenous peoples actively construct, borrow, and build upon rigid and flexible meanings around essentialist markers. Moreover, indigenous peoples weave in and out of different understandings—between the rigid and the flexible—of indigenous identity. This endeavor is valuable because it accounts for the dominant

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<sup>6</sup> Essentialist markers such as these have historically been used throughout Latin America by states (through national censuses, for example), elites, and scholars as indicators of indigenous authenticity.

narratives of essentialism that circulate among the indigenous themselves in Latin America, rather than turning a blind-eye toward narratives of indigenous essentialism.

Chapter Three shows how the Mam in Guatemala construct, borrow, and build upon meanings around essentialist markers to confront two related identity issues: the problem of collective identity boundaries, as will be described in Chapter Two, and the problem of maintaining a sense of indigenous authenticity while lacking essentialist markers (which I will refer to as the *problem of authenticity*). I argue the Mam weave in and out of more rigid understandings of identity, which claim that the collectivity is defined by those who display markers of essentialism, and more flexible understandings of identity that question the validity of essentialist markers as indicators of authenticity and collectivity boundaries.

The Mam in Guatemala primarily address the problem of authenticity by explaining that Mam identity *exists* and that Mam identity is *being lost*. Not only do the Mam weave in and out of different imaginings of collectivity, as analyzed in Chapter Two, but the Mam also weave in and out of explanations of their identity *existing* and *being lost*. The meaning constructs of Mam identity existing and being lost are particularly valuable for Mames who lack essentialist markers. Many of the Mam who lack essentialist markers, such as those in the *municipio* (municipality) Tacaná, along the Guatemala-Mexico border, imagine Mam identity existing and being lost to address *why* they lack essentialist markers, while also maintaining an authentic indigenous identity. Thus, Mames without essentialist markers make sense of their lack of essentialist markers by weaving in and out of explanations of Mam identity existing and being lost in their narratives to confront the problem of authenticity.

As with the construction of different imaginings of collectivity, the construction of Mam identity existing and being lost is a form of imaginative rationality (Smilde 2007) exercised by

the Mam to confront identity problems. The notion of relational imagination (Smilde 2007) is useful in explaining this process too, because the Mam selectively borrow and build upon constructions of identities existing and being lost through structured social relationships. Threads of existing and being lost, therefore, are woven into narratives that produce complex textiles of indigenous collective identities.

## CONCLUSION

Much research has failed to examine the collective identity narratives of indigenous "cross-border nations." The following project initializes this task with its focus on the Mam, who span the Guatemala-Mexico border, by asking whether the Mam in Guatemala imagine themselves as one people with the Mam in Mexico, and how the state border affects such an imagining. Two related identity problems are addressed in this task: how are boundaries constructed around the collectivity, and how do the indigenous without essentialist markers deal with discourses of essentialism and authenticity?

I argue that understanding indigenous collective identity today entails grappling with how and why indigenous peoples weave in and out of more rigid and more flexible imaginings of collective identity within and across bounded and more dynamic space(s). In Chapter Two I show that the Mam weave in and out of different imaginings of collectivity, some more rigid and some more flexible, in their constructions of identity boundaries. Some of these imaginings entail spaces that can be characterized as more bounded while others may be characterized as more dynamic. In Chapter Three I show that the Mam weave in and out of more rigid and more flexible narratives of essentialism and notions of authenticity. Weaving in and out of different imaginings of collectivity and narratives of essentialism are two manners indigenous collective



identities are constructed in the borderland. Finally, in Chapter Four I conclude with a discussion of how the theoretical dimensions of this analysis may speak to other “cross-border nations.”

## CHAPTER 2

### WEAVING IN AND OUT: IMAGININGS OF COLLECTIVITY

The second time Diego shared with me the same narrative his emotions were just as convincing as the first. Diego is a very educated man in his forties who was born in Comitancillo and works for the Guatemalan state's Ministerio de Educación (Ministry of Education). Sitting across from me at his office desk that warm afternoon, he displayed expressions of sadness, confusion, and frustration as he repeated the questions of a Mam man he met in Mexico, "How is it that they split our territory? How? How were they so unfair to leave some of us on one side [of the border] and others on the other side, when we are the same? We are Mam and Mayan." For Diego, these questions are critical to Mam identity because he imagines the Mam collectively as one *pueblo* (people) divided by a state border—indeed, as a "cross-border nation" (Warren 2010).

Some Mam are passionately concerned about Mam collective identity in the contemporary world, particularly engaged in understanding what it means to be a *pueblo*. But every collective identity raises a question about the boundaries of that collectivity. Social boundaries are essential for collectivities, since "Boundaries identify who is and is not a member of the collective" (Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010). How to define the limits of a collectivity, such as the limits of Mam collective identity (i.e., the dividing line between being Mam and being *ladino* (non-indigenous)), can be conceptualized as the collective identity problem of boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that all participants made dichotomous distinctions between being Mam and being *ladino*, wherein being *ladino* represents an otherness that is beyond the collectivity, but not all participants made distinctions

As this research seeks to explain how ordinary *indígenas* construct collective identities in relation to state borders, the problem of boundaries is manifest. Constructing collective identities involves strategies and practices for managing the symbolic boundaries around the collectivity (Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010), which is generally referred to as boundary work (Nippert-Eng 2002). This chapter focuses on how the Mam in Guatemala do boundary work, drawing and maintaining lines between cultural categories that define the collectivity in relation to other(s). I argue that the Mam, individually and collectively, address the problem of boundaries by weaving in and out of three imaginings of collectivity, which range from being more rigid to more flexible and from being within more bounded spaces to being across more dynamic spaces.

This chapter provides examples of three imaginings of collectivity, which will each be analyzed in turn:

- 1) A more rigid imagining of Mam collectivity localized within certain municipal borders;
- 2) A more flexible imagining of Mam collectivity that extends beyond rigid municipal borders and throughout western Guatemala to *la frontera* (the border) with Mexico;
- 3) And an even more flexible imagining of Mam collectivity that transcends *la frontera* and flows throughout southern Mexico.

It is through individual social interactions among Mames within municipal borders and across municipal and nation-state borders that these imaginings of collectivity are realized. Indeed, imaginings in substantialist terms, as inert things in and of themselves that can be obtained, are empty. But through a relational approach (or transactional perspective) these imaginings are realized in sociospatial networks of interaction (see Emirbayer 1997) among

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between being Mam and being part of other Mayan indigenous peoples. As mentioned in the introduction, participants and others in the region frequently use Mam and *indígena* interchangeably.

individuals with multiple identities. Within these Simmelian (1955) networks of duality, individuals are intersections of various collectivities just as collectivities are intersections of individuals (Mische 2008:42-43). I am not arguing such networks *determine* certain imaginings will be adopted, but rather that these relational contexts constitute the field wherein constructing, adopting, and adapting imaginings of collectivity take place. Imaginings of collectivity are an attempt to address the character of these different social networks (i.e., what it means to be Mam in the contemporary world), and imaginings of collectivity are constructed *by* these relational contexts (among ordinary Mames, organizations, the state, etc.).

While this may seem like a tautological argument it is not. I am not arguing imaginings of collectivity (the experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of/for collectivity that are relationally constructed through social networks) *actually* reflect all the social networks they seek to explain. Rather, different imaginings of collectivity, constructed by different social networks, display different experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of/for collectivity. These relational contexts are like fields, which Ann Mische (2008:43) describes as “multiple and overlapping, and actors switch back and forth among them as different sets of relationships are perceived as mattering for the interaction at hand.”

In sum, the analytical contribution of this chapter is showing how the Mam address the collective identity problem of boundaries. This is but one piece to the puzzle of how the collective identities of “cross-border nations” can be characterized. Different contexts and social relations shape the ways the Mam in the contemporary world both consciously and unconsciously address the problem of boundaries. In this chapter I argue that the Mam do boundary work by weaving in and out of three imaginings of collectivity. The following sections will focus on these imaginings individually. Each section provides examples of the imagining of

collectivity and an exploration of how it is borrowed and built upon to address the problem of boundaries. Moreover, I describe instances when Mames weave in and out of these imaginings—moving between the more rigid and the more flexible, the more bounded and the more dynamic. Some imaginings borrow from and build upon state-driven nationalist projects, while other imaginings challenge nation-state reifications. I suggest understanding indigenous collective identity today, particularly among “cross-border nations,” entails grappling with how indigenous peoples weave in and out of these rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity.

#### COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES THAT ARE LOCALIZED

The most common Mam collective identity narrative circulating among participants rigidly localizes Mam collectivity within the borders of certain *municipios* (municipalities). This imagining of collectivity is more rigid in the sense that the collectivity is simply mapped onto state political-administrative boundaries. In other words, this imagining conflates municipal boundaries with the boundaries of Mam collectivity. In essence, some *municipios* are understood to be Mam while other *municipios* are understood to be ladino.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this imagining is more rigid because everyone within the borders of Mam *municipios* is considered Mam, and everyone within ladino *municipios* is considered ladino.

In two classic articles Sol Tax (1937; 1941) argued local *municipios* mark the basic ethnic and cultural divisions of Guatemala for Mayan identity, and he believed this culturally essentialist division between the local communities that are the *municipios* of today “existed in Guatemala before the Spanish conquest” (Tax 1941:35). Watanabe (1992:5-6) notes how Wolf (1955), in another classic article, also essentializes Mayan identity within the closed and

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<sup>8</sup> Occasionally conflating Mam collectivity with rigid political-administrative boundaries is done with the *aldeas* and *caserios* of the *municipio* as well. For example, some participants said they live in a Mam *aldea*.

localized community, although Wolf argued these Mayan towns developed in response to colonialist and capitalist conditions rather than existing before the conquest. Regardless of when municipal divisions were articulated, from this perspective indigenous identity is essentialized within closed *municipios* (Watanabe 2004:41). Today, both local residents and foreign academics alike describe *municipios* as ethnically distinct from one another (Hendrickson 1995:11).

Imaginings of Mam collectivity that are localized today describe *municipios* as “Mam,” “purely indigenous,” “100 percent indigenous,” and having “always been indigenous.” Likewise, *municipios* *not* considered part of Mam collectivity are often described as “ladino,” “purely ladino,” and “not indigenous.” For example, the Mam in Comitancillo frequently describe Comitancillo as a Mam *municipio* and Tacaná today as a ladino *municipio*—the Mam in Comitancillo say Tacaná is “not Mam” or “has never been Mam.”

This conflation is heard in Diego’s concern that “There are some *municipios*, such as Tacaná on the border, which have always been Mam, but are now no longer Mam.” Also heard in this statement is a notion that entire towns can *ladinoize* (Adams 1956; Wilkinson 2004:46), willingly and/or unwillingly losing their indigenous identity. Participants from Tacaná agree that Comitancillo is Mam, and are aware of assertions that Tacaná is not Mam, but they disagree with the latter claim. Moreover, even though Mames in Tacaná deny the claim that Tacaná is ladino, they still tend to attribute a ladino identity to other *municipios* (such as San Marcos, San Pedro, and Tejutla). The point here is not to argue *which* *municipios* are Mam, but to emphasize that *municipios* are consistently labeled dichotomously as Mam or ladino.

Claudia, a grandmother and farmer in her 40s from Comitancillo who is a member of a Mam NGO and several women's groups, usually describes being Mam in terms of being from the

municipio Comitancillo. Sitting in her kitchen one afternoon she described how "we the indigenous" from Comitancillo are ridiculed by the ladinos of the municipio San Pedro Sacatepéquez when selling chickens there. Laden throughout her story, among other stories, are conflations of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity boundaries with municipal boundaries. Implicit in her accounts is an imagining of identity that is bound within specific municipios, in this case Comitancillo (imagined as indigenous) and San Pedro Sacatepéquez (imagined as ladino).

The conflation of indigenous and ladino boundaries with municipal boundaries is not only a contemporary imagining rooted in individual experiences, but historically it has been sustained by the state. For instance, on October 13, 1876 President Justo Rufino Barrios signed Decree 165, legally declaring all the indigenous of San Pedro Sacatepéquez ladinos (Comisión de Oficialización de los Idiomas Indígenas de Guatemala 1998:68; Menchú 1998:17; Wilkinson 2004:46). And some current politicians continue to label entire towns "ladino" and "indian" in their campaigns.<sup>9</sup> I do not mean to imply that Claudia is aware of the history of San Pedro's ladinoization by the state. I am not suggesting the Mam conflate their boundaries of collectivity with municipal boundaries because they necessarily recall certain historical declarations, or are aware of them, or even that such conflation originates with the state. But I am suggesting such declarations by the state have sustained this imagining of collectivity.

In spite of this rigidity sustained by the state and organizations, some relational contexts within political-administrative borders foster more flexible imaginings of collectivity.<sup>10</sup> In the following conversation with Claudia she continues to conflate Mam collectivity with being from the municipio Comitancillo, but she also complicates this imagining:

C: Because here in Comitancillo pues, there weren't any ladinos with us ...

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<sup>9</sup> Fieldnotes June 4, 2011

<sup>10</sup> Fieldnotes May 30, 2011.

J: Here by, by [Comitancillo]?

C: In the town where I lived pues, there weren't any ladinos.

J: No? Only indigenous people?

C: ...We are only indigenous. There weren't, there weren't any ladinos. The same as now, pues, now there aren't any [pause] there aren't any ladinos here [in Comitancillo] now either. With the exception of Doña Maria, pues, there may be some ladinos [here], there are some pues, but in other parts.

J: So... there are just indigenous people here [in Comitancillo]?

C: Yes, we are just indigenous. Purely, u huh, purely indigenous. Purely indigenous.

In this explanation Claudia emphasizes that Comitancillo has always been “purely indigenous.” But she also notes there may be a few exceptions based on her personal interactions. Others in Comitancillo and Tacaná make similar adjustments in their narratives by moving between totalizing and rigid imaginings of collectivity, whereby *all* within a municipio are either indigenous or ladino, and somewhat more flexible imaginings noting exceptions. But what are some possible explanations for the salience of more rigid imaginings of collectivity within more bounded spaces?

It can be argued there are certain advantages and disadvantages, complexly intertwined, for the Mam to use more rigid imaginings of collectivity to address the problem of boundaries. Perhaps the most straight-forward advantage is that borrowing from already existing state political-administrative boundaries is a simpler solution than creating new imaginings of collectivity that are incongruous with boundaries already established by the state.<sup>11</sup> I say

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, this assumes municipal borders predate more flexible imaginings of collectivity, which certainly may not be the case. Here I am merely presenting an explanation that one could possibly use to justify imaginings of collectivity that are localized within municipal borders.



“simpler” in the sense that accepting existing political-administrative boundaries does not introduce conflict between citizens and the state.

As a form of what Smilde (2007:153) would call *relational imagination*, the pervasiveness of this “preexisting package of meaning,” which circulates through state-led programs and organizations, makes it easier for the indigenous to adopt and adapt more rigid imaginings to their lives. Thus, rather than imagining collectivity in new ways, preexisting imaginings are communicated and adopted (Smilde 2007:127).

Nevertheless, adopting these dominant and readily-accessible discourses of collectivity fails to challenge discrimination and racism the Mam face as a pueblo. The extent to which the indigenous may make demands on the central government in a manner already recognized by the state (i.e., through municipal governments) could be interpreted as advantageous for the indigenous, but doing so is problematic for at least two reasons: first, ladinos/as and the indigenous are not always political equals in municipal governments; and second, municipal borders divide indigenous peoples politically. Consequently, discrimination, inequality, and recognition remain significantly under-addressed issues for the indigenous within and across political-administrative boundaries, aside from “minor cultural concessions” granted by the state (see Becker 2011:56; Hale 2006; Cojtí Cuxil 2007).<sup>12</sup>

Warren (1998:14-15) points out that municipal borders divide the indigenous peoples who span them politically. She explains that the maps used by the state and by Mayanists are “at war with each other” because the state insists on the primacy of administrative divisions into departments and municipios, which ignore language and identity divides and “perpetuate Maya

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<sup>12</sup> In Becker's (2011:56) discussion of Ecuador's new Constitution, which recognizes the plurinational character of the country but falls short regarding other indigenous demands, he suggests “it is easier to make minor cultural concessions than to create more inclusive social and economic systems.” I am suggesting here, that more rigid imaginings of collectivity that do not challenge the state fail to create more inclusive social and economic systems.

political fragmentation,” while Mayanists use maps that assert language diversity and indigenous identity are regional issues (Warren 1998:14-15). Maya activist and scholar Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil (2005:18) says:

The political administrative division and the organization by administrative departments of public agencies, is not consistent with the division of the country by Maya, Xinca and Garifuna Peoples and linguistic communities. While this administrative division has been reorganized as a function of the political conveniences of the rulers, the truth is that they all have agreed to deny indigenous peoples their territorial (administrative) and cultural recognition. (My translation)

Since the political-administrative boundaries divide the indigenous politically (fragmenting collectivities), then making demands on the state through municipal governments may actually, and ironically, serve to continue denying indigenous rights and recognition. In other words, making demands through municipal governments reifies the municipio (along with its borders), which, in turn, politically fragments the indigenous peoples who span them.

This solution to the problem of boundaries—imagining collectivity localized within municipal borders—also elides the complexities of identity within and across spaces. The Mam from ladino municipios are stripped of their identity, just as ladinos/as from Mam municipios are overlooked when the boundaries of collectivity are simply mapped onto political-administrative boundaries. Mapping racial, ethnic, and cultural identity boundaries onto state political-administrative boundaries may not seem to be an issue for municipios with a high percentage of individuals self-identifying as Mam, such as Comitancillo where one Mam NGO claims 99.5% of the inhabitants of Comitancillo identify as Mam (AMMID 2011), but the Mam in ladino municipios like Tacaná are stripped of their identity as they are not considered part of Mam

collectivity. Imagining places as indigenous or non-indigenous supposes a monolithic character, and identity is never that simple.

Labeling municipios "Mam" or "ladino" personifies such places too, because the municipios are embodied with racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics. This personification pretends to represent its inhabitants, however, the symbolic body representation significantly masks over complexities within the municipal borders, particularly the discrimination and inequality the indigenous confront within those borders. One participant described what this discrimination internal to municipios looks like from her experiences trying to fix legal paperwork: "Discrimination still exists in Guatemala because, for example, if you [...] have to do something with your papers from the government then you have to wait in line. Long lines. But if you are ladino they just call you up to the front. Just because you look different."

"Body metaphors are appealing because they suggest unity and a common purpose," Manzo (1996:55) says of the national body—which can be applied here to municipal bodies as well—, but "More often than not [body metaphors] disguise internal hierarchy..." Even Comitancillo, which prides itself in being Mam (or at least its inhabitants do), significantly mis- and under-represents the Mam politically. Diego, for example, recognizes "the political parties in the department of San Marcos [which includes Tacaná and Comitancillo] are racist," and "there is not one Mam person in congress or in any public position at the level of the central government." Sury, a Mam political candidate of Comitancillo in 2011 running for a *concejal* (councilor) position under an indigenous candidate for mayor said that only now has some space "finally opened" for the first time for a Mam woman in Comitancillo to run for public office.<sup>13</sup> In our conversation of racism and sexism in the municipio, Sury excitingly noted:

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<sup>13</sup> They were subsequently elected in September 2011, after this fieldwork took place.

S: Space has opened up for women now. In [my political party] I am the representative of the women in these communities and I have the support of many women. I have their support because this is the first time that this space has been opened for us as women. Many husbands too are supporting me, not only the women but many men, the husbands are supporting me because they too see that this space is being opened for indigenous women. [...]Now space is open for a representative of the indigenous women.”

Thus, some Mames view that there are possibilities for Mam representation at the municipal level, but for most Mames, Mam municipios currently—as a symbolic representation—do not actually represent the Mam politically.<sup>14</sup>

As a representation, both politically and figuratively, indigenous presence in Guatemalan public offices is usually limited to symbolic ornamentation or decoration (Cojtí Cuxil 2007:131). Thus, in a contradictory fashion "the same public offices that use indigenous names and decorations discriminate against the living Maya, Xinka, and Garifuna" (Cojtí Cuxil 2007:131). While to a certain extent indigenous culture is celebrated, autonomy and self-determination promised by indigenous rights declarations (e.g., ILO Convention 169), among other indigenous demands, continue to be inexistent realities for the indigenous. Similarly, Hale's exploration of the neoliberal multiculturalism project in Guatemala, whereby proponents of neoliberalism endorse limited cultural rights in order to advance their own political agendas, shows that multicultural reforms can be passed and celebrated "without placing ladino racial dominance in jeopardy" (Hale 2002:487; Hale 2006:36). In other words, labeling a municipio "Mam" and

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<sup>14</sup> One participant (César), however, said, “We [the indígenas] are the ones who now control the politics in the country, because if we’re not afraid and we’re the majority, we decide who gets elected President and who gets elected in our communities” (fieldnotes July 10, 2011). In this statement César is referring to the indigenous more generally than the Mam, in a Pan-Mayanist manner, but other participants who spoke on the manner disagreed. Most of the Mam said that despite being a numerical majority in the country and even locally, they are politically mis- and under-represented.

granting some cultural rights may seem like progressive moves, but they may also be very limited as other indigenous demands are unaddressed and discrimination and inequality persist within such places. Diego even noted that while Comitancillo is Mam, “The public institutions [in municipios] still don’t use the language of the community to attend to the users. For example, the Centro de Salud (Health Center) [...] and even the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (Supreme Electoral Tribunal) in Comitancillo [don’t use the Mam language].” Solely using imaginings of collectivity that are localized plays into this project because it reinforces an oppressive political-administrative system.

Finally, another critique of solely using imaginings of identity that are localized to address the problem of boundaries is mentioned in Nelson's (1999:130-131) discussion of locally bound understandings of identity. Nelson (1999:31) asks, "But what happens when people are no longer bound to (tied to) the community?" She says, "Viewing 'Indian-ness' as bound to a particular place can become an incarceration and a double bind, so that any indigenous person who leaves their community, the rural area, and the manual labor associated with the village is vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity and ladinoization" (Nelson 1999:131).<sup>15</sup> Mayan activists, therefore, reject the indígena/ladino binary that conflates indigenous identity with localized places (Nelson 1999:131).

The Mayan activists Nelson (1999) interviewed "contest the notion that identity is community-bound" and argue Mayan "culture" is not fixed or bound to a specific place, in the sense that one can be Maya in Guatemala City just as they can in a rural "Maya municipio." Nelson suggests the Maya *are* community-bound, though, in that their work is "headed toward, moving in the direction of, a future community" (Nelson 1999:132). Here she uses *community* as

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<sup>15</sup> Nelson's mention of leaving manual labor, along with leaving other essentialist markers of indigenous authenticity, will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

a horizon that is strived for rather than a fixed or solid thing (Nelson 1999:132). Nelson's explanation parallels the conceptualization of *imaginings of collectivity* in this analysis by including aspirations for collectivity beyond one's experiences of collectivity. But contrary to the Maya activists Nelson interviewed, the ordinary Mames I interviewed *do* frequently imagine identity as more fixed, rigid, and bound within specific municipal borders. At the same time, they also weave into their narratives more flexible understandings of identity.

For example, Anibal is a university student in his 20s from Comitancillo whose mother is ladina and father is Mam. Anibal's identity narratives reveal he is very conflicted regarding how he sees himself and how others see him:

A: Here [in Comitancillo] is where since as a child I have seen myself enveloped in situations where I don't know how to identify myself—if as an indigenous person or a ladino person. Pues, I have found certain differences that make me think about my identity now that I've been able to interact between the two cultures. Pues, I don't identify myself as indigenous but I don't feel purely ladino either.

The confusion Anibal feels complicates the rigidity of the indígena/ladino binary.

Unlike most people in Comitancillo who always describe themselves as indigenous, in most interview settings Anibal says he is ladino. Yet in many contexts outside of semi-structured interviews Anibal identifies himself as Mam. For instance, Anibal accompanied me to a community meeting with an indigenous women's group where he introduced me to the Mam women and men present to describe my research. Everyone already seemed to know Anibal fairly well. In Anibal's introduction, standing in front of the room and looking at the 30 people in attendance, he presented himself as a Mam young man and reminded everyone he was the son of Juan. No one in the room seemed to disapprove of Anibal's depiction of himself as Mam. To the

contrary, I noticed many nodding in affirmation as Anibal presented himself as Mam. Anibal also said things such as, “This research is important because it’s about *our* Mam culture,” and he used phrases such as, “...*us* as a people,” and “...who *we* are” (emphases all mine).

In this meeting Anibal said, “Most of you know who I am because of my father.” This was not the first time I heard Anibal use his father’s name—he being a well-known and respected indígena throughout Comitancillo—to present himself as Mam. On another occasion I rode with Anibal in a taxi from San Lorenzo’s market to Comitancillo and an indigenous woman whom neither of us knew began to speak with us. She assumed Anibal was Mam and began to speak with him in the Mam language. Interestingly, even though Anibal frequently says he does not speak Mam he was able to carry on a brief conversation with this woman. At one point though he did not understand what she said so she asked him whether or not he was Mam. Anibal replied that his mother is ladina but then he promptly used his father’s name to point out that he is Mam from his father’s side of the family. He also sustained his Mam identity further, despite not being fluent in the Mam language, by naming other well-known indígenas from Comitancillo in his extended family.

Many Mam identity narratives that transition within the indígena/ladino dichotomy occur strategically. Anibal's introduction at the Mam women's organization and conversation in the taxi ride, which in both cases he used his respected Mam family members as evidence of his “authentic” Mam identity, are examples of strategic maneuvers he would relive in other contexts to construct himself as Mam. When asked later, he would tell me he was even aware of these transitions so that he could “show he was the same.” But in many instances transitions from ladino to Mam, and vice-versa, are seemingly unconscious to him. In either case, movements

within the indígena/ladino dichotomy indicate more flexible identity understandings in certain contexts.

In sum, most Mames address the problem of boundaries by using more rigid understandings of identity, imagining themselves as a collectivity localized within state-established municipal borders. Indeed, the imagining conflates Mam identity boundaries with municipal boundaries. This imagining has been built into state discourses and even the education system, making it easily accessible to adopt and adapt in everyday narratives.

I have argued imaginings of collectivity that are localized borrow from state political-administrative boundaries. Using such narratives, even when seemingly advantageous, may perpetuate inequalities. Borrowing from state political-administrative boundaries to address the problem of boundaries may seem advantageous for its simplicity, since the boundaries are already assumed to exist, and for making demands on the central government in a manner already recognized by the state (i.e., through municipal governments). But imaginings of collectivity that are localized perpetuate inequalities in at least the following three ways: by overlooking the indigenous in ladino municipios; by dividing the indigenous across municipal borders politically; and by sustaining a political-administrative system that pretends to represent the indigenous in Mam municipios, when the indigenous in such municipios actually have less political power than ladinos/as. Furthermore, by labeling a municipio "Mam" or "indígena," there is a sense that demands for autonomy have been met, when in actuality such labels may serve as a cultural concession empty of substantive rights (see Hale 2006).

However, I have also suggested the Mam occasionally move beyond these more rigid imaginings of collectivity by noting the pluriethnic character of municipios. Moreover, in some contexts the Mam weave into more flexible understandings of identity that problematize the



rigidity of the indígena/ladino dichotomy. The following section continues to move beyond the more rigid understandings of identity by showing how the Mam weave into more flexible imaginings of collectivity.

#### COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES EXTENDING TO *LA FRONTERA*

A more flexible imagining of collectivity *transcends* the rigidity of municipal borders and imagines the Mam as an indigenous pueblo throughout western Guatemala. Nonetheless, in this section I argue this imagining maintains rigidity to the extent it is mapped within the nationalist project of the state by ending at the Guatemala-Mexico border. I suggest this more flexible imagining allows the Mam to address the problem of boundaries in a manner that accounts for some of the complexities missed by imaginings of collectivity that are localized within municipal borders. However, I argue this solution to the problem of boundaries is still limiting in the sense that it reifies the nation-state, which impedes the realization of some indigenous demands for rights and recognition.

Unlike the monolithic character of municipios envisioned with imaginings of collectivity that are localized, this more flexible imagining of collectivity is manifest as the Mam recognize exceptions to totality within political-administrative boundaries. In this manner, spaces and places are less bounded and more dynamic. Rather than referring to municipios as “Mam” or “ladino,” if one speaks of such bounded places they will say, “there are indígenas there,” “there are ladinos there,” or “there aren’t many Mam there,” for instance. This imagining envisions spaces as Mam, usually using topographic markers (e.g., mountains and volcanoes), rather than bounded municipios.

For example, Danitsa is a Mam NGO leader in her 30s from Comitancillo who helps women produce and commercialize Mam “cultural” projects.<sup>16</sup> While her work is primarily focused on projects within Comitancillo, she does not limit her discussion of the Mam to those within its municipal borders. Frequently in her narratives of visits beyond Comitancillo's borders to the volcano Tajumulco, and areas near Tacaná and Ixchiguán, for instance, she will recount speaking with other Mames and exchanging ideas with the Mam in those regions. In this manner Danitsa usually imagines the Mam as an indigenous people throughout western Guatemala.

Through social exchanges with Mames across rigid municipal borders and interactions about such exchanges (i.e., within these social networks), typically in conversations, more flexible imaginings of collectivity are constructed. On the other hand, those who lack social relationships with the Mam outside of the municipio (through personal interactions or even accounts of others' interactions with Mames from regions beyond municipal borders) may have limited access to borrow and build upon more flexible imaginings of collectivity. In conjunction with this argument, I agree with Smilde in his reference to Polletta (1998) that "the repertoire of meanings available for [people] to imagine and build upon their own projects is limited" and remarkably structured by an individual's social relationships (Smilde 2007:153-54).

In a conversation with César, a man in his late 30s who leads a Mam women's group of 28 people (19 women and 9 men) in Comitancillo, which works on community projects such as planting trees and building barns, he illustrates how imagining Mam collectivity is structured by

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<sup>16</sup> One branch of this Mam NGO is dedicated to the production of “cultural” textiles—not unlike the material used for the indígena *traje típico*—into placemats, cup holders, frisbees, etc. that can be sold in the local market and exported. Danitsa visits various Mam women's groups associated with the NGO to help them with their weaving and discuss how they can best profit from their products, along with any other concerns the women may have regarding the organization. Other branches of the Mam NGO deal with agricultural development, research, and various projects that contribute to the community. For example, last year through this NGO several families in Comitancillo constructed deep water deposits out of cement for home water consumption since most families in this particular community do not have water spigots at home or only receive water once a week. While much could be said regarding the commodification of culture in commercializing different products by this organization, that is beyond the scope of this analysis.

his social relationships. César recounted how he and a Mam friend from another department, Huehuetenango, were conversing in Mam while waiting for a taxi in the municipio San Pedro Sacatepéquez. Overhearing these men speak in Mam, a ladina woman from San Pedro burst into a racist rant: “Get out of here! Get out of here [or] we’re going to attack you! Go, go, go! [...] Go away!” César then proceeds to recount how he told the women that his friend from Huehuetenango and himself are Mam, and although they speak both Spanish and Mam, their own language is Mam. He then asked, “Why should we leave? We have always gone [to San Pedro], we are going to speak the same [in Mam].”

Implied from César’s narrative is a conflation of ladino identity with being from the municipio San Pedro. In his narrative he frequently uses “them,” “ladina,” and “Shecana” (meaning from San Pedro) interchangeably. In essence, he conflates being ladino/a with being from San Pedro as he imagines ladino/a identity localized within the boundaries of the municipio San Pedro. But he also imagines identity more flexibly by using “us,” “our,” and “Mam” as signifiers of an identity that transcends the borders of Comitancillo and even the boundaries between the departments San Marcos and Huehuetenango. César’s rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity are structured by his individual social relationships, such as his relationship with his friend from a different department. Again, I do not mean to suggest that these relationships *determine* how the Mam imagine themselves as a collectivity, but these social ties and networks provide dynamic contexts for constraining and facilitating ways of imagining collectivity.

Mames from Tacaná, near the frontera, frequently imagine collectivity flexibly extending to the frontera while also attributing it to interactions within social networks. For example, José, Miguel, and Sayra, all school teachers in Tacaná who have lived and taught in regions outside of

its municipal borders, talked about the Mam pueblo throughout western Guatemala they have come to know better as a result of meeting Mam teachers from outside of Tacaná.

It is far more common to hear this more flexible imagining of collectivity near the frontera in Tacaná than in Comitancillo. This may be explained by the variation between the communities in this analysis. Communities near the frontera included in this research had more Mam teachers from outside the municipio and workers who would leave the municipio to work seasonally than Comitancillo.<sup>17</sup> It can be argued that because the Mam near the frontera have more linkages to networks and social ties with Mames in other regions (either through personal interactions or hearing of such interactions) than the Mam in Comitancillo, the likelihood of imagining Mam collectivity more flexibly across municipal borders is increased for the Mam near the frontera.

Like José, Miguel, and Sayra, Eliseo also explains his imagining of Mam collectivity extending throughout western Guatemala and ending at la frontera in terms of personal interactions with Mames in regions beyond Comitancillo's borders. Eliseo is a primary school teacher in his early 20s who plays soccer for the selection team of Comitancillo. Although he notices variation in the Mam language (in tone, pronunciation, grammar, etc.) between communities he has visited, he imagines the Mam as one pueblo extending to the Guatemala-Mexico border:

E: Because in different places there are indigenous people. But the language of them [he pauses] they pronounce different than the Mam language here. In other words, all the Mam languages are different. They are not all the same.

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<sup>17</sup> With the Ministerio de Educación's push to increase bilingual education in Guatemala (emphasizing the teaching of indigenous languages in schools)—the *idioma materna* of the region, plus a secondary language and even a third—there has been an increased demand for Mam teachers in areas such as Tacaná, where there are less Mam speakers.

J: So the Mam language is different in different places?

E: Yes. At the moment of pronouncing the words, the difference is there.

J: For example, the Mam [language] of those in Huehue[tenango] is different?

E: [M hm] Yes.

J: So then are they the same indigenous pueblo...

E: Yes! [he says emphatically over my question]

J: ...Or are they a different indigenous pueblo?

E: No, it is the same indigenous pueblo.

J: So everyone feels they are the same then, the same Mam pueblo?

E: M hm [nodding affirmatively].

Eliseo attributes this understanding of the Mam to his personal interactions with Mames in areas beyond Comitancillo's borders when playing soccer in those regions. But Eliseo says he is unsure if the Mam pueblo extends through Mexico because he has never been to Mexico. This exchange suggests the following: the Mam in different regions are viewed as part of the same indigenous collectivity, despite differences among the Mam; some view language as an integral part of Mam identity (more will be discussed on this in Chapter Three); and imaginings of collectivity take shape in the context of social relationships.

Unlike Eliseo and the teachers from Tacaná, the narratives of Artemio, a farmer in his late 40s from Comitancillo who participates in a few community service organizations, illustrate how *the lack* of social relationships with Mames in other regions frame the ways Mam collectivity is imagined. In our discussions Artemio rarely used the names of municipios to describe where the Mam are located. Artemio's home is situated on a mountainside, not uncommon for many homes in Comitancillo, where several mountains in different directions can

be seen along with the volcano Tajumulco (the largest volcano in Central America). Rather than dichotomously naming municipios as either “ladino” or “Mam,” Artemio would usually point to regions seen, or envisioned in relation to the mountains or volcano seen, from his home. In several of my visits to Artemio's home he would point to different mountains and say things such as "...Behind those mountains the Mam are too," and he would use hand gestures to indicate mountains one would cross over to arrive at other areas of the Mam.

One afternoon Artemio and I conversed as we sat by his *milpa* (corn field). He grabbed a loose stick to draw a map of western Guatemala in the dirt as he described the Mam pueblo. While Artemio's sketch in the dirt did not represent any "traditional" map of Guatemala I had seen, it indicated the Mam pueblo spread throughout the mountains of western Guatemala. Artemio explained with his drawing that near la frontera there have never been any Mam. When asked about the Mam in Mexico he contended that even though he has never been across la frontera he knows there have never been any Mames in Mexico.

Artemio then used the stick to dig a rugged and deep line in the dirt running parallel to his indication of the Guatemala-Mexico borderline. For Artemio this line runs close to la frontera but exists before one arrives at la frontera. Artemio explained that the Mam have always only arrived up to that point—never right on the Guatemala-Mexico border and definitely never across la frontera. While this area is not delineated by any topological markers or geopolitical state boundaries, Artemio imagines this as a nebulous area where the Mam end as a collectivity.

This exchange suggests that Mam collectivity is flexible to the extent it is *not* mapped onto municipal boundaries defined by the state. And the exchange suggests a lack of social relationships with the Mam from the borderland and beyond la frontera contribute to imagining Mam collectivity more rigidly ending at the Guatemala-Mexico border. Focusing exclusively on

either the rigidity or the flexibility of Artemio's imagining of Mam collectivity would overlook the other.

Although the Mam near la frontera certainly have a geographical advantage over those in Comitancillo to develop social networks among the Mam in Mexico, and thereby have more access to choose to adopt more flexible imaginings of collectivity that transcend la frontera, many Mames in Tacaná still address the problem of boundaries by imagining themselves as a collectivity bound within Guatemala. How can this be explained?

One possible explanation lies in how imaginings are constructed. Imaginings of collectivity not only borrow from and build on individual social ties and networks among Mames, but they are also relationally constructed through discourses and practices of nationalism, among other things. In the schools I visited near la frontera there was a much stronger emphasis on celebrating Guatemala through flag ceremonies and other activities of nationalism than in Comitancillo. Through schools, policing, the media, and the state's influence over these realms, among others, nationalism conflates collectivity boundaries with state boundaries, which reifies the nation-state (Manzo 1996).

Hobsbawm (1990:9-10), who defines nationalism as a principle of congruency between political and national units, contends that "nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way around," while also emphasizing that nations need to be understood from the bottom-up. I agree states and nationalism construct the nation, and also contend that citizens both individually and collectively, in turn, construct and maintain the state and nationalism in an interdependent relationship. Like the boundary work of Mam collectivity, which involves strategies and practices for distinguishing between the collectivity and the generalized other, nationalism is a process of boundary creation and maintenance that "could not exist without the

twin concepts of national and alien,” and it requires continual practice and maintenance (Manzo 1996:38). I argue it is through these discourses and practices of nationalism that some may identify as Guatemalan before identifying as Mam, and doing so contributes to the reification of the nation-state. Such reification stands at odds with any imagining of collectivity that transcends state borders.

Referencing Poza’s research on the Mam, Hernández Castillo (2001:59) shows how governmental policies by states (e.g., forbidding the use of traditional costume in Mexico), which aimed to construct unified nation-states fixed within territorialized borders, have fueled Mam divisions so that many Mames in Mexico now identify as Mexican Mam (Hernández Castillo 2001). The preoccupation with maintaining a sense of collectivity within the boundedness of the state (i.e., within its borders) may impede more flexible imaginings that challenge the state’s borders. In Tacaná and near the border the pervasiveness of *la frontera* in everyday interactions among individuals, in conjunction with discourses on nationalism, may contribute to the prevalence of imagining Mam collectivity more rigidly ending at the Guatemala-Mexico border.

For example, Luis is a bus driver in his early 40s who lives right on the border and frequently visits family and friends in Amatenango de la Frontera, Chiapas, Mexico. When traveling with Luis between Guatemala and Mexico I noticed he interacted with many people from both sides of *la frontera*. Most of these interactions were respectful, and many included discussions of being Mexican or being Guatemalan with mentions of *la frontera* always at the heart of the conversation.

For instance, one morning after crossing *la frontera* into Mexico Luis spoke with two friends from Mexico at a nearby tienda to verify if "*no hay ley*" (there isn't law, i.e., Federales



looking for legal permission to be in Mexico that day). In the conversation both parties joked about the corruption of their respective governments and police officers, but the conversation centered on distinctions between Guatemala and Mexico, supposedly as rigid as *la frontera* itself. For several participants there is both a sense of nationalist pride (also conveyed through flags and t-shirts representing Guatemala or Mexico, which abound in the borderland) and a sense of imagining each other as one *pueblo* divided by an artificial border. In both cases the pervasiveness of *la frontera* (even if viewed as arbitrary) is evident. In essence, *la frontera*, as a meaning construct, is an important concept for viewing the world in the borderland and it is ingrained into everyday interactions.

Borrowing state borders to define the limits of collectivity is also a simple solution to the problem of boundaries since the nation-state is already assumed to exist. Similar to the discussion already elaborated on municipal boundaries, since *la frontera* between states is already defined, then collective identity boundaries can easily be mapped onto that division.

Conflating state boundaries with collectivity boundaries seems to suggest the existence of a monolithic nation-state. However, states do not necessarily represent the conflicts, diversity, and competing characteristics and interests of the communities within their borders. As historian Howard Zinn emphasized, history is often told from the perspective of governments who assume to represent a nation as a whole, as if there really is such a thing as a "national interest" represented by the state (Zinn 1980:9). He argued, "Nations are not communities and never have been" (Zinn 1980:9). I follow this argument by problematizing monolithic depictions of collectivities and nations, but I am also arguing such depictions are occasionally useful in different relationships. Imaginings of collectivity that extend to *la frontera* are rigid to the extent

they borrow from nationalist discourses that conflate nations with states, but also flexible to the extent they complicate nations as a monolithic community.

This depiction is seemingly contradictory, but that is partially my point. Rather than addressing the problem of boundaries by simply borrowing from and building on discourses of nationalism, political-administrative boundaries, and individual social interactions, the Mam use all of these social relations as a context to consciously and unconsciously weave in and out of more rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity that complicate identity as a solid and innate thing.

Two apparent disadvantages to solely using imaginings of collectivity that extend to la frontera as a solution to the problem of boundaries have already been alluded to, but should be articulated before concluding this section. First, this imagining alone still elides the complexity of identity. Imagining Mam collectivity ending at la frontera ignores the Mam in Mexico. In other words, this imagining of collectivity does not account for peoples who span state borders, i.e., "cross-border nations." And second, although this imagining is comparably more flexible than more localized imaginings as a solution to the problem of boundaries, it still fails to articulate where Mam identity ends moving in other directions (for example, eastward in Guatemala). In other words, the rigidity of the Guatemala-Mexico border serves as a supposed hard line where being Mam ends or begins, but moving in other directions the symbolic boundaries between the collectivity and the generalized other become muddled.

In sum, the problem of boundaries is also addressed by more flexible imaginings of collectivity that extend throughout western Guatemala but end at the Guatemala-Mexico border. These imaginings are constructed, borrowed, and built upon in sociospatial relational contexts. Such relational contexts include individual social interactions and stories of others' interactions

with the Mam in regions beyond municipal borders. This section has also highlighted how discourses and practices of nationalism influence imaginings of collectivity within these relational contexts. The pervasiveness of discourses and practices of nationalism make this imagining widely accessible. However, the lack of social relationships with Mames from regions beyond municipal borders limits the access many Mames have to this imagining. I have argued these networks do not determine whether a more flexible imagining of collectivity will be adopted and adapted, but they frame the space that such agentic adoptions can occur, either consciously or unconsciously.

I have suggested this imagining challenges the political-administrative system of government by viewing Mam collectivity across the more rigidly bounded municipal borders. Thus, this imagining is advantageous to the extent it is more inclusive and stands at odds with a system that mis- and under-represents the indigenous. But I have also argued that rigidly viewing Mam collectivity ending at *la frontera* reifies the nation-state. In turn, a monolithic character is supposed on citizens (imagined as the nation), which denies indigenous peoples rights to recognition they seek. Furthermore, reifying the nation-state politically fragments the indigenous who span state borders.

Weaving in and out of rigid and flexible imaginings of collectivity addresses the problem of boundaries by using narratives others can easily relate to, particularly since the conflation of state and municipal boundaries with identity boundaries is already assumed to exist (either as Mam municipios or as a nation-state), while also pushing for more nuanced understandings of collectivity that are incongruous with boundaries both within and between states. But weaving in and out of these two types of imaginings still fails to account for the Mam in Mexico, and an understanding of Mam collectivity as a “cross-border nation.”

## COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES TRANSCENDING *LA FRONTERA*

An even more flexible collective identity *transcends* la frontera by imagining the Mam as a pueblo that spans the Guatemala-Mexico border. This imagining is more flexible by virtue of its non-reliance on boundaries already defined by the state (e.g., municipal and departmental boundaries within the state, and boundaries between states), thereby challenging the reification of the nation-state. In other words, this imagining conflicts with the notion that a monolithic nation is simply mapped onto the territorial boundaries of the state. This imagining is also relationally constructed in a sociospatial context, but is less common than other imaginings because it counters nationalism—promoted by the state from above and by citizens from below—and fewer ordinary Mames have access to Mexico or know others in their interpersonal networks who have met the Mam in Mexico. Since this imagining of collectivity is very limited, I will rely heavily on the narratives of one particular participant, Diego, who was introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

This more flexible imagining of collectivity need not dismiss *nation* and *nationality* as useful concepts. Indeed, Sarah Warren's (2010) work on the Mapuche as a “cross-border nation” speaks to how indigenous identity can be analyzed through the lens of nation and nationalism. La Comisión de Oficialización de los Idiomas Indígenas de Guatemala (1998:179) includes in its definition of nationality the following:

Its essence is the existence of a “*nosotros*” (us). The political unification (one single state) is not an essential element of a nationality, since it can even be divided between several states. Thus, there are Mames in Guatemala and Mexico, but still, they feel they constitute a single ethnic community. (My translation)

This conceptualization suggests that some of the indigenous are aware of the tendency to conflate nations with individual states, binding peoples within the territorial limits of the state, and that a sense of collectivity can transcend state borders, as in the case of the Mam. The point here is the articulation of nation and state disjoints at their supposed convergence: *la frontera*.

Diego says the Guatemala-Mexico border was created as an artificial boundary among the Mam. Indeed, he and a few others I spoke with imagine the Mam as a nation that spans a state border. Regarding *la frontera* and Mam collectivity Diego emphasizes, “The border should have been around us rather than between us. The border didn’t take into account the indigenous territorial boundaries.” Pozas (1952:27, in Hernandez Castillo 2001:59-60) says distinctions between the Mam in Mexico and Guatemala “occurred rapidly because of a fixing of limits between Mexico and Guatemala, which determined the separation of the Mam into two groups...” who were once “one single people and one single culture.”

One afternoon, while visiting in his Ministerio de Educación office, Diego gave me a copy of his office’s latest version of a Mam language manual to be published and given to teachers in the department. He proudly pointed out a statement on page 10 the Mames from his office included in this latest version, which was not in the previous curriculum:

The Mam people are a sociolinguistic community divided by two States, Guatemala and Mexico, since the colonial political division did not take into account the territorial borders of the original peoples, therefore, a part of the people remained in Guatemala and the other in Mexico. Currently, about 50,000 speakers of Mam live in the Chiapas State. Additionally, he said, “...The Guatemalan Map was made, was constructed, by the colonizers, by the invasion, and it doesn’t correspond with the Mayan territory.” While I have argued some Mames may be unaware of historical discourses promoted by the state that influence their

imaginings of collectivity (e.g., Claudia's conflation of identity boundaries with municipal boundaries), here we learn some Mames are very conscious of how their imaginings are historically structured, even by the state, and people can simultaneously challenge the state and such histories by imagining Mam collectivity incongruously across la frontera.

This more flexible imagining also builds on individual interactions among Mames across la frontera and stories heard of such interactions. Diego continually revisits and shares the story of a time when he was at a meeting in Unión Juárez, Mexico:

So I've seen in a meeting, we had a project that I worked on for bilingual education, and there was a meeting, an invitation for me, in Chiapas [...]. I was invited to a meeting in Unión Juárez [...]. I spoke. But I said, "I am Mam." And I said a few words. At the end, in the audience a tall person asked to talk with me. And he climbed on stage, I had the microphone. And we spoke...and he said, then, how he heard that I was Mam. Then he told me that he was Mam too. And then we started to speak in Mam. A few minutes later I saw his face with tears rolling down his cheeks. [Diego uses his index finger and runs it from his right eye down his cheek, as tears rolling down the face] I also felt a bit sentimental, because then he said, "How is it that they split our territory? How? How were they so unfair to leave some of us on one side and others on the other side, when we are the same? We are Mam and Mayan." [...] [The border] line divides us, but it is important to try to communicate and come closer. Pues, I was the same as him.

Diego then elaborated on why this story is important to him:

I tell this story often because some say that on that side [Mexico] there is no Mam. And that Mexico influences us much so we lose [our sense of] being Mam here in Guatemala [...] affecting the identity of the Mayan here. I say no! That there is also a part of the

Maya, Mam, back in Chiapas who are trying to, that they are looking for a return to their identity, and they work to ensure their identity. It is good to develop the Mam identity.

Diego's narrative of realizing there are Mam in Chiapas was expressed as a meaningful personal interaction across the state border. He says, "There's a dream that I feel we, the Mayans, have to go and find each other and together work for the development of the Mayan people in general. In the case of the Mam, yes, we have this obligation."

Diego also describes what he sees as the greatest challenge in realizing this dream: "It's just that from that side [Mexico] we don't have so much contact. But we need someone that promotes, that works, that can be the mediator between us [Mames in Guatemala and Mames in Mexico]. So that together we can plan, and together we can construct the work for the Mam."

The following conclusions can be drawn from Diego's statements: imaginings of collectivity can be greatly influenced by both individual interactions with the Mam across state borders and understandings of histories; and some look forward to the realization of a "cross-border nation."

The desire to communicate across borders is justified in ILO Convention 169, Article 32: "Governments shall take appropriate measures, including by means of international agreements, to facilitate contacts and cooperation between indigenous and tribal peoples across borders, including activities in the economic, social, cultural, spiritual and environmental fields."

Transnational mobilization has strengthened indigenous movements in Latin America (see Brysk 2000), especially as local actors have reached out through transnational networks to pressure their respective states—theorized by Keck and Sikkink (1998) as a "boomerang effect," and further theorized by Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe (2009) as a "reloaded boomerang"—, but communication among indigenous peoples across state borders is a key aspect (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:32; Brysk 2000). A narrative of trying to "come closer together" to

strengthen the Mam is embedded throughout this imagining. But while the Mam who imagine themselves as a collectivity across state borders want to "come closer together," socially and politically, they understand *la frontera* is an effective tool for states to divide the Mam.

Diego emphasizes, "there are not all of *las facilidades* (freedoms from difficulties) so that a grand effort can be made [to "come closer together], but there should be! There should be from both sides of the border." Some Mames envision this "coming closer" through *cambios políticos* (political changes), but most are unsure of what such changes would entail. Participants say this could be costly for both states, but it cannot be done without each state. Although some individuals are optimistic about all the Mam imagining themselves as a collectivity across *la frontera*, they believe working through the states, possibly against their own interests in promoting nationalism, is a daunting task.

In spite of the difficulty, Diego says, "It's important as pueblo Mam that we unite and fight for a better future. Now, what instances are there [of this]? There aren't many." He mentions there is some intent, but overall little is being done to coordinate activities between the Mam in Guatemala and the Mam in Mexico. Supposedly some organizations are coming closer, but he is unable to provide any specific examples. And even with those ambiguous examples, very little is actually being done:

[...] I know that on the part of academics and the Mayan languages there is an intent [...]. It's just that right now I'm with the Ministerio de Educación and [...] we don't have [pause], there isn't any activity for teachers to be able to go [to Mexico], because Chiapas isn't thinking about it either. But I was working on that project [in Unión Juárez] and other organizations are coming closer together.



Diego's statement that some Mam organizations in both countries are "coming closer together" remains vague, and no one I interviewed could name any specific organizations coordinating between the Mam in Guatemala and the Mam in Mexico.

Overall, there are very few efforts and resources available to "come closer together" across la frontera. Diego recognizes this limitation but remains optimistic:

There should be more so that we can come closer. Right? I don't know... We have to think of a strategy so that, so that we don't think so much in the dividing line [the border], so that we can focus instead on the pueblo that we are, we're the same. We're the same.

Even though Diego recognizes there are relatively few means for the Mam to "come closer together" across la frontera, he continually says, "there should be though."

While the nation-state is reified by imaginings of collectivity that end at the Guatemala-Mexico border, "coming closer together" across la frontera, even if only ideally, and imagining Mam collectivity more flexibly across state borders challenges this reification. Imagining Mam collectivity across more dynamic spaces, rather than within the boundedness of municipal or state borders, is a solution to the problem of boundaries that accounts for "cross-border nations." But the solution is not without disadvantages. Most notably, while this imagining is more inclusive by accounting for the Mam extending across state borders, it fails to articulate the limits of that extension. As a solution to the problem of boundaries this beckons the question of whether this imagining is *too* flexible.

Mames partially resolve this problem by not relying solely on this more flexible imagining. Indeed, actors can mentally switch back and forth among different social networks—in this case to weave in and out of different imaginings—as "different sets of relationships are perceived as mattering for the interaction at hand" (Mische 2008:43). On several occasions

Diego transitioned from talking about the Mam as a pueblo across la frontera to discussing Mam identity issues throughout western Guatemala (conflating identity boundaries with nation-state boundaries) and within municipios (conflating identity boundaries with municipal boundaries), by situating himself differently based on his multiple identities (e.g., activist, father, community leader, state employee). For example, after sharing his story from Unión Juárez he later discussed how one of his office's concerns is that some Mam municipios near the border, like Tacaná, now no longer identify as Mam, so teaching the Mam language is a challenge. Movements between the rigid and the flexible through relational networks address the problem of boundaries and other identity issues at hand, while also problematizing collective identity as an innately static thing.

Whether any single imagining is too flexible or too rigid drives the weavings in and out of different imaginings of collectivity. By weaving in and out of all three imaginings of collectivity the Mam borrow from and build upon discourses and experiences organizations, municipal governments, the central government, activists, researchers like myself, ordinary Mames and ladinos, and others<sup>18</sup> can relate to (as we all have relational understandings of different rigid and flexible boundaries), while also complicating identity. Weaving in and out, either consciously or unconsciously, addresses the problem of boundaries, therefore, in an innovative manner. Transitions between the rigid and the flexible, the bounded and the dynamic, complicate identity by showing how collectivities can share experiences and visions of unity while simultaneously challenging “any definition of ‘the culture’ as an integral, unified, and homogenous whole” (Hernandez Castillo 2001:11).

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<sup>18</sup> I recognize that there is obviously much overlap between these categorizations.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on how ordinary Mames in Guatemala construct collective identities in relation to the Guatemala-Mexico border. Driving this chapter is the question of how to define the boundaries of collectivity, where *nosotros* (us) ends and *ellos* (them) begins. I have shown the Mam do boundary work by both drawing lines between identity categories and maintaining those lines in a manner that can be crossed over (Nippert-Eng 2002), through various imaginings of collectivity that range from being more rigid to more flexible.

This chapter focused on the following three imaginings of collectivity: an imagining that rigidly conflates identity boundaries with municipal boundaries, a more flexible imagining that conflates identity boundaries with state boundaries, and an even more flexible imagining that transcends such connotations. I argued that any one of these imaginings is fraught with disadvantages for the indigenous (e.g., serving to divide the indigenous politically, to deny claims for historical territories that span borders, and to strip the indigenous of their identity).

However, while each of these imaginings has disadvantages and advantages for the Mam, Mames address the problem of boundaries, consciously and unconsciously, by weaving in and out of all three of these imaginings in their individual narratives. By weaving in and out, the Mam are able to rely on static boundaries already assumed to exist (such as municipal and state borders) and simultaneously push for more flexible visions of collectivity in the contemporary world. Doing so complicates collective identity as an innate or static thing and pushes for new ways of understanding indigenous collective identities, particularly among “cross-border nations.”

Overall, imagining Mam collectivity flexibly is important for the Mam if they are to realize autonomy spanning *la frontera*. Imagining collectivity more rigidly bound within

municipal and state borders, on the other hand, may impede this cross-border realization. Very few Mames imagine Mam collectivity flexibly though, perhaps because there are limited opportunities to interact with Mames across municipal borders and even less opportunities to interact with Mames across the Guatemala-Mexico border.

In the grander scheme of things this chapter is important, therefore, because it highlights that while flexible imaginings of collectivity, which transcend *la frontera*, are less dominant in Comitancillo and Tacaná than the more rigid imaginings of collectivity, the few Mames who have had opportunities to interact with Mames from Mexico are passionately engaged in promoting an understanding of the Mam pueblo as a “cross-border nation.” Both Guatemala and Mexico have powerfully promoted nationalism in a manner that has penetrated everyday identity understandings at the expense of more flexible ways of imagining collectivity. Although this may be true, overemphasizing the force of Mexican and Guatemalan nation-building discourses elides the meaningful resistance that is also occurring. This chapter has highlighted how some Mames, even if only a few, have been creating ways to problematize and resist the dominant discourses that reify the nation-state. My point is that this resistance, however limited it may be at this moment due to state or institutional constraints, should not be overlooked. As Watanabe (1992) articulates, the Mam have always been, and continue to be, “more than passive victims of enduring iniquities.”

I have also argued these imaginings are relational to each other and relationally constructed in complex sociospatial networks that include messy combinations of historical narratives, discourses and practices of nationalism, economic constraints, the state, municipios, NGOs, activists, friendships, acquaintances, stories, etc. These imaginings are structured in this relational landscape, where Mames borrow from and build upon these relational contexts in

constructing collective identities. Imaginings can be adopted, as more dominant narratives circulating often are, or built like acts of bricolage by relying on various interpersonal interactions between the Mam at different spatial scales. Certainly, these networks are limiting as well. Indeed, some ways of imagining, as with any cultural repertoire of meanings, are unavailable to some while more accessible to others.

It is more challenging for individual Mames with limited access to “come together” across la frontera, either through personal interactions with Mames from the Mexican side of the border or hearing stories of such interactions, to imagine the Mam as a “cross-border nation.” While I do not claim more flexible imaginings of collectivity are entirely *dependent* on interpersonal interactions or stories heard of like interactions, I suggest such exchanges foster more flexible imaginings. Thus, the limited access to interpersonal networks across larger scales contributes to the infrequency of collective identities dialectically transcending the Guatemala-Mexico border.

This chapter’s analysis is but one piece to the puzzle of how the collective identities of “cross-border nations” can be characterized, and more specifically, how boundaries are constructed around indigenous collective identities. The following chapter further complicates these identities by showing how Mames define *being Mam* differently—constructing, borrowing, breaking from, and building upon meanings around essentialist markers—in these different relational contexts.

## CHAPTER 3

## WEAVING IN AND OUT: MEANINGS AROUND ESSENTIALISM AND AUTHENTICITY

I was introduced to a small community<sup>19</sup> near the Guatemala-Mexico *frontera* (border), in the *municipio* (municipality) Tacaná, by three men in their late 20s from Comitancillo who have lived in the borderland as primary school teachers for the past eleven years. All three self-identify as Mam, and they frequently speak amongst each other in the Mam language. One afternoon we were playing soccer outside the school with several others from the community when the game was ended by a torrential downpour, not uncommon in the region's rainy season. The four of us ran for shelter under the tin awning of a nearby *tienda* (corner shop). One of the teachers, José, and I bought sodas and sat down to wait out the rain beating like firecrackers on the tin above us. An acquaintance of José casually walked by the tienda with his child and no umbrella. José yelled out to him with a smile on his face and a chuckle in his tone as if the soaked passerby were crazy, “*Ma tzaj jbal*” (It's raining!). The man didn't reply to José, but he smiled back. José then turned to me and quietly said with a snicker, “He understands [Mam], he just doesn't respond.” José then rolled his eyes as he leaned back in his chair as if to say in frustration, “He should respond in Mam though because he can.”

José's frustration focuses on two issues. First, there are some Mames who are capable of speaking Mam but choose not to because they do not want to be seen as indigenous. And second, *being Mam* means something different in Tacaná than in Comitancillo. Just as Chapter Two showed how the Mam address the collective identity problem of boundaries, José's frustration

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<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, I have elected not to use the names of places (particularly *aldeas* and *caseríos*) within Comitancillo and Tacaná to protect the anonymity of participants.

implicitly points to another indigenous identity problem, particularly for the Mam in the borderland: how to maintain a sense of indigenous authenticity while lacking essentialist markers.

Throughout this thesis I suggest understanding indigenous collective identity today entails grappling with how indigenous peoples weave in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity. To sustain this argument, this chapter furthers the discussion of imaginings of collectivity by showing how the Mam weave in and out of rigid and more flexible meanings around essentialism and authenticity in their collective identity constructions.

An important question lingers: how do Mames know the Mam exist in other regions? Chapter Two articulated how imaginings of Mam collectivity are borrowed and built upon in relational contexts—typically as individuals meet Mames from other regions, such as across municipal borders and/or the Guatemala-Mexico border, or heard stories of such interactions. However, how did individuals know they were actually interacting with other Mames across those regions rather than ladinos? In other words, how did Eliseo, the teacher and soccer player from Comitancillo, know that those he played soccer with in Huehuetenango were actually Mam rather than ladino? How did school teachers in Tacaná know that the teachers they met in regions beyond Tacaná's municipal borders were Mam? How did Danitsa, a leader of a Mam NGO from Comitancillo, know she had met Mames near the volcano Tajumulco?

This chapter, therefore, addresses how individuals are identified as belonging to the collective. By *collective belonging*, I mean whether or not individuals are considered part of the collective by Mames, which entails describing what it means to belong to the collective in a more generalized sense. This chapter centers on how collective belonging is defined. In other words, how do Mames define whether an individual is part of the Mam pueblo? Defining

individual belonging to the collective inherently involves defining the collectivity as well. Focusing on how Mames describe what it means for individuals to belong to the collective has the advantage of seeing how Mam collective identities are constructed at the grassroots.

Defining who is and is not part of the collective is a process of constructing and reconstructing collective identities. Identities are typically understood according to one, or various combinations, of the following three views: a primordialist view, an instrumentalist view, and a constructivist view (Arthur 2011). The primordialist view, typically eschewed by social scientists for various reasons, uses stable essentialism to define identity as unchanging, such as seeing the contemporary Maya stuck in a timeless past. The instrumentalist view follows rational choice approaches as individuals can freely choose their identities, which are neither timeless nor unchanging (Arthur 2011:5). Finally, a constructivist view understands identities as not simply *chosen* by individuals, and neither as timeless and unchanging, but rather made through social relationships and institutions in which people are embedded (Arthur 2011:5).

In this chapter I argue ordinary Mames often draw from rigid essentialist markers, contrary to much literature on indigenous peoples that shuns essentialist explanations of identity, as they define who is and is not part of the collective in different relational contexts. By *essentialist markers* I mean outward characteristics claimed to convey a primordial indigenous essence (such as speaking an indigenous language, wearing “traditional” indigenous clothing, failing to “modernize,” and adhering to other outward characteristics of cultural difference). In a way, this argument illustrates how all three of the aforementioned identity views intersect at different moments in indigenous collective identity narratives. My analysis emphasizes that relational contexts are not entirely determinative, but they frame the settings wherein agency takes place to adopt, adapt, challenge, and modify identities.



The decision of most scholars to eschew essentialist explanations is well-taken, particularly since such explanations cannot account for the complexities of identity and overlook the indigenous who do not exhibit such essentialist markers. However, radical anti-essentialism also has pitfalls (Watanabe and Fischer 2004:259-61; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Fischer 1999). In a conference regarding contrasting historical circumstances and future cultures of Maya peoples in Mexico and Guatemala in 2000, Richard G. Fox cautioned, “We can fall over ourselves so much in trying to avoid essentialism that we end up talking as if there are not these important and significant differences among ways of life or among peoples...” (Watanabe and Fischer 2004:25). Ideally, scholars can still acknowledge cultural difference “without fear of essentialism” (Watanabe and Fischer 2004:25). Yet it is still important to understand *why* some indigenous peoples choose to understand themselves in essentialist terms, which are often not of their own making (Martinez Novo 2006:116-17).

I should note that my point in including narratives of essentialism is not that I find great explanatory “power” in essentialist identity explanations. In fact, I recognize these explanations are very limiting and typically disempowering for the indigenous as they impede the realization of certain demands, such as recognition as authentic indigenous peoples. Rather, my point in including narratives of essentialism in my analysis of collective identity constructions is that ordinary Mames use such explanations themselves in everyday interactions as they define collective identity boundaries—perhaps at times to their disadvantage, yet at other times actually to their advantage. If we are to understand how indigenous peoples construct their collective identities we cannot simply ignore the essentialist narratives shared in everyday interactions.

Rather than solely relying on essentialist explanations, though, the Mam also weave into their narratives more flexible identity explanations as they critique essentialism. This collective

identity construction both embraces *and* challenges notions of being "authentically" Mam. By weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible meanings around essentialism and notions of authenticity in relational contexts, the Mam (both individually and collectively) address the problem of boundaries, defining the line(s) between who is and is not part of the collective, while also further complicating static characterizations of collective identity.

The Mam also weave in and out of explanations of their identity *existing* and *being lost*, between contending that being Mam, and what that entails, thrives in the contemporary world and will continue thriving, on the one hand, and on the other, that Mam-ness is fading in the contemporary world. I argue the meaning constructs of existing and being lost are an attempt to address the problem of authenticity. Many of the Mam who lack essentialist markers, such as those along the Guatemala-Mexico border, use explanations of existing and being lost to address their lack of essentialist markers while also asserting they maintain an authentic indigenous identity.

## PROBLEM OF BOUNDARIES

How do Mames define the boundaries between who belongs and who does not belong to the collective? Different imaginings of collectivity are relationally constructed by interacting with Mames across other regions, but how did participants know they are actually interacting with other Mames across those spaces? In this section I show that Mames frequently define who belongs and who does not belong to the collective by relying on essentialist markers, but also by weaving into their narratives a more flexible definition of collective belonging: self-identifying as Mam.<sup>20</sup> In other words, I suggest the Mam address the problem of boundaries in their

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<sup>20</sup> The purpose here is not to isolate variables that indicate essential "Mam-ness." An ontologically different approach, attempted here, is to analyze how identity is constructed around notions of essentialism and self-

constructions of different imaginings of collectivity by defining collective belonging through exhibiting essentialist markers (a rigid definition) and self-identifying as Mam when describing their historical and familial "roots" (a more flexible definition).

In a classic article, Sol Tax (1937) rigidly defined the identity boundaries between Mayan peoples and ladinos/as in the following manner:

Indians speak Indian languages, wear Indian costumes, have Indian surnames, and live like Indians. A ladino has a Spanish surname and speaks Spanish as a mother tongue; he wears European-type clothes, wears shoes, lives in a house with windows, is usually literate, and has, in general, a better standard of living than his Indian neighbor.

The emphasis is that language, class, technology, clothing, etc. all have symbolic value, so "seeing *traje* (indigenous dress) means one is seeing Indian" (Nelson 1999:181; Warren 2009:779; Fischer and Brown 1996; Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:27).

Women's usage of *traje*, as an identity marker, is particularly noteworthy (Warren 2009:781). While many indigenous men in Guatemala maintain the tradition of wearing *traje*, there is a disproportionately higher expectation for women to represent their indigenous identities through *traje*.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, most representations of *being Guatemalan* and *being Mayan* "depend heavily on indigenous women in *traje*" (Nelson 1999:38). Watanabe (2000:238) explains, "After language, traditional handwoven Maya dress remains the most obvious expression of Maya identity, especially for women."

Since most men have "lost" the tradition, as expressed by many participants, women's continual usage of this essentialist marker to signal an authentic identity is important for many

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identification. What I am arguing is that neither exhibiting essentialist markers or self-identifying as Mam are sole conceptual tools for defining an individual's belonging to the collective, but rather that identity is constructed in everyday interactions typically around both exhibiting essentialist markers and self-identifying as Mam.

<sup>21</sup> This observation holds true in the communities where I conducted my research, however, in several communities this observation does not apply (e.g., Todos Santos Cuchumatán, Sololá, and Nahualá, among several others).

ordinary Mam women. Moreover, women's usage of traje is important for men's identity too. Comitancillo is described by many as a Mam municipio because the women wear traje, along with exhibiting other essentialist markers. Consequently, the men of Comitancillo are assumed to be Mam at least partially because of how the women dress. Most women in Tacaná near the border, on the other hand, do not wear traje and the men are assumed to be ladinos. In essence, women's usage of traje is not only an individual identity marker, but it represents an identity marker of the community too, including the men of that community.

Not only do women perpetuate the cultural expectation that women will dress indigenous, but men also participate in enforcing cultural expectations. Men's participation in enforcing this expectation may even happen in subtle ways. One day Anibal was scrolling through photographs I had recently taken around the community of landscapes and people I had met. He scanned through them fairly quickly since most seemed very familiar to him. But then he stopped on one picture with a surprise look on his face. It was a picture of a family. Beatriz, the oldest daughter in the photo who is about the same age as Anibal, caught his attention. “Since when does she wear corte?” he asked surprised. Anibal had not seen Beatriz in a while and he told me she used to not wear corte. A couple weeks later I spotted Anibal flirting with her and complimenting her corte—positively reinforcing the cultural expectation for women to dress in traje. I am not saying that men only use positive sanctions to encourage women to wear traje, certainly men may enforce the expectation in other ways, but rather my emphasis is that it is not only women who participate in enforcing these gendered cultural expectations.

In essence, indigenous women are expected to have their indigenous culture and identity inscribed on their bodies through traje, in effect becoming “authentic” icons of tradition (Nelson 1999; Warren 2009:779). With this definition of collective belonging, Mam women are expected

to be the “legitimate bearers of tradition and culture” (Warren 2009:786-87). This is especially true for women from Comitancillo. Men from Comitancillo, on the other hand, are no longer expected to wear the traje típico merely because “men have lost the tradition,” as some participants explained.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond women’s wearing of traje, this essentialist binary definition of identity belonging suggests “Ladino identity is defined as modern in terms of technology and lifeways” (Nelson 1999:249). For example, Anibal described being teased by *indígenas* (the indigenous) and ladinos alike for deciding to attend a good school in a “ladino” municipio. He said, “If the indigenous seek to get ahead they are teased because the indigenous are seen as not being able to get ahead. And if they get ahead they are seen as no longer indigenous.” Nelson (1999:249) articulates, “the binary semiotics of identity in Guatemala mean you cannot simultaneously be Indian and modern.” The simple binary suggests that any movement to adopt new technologies, “get ahead,” wear “Western” clothing, etc. is “progress,” and simultaneously a movement away from being “authentically” indigenous (Jackson and Warren 2005). This proves to be especially challenging for the indigenous in urban areas to “prove and authentic identity” (Warren 1998; Warren 2009).

Imaginings of collectivity—both rigid and more flexible imaginings—are often constructed by conflating essentialist markers with identity. Imaginings of collectivity localized within municipal borders often rely on the more rigid meanings around essentialism to signal identity. For example, most participants who described Comitancillo as a “Mam” municipio did so by saying everyone in Comitancillo speaks Mam and the women wear *corte* (indigenous wrapped skirt of the traje típico). In this manner, peoples, traje, language, and municipios become entangled, so different languages and styles of traje simultaneously signal a conflated

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldnotes July 18, 2011

municipal and indigenous identity (Hendrickson 1995).<sup>23</sup> Nelson (1999:130) notes contestations among historians regarding traje's origins: either as imposed on communities by the Spanish colony as a form of counterinsurgency or as a marker of community identity predating colonialism. In either case, though, traje maintains rigid "centuries-old associations with municipalities" (Hendrickson 1995:66). Adopting essentialist markers in relational contexts, therefore, is one way the Mam construct more rigid imaginings of collectivity localized within municipal borders.

For example, Isabela, a hard-working mother in her mid-20s from Comitancillo who occasionally describes herself as Mam (her mother is ladina) and whose husband always self-identifies as Mam, usually rigidly imagines the Mam as a *pueblo* (people) within Comitancillo's borders because Comitancillo women wear *corte*. This is especially interesting since Isabela, contradicting herself, does not wear *corte*. Yet Isabela says, "Those who wear *corte* are indigenous and those who don't, we say, are ladinos." I asked her, "what about those who speak Mam but don't wear *corte*?" Isabela simply responded, "they're not, as we say, indigenous then." While Isabela uses this explanation to describe Comitancillo as a "Mam" municipio, rigidly imagining Mam collectivity within the municipal borders, she also uses this explanation to define herself as ladina because although she speaks Mam she does not wear *corte*. This suggests that essentialist markers, some more than others, are used to define who belongs and does not belong to the collective, in this case imagined as a collectivity bound within municipal borders.

The Mam also borrow from rigid essentialist markers as identity indicators to construct more flexible imaginings of collectivity. In a discussion regarding where the Mam are located as

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<sup>23</sup> Hendrickson (1995:51) also notes variation in trajes among municipios, as materials are often imported and designs are borrowed from other municipios. Watanabe (2000:238) argues local Maya dress indicates this historical borrowing between communities.

a people, Eliseo conflates Mam language fluency with Mam identity as he imagines Mam collectivity a little more flexibly than Isabela:

J: Where are the Mam located?

E: From here to [*long pause*]. Well, because here in [this town] not everyone speaks Mam, there are some who speak Spanish. And from there [...] to [Comitancillo], they are also Mames. In the very center of, in the center of the pueblo of Comitancillo everyone also speaks in Mam. But in the outskirts, yes, the other sectors, hamlets, there is [*pause*], Mam is spoken.

Eliseo started by saying the Mam exist “From here to...” and then after pausing for several seconds he noted that not everyone in Comitancillo is Mam because not everyone in Comitancillo speaks Mam. Contrary to Isabela, Eliseo uses essentialist markers to problematize more rigid imaginings of collectivity. Eliseo then continued to answer the question of where the Mam are located by stating other areas of Comitancillo where the Mam language is spoken.

Thus, in different relational contexts Mames occasionally use language, an essentialist marker, to problematize (other) rigid imaginings of collectivity that view municipios as monolithically Mam or ladino. Likewise, in some contexts women use *traje* as an essentialist marker to signal a pan-Maya identity existing *across* municipal boundaries (Hendrickson 1995:64).

However, defining collective belonging with essentialist markers has serious limitations and may be very disempowering for the indigenous (Nelson 1999). For one, identity discourses centered on essentialism tend to lack depth and ignore the many indigenous who do not display such essentialist markers (see Nelson 1999; Hernández Castillo 2001). For example, some of the indigenous do not learn indigenous languages from their parents (Nelson 1999:160), which was

repeatedly the case in Tacaná where many participants said their parents felt pressured to think that by having their children give up Mam for Spanish they could "succeed." Abandoning cultural traits, such as language and dress, was reinforced by ladino teachers in borderland schools in past decades as well.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, some of the indigenous cannot afford to buy corte (Nelson 2009:176). For instance, Sayra, a teacher and single mother in her 30s who has lived in the borderland for several years, said she is troubled because she no longer wears corte as she did when she was younger in Comitancillo. Sayra explained that as she grew her family could no longer afford to buy new corte, and as a result she had to start wearing pants.

Many Mames understand the limitations of essentialist markers for defining the collective so they use self-identifying as Mam and pointing to their Mam "roots," regardless of whether they exhibit essentialist markers, to define collective belonging. In other words, more flexible than essentialist explanations of belonging to the Mam pueblo, one is Mam if they self-identify as Mam and have Mam "roots."

Many participants said they are Mam because of their "roots," but unfortunately it was uncommon for participants to develop explanations of what the notion of "roots" means. For most participants it seemed to mean having Mam ancestors. This understanding focuses on the past. But for some Mames "roots" involves having ties to the Mam pueblo and Mam culture in the present and the future as well. When asked about what it means to be Mam Diego said, "Well, more or less, [a Mam] is someone who knows where they come from, and they know their roots, they have a cultural connection, and from that they construct their future." Although this definition is broad, his emphasis on the forward-looking aspect of "roots" is noteworthy.

The Mam are *not* rooted in a timeless past, but they are rooted in cultural traditions that continue to be passed on; their roots contribute to the ways in which they develop new cultural

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<sup>24</sup> Fieldnotes July 4, 2011.



forms, traditions, technologies, and ways of being (Watanabe 2000:240). "Roots" could be seen in the efforts of women in the community to help Marleny, a women who had just given birth, bathe in the *chuj* (steambath) with her newborn daughter. "Roots" could be heard in Ana's account of protesting the mining taking place in Mam communities that would exploit lands in the future and create unstable grounds. This concern for the land the Mam are "rooted" in is also seen on random walls spray-painted throughout San Marcos reading "¡no a la minería!" And "roots" could be observed in the work of a Mam women's organization to plant trees in a community that has been deforested. Together, Mam "roots" involves not only looking to the past, but also an ongoing and forward-looking process of connection to the Mam pueblo and its ancestral territory.<sup>25</sup> While this forward-looking process of connection is present in some narratives, in many cases "roots" are simply discussed in terms of having Mam ancestors. Thus, there is tension in the forward-looking and backward-looking character of "roots."

Along with having Mam "roots," self-identifying as indigenous is a way for those who may or may not exhibit essentialist markers to indicate they are authentically indigenous. Special Rapporteur Martínez Cobo presented a working definition of "indigenous communities, peoples and nations," which deems the right for indigenous peoples themselves to define who indigenous peoples are, and he says, "On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who belongs to these indigenous populations through self-identification as indigenous (group consciousness) and is recognized and accepted by these populations as one of its members (acceptance by the group)" (Martínez Cobo 1986/7). Article 1 of ILO Convention 169 supports this definition of collective belonging by stating self-identification is a "fundamental criterion" for identity

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<sup>25</sup> Future research should further tease out different understandings of "roots," and how the Mam collectively define their "roots."

(Nelson 1999:296). In a way, self-identifying as Mam challenges essentialism as an indicator of authenticity by creating identity space(s) for those who lack essentialist markers.

Not only do some Mames who lack essentialist markers self-identify as Mam, but some Mames who exhibit essentialist markers do *not* self-identify as Mam. For example, Anibal clearly could speak sufficient Mam to carry on a conversation and he regularly bathes in the chuj, which he would later say means that someone is Mam, but in interview settings and among his friends he would occasionally self-identify as ladino. Transitioning between identities was most apparent in his usage of the pronouns “us” and “them” as he spoke—“us” sometimes meaning ladinos, and other times meaning the Mam pueblo (see Nelson 2009:176). Sayra’s pronouns also bounced around like Anibal’s, with the indigenous sometimes being “us” and sometimes “them,” when describing identity in relation to essentialist markers and self-identifying as Mam. But Sayra inverts this relationship between exhibiting essentialist markers and self-identifying as Mam. She points out that some Mames lack essentialist markers yet they self-identify as Mam. Sayra said that although she no longer wears corte, which on some occasions she used as an essentialist marker to define what it means to be Mam, she and other women in the borderland who wear pants are Mam nonetheless.

Using essentialist markers and self-identifying as Mam are not mutually exclusive categories, even within individual narratives. Some Mames use essentialist markers in certain contexts as they imagine Mam collectivity and in other contexts use more flexible explanations of belonging by saying they are Mam, despite lacking essentialist markers. For instance, in my first interview with Diego, he was troubled that Tacaná is “now no longer Mam” because when he visits people in Tacaná they do not understand him when he speaks Mam. In this case, Diego borrows from essentialist markers to imagine Mam collectivity localized within municipal

borders (Comitancillo imagined as Mam and Tacaná imagined as ladino). Yet in the same interview Diego recounted his meeting in Chiapas where he emotionally described the man from Mexico who identified himself as Mam too, with a shared history of being one pueblo with a territory spanning the current borderline. In this latter case, Diego borrows from a more flexible definition of collective belonging (self-identifying as Mam) to imagine Mam collectivity more flexibly across the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Eva, a 19 year old primary school teacher from Tacaná, near the border, provides an identity narrative also emblematic of how Mames may borrow from both rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging. In the following discussion Eva emphasizes she is Mam even though she does not speak the Mam language:

J: Even though you don't speak Mam, since you didn't learn Mam from your childhood, do you feel that you are an indigenous person or no?

E: Yes! Yes, because I come from a family, how do I say it [*pause*] an indigenous [family]. Because my grandparents, yes, speak Mam. My mother sort-of speaks it but she speaks Spanish more. Then when they [grandparents] arrive [at home] we understand because I [*pause*], when they speak I have to listen carefully and sort-of, some words stick with me when they speak.

Eva's narrative suggests one can self-identify as Mam with ancestral "roots," regardless of whether one exhibits essentialist markers, while also entangling essentialist explanations into a narrative. Eva explains she is Mam because of her "roots" (i.e., her grandparents and their ancestors), and her grandparents are Mam because they *speak* Mam.

Rigidity and flexibility in definitions of belonging, just as in different imaginings of collectivity, should be understood as gradations. Saying one is not Mam unless they wear traje, is

not the same as saying one is not Mam unless they wear traje, speak Mam, and bathe in the chuj. In the latter case, thinking that several essentialist markers are needed for one to be authentically Mam is a more rigid definition than the former because there is less space to deviate from the expectation. Self-identifying as Mam with Mam "roots" is more flexible to the extent it is less tied to exhibiting essentialist markers (i.e., one can self-identify as Mam, regardless of whether they exhibit essentialist markers). Rather than solely conflating essentialist markers with identity or defining collective belonging through self-identification, I suggest Mames move back-and-forth between these rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging.

In conclusion, I now return to the question posed in this chapter's introduction: how do Mames know the Mam exist in other regions? Participants who described interacting with other Mames across different spaces clarified that these individuals were Mam because they had Mam "roots" and self-identified as Mam, and/or they demonstrated essentialist markers. Defining Mam collectivity rigidly by essentialist markers and defining Mam collectivity more flexibly by self-identifications of being Mam with ancestral "roots" are two predominate ways the Mam construct different imaginings of collectivity to address the problem of boundaries.

#### PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY

I have argued the Mam use essentialist markers rigidly and more flexibly to define the boundaries of collectivity (i.e., the boundaries between *being Mam* and *being ladino*), but how do some Mames make sense of lacking essentialist markers while asserting they are authentically Mam? I conceptualize this issue as the problem of authenticity. The question is significant, because if *anyone* can say they are Mam and if some Mames have "lost" their culture that distinguishes them from others, then how can the Mam demand rights as a people? Richards

(forthcoming, chapter 5) makes a similar point for the Mapuche in Chile: if the Mapuche are seen as either never really having a distinctive culture, as elites have contended, or having "lost" their culture, then they are wrongfully seen as the same as other Chileans and, consequently, undeserving of rights as a people. Ordinary Mames overcome this impediment by explaining that Mam identity in the contemporary world simultaneously *exists* and *is being lost*.

In this section I argue the Mam address the problem of authenticity in their collective identity constructions by weaving in and out of explanations of Mam identity existing and being lost. By weaving in and out of existing and being lost explanations, Mames can embody a sense of authenticity that borrows from essentialist notions of identity while also challenging these notions. In essence, weaving in and out of existing and being lost is a way for some Mames to make sense of why they lack essentialist markers while still maintaining an authentic identity they can make claims on as a pueblo.

### **Mam Identity Existing**

Mames frequently use essentialist markers as evidence that they, as a people, exist. For example, Claudia argued, "Comitancillo is Mam because everyone speaks Mam and the women wear traje." Nelson (2009:783) argues physical visibility (i.e., exhibiting essentialist markers) for many indigenous peoples "is imperative to show people that 'we continue to exist.'" Being indigenous, therefore, often entails proving the validity and visibility of that identity, both inside and outside of indigenous communities (Warren 2009:786).

However, not all Mames believe speaking Mam or wearing traje if you are a woman is essential to *being Mam*. Eduardo is a farmer in his 30s from the borderland in Tacaná who usually describes Mam language as an important aspect of Mam culture even though he, like

most others of his generation in the borderland, never learned the language from his parents. Partly because Eduardo does not speak Mam, though, he criticizes the conflation of Mam identity with the ability to speak the Mam language, along with other essentialist markers, by arguing that identifying as Mam and Mam “roots” are the core components of being Mam:

J: Even though you don’t speak Mam, do you still consider yourself indigenous?

E: Oh yes, because we all here still have the same indigenous roots. We’re still Mam because of our roots. Because of our parents. The women now use pants, most of the women, but the women used to use corte, that was the tradition. But they are still indigenous. Because my parents, they still speak Mam. And here [...] everyone used to speak Mam, here in Tacaná, but now no. I wish I could have learned Mam too to teach to my children, but I didn’t learn it, so now they have to learn it in the schools, but it is good that they learn it.

Eduardo says the Mam language is important to Mam culture, but speaking Mam is not a necessary characteristic of *being* Mam.

Eduardo is glad to see his children learning the language in school in this borderland town, where most classes are now being taught by bilingual teachers from Comitancillo.<sup>26</sup> Parents in Tacaná were happy that aspects of Mam culture they experienced when younger, but which have faded in their generation, such as speaking the Mam language, are now being rekindled among their own children in school. The teachers are optimistic that speaking Mam in this community will be the norm in the near future.

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<sup>26</sup> The Ministerio de Educación now promotes bilingual education throughout the department of San Marcos, where schools are to teach the *idioma materna* of the majority of students (the maternal language, L1), a second language (L2), and a third language (L3). In Comitancillo, for example, classes are mostly conducted in Mam (L1) and then there will be a period the teacher teaches some Spanish (L2) and, less frequently, English (L3). In Tacaná, classes are mostly conducted in Spanish (L1) and then there will be a period the teacher teaches some Mam (L2) and, less frequently, English (L3).

Mayan activists have also argued that while speaking a Maya language does not define being Maya, language is still a symbolically important identity marker (Watanabe 2000:238; Cojtí Cuxil 1991). Moreover, language encodes beliefs, values, and ways of seeing the world that may differ from the dominant culture. Speaking Mam, therefore, beyond just an identity marker, has the potential to strengthen Mam culture and Mam collective identity.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to essentialist markers, self-identifying as Mam with “roots” evidences the existence of the Mam as a people in the contemporary world. This statement is especially important to the many Mames in the borderland who are aware of accusations that there are no Mam near la frontera because they do not exhibit essentialist markers as in Comitancillo. However, this is not limited to the borderland. Many Mames in Comitancillo also do not speak Mam, wear traje, and/or abstain from using technology, for instance, and face similar accusations of inauthenticity. Self-identifying as Mam, regardless of whether one exhibits essentialist markers, however, challenges more rigid essentialist views of culture by asserting that “Indians live *within* modernity, not outside of it” (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:58).

Gabriela, for example, is an 18 year old student from Comitancillo who speaks Mam and self-identifies as Mam. But Gabriela does not wear traje and she tirelessly works in computer labs. These are only conflicting characteristics, though, if we insist on viewing culture as static and bounded (Nelson 1999:162). Richards’ (forthcoming, chapter 6) research with the Mapuche in Chile, on the other hand, highlights the argument that culture is dynamic—in other words, there is no “authentic” Mapuche “essence” unchanged over time that does not adopt elements of “other” cultures. One Mam women's group evidences this forward-looking notion of “roots” by building greenhouses for plants and produce (e.g., tomatoes, carrots, and chiles). As this group

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<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Patricia Richards for this insight.

adopts “other” technologies while working together as Mam women they illustrate that culture is dynamic, which challenges more rigid essentialist understandings of culture and identity.

Self-identifying as Mam, contrary to essentialist understandings of collective belonging, is a way for all Mames to show Mam identity exists. In this fashion, Nelson (1999:161) echoes Dr. Demetrio Cojtí’s suggestion that the indigenous in Guatemala today may construct a postcolonial identity through a “centrality of consciousness and commitment to Mayan identity rather than any one cultural trait.”

Overlooking either how the indigenous use essentialism in everyday narratives or more flexible understandings of collective belonging, however, misses significant details in how indigenous peoples construct collective identities in the contemporary world. In different relational contexts, I argue, Mames use both essentialist markers *and* self-identifications of being Mam with “roots” as evidence of Mam identity existing today.

### **Mam Identity Being Lost**

Just as Mames use rigid essentialist markers and more flexible self-identifications of being Mam as evidence that they exist as a pueblo, these same rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging are used to argue Mam identity is lost or being lost.

The absence of essentialist markers is frequently used as evidence that the Mam no longer exist as an authentic indigenous people. When describing my research about the Mam in Guatemala, one of Anibal’s younger siblings, Antonio, a 19 year old in the Guatemalan military who always seems to assume a ladino identity (unlike his older brother), often ranted that no one is really “one hundred percent indigenous anymore.” To Antonio, the Mayans all died, mixed



with the Spanish, or adopted other cultures, so none of the so-called indigenous peoples of today are authentically indigenous.

Regarding the Mapuche, Warren (2009:786) says the state and the general Argentine population “both tend to assume that indigenous peoples no longer exist or that they must maintain certain essential traits to be ‘real.’” Richards (forthcoming, chapter 6) explains that viewing culture as static and from the past bolsters critiques that the indigenous no longer exist or are the same as other non-indigenous citizens. Thus, the state and local elites can use (essentialist) culture as an excuse to deny the indigenous political claims as a people. In essence, rigid definitions of collective belonging, for the Mapuche in Chile and Argentina just as the Mam in Guatemala and Mexico, can be used to deny a supposed “authentic” existence of indigenous peoples.

Rather than denying the existence of the indigenous altogether, though, this more rigid definition of collective belonging is also used as evidence that Mam identity is lost in specific regions. Diego, for instance, used this essentialist explanation to reason Comitancillo is Mam because it is “Mam-hablante” (Mam speaking), and because people no longer speak Mam in Tacaná, “Tacaná is now no longer Mam.” Likewise, while using essentialist markers as a rigid explanation of collective belonging, Eva worries Mam collective identity and culture may someday be entirely lost in the borderland:

E: ...And it's also a culture that shouldn't be lost here with us. We will arrive one day when I have children, and I'm going [to speak with them] in Mam. [...] So that this culture isn't lost.

Eva frequently uses culture and identity synonymously. But my point is not that the conflation of culture and identity impedes explanations of Mam identity existing in the contemporary world.

Rather, the point here is that static and more rigid definitions of culture, which solely rely on essentialist markers, may bolster the notion that Mam identity has been lost. When culture is understood as more dynamic, and definitions of collective belonging are more flexible, then identities and peoples can be understood to exist within culture(s), not outside of culture(s).

However, even more flexible definitions of collective belonging can foster the idea that Mam identity is being lost. This returns us to José's frustration at the chapter's introduction. Mam identity is being lost when people with Mam "roots" do not want to be seen as indigenous (they do *not* self-identify as Mam), regardless of whether they exhibit essentialist markers. José was not frustrated simply because some people can speak Mam and others cannot, but he was frustrated because regardless of one's ability to speak the Mam language, some individuals no longer want to be, or be seen as, Mam. In a rant about children becoming less "respectful," Eva implies this issue for her community near la frontera:

E: ...Years and years before the people here were different. They were, how do I say it, more respectful. They participated more. [...] But now I don't know what is happening. [...] Now I always hear teenagers say bad words, many people go to the United States, speak English [...] so from [the United States] they bring cultures and propose them here. Then the children of these people that go to the United States are learning that [from their parents]. So conforming to that, [Mam] culture is being lost.

Eva feels distraught over how Mam identity can be so easily abandoned and replaced by other "cultures." Eva's observation also sustains the theoretical explanation that these identities are relationally constructed. This suggests that just as *traje* can be taken off to signal Mam identity being lost, no longer self-identifying as Mam can signal Mam identity being lost as well.

In sum, different ways of defining collective belonging can be used to explain Mam identity is being lost. Mames who are accused of inauthenticity, such as those in Tacaná, will frequently assert their authenticity by saying certain cultural aspects have been lost but they they are Mam because of their ancestral "roots."

### **Weaving In and Out of Existing and Being Lost**

The rigid or more flexible definitions of collective belonging do not determine whether Mames will explain their collective identity exists or is being lost. In other words, Mam identity can be explained as existing and being lost in two ways: first, by whether people exhibit or do not exhibit essentialist markers; and second, by whether people self-identify or do not self-identify as Mam with "roots." Table 1 maps out how different explanations of existing and being lost can be classified according to the extent they borrow from and build upon rigid definitions of collective belonging, which conflate essentialist markers with Mam identity, and more flexible definitions of collective belonging, which rely on self-identifying as Mam with indigenous "roots."<sup>28</sup>

The purpose of this table, however, is not to merely present how narratives can be classified. Rather my argument is that Mames address the problem of authenticity by weaving in and out of these rigid and more flexible meanings around essentialism and these explanations of Mam identity existing and being lost. In effect, I argue Mames navigate between these quadrants in their individual narratives, both consciously and unconsciously, as they construct their collective identities.

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<sup>28</sup> I recognize the table's distinctions could be critiqued for presenting false dichotomies, especially since some Mames define Mam collective belonging as exhibiting essentialist markers *and* having Mam "roots," but the purpose of distinguishing between these categories is to analyze how identities are constructed, which can only be accomplished by teasing out junctures wherein people frequently make transitions in their narratives.

	<b>EXISTING</b>	<b>BEING LOST</b>
<b>RIGID</b>	Mam identity exists because people exhibit essentialist markers in the contemporary world (e.g., people wear traje, speak Mam, bathe in the chuj, greet with the Mam <i>saludo</i> , and/or they are "stuck in the past"). [II]	Mam identity is being "lost" because people do not exhibit essentialist markers in the contemporary world (e.g., people do not wear traje, speak Mam, bathe in the chuj, greet with the Mam <i>saludo</i> , and/or they have embraced "modernity"). In other words, authentic Mames are becoming non-existent. [I]
<b>FLEXIBLE</b>	Mam identity exists because people with Mam "roots" self-identify as Mam in the contemporary world, regardless of whether they exhibit essentialist markers. [III]	Mam identity is being "lost" because people with Mam "roots" are not self-identifying as Mam in the contemporary world, regardless of whether they exhibit essentialist markers. [IV]

TABLE 1. *Existing and being lost according to rigid essentialist and more flexible self-identification definitions of collective belonging.*

Claudia exemplifies how some individuals actively move back-and forth across these understandings. In her adobe kitchen one afternoon, I was interviewing her when her 21 year old son came over to visit. The kitchen was full of her younger children and some grandchildren playing while we discussed my interest in Mam identity. Claudia's son enthusiastically jumped into the interview by explaining he was sad he did not continue speaking Mam as he grew up, because he is no longer fluent. He hopes his mother will continue teaching her young children and grandchildren the Mam language because he feels language is an important aspect of their indigenous identity.

Since some of the children in Claudia's kitchen were wearing corte while others were not, I channeled Isabela's remark mentioned earlier in this chapter by asking whether one is Mam if they speak the language but do not wear corte. Claudia countered Isabela's response:

C: Yes, they are indigenous pues! It's just that [the indigenous who don't wear corte] [...] just want to try on ladino clothing [...]. Look at this little girl wearing pants [*she points to*

*her 7 year old daughter that is playing across the room*]. She is indigenous. I am indigenous, I am her mother.

J: And [...] did you always wear corte?

C: Yes. Me, yes, corte since I was little. The corte since I was little. Uh huh. This little girl, look, she is wearing pants, but after, when she has grown a little more [*pause*] she will take them off, and wear corte. Because [children] don't like wearing [pants] [...]. They don't like it, so afterward they take them off, and they wear the corte. She will wear the corte and the pants will be left there [*pointing to the dirt floor*].

J: And if they don't wear corte [in the future] are they still indigenous?

C: Uh huh, yes, still. They are still indigenous people [...].

Additionally, Claudia later points out that her 21 year old son is Mam even though he is no longer fluent in the Mam language. In these conversations Claudia describes Mam identity as adherence to essentialist markers, wearing corte or speaking Mam, and she simultaneously describes *being Mam*, regardless of exhibiting essentialist markers. This suggests Claudia makes the transition from explaining Mam identity exists according to rigid essentialist markers (quadrant II) to explaining Mam identity exists according to more flexible definitions of collective belonging (quadrant III) by saying her children are authentically Mam because she, as their mother, is Mam—Mam “roots,” in this case, provide a sense of authenticity. In sum, Claudia explains that Mam identity exists in the contemporary world by weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging.

In another moment Claudia challenges the conflation of an essentialist marker with Mam identity, yet she simultaneously reifies the conflation:

C: Here, more than anything [...] everyone here can speak Mam. Everyone. Even including, look with Doña Maria [a ladina], pues, even her daughter [Isabela] can speak in Mam [...]. The daughter of Doña Maria can speak in Mam [...], her [Isabela's] husband is indigenous.

Claudia challenges the conflation of speaking the Mam language with Mam identity by noting there are some ladinos/as, such as Isabela, who can speak Mam. Thus, language, alone, does not define one's belonging to the collective. At the same time, Claudia reifies the conflation of essentialist markers with Mam identity by noting the reason Isabela can speak Mam is because her husband is indigenous. In other words, an implicit assumption in Claudia's observation is that since Isabela's husband *is* Mam he *speaks* Mam. This suggests that while Claudia was able to navigate from explaining Mam identity exists by defining collective belonging as exhibiting essentialist markers (quadrant II) to explaining Mam identity exists more flexibly by self-identifying as Mam (quadrant III), she was able to just as easily weave back into more rigid definitions of collective belonging (quadrant II). In other words, movements between the more rigid and the more flexible are not unidirectional.

I do not mean to suggest either of these definitions of collective belonging (exhibiting essentialist markers or self-identifying), as they are used to explain that Mam identity exists or is being lost, are normatively "better" than the other. Obviously rigid and more flexible definitions *each* have limitations, but they are both complexly empowering and disempowering for the indigenous (Warren 2009:787).

On the one hand, for example, the indigenous can "perform" cultural distinctiveness by embracing essentialism to gain access to resources (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:71; Hale 2002, 2006). However, these same performances can also be used to deny contemporary

demands, since "modern" demands may be seen as inauthentic. Moreover, not all the indigenous have equal access to "perform" an "authentic" identity.

On the other hand, viewing traditions, cultures, and identities as malleable constructs may seem more advantageous for the indigenous than more rigidly defined conceptualizations because they are more inclusive. Yet some scholars have noted that excessive malleability may lead to molding indigenous identities and demands—through selectively permitting certain aspects of *being indigenous* while limiting others—to fit political-economic models perhaps at odds with said demands (e.g., see Hale 2006). In their discussion of ethnodevelopment in the Andes, for example, Andolina, Radcliffe, and Laurie (2009:58) say, "Tradition is seen as positive [by the Inter-American Development Bank] when it can be molded to particular interpretations of modernity (e.g., those defined by free-market capitalism) and when it moves away from the anti-Western, anticapitalist assumptions about certain variants of Andeanism."

I suggest that rather than ignoring the more static essentialist notions of identity *or* the more flexible definitions of collective belonging, we should recognize the ways Mames weave in and out of both in their constructions of collective identities. Weaving in and out of the rigid and the flexible is an important challenge to the neoliberal system. In some ways, asserting rigid essentialist differences that cannot be molded into free market capitalism may be a way for the indigenous to resist neoliberalism. In other words, rather than having indigenous demands only selectively included, through processes of neoliberal multiculturalism, the indigenous may use static essentialist understandings that are not malleable to reject becoming what Hale (2006) would call the "indio permitido."

Claudia's efforts to hang on to more rigid definitions of collective belonging discussed above, such as speaking Mam or wearing corte, are sincere. Luis, a bus driver who lives on la

frontera, recounted that as a child he and his siblings attempted to convince their grandmother to stop wearing traje. He said that they learned quickly that she would always refuse, because wearing traje was important to who she was as a person.<sup>29</sup> As Hendrickson (1995:193) notes, “For many, there is an ideological and emotional identification with traje such that dress is inextricably associated with the person’s very being.” Indeed, “doing” identity is entrenched in a sincere desire to have a visible identity, which can reinforce the boundaries and cultural differences that distinguish the indigenous from the non-indigenous (Warren 2009:783).

Weaving in and out of explanations of existing and being lost by rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging occurs frequently. Sometimes even mid-sentence. Diego, for example, expresses disappointment that “In Tacaná people are no longer identifying as indigenous, but they are still Mam because of their roots.” Diego’s move from the first part of his sentence across the comma demonstrates weaving out of quadrant IV and in to quadrant III.

Sometimes these transitions are expressed over several sentences. When Sayra discussed how she could not afford corte to wear as she did when she was a child, she said she would now feel too uncomfortable wearing it in the borderland because other women there do not wear corte. She fears she would stand out. She says this is why “Mam identity is being lost in the borderland” (quadrant I). Yet then she says that regardless of whether those in the borderland, including herself, wear corte they are still Mam because of their roots (quadrant III).

Finally, sometimes these transitions are merely implied relationally to other understandings. For example, José’s frustration that people in Tacaná can understand Mam but don’t want to be seen as indigenous anymore, particularly those in younger generations (quadrant IV), is bothersome to him because *being Mam* in Comitancillo seems to mean you can

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<sup>29</sup> Fieldnotes July 22, 2011



understand and speak the Mam language (quadrant II). José wrestles with how to reconcile these distinctions in defining Mam collective belonging.

Weaving in and out of explanations of existing and being lost by rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging are processes contributing to how the Mam imagine themselves as a collectivity and as individuals that belong to that collectivity. Indeed, as Mames move between these explanations they problematize identity as a solid “thing” by defining the boundaries between the collectivity and the more generalized other—in other words, Mames construct over-and-over again what it means to *be Mam* in the contemporary world through different imaginings of collectivity. It is in this manner the Mam address the problem of boundaries. Furthermore, the Mam also address the problem of authenticity, since *being Mam* can borrow from essentialist explanations while not being entirely dependent upon them.

Just as I have contended imaginings of collectivity are relationally constructed, I suggest explanations of existing and being lost discussed in this chapter are constructed in relational contexts as well. While the narratives in this chapter may seem free-floating, as if individuals can invent their own collective identities however they please (like the instrumentalist view), I argue these narratives are actually quite constrained. As Watanabe (1992:217) notes in his analysis of the Mam, the indigenous “are not free to simply invent their own identity. History constrains them, especially the colonial heritage of Guatemala that glorifies the Maya past yet denigrates contemporary Maya as ‘uncivilized Indians.’” Like the different imaginings of collectivity elaborated in Chapter Two, different explanations of existing and being lost are fostered and stifled by histories of discrimination, essentialist narratives, state discourses, nationalist practices and discourses, access to interactions with Mames who have similar and dissimilar experiences, access to stories of such interactions, membership in organizations, etc. All of these discourses

and experiences provide various meanings and a context wherein agency takes place to adopt, adapt, challenge, and modify identities.

For example, Gabriela frequently asserts she is Mam despite not wearing corte by describing those closest to her who self-identify as Mam who do not wear corte. Often she will do this by discussing her mother, Ana, a Mam woman who does not currently own corte and has not been able to afford it for several years. When asked whether one is not Mam if they cannot speak Mam, Gabriela said such an assumption does not make sense to her, primarily because her siblings and father are Mam but they do not speak Mam. Gabriela recalled a conversation with a Mam school teacher who told her, “If you speak both Spanish and Mam you can be both ladina and Mam.” However, this explanation was unsatisfying for Gabriela. According to Gabriela, she will *always* be Mam, even though sometimes people see her as ladina because she can speak Spanish and she doesn't own corte. Nonetheless, she argued that even if she *only* spoke Spanish she would still be Mam.

From Gabriela's perspective, she can be Mam without corte because her mother identifies as Mam despite not wearing corte. Gabriela's narratives illustrate how interactions with her mother, father, siblings, and school teachers all shape how she defines collective belonging. Importantly, this also suggests agency occurs within these relational contexts. In other words, her social networks did not determine Gabriela would believe her mother over her school teacher; she exercised agency within her social networks to decide to believe her mother. Relational contexts provide repertoires of meanings and a context wherein agency, constrained more for some than for others, takes place to adopt, adapt, challenge, and modify these meanings and identities. Her perspective, not unlike other participants, reinforces the notion that these imaginings are constructed in, and heavily rely on, different relational contexts.

In sum, Mames address the problem of authenticity by relying on essentialist markers, challenging those markers as indicators of authenticity, and/or using more flexible definitions of Mam collective belonging, as they explain that Mam identity simultaneously exists and is being lost. By weaving in and out of these rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging while also weaving in and out of explanations of an authentic Mam identity simultaneously existing and being lost, the Mam complicate the image of identities as some solid “thing.” Furthermore, as Mames transition between the rigid and the flexible, and existing and being lost, those who do not exhibit essentialist markers are enabled to assert they are authentically indigenous. Transitioning from the static to the more flexible, and vice-versa, allows the Mam to rely on traditionalist images of authenticity, often favored by the state when articulating demands (Warren 2009:786-87), while also pushing for a more inclusive identity.

## CONCLUSION

Ordinary Mames often define who belongs to the collective by relying on rigid essentialist markers of identity. However, Mames also define collective belonging as self-identifying as Mam with Mam “roots.” By weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible meanings around essentialism and notions of authenticity in relational contexts, the Mam define different boundaries between being Mam and being ladino (addressing the problem of boundaries). Both essentialist definitions of collective belonging and the usage of self-identifying as Mam with Mam “roots” play into how the Mam imagine themselves as a collectivity at various scales (e.g., localized within municipal boundaries, extending throughout western Guatemala but ending at la frontera, and transcending la frontera). Although none of these definitions are deterministic for how Mames construct different imaginings of collectivity. With these definitions of collective

belonging, Mames explain that their identity simultaneously exists and is being lost. The meaning constructs of existing and being lost problematize identity (complicating the image of identity as some solid "thing"), challenge the rigidity of authenticity, and opens spaces for those without essentialist markers to assert an authentic indigenous identity.

In sum, the Mam construct their collective identities in a manner that both embraces *and* challenges notions of being "authentically" Mam, which is empowering and disempowering. On the one hand, essentialist markers have a historical significance to many Mames since they represent valued "traditions" inextricably linked to their very being (Hendrickson 1995:193). On the other hand, those who lack essentialist markers may feel they are less authentically Mam. Furthermore, rigid notions of culture and space often portray the indigenous as "poor, spatially circumscribed, and vulnerable," which ignores "the complexity of indigenous society..." (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009:58). Rather than dismissing rigid definitions altogether, however, essentialist markers provide something many of the indigenous can grab a hold of while pushing for more flexible definitions of belonging.

Many indigenous peoples take advantage of these essentialist markers to illustrate the complexity of identity. For example, Rigoberta Menchú uses traje to challenge stereotypes of indigenous women and the "naturalness" of identities—she does this by simultaneously embracing multiple identities (e.g., activist, scholar, and feminist) and essentialist markers (Nelson 1999:38). Likewise, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) has made effective use of the internet and new technologies, which contradicts more static characterizations of indigenous identity and culture. Additionally, Nelson (1999:39) develops the concept of the "Maya-hacker," which undermines the binary image of the pre-modern Maya consigned to the past and the "modern" ladino. Referencing Trinh (1986), Nelson says, "...By

appropriating 'modern' technology and knowledge while refusing to be appropriated to this definition, the Maya-hacker is [...] the 'innappropriate(d) other'" (Nelson 1999:39).

Navigating between the rigid definitions of being Mam, which rely on essentialist markers, and the more flexible definitions is a process at the core of the "Maya-hacker." Warren (2009:772-73) argues those who lack familiar signs of authenticity, the urban Mapuche in her research, are caught in the bind of deciding whether to strengthen links to an essentialist identity, which can "legitimate indigenous claims and win allies," or incorporate more modern elements into their identity. Similarly, Mames who lack essentialist markers worry about their identity and culture being lost while also emphasizing how their identity continues to exist and progressively evolve, despite lacking essentialist markers.

In conclusion, the Mam explain their identity simultaneously exists and is being lost in the contemporary world. I have argued that by weaving in and out of explanations of existing and being lost, along with the rigid and more flexible definitions of collective belonging, Mames who lack essentialist markers are able to define themselves as authentically Mam.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS

State borders are imposed over what were initially the territories of indigenous peoples. Little research, however, has addressed how indigenous peoples who span state borders (such as the Mapuche across the Chile-Argentina border, the Tohono O'odham across the Mexico-United States border, and the Mam across the Guatemala-Mexico border) construct collective identities in relation to those borders. I initiated this task by focusing on how the Maya-Mam construct boundaries around their collective identities. This project has addressed whether the Mam in Guatemala discursively tie themselves to the Mam in Mexico, despite the state border, and how they construct boundaries around their collective identities.

A recurring identity problem indigenous peoples must confront is that of boundaries. Assuming the existence of a collectivity raises a question about the boundaries of such collectivity: where does the notion of "us" end and the notion of "them" begin? In other words, how are boundaries defined between the collective *self* and the more generalized *other*? In Chapter One I argued that these questions are particularly important for indigenous "cross-border nations" (Warren 2010), since their collective identities must, in some fashion or other, address the state borders that divide or pretend to divide them.

My overall argument has been that the Mam address the problem of boundaries by weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of indigenous collective identity within and across bounded and more dynamic space(s). How do the Mam actually do this? This thesis

has emphasized two manners the Mam weave in and out of rigid and more flexible understandings of indigenous identity.

First, Chapter Two showed how Mames weave in and out of rigid and flexible imaginings of collectivity. These imaginings can also be characterized as from being within bounded notions of space to being across more dynamic spaces. Mames imagine themselves as a people bound within certain municipal borders, as a people transcending municipal borders but ending at the Guatemala-Mexico border, and even more flexibly as a people spanning the Guatemala-Mexico border. Each of these different imaginings of collectivity has certain advantages and disadvantages for the Mam. Rather than solely imagining Mam collectivity in one way or another though, individual Mames weave in and out of all three imaginings in a manner that complicates static understandings of what it means to be Mam in the contemporary world. While these imaginings are an attempt to mark the boundaries of collectivity, how do the Mam define who is and can be a part of the collective? Chapter Three addressed this question.

In Chapter Three I showed that the Mam also weave in and out of rigid and more flexible understandings of indigenous identity in the ways they define individual belonging to the collective. The Mam define collective belonging by weaving in and out of rigid and flexible meanings around essentialism and authenticity. Often Mames will conflate identity belonging with exhibiting essentialist markers. This means that if one exhibits certain characteristics they are authentically Mam, but if they lack those characteristics they are not authentically Mam. “Performing” identity according to these characteristics is simultaneously enabling and disempowering for the Mam. But the Mam also say that those who self-identify as Mam and who have Mam “roots” belong to the collectivity, regardless of whether they exhibit essentialist markers.

Rather than defining collective belonging entirely in one way or another, the Mam transition back-and-forth between these definitions, complicating static understandings of collective identity. They further complicate collective identities by weaving in and out of explanations of their identity existing and being lost. Exhibiting essentialist markers and self-identifying as Mam to evidence Mam identity existing and being lost not only complicates static identity understandings, but also creates space(s) for Mames without essentialist markers to address the problem of authenticity. In other words, Mames without essentialist markers can assert their authenticity by weaving in and out of these different narratives.

Chapters Two and Three each point to how these different imaginings of collectivity and definitions of collective belonging are borrowed from and built upon in relational contexts. For example, for the Mam in Guatemala, imagining the Mam as a "cross-border nation" spanning the Guatemala-Mexico border is said to stem from personal interactions with Mames from Mexico or hearing stories of such interactions. Conversely, individuals without experiences interacting with Mames from beyond their own municipal borders or from beyond the state border, or who had not heard of such experiences, typically imagine the Mam as a collectivity more rigidly bound within state and/or municipal borders. While collective identities borrow from municipal and state boundaries they also challenge the rigidity of such boundaries. Social networks also provide the context wherein more flexible definitions of what it means to be Mam in the contemporary world, which show that one can be authentically Mam without exhibiting essentialist markers, may stem from stories and examples drawn from others' lives. I have argued these networks are not deterministic, however, in terms of which imaginings and definitions will be constructed. Rather, the networks frame the socio-spatial settings wherein agency occurs to adopt, adapt, challenge, and modify these identities.



In sum, the Mam, individually and collectively, construct their collective identities by weaving in and out of the rigid and the more flexible aspects of their identity. Focusing on the rigid characteristics at the expense of the more flexible, or vice versa, as many academics tend to do, skims over the complexities of collective identity that are experienced, shared, and imagined in everyday interactions. Hence, I suggest that understanding indigenous collective identity today, particularly among “cross-border nations,” entails grappling with how and why the indigenous weave in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity across bounded and more dynamic spaces.

#### SOCIOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL VALUE

An inevitable question looms over all research: so what? Why does this analysis matter? The question of value relevance has significance for the researcher as well as the researched. Therefore, I will outline the significance of this analysis for the Mam as a *pueblo* (people) as well as the significance of this research for sociologists who may or may not be Mam.

I mentioned in Chapter One that not all Mames consider the issue of boundaries a problem. I mentioned this because I did not want to reify it as such. However, I noted that many participants do feel that it is important to understand how the Mam think of themselves as a *pueblo* because these different imaginings may have direct effects on their collective future. For example, imagining the Mam as a people bound within Comitancillo’s borders supposes that the municipio represents the Mam, when it can be argued that the Mam may actually be politically disadvantaged at the municipal level. In this case imaginings are important because they may impede the realization of political demands and rights as a *pueblo*. Conversely, in an empowering way, understanding these different imaginings is also important to the Mam as they

look to the future, particularly as a “cross-border nation.” Diego said, “We have to think of a strategy so that, so that we don't think so much in the dividing line [the border], so that we can focus instead on the pueblo that we are. We're the same. We're the same.” In sum, how the Mam define their boundaries of collectivity and which individuals belong to it may have direct consequences on the pueblo, in empowering and disempowering ways.

Learning why some places are “Mam” while others are “not Mam” or “no longer Mam” is also described as important. For instance, repeatedly participants from Comitancillo would ask me, with a troubled tone, if I had figured out yet why Tacaná near the border is “no longer Mam.” When discussing differences between Tacaná and Comitancillo Diego felt puzzled and said to me, “I don't have all of the explanation. But I would like to have the results of your research, right? What has happened? I would like to study... Tacaná because there isn't any clear information.” Questions like these demonstrate that some Mames place great importance on learning from these different imaginings.

As a partial response to Diego's question echoed by many others from Tacaná, I have shown that a lot of the explanations analyzed in this project emphasize differences in how identity is actually defined. Near the border, for instance, it is far less common for the Mam to define individual belonging to the collective in terms of exhibiting essentialist markers, whereas in Comitancillo such markers abound. It is as if the Mam in Tacaná and the Mam in Comitancillo may see past each other due to how they define identity differently. While this still does not entirely tease out why some essentialist cultural aspects are emphasized in certain places while diminished in others, recognizing the distinctions in how identity is defined across different spaces may strengthen solidarity among the Mam. Cohesions can be strengthened, according to

Danitsa, by recognizing “*Somos iguales* [We’re the same]. We might not speak the same or wear the same *traje*, but we’re the same.”

From a practical standpoint, once this research is shared in different communities it may be valued by the Mam who have less access to each other due to geographical distance. The emphasis on social networks in this analysis has highlighted that not all individuals have equal access to all meanings. For example, the lack of personal interactions or stories heard of such interactions with Mames across municipal and/or state borders may impede the sharing of more flexible imaginings of collectivity. In a way, by sharing how identity is defined in Comitancillo with those in Tacaná and vice versa, this research may bridge a socio-spatial gap for the Mam in Guatemala (and the Mam in Mexico, for that matter). Unfortunately, sociologists rarely repatriate their analyses to Mayan communities (Nelson 1999:251). Bridging this gap cannot be done by academic writing alone, but it may begin to be achieved by sharing this analysis in community workshops where this research was conducted, which is my intent.

Aside from the value the Mam pueblo may find in this research, this research is significant for sociologists, who may or may not be Mam. In a broad fashion, this research is important to identity scholars. I have shown that identity is constructed in relational contexts in a non-deterministic fashion and in a manner that complicates static understandings of identity.

This analysis is an attempt to simultaneously take on Marcus and Fischer’s (1986) challenge to “improve nonessentialist writing” (referenced in Watanabe and Fischer 2004:4), while also avoiding “extreme anti-essentialism” (Watanabe 2004:259-61). In effect, I have argued that the Mam construct their identities in a fashion that shows they *can* “simultaneously be Indian and modern,” despite the binary semiotics of identity in Guatemala (Nelson 1999:249), while not overlooking how ordinary Mames use essentialist markers in everyday interactions.

Finding balance between these rigid and more flexible identity definitions is a continual project of researchers and the indigenous. Watanabe (2000:246) articulates this challenge:

In the end, the question remains how best to understand what is "Maya" without succumbing to static essentialism of a timeless Maya culture or an equally ahistorical presentation of continually emergent "imagined communities" or "invented traditions." Finessing the misplaced romanticism of the first and the potential arbitrariness of the second may ultimately depend more on pragmatic rather than theoretical grounds of first identifying those individuals and groups who call themselves Maya (or perhaps *indígena*, *natural*, *civilizado*, *capitalino*--but not Ladino), then determining why they do so and what they intend by it by attending closely to how they use those images, practices, and institutions they--and others (Ladinos and anthropologists alike)--have come to recognize as "Maya." (Italics in original)

Watanabe recognizes this may sound tautological, but we need to understand "...how successive pasts have continued to inform succeeding presents and how ongoing presents have repeatedly appropriated their pasts" (Watanabe (2000:246).

Overall, this thesis has attempted to address this challenge. Thus, this contributes to sociological understandings of how collective identities may be constructed by weaving in and out of static essentialism and more flexible emerging identities. In effect, the approach taken in this analysis illustrates how ordinary people may construct complex identities by transitioning between primordialist, instrumentalist, and constructivist identities in their everyday interactions (Arthur 2011:5).

In sum, this thesis may be valuable to the Mam divided by municipal and/or state borders because it may serve as a socio-spatial bridge between disjointed social networks. Consequently,

different identity understandings may be shared among the Mam, which can be adopted, adapted, modified, and challenged by Mames. This thesis is also sociologically valuable. My arguments illustrate that understanding indigenous collective identity constructions in the contemporary world cannot be accomplished by ignoring the rigid or more flexible characteristics of those identities. But rather, ordinary indigenous individuals both consciously and unconsciously maneuver between the rigid and the more flexible in a manner that complicates static understandings of identity. Throughout this thesis I have argued that understanding indigenous collective identity constructions today entails grappling with how and why indigenous peoples weave in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of indigenous collective identity within and across more bounded and more dynamic space(s).

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I have analyzed how different identities borrow from and build upon state discourses and practices of nationalism, limited (municipal) autonomy, and essentialism, while also challenging these conceptions. While substantively this has been a study of Mam collective identities, formally this has been a study of indigenous “cross-border nation” collective identities.

Mames from Guatemala construct their identities in relational contexts that include the state and other Mames. I have argued that social networks are sites of struggle and identity construction where agency takes place—always in a constrained fashion. But while this analysis has elucidated how the Mam in Guatemala imagine themselves as a collectivity differently, even at times as a “cross-border nation,” it has not addressed how the Mam in Mexico imagine Mam collectivity in relation to these imaginings. What are the key similarities and the key differences? How have historical distinctions between each state’s approaches to the indigenous affected

these imaginings? And what possibilities are there for the Mam to “come closer together” across the Guatemala-Mexico border from the perspective of the Mam in Mexico?

Regarding the Mapuche across the Chile-Argentina border, Warren says, “Mapuche activists are challenging the framework of the nation-state by creating alliances beyond it and by framing the terms of their political goals and identity as something transnational” (Warren 2009). Those in Guatemala who imagine the Mam as a “cross-border nation” also challenge the framework of the nation-state by constructing collective identities that transcend the Guatemala-Mexico border, but most Mames in Guatemala say that very little is being done to create alliances across *la frontera* (the border). Furthermore, this analysis has highlighted that very few Mames actually have experiences they can turn to for imagining Mam collectivity flexibly across *la frontera*. In essence, unlike the Mapuche, the Mam have had less success in constructing their “political goals and identity as something transnational” (Warren 2000). While Hernández Castillo’s (2001; forthcoming) research has effectively centered on the historical effects of the state on Mam identity in Mexico, which points to distinctions between the Mam in Mexico and the Mam in Guatemala, research has yet to fully address what impedes the realization of Mam cross-border alliances.

I propose that future research, which I plan to undertake, addresses how the Mam in Mexico construct collective identities in relation to the Guatemala-Mexico border, and how Mam collective identities from both sides of *la frontera* may be understood in relation to each other. This project must consider not only the significant historical distinctions experienced by the Mam from each side of the border, but also how contemporary Mames act (or fail to act) to construct a “cross-border nation.” Future research should also further address the meanings and substance of Mam “roots,” and explore how relational contexts define or contextualize these

"roots." While the Maya movement has emphasized forward-looking notions of being Mam (see Nelson 1999, including her image of the "Maya-hacker"), most of the participants in this project tended to use "roots" in a manner that focused attention on Mam ancestors. More could be done to tease out different understandings of "roots," including how and why they are used in certain contexts.

In conclusion, I emphasize that the Mam are actively involved in constructing their identities in the contemporary world. While meanings and identities are continuously constrained by the socio-spatial environments around us, these settings also facilitate spaces where identity understandings can be adopted, adapted, modified, and challenged. Indeed, these spaces provide the context wherein agency takes place.

Within this context the Mam continue to weave. Watanabe (2000:240) says the Mam use various techniques to weave not only *traje* (indigenous dress), but other Maya technologies as well, such as planting, building houses, story-telling, and calendrical divination. He says, "Quite literally, Maya create their aesthetics (and their cultures) by constantly weaving and reweaving the material elements, symbolic forms, and tacit expectations that fill their daily lives" (Watanabe 2000:240). By weaving in and out of rigid and more flexible imaginings of collectivity in everyday interactions, the Mam continue to create complex textiles of indigenous collective identities, which inform the present in relation to the past while pushing for new future(s).

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