
The Spatiality of Boundary Work: Political-Administrative Borders and Maya-Mam Collective Identification

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ABSTRACT

How does the collective identification of indigenous peoples who span contemporary state borders align with and diverge from those borders? This article analyzes how the Mam, an indigenous people divided by the Guatemala-Mexico border, identify collectively. We further existing sociological literature on collective identity “boundary work” by demonstrating how it is shaped by spatial, and not just symbolic, boundaries. Mam individuals and organizations define symbolic boundaries that sustain political-administrative borders (such as municipal divisions within Guatemala and Guatemala’s border with Mexico) in some

relationships across the border for cultural, political, economic, or social purposes ([United Nations 2008](#)). How do state borders, as well as forms of collective identification that emerge in relation to them, impede or facilitate the collective rights of cross-border nations? Addressing this question calls

is imposed by the state (from the center outward), but also “the role of local communities and social groups in shaping their own national identities” (Sahlins 1989:8), in a second findings section we show that narratives of Mam collective identification shift depending on context. We show that Mam individuals weave in and out of different scalar narratives, denaturalizing state borders in the process. We also show that Mam organizations promote acknowledgment of the incongruity of these symbolic and spatial boundaries and signal the Guatemala-Mexico border as a site of contestation. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of these findings for efforts to establish the rights of cross-border indigenous nations and call for greater attention to spatial issues among sociologists studying collective identity.

THE MAM AND THE GUATEMALA-MEXICO BORDER

Ancestral Mam territory encompasses part of western Guatemala (in the regional departments of Quetzaltenango, Retalhuleu, San Marcos, and Huehuetenango) and part of the border state of Chiapas, Mexico. But the Guatemala-Mexico border itself has shifted over time. Chiapas was part of what was known as the “Kingdom of Guatemala” from the middle of the sixteenth century until 1821, the year both countries achieved independence from Spain (De Vos 1994). For a brief period in the late 1830s, several western Guatemalan departments and Chiapas together seceded and declared themselves to be Los Altos, the sixth state in the Federal Republic of Central America. With

Of course, in an important sense, the Mam cross-border nation already exists. The mere imposition of state borders crossing Mam territory does not erase the longer history of Mam living out their lives in that territory. Nonetheless, we refer to the “construction” of the Mam cross-border nation

(Melucci 1995). Marta Elena Casaús Arzú (1998) writes: “Identity is a process of constant change and reconstitution, and the boundaries of identities are found in permanent modification based on historical conjunctures” (p. 192). Collective identities are not fixed, but the product of a process always in construction (Hall 1996; Mallon 1996; Nagel 1994; Nelson 1999; Wade 1997).

Just as collective identification is processual and socially constructed, the boundaries that mark difference along lines of race, ethnicity, and nation are created through “marked juxtapositions in daily interaction” (Barth 1969:10; Taube 2012). In other words, individuals and collectivities negotiate the boundaries of their collective identities through everyday social interactions. Within Guatemala these interactions involve negotiating the boundaries of the persistent indigenous/ladino dichotomy. Indigenous identification is relationally constructed in opposition to ladino (non-indigenous) identification; each is defined in terms of the other (Nelson 1999; Smith 1990).

Identity boundaries are also negotiated through everyday social interactions among the indigenous Maya population, which is complex and heterogeneous. In Guatemala, the Maya population is made up of at least 21 distinct peoples with varying languages, histories, cultures, dress, ancestral territories, etc. (Del Valle Escalante 2008; Mac Giolla Chríost 2003).² While today language seems to be one of the more dominant distinguishing features among Maya peoples, in some cases this diversity is also rooted in ancient territorial rivalries (Carmack 1995; Watanabe 1995). However, not only are the Maya not homogeneous, but different Maya peoples themselves are also not internally homogeneous. Indeed, referring specifically to the Mam, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (2001) writes that their lives “challenge any definition of ‘the culture’ as an integral, unified, and homogenous whole” (p. 11).

To be identified as indigenous, any individual must both self-identify and be recognized by others as a member of that group (

Although the agreement depicts Guatemala as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation, it still sustains a singular nation-state framework or “a project of a multicultural nation” (Casaús Arzú 1998:121).³ As Casaús Arzú (1998)

Nevertheless, some participants defined the boundaries of their collectivity even more broadly, by viewing the Mam as a people spanning the Guatemala-Mexico border. This way of defining the collectivity does not rely on boundaries defined by the state, and thereby challenges the nation-state framework. This narrative is embodied by Diego, a highly educated man in his forties who works for Guatemala's Ministry of Education. On several occasions, Diego revisited a story about 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

inadvertently legitimize those divisions and undermine political efforts to construct the cross-border nation.

WEAVING IN AND OUT OF SCALAR BOUNDARIES

Nevertheless, there is more to this story. Although the Guatemalan state has been effective at restricting Mam definitions of collectivity, and thereby constraining demands for cross-border rights, our findings suggest that depending on the situation at hand, Mam individuals and organizations imagined the spatial boundaries of their collective identity differently. This signals that Mam collective identification boundaries are not hardened realities but, instead, are shifting and context-driven. For example, in some contexts The Council of the Mam Nation and other organizations promote acknowledgment of the incongruity of the boundaries of Mam collective identity with political-administrative borders, revealing the Guatemala-Mexico border as a particular site of contestation. In this section, we provide examples of how Mam participants weave in and out of the three scalar narratives when discussing what it means to be Mam in the contemporary world. These examples demonstrate an ongoing symbolic struggle between the Mam and the Guatemalan state regarding the boundaries of Mam collectivity.

The three scalar narratives discussed in the previous section are not generally used in a mutually exclusive manner. The same individual may express the boundaries of collectivity quite narrowly in some circumstances and more broadly in others. Over the course of several conversations or even a single conversation, depending on the context at hand, an individual may express various combinations of these three narratives. The complexities of collective identification are manifest as Mam continuously weave in and out of these three boundary narratives.

For instance, César is in his late thirties and leads a small Mam group that works on community projects such as planting trees and building barns in Comitancillo. In one conversation, he illustrated how Mam individuals may define the boundaries of collectivity differently in varying contexts. César recounted how he and a Mam friend from another department, Huehuetenango, were conversing in the Mam language while waiting for a taxi in 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 beat you! Go, go, go! [. . .] Leave!” César relates how he told the woman that he and his friend are Mam, and although they speak both Spanish and Mam, their “own language,” as he describes it, is Mam. He asked, “Why should we leave? We have always gone [to San Pedro], we are going to speak the same [in Mam].”

As he spoke, César used “them,” “ladina,” and “Shecana” (meaning from San Pedro) interchangeably. He associated being ladino/a with being from San Pedro as he identified ladino identity as localized within the boundaries of that municipio. But he also weaved into a broader narrative of boundaries by using “us,” “our,” and “Mam” as signifiers of collective identification transcending Comitancillo and even the boundaries between the departments of San Marcos, where San Pedro Sacatepéquez is located, and Huehuetenango. As we have shown, administrative divisions within Guatemala have long served as instruments of domination by politically fragmenting the indigenous and failing to recognize indigenous authority that spans such divisions. These divisions are often internalized as essentialized spatial identities, and thereby contribute to state goals related to assimilating Mam subjects as part of the Guatemalan nation. But in this context César recognizes that he and his friend are part of a collectivity that transcends certain political-administrative borders. By weaving in and out of these scalar understandings of identity, César, in effect, de-essentializes these spaces.

Like César, Eliseo, a primary school teacher in his early twenties who plays soccer for the Comitancillo selection team, also occasionally refers to Comitancillo as a Mam municipio. But he too weaves into broader definitions of Mam boundaries. In his accounts, especially those that center on his personal interactions with Mam in regions beyond Comitancillo, he sometimes refers to the Mam

community leader, state employee). As Diego's various group affiliations intersect differently in distinct contexts, different ways of defining boundaries of collective identification are actively constructed.

For example, when describing his work as a young teacher and activist, Diego said, "We strengthened the bilingual issue throughout all the highlands of San Marcos, in all the municipios. And we made texts . . . and we initiated some awareness raising because [we were] being Mam. At that time, many other teachers wouldn't listen to us [because we were Mam]." This excerpt highlights Diego's definition of the Mam as a pueblo extending throughout the western highlands, beyond municipal borders. Situating himself as an activist and passionate educator earlier in his career, Diego was able to give meaning to his activism and Mam language education throughout the western highlands. Later in the same interview Diego situated himself as a state employee when he described current challenges for promoting Mam language education. His primary identification shifted from describing himself as an activist and educator to discussing his current dilemmas as a state employee because the interaction at hand, our conversation, transitioned into a new direction. In this latter way of identifying, Diego expressed frustration that some "Mam municipios" near the border, like Tacaná

It was through a series of similar meetings in 2011 in Pavencúl, Mexico that the Consejo Mayor Mam, today known as the Council of the Mam Nation, was organized, composed of Mam Councils from Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Retalhuleu, and Quetzaltenango in Guatemala and from Chiapas in Mexico (Hernández Castillo 2012). The Council of the Mam Nation continues to engage in symbolic boundary work to challenge the Guatemala-Mexico border. For example, in December 2014 leaders from the Mam Council in Chiapas, Mexico (El Consejo Regional Indígena Maya-Mam del Soconusco) and from the Mam Council in Huehuetenango, Guatemala (El Consejo Mam Saq Tx'otx') convened in Huehuetenango to explore how they could be better united in addressing political, social, and cultural issues as a cross-border pueblo. One pressing concern was that Mam leaders from both sides encounter problems with border officials each time they attempt to meet as a cross-border council, including the day prior to this meeting. An idea that resulted from the meeting was to create a credential for Mam council leaders to have easier access to convene on either side of the border. Such a credential would make it easier for Mam individuals and organizations to cross the border to visit sacred sites (such as Zaculeu in Guatemala and Izapa in Mexico) for ceremonies and to organize social, cultural, and political events on either side of the border. The idea to create a credential (a tangible object with potential spatial consequences) emerged while interpreting the border as a site of contestation and discussing the symbolic struggle of the Mam as a cross-border nation. This example demonstrates that potential spatial consequences may stem from the symbolic struggles of collective identification.

Following this meeting, council representatives from both sides were tasked with sharing in several communities the primary message from this meeting: the Mam will continue to strengthen its alliance as a cross-border nation. Lench, a leader from the Mam Council in San Marcos (El Consejo Mam te Txe Chman), explains that the Council of the Mam Nation recognizes the need to discuss this vision of Mam collectivity transcending the Guatemala-Mexico border with various communities in order for it to gain wider acceptance among the Mam. Lench describes the issues addressed at these community meetings: "We speak of unity, of autonomy, we speak of self-determination of the pueblo Mam, of the nation. That's to say the Mam Nation has its own system of justice, its own political system, its own economic system, its own spiritual-religious system, [and] we have our own cultural sys-

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