

Borrowing Borders: How the Maya-Mam Identify Collectively
Across the Guatemala-Mexico Border

Jeffrey A. Gardner

US Citizen
Sociology Department
PhD (degree sought)
gardnerj@uga.edu

In researching indigenous Mam identities along the southern Mexican border, Dr. R. Aida Hernández Castillo (2001) remarked: "The border became for me no longer a boundary line between two countries but rather a space of identity, a way of being." 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 conflicting boundaries between some nations and states. Conceptualizing *peoples* as nations bounded within state borders is especially problematic for indigenous nations that 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). These indigenous peoples can be characterized as “cross-border nations” (Warren 2010). Although state borders are imposed over what were initially territories that belonged to the indigenous, little research has addressed how indigenous cross-border nations construct collective identities in relation to state borders. Furthermore, even less research examines how indigenous cross-border nations manage collective identities *across* those borders.

The Mayan-Mam in Guatemala and Mexico are an excellent example of a people divided by a state border. My ethnographic research over 3 months in the borderland of Guatemala in 2011 (with 20 participants)¹ for my MA thesis shows that while some Mames are engaged in promoting a cross-border nation not all Mames view *being Mam* in this manner. While my thesis elucidated how the Mam in Guatemala construct their identities, many cross-national aspects of Mam identity were beyond the scope of that research. My proposed PhD dissertation research, on the other hand, will address how the Mam in Guatemala *and* Mexico identify collectively in relation to the border.

My preliminary dissertation research this summer will show how these identities are structured in Mexico as well and how organizations from both sides of the border participate in constructing these different ways of identifying, a task that was beyond the scope of my previous research. How Mames identify as a collectivity is further complicated by competing nation-building discourses from Mexico and Guatemala. Historically, both states used assimilationist projects to address “the Indian problem.” For example, in Mexico the state worked to erase Mam identity through the myth of *mestizaje*. And in Guatemala, state-driven multiculturalism projects highlight the country’s diversity while sidelining more substantive indigenous rights (Hale 2006). In many ways these state-driven assimilation, *mestizaje*, and today, multiculturalist projects may inform how the contemporary Mam identify as a collectivity, especially as the Mam challenge these projects within each country and across the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Research needs to further address how state-driven assimilationist, *mestizaje*, and multiculturalist projects divide the Mam, how the Mam contest these projects, and how being Mam is informed by these projects. How are Mam identities constructed and negotiated across the Guatemala-Mexico border in relation to the goals of the Mam themselves as well as these competing nation-building discourses? How do the Mam contest state-driven nation building projects? I propose an ethnographic study that will examine the complex process of managing Mam collective identity narratives across the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Research Objectives: This project will explain how collective identities are situated in relation to competing nation-building discourses and how a state border constrains and promotes various collective identities. To explain the articulation of Mam identities across the Guatemala-Mexico

¹ I am very gracious to LACSI for aiding this MA research with a travel award in 2011, as I acknowledged in my MA thesis.

border I will address the following questions, which are informed by my master's thesis research on the Guatemalan side of the border:

- 1) What are the dominant Mam identity narratives circulating in the borderland and how do they relate to country, community, and *pueblo* (people or nation)?
- 2) How do competing nation-building discourses—both historical and contemporary—from Mexico and Guatemala inform how the contemporary Mam identify as a collectivity? Furthermore, how do some Mames contest these discourses?
- 3) Who is involved in constructing these identity narratives and what is the role of non-governmental organizations, the states, movement organizations, etc. in their construction and dissemination across the Guatemala-Mexico border?

These questions are important because their answers will explain the various ways that the contemporary Mam identify as a collectivity, why they view themselves in such ways, and why they do not exclusively view themselves as part of a Guatemalan or Mexican nation in spite of their locations within those state boundaries.

Methods: I will address these questions with formal and informal interviews and fieldwork aimed at understanding how the Mam identify collectively in different contexts. I will focus on Mam communities in Tacaná and Comitancillo, Guatemala and Bejucal de Ocampo and Pavencul, Mexico. From the first time I lived in these highlands, in 2003-2005, I was intrigued by Mam narratives detailing conflicts in reconstructing their own identities and culture. Over years I have developed a rapport in Mam communities in the borderland that solidifies my confidence in conducting this research. My pre-dissertation research this summer will consist of at least the following tasks:

- 1) Establishing contacts with Mam organizations in Mexico and Guatemala.
- 2) Interviewing leaders and participants from at least 3 Mam organizations and interviewing new contacts in Mexico who do not participate in Mam organizations.
- 3) Conducting preliminary archival research of government documents to historically contextualize the Guatemala-Mexico border's relationship to Mam collective identities and analyzing nation-building discourses of Guatemala and Mexico.

Each of these tasks will aid in analyzing how Mam collective identities are situated in relation to competing nation-building discourses in the two countries and how the Guatemala-Mexico border constrains and promotes various ways of identifying collectively.

My research questions will be addressed by gathering personal narratives from everyday Mames (i.e., not only Mam leaders in communities and social movements) and describing what being Mam means to them in relation to their country, community, and *pueblo*. I will observe which characteristics of Mam identities are most salient in different contexts and how they explain the importance of these aspects. I will also ask how the importance of these aspects has changed over time. I will gather a snowball sample of 50-60 people for my dissertation. This summer my goal is to conduct in-depth interviews with at least 20 of these participants.

I will also interview leaders and members of Mam organizations from Mexico and Guatemala—a task that was beyond the scope of my previous research—such as the Maya-Mam Association of Research and Development in Comitancillo, Guatemala that contribute to the construction of Mam identities. From these interviews I will map out how identity is cross-nationally coordinated among individuals and organizations and how the border simultaneously challenges and facilitates such coordination.

Furthermore, I will situate these contemporary indigenous collective identities in relation to ongoing histories of state-driven assimilation, mestizaje, and multiculturalism from both sides of the Guatemala-Mexico border. Focusing solely on either the Guatemalan or the Mexican side of the border fails to capture the existing cross-border coordination and possibilities for future cross-border coordination of Mam collective identities. Therefore, this project will consider narratives, contestations, histories, and state-driven projects from both sides of the border and across it. Doing so will demonstrate how contemporary Mam collective identities are informed by these histories and projects and also how the Mam actively resisted and continue to resist these state-driven projects, and develop agendas based on their own collective priorities.

Conclusion: My dissertation will address what research has failed to in the past: a thick description and explanation of how indigenous cross-border collective identities are actively constructed in relation to state borders and difficult histories of struggle. The analysis will problematize nation state frameworks and complicate collective identity research. This research will also highlight the creative capacity of collectivities to overcome oppressive projects with roots in colonization.

Not only is this proposed analysis invaluable for its contribution to understanding socio-politico-cultural processes along state borders, but it may also have an impact on indigenous communities and border identity politics as well. Aside from its publication and presentation at conferences in the US, I will share my analysis with Mam communities in Mexico and Guatemala through local academic conferences and community workshops, something that many researchers fail to do in Mayan communities. In fact, this summer I also plan on sharing what I have learned from my thesis in the communities where I conducted research in Guatemala. Translated and distributed across the Guatemala-Mexico border, this proposed project will provide Mam people and organizations in Mexico and Guatemala with analyses that may be useful for the reconstruction and reproduction of their own identities and culture in terms established and defined by them rather than by the Guatemalan and Mexican states.

LACSI's Summer Graduate Field Research Award will provide me with necessary financial support to travel between Mam communities in Mexico and Guatemala to conduct preliminary dissertation research. Thank you for your consideration.

Requested Travel Expenses

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| 1) Roundtrip airfare (Spirit airlines): | \$388 |
| 2) Spirit carry-on baggage fees: | \$75 |
| 3) In-country travel: | \$250 |
| (Mexico & Guatemala) | |

TOTAL requested: \$ \$713

REFERENCES:

- Hale, Charles R. 2006. *Más que un Indio: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Hernández Castillo, R. Aida. 2001. *Histories and Stories from Chiapas: Border Identities in Southern Mexico*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Warren, Sarah Dodge. 2010. *Urban Indigenous Identities and Claims for Collective Rights in Chile and Argentina*. PhD dissertation. University of Wisconsin.