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# “I became more Maya”: International Kaqchikel Maya Migration in Central America\*

“Me convertí en maya”: la migración internacional Maya Kaqchikel en Centroamérica

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**Abstract:** Previous scholarship highlights migration from the Global South to the Global North. This paper focuses on South-South migration using a case study of a Kaqchikel Maya woman, Brenda, migrating from Guatemala to El Salvador. Her life history and participant-observation data were gathered over the course of 18 months between 2010 and 2015. In her case, migration within Central America encouraged ethnic revitalization, particularly through her investment in Kaqchikel language and clothing. Such revitalization might be a common occurrence among indigenous women and is a significant consequence for indigenous women because of the reinforcement of gendered ethnic work as women are responsible for reproducing indigenous language and the use of ethnically marked clothing.

**Keywords:** migration, maya, woman, participant-observation.

**Resumen:** La literatura se enfoca en la migración desde el sur global hasta el norte global. El presente artículo se enfoca en la migración sur-sur, a partir del caso de una mujer Kaqchikel Maya de Guatemala, Brenda, que migra a El Salvador. Tanto su historia de vida como los datos de observante-participante se recolectaron durante 18 meses entre 2010 y 2015. En su caso, la migración dentro de Centroamérica se convirtió en estímulo para la revitalización étnica, lo cual podría ser un hecho normal entre las mujeres indígenas por su rol como portadoras de cultura. En el caso objeto de este artículo, la migración se traduce en el refuerzo del trabajo étnico de género en el cual las mujeres son responsables de la reproducción de la lengua indígena y el uso de vestuario étnico.

**Palabras clave:** migración, maya, mujer, observación-participante.

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*Rin yib'e El Salvador. Cada semana yib'e, yik'oje jub'a ke la. K'a ri yipe pa jay.* “I go to El Salvador. Every week, I go and I stay there a bit. Then I come back home.”  
- Brenda

Brenda is currently a 25-year-old woman from Santa Catarina Palopó, a small town in rural Guatemala. She is ethnically Kaqchikel Maya, and Kaqchikel is her first language. A few years ago, she began migrating from Guatemala to El Salvador for work. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, many indigenous Guatemalan women have begun migrating for work due to increased economic pressures under neoliberal economic and political regimes (Del Cid, 1992; Jonas, 2013; Jonas & Rodríguez, 2014; Monzón, 2006). With increased migration has also come a rise in social remittances, or “the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that migrants export to their home communities” (Levitt & Nyberg-Sorensen, 2004, p. 8), which may “be transmitted by migrants themselves on

their return" (Barrett, Gibbons, & Peláez Ponce, 2014, p. 1). Brenda's experience serves as a case study to understand indigenous women's migration from Guatemala to other Central American countries and the resultant social remittances.

The majority of international migration scholarship focuses on movement from the Global South to the Global North, often ignoring international migrations from one developing country to another (Burns, 1993; Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011; Fink, 2003; Foxen, 2007; Holmes, 2013; Jonas & Rodríguez, 2014; Loucky & Moors, 2000; Massey et al., 1998). Despite the lack of scholarly attention to Guatemalan migration to other Central American countries, Central American media sources have highlighted the growing trend of migration from the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to southern Central America ("Crece la migración a Costa Rica", 2015). This article addresses the gap in scholarship by examining migration from one country in the Global South to another, in this case from Guatemala to El Salvador.

Social remittances have likewise been especially highlighted in Guatemala-US literature (Jonas & Rodríguez, 2014; Landry, 2011; Palma, 2010). However, social remittances sent or brought home by migrants like Brenda, who migrate within the Global South, are arguably more influential than remittances from the Global North because migrants to other Central American countries have the ability to return home more frequently than do many of their undocumented, US-bound counterparts. This is true for Brenda, who has remained intimately connected to her home community through weekly migrations home.

The objectives of this paper are fourfold. First, I aim to characterize indigenous Guatemalan women's international Central American migration. In doing so, I relocate indigenous women's experiences to the center of migration and social remittance discussions. Second, I aim to understand the connections between nationally-bound and international migration in the context of South-South migration. Third, I seek to characterize the experience and consequences of repeated short-term migration. My fourth goal is to discern indigenous women's social remittances and their impact on the home community.

## **International Migration, Indigenous Women, and Guatemala**

Guatemala is a rich place to study international migration and social remittances because of its history of international migration, a result of state and structural violence, particularly against its indigenous population (Elías, 2016). That violence escalated to extreme heights during the genocidal civil war (1960-1996) and again during the post-peace neoliberal political-economic system that now governs the country, which has led to high rates of indigenous migration (Jonas & Rodríguez, 2014). Indigenous international Guatemalan migrants are culturally and linguistically distinct from their non-indigenous, Ladino counterparts. When migrating to other Central American countries, indigenous

Guatemalan migrants arrive in nations with much lower percentages of indigenous peoples (Elías, 2016).

While indigenous migration from Guatemala has received international scholarly attention, much of it focuses on communities in western Guatemala, including the K'iche, Mam, and Q'eqchi'. Kaqchikel-speaking migrants from central regions of the highlands have received little scholarly attention (Farley Webb, 2015). Kaqchikel is one of the "big four" languages, meaning that it is one of the four indigenous languages in Guatemala with the most speakers. Therefore, Kaqchikel experiences are significant in analyzing Guatemalan migration. Moreover, given the uniqueness of their history and position in the nation-state as leaders in ethnic revitalization (Warren, 1998), it is crucial to include Kaqchikel experiences in migration literature.

Indigenous women migrants from Guatemala are a pivotal population among whom to study migration and social remittances because of indigenous women's designated role as culture bearers, those responsible for the reproduction of ethnic identity (Farber, 1978; Hendrickson, 1995; Romero, 2015; Smith, 1996; Warren, 1998). Women are more likely to pass on indigenous languages to children than men (Garzón, Brown, Richards, & Ajpub', 1998; Maddox, 2010; Romero, 2015), and women more often wear *traje*, indigenous clothing (Hendrickson, 1995; Oztzy, 1996). *Traje* is visually distinctive from Western clothing and is town-specific (Hendrickson, 1995). An example from Santa Catarina, Brenda's hometown, is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**

*Women's Traje*

Source: own work.

National discourses in Guatemala have long treated indigenous language and culture as unwanted, devalued, and something to eradicate. Social remittances from migrants in the Global North have generally reified the negative discourses about indigeneity by framing progress and economic advancement as exclusive from and in opposition to indigenous language and culture (Cojti Cuxil, 1991; Fernández-Guzmán & Shiomara del Carpio-Ovando, 2013; Lyman, Cen Montuy, & Tejada Sandoval, 2007; Stephen, 2007). Examples include the notion that speaking an indigenous language holds back the intellectual development of an individual or that eating tortillas instead of meat limits an

individual's productivity. The literature reifies such discussions by framing the Westernization of indigenous communities as progress on developmental scales, highlighting increasing education, wealth, and other markers of Western success (Barrett et al., 2014). While advances in "developmental" realms often means better quality of life for home communities through things like running water, higher levels of education, etc., such discussions also inadvertently highlight a shift away from indigenous cultural practices as a direct result of migration. For example, increased access to education via social and financial remittances is highlighted as progress for developing communities because of the student's increased ability to navigate the Western world. The continued passing down of indigenous knowledge is typically given little consideration. Investing more in Western education and less in traditional indigenous education as a result of social remittances is framed as progress and reifies national anti-indigenous discourses.

Contrary to these themes of Westernization as progress, some scholarship has reported indigenous migrants gaining confidence in their ethnic identity via migration (Barrett et. al, 2014; Moran-Taylor, 2008; Taylor, Moran-Taylor, & Ruiz, 2006). While such scholarship includes women in the analysis, the focus has not been on gendered displays of ethnicity. However, indigenous women's experiences are imperative to foreground because women invest their financial and social remittances based on their social role as culture bearers (Fischer & Hendrickson, 2002; Hendrickson, 1995; Romero, 2015).

Understanding migration's impact on indigenous identity is important given the increasing language and culture loss in Guatemala. Many scholars have noted the increased pace of language loss and shift away from traje in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century as neoliberalism has forced indigenous communities to increasingly engage in the global market (England, 2003; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2008). While Maya activists work to protect and revitalize language and culture through national policies and education reform, such efforts are difficult to implement, not implemented at all, or unintentionally continue to undermine indigenous language and culture (Cojti Cuxil, 1991; Congreso de la Republica, 2003; Domingo, 2007). Maxwell (2009) points out that even though Kaqchikel is now taught in many schools, including in Santa Catarina where Brenda is from, much of the curriculum remains Western-centric, assumes a non-indigenous worldview, and is often taught by non-native, non-indigenous teachers. Instead of locating revitalization efforts in structural interventions such as these, this work investigates indigenous women's daily actions that influence Kaqchikel and traje.

## Method

Drawing on anthropological methods, I identified Brenda by conducting a snowball sample survey among both men and women in Santa Catarina Palopó (n = 43). From the survey, I identified indigenous women migrants. Brenda was one such migrant, and I use her as a case study

because of her frequent migrations to another Central American country (Creswell, 1998).

Brenda was 18 years old when we met in 2010 and had spent the first ten years of her life in Santa Catarina. She then began migrating for work after being removed from school. She has been migrating, first within Guatemala and now to El Salvador, ever since. At the writing of this article in 2017, she spends three days per week in El Salvador with the other four days in Guatemala. Given her frequent migrations and strong ties to her home community, she was the ideal participant for this study.

This case study utilizes Brenda's life history and 18 months of participant-observation fieldwork gathered between 2010 and 2015 in Brenda's home community. I collected her life history over the course of two days in 2013. I also conducted other shorter interviews with her intermittently during my fieldwork. As I speak Kaqchikel Maya fluently, I conducted all research with Brenda in this language because it is her first and preferred language. Upon completion of fieldwork, I transcribed the life history and interviews. I later translated into English all materials I draw on here; all translations are mine.

The use of life history is crucial to understand the context in which international migration takes place and its impacts on migrants themselves (Bernard, 2011; Thomson, 2007). Furthermore, the use of life history is a means of valorizing and legitimizing the tradition of oral histories often used in Maya communities (Carey, 2001). Using Brenda's life history provides a means of understanding those traditionally marginalized in academic literature (Geiger, 1990; Thomson, 2007). I also draw on my field notes from participant-observation work to contextualize Brenda's experience within community norms and the experiences of indigenous women.

While gathering participant-observation data, I engaged in Brenda's daily activities with her, running errands, going to church, cooking and cleaning at home, and other mundane tasks. My own identity as a woman in my 20s aided my integration into Brenda's life, although being a white American was challenging at first. However, speaking Kaqchikel and partaking in other gendered ethnic activities, such as making tortillas, aided my integration. My field notes from participant-observation with Brenda focus on her actions specifically with regard to ideas, notions, and other remittances she brought home.

## Findings and Discussion

### *The Migration Path: Motivation, Connections, and Social Remittances*

**Leaving home.** When I asked Brenda about the beginning of her migration journey, she responded:

First, I went to school. My dad did not have a lot of money, so I only went to school for two years. And then I saw that I couldn't go anymore; my dad had a lot of bills in front of him. I saw that I couldn't keep studying. Then a woman came to me.

"Come with me." I went with her when I was still small. I was ten years old. I was ten years old, and I left [my house]. (June 23, 2012)

Elementary school in Guatemala is public, but the cost of school supplies often price poor families out of receiving education. Girls' education is often sacrificed with the hope that parents will be able to send their sons to school with the savings (Hallman, Peracca, Catino, & Ruiz, 2006). Men's education is seen as more valuable because their earning potential is higher than women's and because men are expected to support their parents while women are expected to marry and support their in-laws. Brenda's parents could no longer afford to send her to school because they could not afford the school supplies, and she had several male siblings coming up after her.

Paying for Brenda's daily consumption needs such as food and clothing was also becoming increasingly difficult for her family, a situation that led her to leave her natal household and become a child laborer. When Anna, a wealthier indigenous woman from town, came to ask if Brenda would work for her, Brenda's family agreed.

Then a woman came. "Do you want to go with me? Take care of my kids," she said to me. I went with her when I was young. Her son was one year old when I went with her; I took care of him. I took care of him; I gave him his bottle; I gave him his coffee. I took care of him. I took care of him. He grew up, and I washed him; I washed his clothes. He grew. (June 23, 2012)

Child labor in Guatemala is common, with 21% of children between ages 7 and 14 engaged in wage labor outside the home (Dammert, 2010).

Despite the frequency with which girls work outside of the home, there are concerns over the kinds of values young women learn while away from their parents, particularly as it relates to ethnic identity (A. Cuma, personal communication, April 7, 2017). When Brenda went to work for Anna, Brenda was allowed to wear her *traje* and speak Kaqchikel at work, but Anna and her family were not nearly as pro-indigenous as Brenda's family was. "They wanted me to speak Spanish, but I could not," Brenda recounted. While Anna tolerated Brenda's use of Kaqchikel, Anna insisted on speaking to Brenda in Spanish, revealing her opinion that Spanish was better than Kaqchikel. At the time, Brenda said, "my work in Anna's house did not change my view of my language." (April 7, 2017)

Brenda's early integration into the labor force placed her in a difficult position. She was able to cover her daily living expenses, but her limited education and young age restricted her employment opportunities and increased her reliance on Anna's family to continue employing her. Her status as a child also meant that her wages went directly to her father for the family's expenditures. While working in Santa Catarina with Anna's family, Brenda earned her room and board and 10 quetzales per day, or US \$1.25.

*Local migration: experiencing symbolic violence.* After two years, Anna took Brenda to Panajachel, a town five kilometers away. Brenda's parents gave consent, and although Brenda did agree to go, her consent was not the deciding factor in her move to Panajachel. As Brenda told it,

“[The boy] grew; he turned six years old. They took me to Panajachel. They took me with their daughter. ‘Now you will work here with my daughter. You will be here.’ Okay, I said. There, I learned a lot of different things.” (April 7, 2017)

Anna’s family “took” her, reflecting Brenda’s position as a child laborer. Brenda worked six days a week with Anna’s family and went home to Santa Catarina for one day per week. Her wages remained the same.

Brenda recounted that in Panajachel, she was exposed to more Ladino, or non-indigenous, culture and negative views of her language. Although Anna and her family were indigenous, they consistently pushed Brenda to speak Spanish. Brenda recounted,

“I learned to speak Spanish when I went to work in Panajachel. Because I was still young when I learned to speak Spanish and talk to her child. I didn’t know much Spanish then. But she did. ‘This is how you talk to my child,’ she would say. So I learned some. That’s how it was. I learned little by little.” (June 23, 2012)

While she was not openly punished for speaking Kaqchikel at work, Anna’s family preferred that Brenda speak Spanish, especially in front of or with the children. Brenda’s employer told her that she did not want the children to suffer in school, that she wanted them to succeed and do well, and eventually be employed.

The clear connection of Spanish to education, employment, and success placed more value on Spanish than it did on Kaqchikel. The message of Spanish’s superiority was reinforced in Panajachel in general, as it is a deeply engrained component of national culture (Garzón, 1998). Brenda’s view of her own language as lesser than Spanish is a kind of symbolic violence produced through structural forces that devalue some languages and privilege others (Bourdieu, 2000; Crystal, 2000; Holmes, 2013).

At this point, Brenda brought negative ideas about Kaqchikel home to Santa Catarina as social remittances. The overtly negative views of Kaqchikel she found in Panajachel were distinct from Santa Catarina where Kaqchikel was the *lingua franca*. Although national discourses about the superiority of Spanish existed in Santa Catarina, their presence was more limited. Brenda’s weekly trips home allowed her to transport such views. “I spoke more Spanish at church and with my friends than I did before,” she recalled.

**Nationally-bound migration: engraining symbolic violence.** After working a few years in Panajachel, Brenda began migrating to Guatemala City. Brenda recounted, “Anna’s sisters-in-law took me to sell in Guatemala City.” While migration to Guatemala City is the most common migration destination within Guatemala, it was a significant for Brenda in terms of experiencing a different way of living and reinforcing negative ideas about her language and clothing (Caballeros, 2013; Martínez López & Díaz Aldana, 2007).

The first time Brenda went to Guatemala City, the experience was overwhelming. Brenda recalled the smells of exhaust, street vendor food, and the mix of refreshing cilantro cutting through the stench of trash left to rot in the street; those odors filled her lungs, making it difficult to breathe. “It did not smell like the smoke from the cooking fire at

home," (April 7, 2017) she recounted. The massive numbers of cars struggled and fought to get through clogged streets, multiple lanes, and confusing traffic patterns. She felt awe looking at the enormous buildings towering over her, the kind she had only ever seen in movies projected on the cantina walls on Saturday afternoons. "They must have a lot of Ladinos in them," she recalled thinking. Brenda saw people in Western clothing: women in skirts, men in cloth pants or jeans. She remembered the noise, from car horns, bus engines, screeching brakes, to bits and pieces of language. "It was all Spanish," (April 7, 2017) Brenda said.

Brenda sold indigenous handicrafts, purchased by Anna's family in Santa Catarina, to tourists. She sold primarily to domestic tourists, with the occasional foreign tourist. She found it difficult to transition from working in domestic labor in Panajachel to selling directly to individuals on the street in Guatemala City. "It was just selling. Three bracelets, two *chalinas*, just a little bit I did. Maybe I was lucky, I would sell everything they gave me. I would sell it all. And slowly, the business grew. It grew." (June 23, 2012)

Much as Brenda received negative messages about her language when she migrated to Panajachel, she also received negative messages about her clothing while in Guatemala City. Brenda heard or was the target of racist epithets. She recalled approaching a group of young Ladino men to sell some of her handicrafts. At her approach, they told her "Go away you stupid *indio*." *Indio* is a racial slur brought on by Brenda's use of *traje*, which physically marked her as indigenous. Brenda felt trapped when such events occurred. Her employer, Anna and her sister, wanted Brenda to actively approach people to try and increase sales. Because they were always with her, Brenda felt watched, like she had to approach people, even if she did not want to. However, approaching individuals could result in instances like the above, in which potential clients became verbally abusive, centering their attacks on issues of ethnic identity. Over time, Brenda internalized those messages about indigenous clothing, another kind of symbolic violence.

While Brenda worked three-day weekends in Guatemala City, she migrated home to Santa Catarina weekly. At home, she commuted to Panajachel to do domestic work for Anna three of her four days in the area. Her frequent returns meant that Brenda maintained her regular communications and connections in Santa Catarina. She went to church once a week, caught up with her sisters, and engaged in the life of the town. Brenda remembered, "While I was going back and forth to Guatemala City, I spoke more and more Spanish when I was at home. I thought I was smart for using more Spanish words". (June 23, 2012) Such actions revealed her increasingly negative view of Kaqchikel.

**International migration: refuting symbolic violence.** After working for five years in Guatemala City, Anna's family decided to sell handicrafts in El Salvador. Brenda recounted,

"They learned (of a new opportunity), so they went to El Salvador. And since I was still young, they got me permission so I could go. They called my mom and my dad. My parents signed so that I could cross the border." (June 23, 2012)

To Brenda, the locale where she and Anna's family sold handicrafts outside El Salvador's capital city looked strikingly similar to Guatemala City. "There are a lot of Ladinos there. They buy our handicrafts. We sell stuff," (June 23, 2012) she said. Brenda had to speak Spanish with all of her customers, just as she did in Guatemala City. Sometimes customers would ask if she spoke an indigenous language and would ask to hear a few words. Brenda also noted that El Salvador had far fewer indigenous people than Guatemala, so she and Anna's family were frequently the only people in *traje* anywhere they went.

Brenda recalled how her *traje* use in El Salvador increased sales and, in turn, her support of *traje*. She said "People would see our *traje*, and they would like it. They would tell me how beautiful it is. They see you, and they come over. They take your photo." (June 23, 2012) Encounters with tourists, as described by Brenda, serve as clear moments of commodification of indigenous clothing and arguably work towards "Othering" indigeneity. However, Little, a leading scholar in tourism studies among Kaqchikel vendors, argues that the investment in indigenous culture is more important and significant than the act of Othering (Little, 2004). This was true for Brenda; such interactions were significant because they changed the narrative that she heard: instead of being demeaning, such interactions increased her sales, adding economic value, and by extension, cultural capital to indigenous culture.

Brenda also recounted significant experiences with the Kaqchikel language. She said

"They like it when we speak in Kaqchikel. Many people there say they want to learn Kaqchikel. There are some that we teach a few words to. Some people are good at it, and other people are not. That is what they say. They really like to hear us speak Kaqchikel." (June 23, 2012)

She was initially surprised when people took interest in her language because she had internalized the idea that Kaqchikel was a lesser language, not complex, and unworthy of the global arena. However, working in El Salvador, a place with very different ethnic relations than Guatemala, she found people valued her language. This spurred her own thinking and consideration of language ideologies, and it encouraged her to use more Kaqchikel, particularly at home.

Once Brenda began migrating weekly to El Salvador, she returned home to her family in Santa Catarina for four days each week. Her pay increased so that she was earning 35 quetzales, or US \$4.60, per day, but her room and board were no longer covered. The minimum daily wage is 87 quetzales according to Guatemalan law, but women commonly earn less than men (Gobierno de Guatemala, 2016; Instituto Nacional de Estadística Guatemala [INE], 2015). Brenda's regular return home, and her increased socio-economic status, meant that Brenda remained well-connected and that her support of Kaqchikel and *traje* was influential.

While at home, Brenda began recovering and intentionally using more Kaqchikel and less code mixing with Spanish. As she put it, "Our language is beautiful. That is what I think now." Her daily actions mirrored her intellectual support for Kaqchikel. For example, she said, "I know Spanish

now. I learned it, but when I am in Santa [Catarina], I always speak in Kaqchikel. It is very important." (June 23, 2012 ) Indeed, her statement reflects what I observed over the many years I have known Brenda. When she was in Santa Catarina, she never spoke Spanish unless she was with a Ladino person. Otherwise, she spoke only Kaqchikel when she went to the mill, the store, to church, or anywhere else in town.

In addition to Brenda's daily use of Kaqchikel, she also used Kaqchikel at key moments, especially when in front of large groups of people at her church, an act that separates her speech from that of her peers'. She attended a local Evangelical church with about 350 members. Brenda participated in the youth group, who held a service every Wednesday. During the service, members of the youth group were called upon to assist by leading the opening prayer, reading from the Bible, leading the hymns, collecting the offering, and/or other duties. Brenda frequently participated in such activities. When she was called upon to lead some aspect of the service, she only spoke in Kaqchikel, and she used few words from Spanish. I wrote down her opening dialogue one evening before she led the hymn:

Good evening everyone. Thanks be to God that we are reunited here. Hello to our *pastor*, hello to members of the church *directorate*, hello to members of *youth group*, hello to everyone who has come together this evening. I am very happy to have the *privilege* of being up here. Now, we will sing to praise *God*. (J. Bennett, field notes, April 18, 2012)

The italicized words were said in Spanish, in an otherwise Kaqchikel sentence. Compare this to many of Brenda's colleagues, who when they do their opening greeting, say something like this (from an opening speech a week later):

Good evening everyone. Thanks be to *God* that we are reunited here. Hello to *our pastor*, hello to *members* of the church *directorate*, hello to *members* of *youth group*, hello to everyone who has come together this *evening*. I am very happy to have the *privilege* of being up here. Now, we will *sing to praise God*. (J. Bennett, field notes, April 25, 2012)

When Brenda stood in front of the congregation, she consciously chose to use more Kaqchikel words than Spanish words. When I asked her about this trend, she told me "it is so people know I have not forgotten." Implicated here is that she has not forgotten *despite* her regular migration out of the country.

Brenda also actively supported the continued use of *traje* because of her experiences in migration to El Salvador. She told me, "this is our way of being, so we should dress this way." Brenda's support of *traje* came in multiple forms while she was at home, but the most visible form was through her use of wages to purchase more *traje* to wear herself. Although she had been using some of her wages to purchase new pieces of *traje* while working in Guatemala City, such purchases were few and far between. When Brenda began migrating to El Salvador, she increased her investments in *traje* as her pay increased and as she began to change her opinion of *traje* and support its use. She quickly began

commissioning more pieces of *traje*, sometimes as many as one new outfit every three months. This is much more frequent than other women, who typically acquire a new outfit once every year. Additionally, Brenda began requesting fancier, more elaborate designs. In part, these requests were “because the people in El Salvador like to see it,” but commissioning expensive pieces was also a statement about Brenda’s increased earning capacity because of her selling activities in El Salvador.

Brenda invested her financial remittances in clothing, not housing, not education, not any of the other numerous ways scholars have documented that migrants invest their hard-earned money. This investment is a direct investment in ethnic identity. Brenda’s commissioning of *traje* also provided wages for indigenous women who depended on that work. But more importantly, this investment in ethnicity is gendered. Were Brenda a man, it would be highly unlikely that she would even wear *traje*, much less invest money in it, given that most men do not wear *traje* in Santa Catarina today. As an indigenous woman migrant, then, Brenda’s spending habits and use of remittance money were gendered.

Brenda’s support of *traje* and investment in Kaqchikel Maya identity is also creating more class distinction. As Brenda and other migrant women use their wages to invest in *traje*, women without such financial resources are quickly priced out of the market. This is not to say that non-migrant women do not wear *traje*; on the contrary, many non-migrant women do. However, migrant women are able to access higher-priced pieces, which are clearly and easily distinguishable to the average person in the region. As such, Brenda and those like her physically mark themselves with their financial success by wearing it on their bodies.

Brenda’s case also highlights the connection between nationally-bound and international migration. Scholars have framed migration as a unidirectional process that involves moving from point A to point B. This dynamic does not reflect the complex networks of mobility that most Guatemalan migrants experience today (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011). Instead, many migrants, including Brenda, begin their migration journeys with internal movements at young ages that lead to making connections, which eventually lead to the opportunities and networks individuals need in order to travel internationally. International migration from Guatemala to other Central American countries is inextricably linked to nationally-bound, internal migration.

## General Discussion and Conclusions

Brenda’s life history highlights several important facts about international migration in Central America. International migration is often connected to and preceded by nationally-bound migration. International migration can be frequent. Migrants can and do remain part of home town culture because of their frequent trips home. Finally, social remittances from international migration can support and reinvigorate indigenous language and clothing among women.

The idea that migration can create social remittances to support indigenous language and culture is a finding whose implications merit deep discussion. For many academics and activists, the idea that a by-product of neoliberalism, in this case international migration as a means of mediating increasing poverty in rural areas, is indeed exciting. However, for Brenda and other women like her, their decisions to support indigenous dress and language have very real implications for their lives and futures. When Brenda decided to use her earnings to purchase more *traje*, she kept money from other areas of her life. Within her community, many elders were proud that she invested financially in markers of indigenous identity. Her peers envied her beautiful pieces of *traje*. However, some community members saw her choices as a negation of her responsibilities to care for others through providing food, housing, education, and other necessities. This is a critique of women migrants documented in other remittance literature (Curran & Saguy, 2001). Migration allowed Brenda to support and invest in her ethnic identity, a gendered role in Kaqchikel communities, but that investment pitted her against other gendered expectations of her as a family supporter.

In addition to the financial commitment it takes to invest in more *traje*, such decisions also put Brenda and women like her at risk for continued discrimination. Discrimination against women for using *traje* is well-documented in Guatemala (Barrios, 2014; Nimatuj & Alicia, 2004). Even though Brenda uses *traje* in Santa Catarina where its use is normalized or in tourist contexts where *traje* earns her more money, her constant use of it could impact her life in Guatemala, such as local employment opportunities, her ability to engage successfully with financial institutions, or the price she pays for consumer goods sold in predominantly Ladino stores (Fischer & Hendrickson, 2002). Brenda's continued use of *traje* not only puts her at continued risk for discrimination in her home country, but it also costs her time and energy because of the ways in which that daily discrimination impacts life. Her support of indigenous clothing thus becomes extra work that only women are doing.

The same can be said of Brenda's support of Kaqchikel. While speaking Kaqchikel earned her money when she engaged with tourists in El Salvador, publicly supporting Kaqchikel and using it in Guatemala left her open to continued discrimination from Ladinos, national institutions, and society at large. In the same ways that using *traje* becomes time and labor intensive, so too does the use of Kaqchikel. Combining both her use of *traje* as a visual marker of indigeneity and her use of Kaqchikel as an audible marker, she becomes doubly-exposed to discrimination and its effects.

Supporting and revitalizing indigenous language and culture as a result of migration means more work and reinforcing the gendered nature of ethnicity and ethnic production for Kaqchikel women. Indigenous women's role as culture bearers becomes re-entrenched, perhaps to women's disadvantage. I openly discussed such concerns with Brenda, who responded by telling me "This is our way of being. I like to speak like

this (in Kaqchikel). I like these clothes. I will not change them. That is wrong, I learned this through migrating. Yes, I became more Maya.” (June 23, 2012) For Brenda, renewing her commitment to Kaqchikel Maya language and clothing is an act of strength and resistance.

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- \* Research article.

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