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## Crafting connections: maya linkages between Guatemala's *Altiplano* and *El Norte*

Michelle J. Moran-Taylor\*

**Abstract.** International migration constitutes one of the most significant phenomena impacting Guatemala today. About a million and a half Guatemalans live and work in rural and urban cities and towns across the United States and Canada. Like many other migrant groups, most Guatemalans sustain strong transnational linkages between their homeland and *el norte* (the United States). In the Guatemalan example highlighted in this article, such bonds owe much to the long-standing Guatemalan-U.S. historical connections, to the country's geographic proximity to the United States. Drawing on ethnographic material, this article examines the divergent kinds of transnational connections that Maya indigenous (K'iche') migrants craft and keep alive between their home community and their two primary destination localities in the United States—Houston, Texas and Los Angeles, California. The article shows the different means of communication and technology, as well as the varying types of transnational organizing—particularly grass-roots efforts—that help shape current linkages between those who go and those who stay.

**Keyword:** Transnational migration, social ties, Guatemalan Maya migration, communications, grass-roots organizing.

**Resumen.** La migración internacional constituye uno de los fenómenos más significativos que afectan a Guatemala hoy en día. Casi un millón y medio de guatemaltecos viven y trabajan en grandes ciudades o en comunidades rurales y pueblos de los Estados Unidos y Canadá. Al igual que muchos otros grupos migrantes, la mayoría de los guatemaltecos mantienen fuertes lazos entre su país natal y *el norte* (los Estados Unidos). Según el ejemplo que se resalta en este artículo, dichos lazos se deben en gran medida: a las conexiones históricas que se han mantenido entre Guatemala y los Estados Unidos desde hace muchos años, a la disponibilidad hoy en día de medios de comunicación y de transporte más eficientes, y a la proximidad geográfica del país centroamericano con los Estados Unidos. Mediante la recopilación de material etnográfico, este artículo examinará los tipos divergentes de conexiones transnacionales que los indígenas migrantes mayas (K'iche') establecen y mantienen vivas entre su país natal y los dos destinos principales ubicados en los Estados Unidos: Houston, Texas y Los Ángeles, California. Este artículo muestra los diferentes medios de comunicación y tecnología, así como los diversos tipos de organizaciones transnacionales, principalmente los esfuerzos por conservar sus raíces, que es lo que ayuda a conformar los lazos entre los que se van y los que se quedan. Palabras clave: Migración transnacional, redes sociales, migración de guatemaltecos maya, comunicaciones, organización a nivel local.

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## Introduction

International migration constitutes one of the most significant social, cultural, and economic phenomena impacting Guatemala today. The mass movement to the United States has grown rapidly in the last three decades, creating a migration consciousness that penetrates just about every corner of Guatemalan society. Now nearly a million and a half Guatemalans live and work in the United States and Canada. This figure represents almost ten to fifteen percent of the total Guatemalan population. Like many other migrant groups, most Guatemalans sustain strong transnational linkages between their homeland and *el norte* (the United States). Certainly, these bonds owe much to the long-standing Guatemalan-U.S. historical connections, to the more efficient means of communication and transportation available, and to the country's geographic proximity to the United States. While only one country (Mexico) separates Guatemala from the United States, this spatial distance is relatively small comparable to that of other migrant sending regions. Additionally, because of Guatemala's geographic proximity to the U.S.-Mexican border, it is precisely the border straddling between Guatemala and Mexico that has recently become the gateway to many other migrant nationals (e.g., Salvadorans, Hondurans, Ecuadorians, Chinese). Importantly, transnational attachments emerge and endure because migration in one way or another impacts those who remain behind—and in Guatemala, few remain untouched.

In this article, I examine the flow to the United States of Maya indigenous migrants from the *municipio* of San Cristóbal Totonicapán in the western highlands of Guatemala.<sup>1</sup> A focus on this group is significant because they form part of a large U.S.-bound Guatemalan migrant stream, and in turn, the increasing Latino community in the United States. Of particular concern in this paper are the kinds of transnational ties Guatemalans craft. As others observe (e.g., Glick Schiller, 1992; Kearney, 1995), transnational migration emphasizes the bi-directional

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter I refer to this town simply as San Cristóbal.

flow of people, commodities, ideas, and behavior. Though we now have a clearer understanding of northbound and southbound exchanges, how these unfold from the ground up needs more attention. Here, then, I attend to transnational connections between migrants and non-migrants and their inner workings, especially from the perspective of the sending community. I show, for instance, how different means of communication facilitate the maintenance of social ties across international borders and the varied ways in which Maya migrants keep their loyalties oriented towards their homeland. In particular, I illustrate this through the formation of migrant formal and informal organizations. Following Guarnizo and Smith (1998:29), I seek to capture how “transnationalism from below” develops in Guatemalan communities of origin. In other words, instead of looking at broader structures and exploring how migration unfolds at the state level, transnational from below illuminates the everyday grounded activities and practices of people in migration processes and practices.

### **Guatemalan migration studies**

Past studies that address the migratory movement of Guatemalans highlight the internally displaced population in Guatemala and the refugee problem in Mexico and the United States (e.g., Carmack, 1988; Manz, 1988; Stepputat, 1994; Nolin Hanlon, 1999; Taylor, 1998). More recently, research that looks at Guatemalan migration to *el norte* typically examines how individuals adapt in their places of arrival and the new communities migrants create. Studies address how Guatemalans work and live in U.S. localities stretching across a gamut of places. Most of these works concentrate on U.S. urban places with large Guatemalan populations such as Houston (Hagan, 1994); Los Angeles (Kopahl, 1998; Popkin, 1999; Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1999; Menjivar, 1999; Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla, 2001); Phoenix (Moran-Taylor and Menjivar, n.d.); San Francisco (e.g., Vlach, 1992); and Washington D. C. (Repak, 1995). Research that centers on U.S. rural localities reveals how many Guatemalans engage in agricultural labor in Florida (Burns, 1993; Wellmeier, 1998) and work in poultry factories in North Carolina (Fink, 2003). In comparison to this growing body of work,

from the view of the community of origin we know much less about this Guatemalan migration to *el norte*.

More specifically, limited research focuses on Guatemalan transnational migration. Transnational work examines gender in migrants' destination (Kopahl, 1998), identity formation in the context of social organizations (Popkin, 1999); attachments to land and exile (Montejo, 1999); transnational ruptures and political violence (Nolin Hanlon, 2000), and more recently, land, ethnic and gender relations in home communities (Taylor, Moran-Taylor, and Rodman-Ruiz forthcoming). While these studies provide fuller understandings of Guatemalan migration, how those abroad and those at home craft transnational connections at a localized-level receives less attention.

### **Guatemala's *altiplano***

Guatemala's *altiplano* or western highlands are known as *tierra fría* (cold country).<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the rest of the country –a society generally viewed in dichotomous terms of indigenous and non-indigenous– Maya people and culture dominate the *altiplano*. Three factors characterize Maya culture –land, community, and affinity to place (Lovell, 1988). As Lovell (1988:27) clearly states, “this trinity has been, and will remain, fundamental to the maintenance of Maya identity.” Similarly, Montejo (1999), in his writing about Maya migrants living in the United States, echoes that land, community, and affinity to place continue to form an integral part of Maya culture.

To contextualize Guatemala's western highlands and to better understand indigenous life in this region, in what follows I sketch out a brief description of Maya identity, the role of the state, and the colonial heritage. Guatemala, and Mesoamerica in general, is often rendered as a “heritage of conquest” because of a 500-year history of conquest, repression, and marginalization (Tax, 1952; Kendall, Hawkins and Bossen, 1983; Lovell, 1988). Guatemala's *altiplano* is home to the

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<sup>2</sup> In Adams' (1970) regional division, the *Occidente* is described as including seven departments West of Guatemala City.

largest concentration of indigenous people in the New World. But calculating the indigenous percentage of the Guatemalan population is a contentious issue. Ethnic self-identity, for example, was only employed for the first time in 1994.<sup>3</sup> Previously, as Watanabe (2000) observes, census takers (i.e., government employees) sought to discern ethnic identity in both inadequate and insensitive manners. Simply, census takers asked: "Are you Indian?" This approach, however, largely ignores the subtleties of how Guatemalans self-identify (Watanabe, 2000). From an historical perspective, Lovell and Lutz (1994) argue that regardless of current debates that address Maya populations, the sheer numbers and impressive increase in indigenous people since the Conquest belittle controversies about whether Mayas or Ladinos (non-indigenous) make up the majority. In short, assessing Maya demographics is a complex task. But more importantly, it embodies an issue at the heart of rethinking the nation-state in Guatemala (see Smith, 1990; Grandin, 1999; Nelson, 1999; Watanabe, 2000).<sup>4</sup> This concern emerges, particularly among some non-indigenous people, who view that as long as the Maya retain their own ethnic identity, the country cannot fully attain the status of a modern nation (Smith, 1990). And a modern nation state implies, Smith (1990:5) writes, "not only unity, but the eradication of what they believe to be the very symbol of backwardness—a group of people still rooted in the traditions of a colonial past." In sum, altogether, twenty-one different ethno-linguistic groups exist in Guatemala. In recent years, however, political and economic instability has pushed an increasing number of Maya men and women from Mexico and Guatemala to the United States. Now sizeable indigenous Maya communities span the United States (see Burns, 1993; Moran-Taylor and Richardson, 1993; Hagan, 1994; Wellmeier, 1998; Popkin, 1999; Adler, 2000; Loucky and Moors, 2000; Fink, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> While the 1994 Census contains broader information previously lacking, overall Guatemalan scholars and others criticize it for being highly flawed.

<sup>4</sup> For other discussions of Guatemalan contemporary demography, see John Early (1982, 1983). For an historical account of the demographic ramifications of the Spanish Conquest on Guatemala, see Lovell (1992) and Carmack et al. (1982).

### San Cristóbal

The *municipio* of San Cristóbal is in the heartland of Maya K'iche' indigenous culture in Guatemala's *altiplano*. The Maya K'iche' comprise the largest out of the twenty-one different Maya-speaking indigenous groups found in Guatemala. San Cristóbal lies in the midst of Guatemala's most densely populated indigenous highlands. The *municipio* of San Cristóbal is located within the jurisdiction of the department of Totonicapán—an area with the highest concentration of indigenous people in Guatemala (approximately 97 percent [*Guatemala: La Fuerza Incluyente del Desarrollo Humano* [UN], 2000]). The town rests in between the Sija and Salamá Rivers, at 2,330 meters above sea level in the *altiplano*. It sits strategically at the bustling *Cuatro Caminos*, the most important junction in the western highlands along the Panamerican highway. Geographically, the town is merely a 15-kilometer ride to Quetzaltenango (Guatemala's second largest city) and 185 kilometers from Guatemala City. In 1994, the *municipio*'s population figured an estimated 29,903 (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, 1994) of which 78 percent identified as indigenous (*Municipalidad de San Cristóbal, Censo Urbano*, 1998).

Two crucial features earmark Maya ethnic identity: language and *traje* (traditional clothing). Many Maya, especially women, wear their *traje*. While men abandoned this tradition several decades ago, women

**Table 1**  
Population of San Cristóbal, Totonicapán

Year	Population Town	Population <i>Municipio</i>
1955	3,820	11,099
1964	3,188	14,811
1973	3,942	16,795
1994	4,378	29,903

Source: *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas* (INE), *Censo de Población*. De Gall (1978).

maintain their colorful regional *traje*, which consists of an ankle-length *corte* (skirt) worn today wrapped around the waist and held with a *faja* (belt). Women also wear a *huipil* (traditional blouse). The *corte* remains an integral ethnic marker of the Maya K'iche' group (one announcing ethnic affiliation and geographic location). In contrast, the *huipiles* worn originate from various Maya regions. These traditional blouses are usually brought in the area by *comerciantes* (vendors) and sold at local markets. For San Cristobaleños (and for Maya groups in general) the *traje* allows for a shared ethnic identity. In addition to *traje*, Maya ethnic identity is also marked by language. Although most indigenous people in San Cristóbal speak K'iche', as well as Spanish, youngsters are slowly losing their ability to speak their native language. While doing fieldwork, for example, I observed that in a local preschool, a mere handful out of seventeen youngsters, were completely bilingual—the others spoke only Spanish. In the surrounding villages, however, a different scenario emerges. Men tend to be largely bilingual, but women typically command only a partial or no understanding of Spanish.

With respect to out-migration, the flow that emerges from San Cristóbal heading to the United States is mostly male-dominated. Though some women hail North, typically these are females who join their husbands who migrate first. That is, the out-migration from the Maya town of San Cristóbal resembles a step migration paralleling earlier Mexican flows to *el norte*. Many of these migrants arrive to the southern U.S. metropolis of Houston, Texas (Moran-Taylor and Richardson, 1993; Rodríguez and Hagan, 2000). While Houston represents a prime U.S. destination, many others go to Los Angeles, California. And, in outlying Maya villages of San Cristóbal, men and women generally gravitate to Miami, Florida.

### **Context of exit**

Overlapping political, economic, environmental, cultural, and/or individualistic (e.g., domestic violence) forces shape the decisions of Guatemalans to emigrate. Castillo (1999) points out that according to U.S. and Mexican census data and immigration records, Guatemalan



migration to the United States gradually emerged in the 1960s, but with the civil war escalated in the mid-1980s. By the 1990s, however, this stream of mainly undocumented migrants became a major concern for both Mexico and the United States (Castillo, 1999). Outmigration from Guatemala to the United States in the 1990s increased due to political strife, poverty, scarcity of employment opportunities in both rural and urban areas, and the country's persistent inequalities in wealth and land ownership. This northward emigration, as Lovell (1999) observes, will continue to increase in light of the lack of alternatives to population pressure on land resources.

Although many regions in the *altiplano* suffered a great deal of atrocities due to Guatemala's most repressive years of armed conflict in the 1980s, the department of Totonicapán (the area where San Cristóbal is located) did not endure the same level of state terror its neighbors experienced. The turmoil and obliteration of entire communities that many others lived in departments such as Huehuetenango and Quiché, led thousands of Guatemalans to seek haven in Mexico and Belize; others continued further north unto the United States and Canada (see Burns, 1993; Popkin, 1999; Loucky and Moors, 2000; Nolin Hanlon, 2000). In part, residents of the department of Totonicapán did not experience much of the institutionalized violence wrought in other heavily populated indigenous places because, as locals told me, people in this particular area successfully employed their "*poder local*" (local power) to subvert any uprisings.

Current figures from a 1998 United Nations study in Guatemala (*Guatemala: La Fuerza Incluyente del Desarrollo Humano* [UN] 2000) clearly point to the miserable conditions prevalent for the majority of people in the country. For instance, more than half the population (57 percent) lives below the international poverty line of U.S.\$2 per day. Of these six million people who fall under this poverty category, 2.8 million live in extreme poverty—that is, they fail to meet the caloric intake of the Guatemalan *canasta básica* (basic basket).<sup>5</sup> Poverty, however,

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<sup>5</sup> According to the *Instituto de Estadísticas Económicas* (2002), the *canasta básica* for a Guatemalan family of 5.3 consists of the following items: sour cream, cheese, fresh milk, powdered milk, chicken, beef, medium-size eggs, black beans, second-class

is more pervasive among Guatemala's Maya indigenous population—70 percent of indigenous people versus 41 percent of non-indigenous are classified as poor. Further, the informal economy of Guatemala accounts for 40 percent of the workforce, while 27 percent rely on subsistence agriculture, 15 percent work in the formal sector, and 12 percent hold jobs in modern agriculture. Lastly, 3.7 percent of the economically active population remains unemployed (*Guatemala: La Fuerza Incluyente del Desarrollo Humano* [UN] 2000:41-59). The lack of a comprehensive rural development policy (60 percent of Guatemala's population is rural) exacerbates the country's unemployment and underemployment situation and helps explain high rates of poverty in Guatemala (Jonas, 2000). Under Guatemala's poor and tattered economic umbrella, not surprisingly, many citizens migrate to the United States seeking better opportunities and greater financial stability. As Pablo, a *campesino* from San Cristóbal, told me: "If we have to work here [Guatemala] like mules for pennies, why not do it elsewhere for *human wages*."<sup>6</sup>

## Methods

This study draws on ethnographic material that forms part of a larger cross-regional and cross-cultural research project that looks at U.S.-bound Guatemalan migration, more specifically, return migration, transnational processes, gender and migration, and the tangible and intangible impacts that this flow brings about in sending communities. I carried out field research in Guatemala from 1999 through 2001 (for a total of 15 months) and employed a variety of methods such as

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rice, tortillas, white bread (*pan francés*), sweet bread (*pan dulce*), pasta for soups, sugar, butter, cooking oil, mirilitons (*guisquiles*), green beans, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, bananas, plantains, coffee, salt, and sodas. These comestibles, however, represent food items gleaned from a study conducted in 1983. To date, no other study assesses the specifics of what the Guatemalan *canasta básica* includes. Further, the current value of the *canasta básica "alimentaria"* (food consumption), as of July 2002, is Q1,251.42 (U.S. \$163) and the *canasta básica "vital"* (vital), which includes expenses such as electricity, water, telephone, and education is Q2,283.61 (U.S. \$297).

<sup>6</sup> For confidentiality purposes, throughout this article I use pseudonyms.

participant observation, informal interviews, and in-depth semi-structured interviews. In addition to my fieldnotes, personal journal, and multiple informal interviews, I employ data gleaned from 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews I conducted in San Cristóbal.<sup>7</sup> Using snow-ball sampling, I interviewed 10 females and 10 males (migrants and non-migrants) from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. And of these study participants 12 were married, 8 single, 1 separated, and 1 widowed. Most people I interviewed had children—only 5 out of 15 did not. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 82. The occupations widely varied from weavers, artisans, seamstresses, tailors, nurses, students, entrepreneurs, and the unemployed to NGO workers. Eight of the 20 study participants were returnees—mostly males who spent on average four years in the Texan city of Houston and returned in the last five to eight years to their home community.

I interviewed San Cristobaleños in houses, *tienditas* (small shops), sport facilities, car, welding, clothing, and tailor shops, fields, restaurants, pharmacies, funeral parlors, churches, and NGO's. All my interviews followed a simple guide and always included questions about: migration and employment histories; return migration; gender relations, roles, and identity; self-identity (e.g., attitudes and perceptions of ethnic identity); transnational flows (e.g., tangible and intangible and their frequency, density, and types); migration-related changes, and future migrants' goals. This format let migrants speak freely and widely. I conducted my interviews in Spanish and not Kiche'. In urban San Cristóbal, most community members speak both languages and felt at ease using Spanish.

### **Local-level driven transnational ties**

In particular, this section examines dimensions important in discussions that explore "transnationalism from below" and its relationship to social ties. First, I focus on the means of communications connect-

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<sup>7</sup> I recorded over 500 pages of single-spaced typewritten notes that I thematically coded for analysis.

ing Guatemalans with those abroad. Looking at how transnational ties emerge and are encouraged between those who stay and those who go also requires an examination of Guatemalan hometown associations, informal organizations and migrant leadership. Carving out transnational ties becomes easier with the innovative and efficient kinds of transportation, telecommunications, and technology available today. For instance, with cheaper technology, increasing purchasing power (among more financially prosperous individuals and those who remain behind and receive remittances), and with greater global flows and consumption of televisions, stereos, video recorders, cameras, cellular telephones, and cassette recorders—electronics become common features in many Guatemalan households. In turn, many of these commodities allow for documenting and reproducing images of daily life and celebrations, and at the same time, enable the stream, coordinated exchange, and sharing of meaningful moments, ideas, and beliefs between those abroad and those at home. When writing about globalization and its cultural dimensions, Appadurai (1996) argues that the growth of complex links between the global (e.g., telecommunications, technology) and the local constitutes one of the most distinguishing aspects of contemporary life. Bailey, Wright, Mountz, and Miyares (2002), however, critique this notion and call for paying more attention to how these flows may indeed be mediated in and by specific local contexts. In what follows I explore some of these concerns.

*Communications connecting guatemalans at home and abroad*

While Guatemala's spatial proximity to the United States helps perpetuate close-knit linkages between migrants and non-migrants, modern and easily accessible communications between migrants' places of origin and arrival undoubtedly also help ease social ties and how locals now stay connected (e.g., e-mail, cellular telephones, audio-cassettes, newspapers on-line, private courier services). When out-migration increased during the early 1990s in Guatemala, a proliferation of private postal services emerged linking Guatemalans with kin and friends living abroad such as Urgente Express, King Express, Inter-capitales, and Gigante Express. Primarily, these private mail services

propagated due to the inefficiency of the Guatemalan Post, high incidence of corruption behind this institution, and its failure to meet the needs and demands of many people throughout the country. To amend its past murky image, and in accordance to Guatemala's recent move to privatize former government-run services, the Canada Post currently operates the national post office (a deal it recently struck with the Guatemalan government).

Less prominent, but yet another mode of communication employed to meet recent demands and to stay connected even more efficiently include the host of private postal services now available in Guatemala City. These newer businesses offer Guatemalans a postal box address in the United States—typically in Miami, Florida, which are then forwarded to a special box in Guatemala. Certainly, paying for this service provides a safer and more private way of receiving goods and letters. Fees, however, are steep. Usually clients pay between U.S.\$15 to 20 per month to rent the foreign postal box, plus any added charges to receive packages in Guatemala.

While in the past, written correspondence stood as the chief mode to exchange information and to keep in touch, presently most Guatemalans favor communicating via telephone. Again, this communication is made easier particularly following the privatization of yet another Guatemalan entity, GUATEL—Guatemala's national telephone company. Whereas in other rural areas telephones are widely common, this appears less so in San Cristóbal. Among San Cristobaleños who own a telephone, some set up *teléfonos comunitarios* (telephones rented out from peoples' homes, typically these include some makeshift cabin for greater privacy). *Teléfonos comunitarios* are useful because these allow people to better arrange when and where to call their kin or more common, to receive telephone calls from loved ones abroad.

Take the case of Lupe and Juan. Though Lupe is a San Cristobaleña non-migrant, married woman in her late forties, her husband Juan returned from Houston, Texas ten years ago after living in that city for nearly two years. Both Lupe and Juan work outside of their home—she is a teacher and he is a refrigerator technician. Through the graces of Juan's hard work in Houston, the couple managed to expand and remodel their humble home, and in the process, installed a telephone

line in their front room. Now the couple offers San Cristobaleños the services of their *teléfono comunitario*. While many locals in town employ such means of communications to stay connected, the couple's chief customers constitute folks from nearby villages.

Additionally, with the great influx of cellular phones in Guatemalan households, communicating via these means becomes much easier and economical than arranging to have an actual telephone line installed. Even in remote, rural villages for some owning a cellular phone increasingly becomes a standard feature in their homes. In these instances, kin abroad assist relatives by remitting monies to pay for the actual telephone and subsequent costs. Telephone cards or charging telephone minutes on credit cards provides yet another avenue to more easily communicate. This mode is cheaper than having a telephone line installed at home or buying a cellular telephone.

Another well-used conduit for the exchange of information among some Guatemalans communicating across borders are audio cassettes, particularly in the western highlands.<sup>8</sup> An attendant at a local courier private business in San Cristóbal told me that on average during the main market day on Sundays, locals usually send around 50 to 60 audio tapes to relatives scattered throughout the United States. In San Cristóbal, people in town and in rural areas favor forwarding audio-cassettes instead of letters. This preference emerges due to several reasons: 1) Their ancestral oral traditions facilitate story telling on audio tapes, 2) audio tapes are less expensive than videos or telephone calls, 3) it provides an avenue in which people can convey in great detail their daily rhythms, and 4) it allows illiterate people to communicate with ease.

A final observation with regards to transnational ties, communications, and technology, concerns the ways in which compatriots abroad continue to participate in their home country's affairs via national

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<sup>8</sup> Rodriguez and Hagan (2000) and Ochoa (2001) make similar observations. Further, Siems (1992) brings to the fore compelling personal letters of Mexican and Central Americans. In this endeavor, he provides another perspective on the struggles and hardships that undocumented Latino migrants often encounter in the United States.

newspapers. Since several major circulating Guatemalan newspapers can now be read on line (e.g., *Prensa Libre*, *Siglo XXI*), this medium plays an enormous role in how Guatemalans abroad have their voices heard at home—whether it is simply to wish a relative happy birthday or to critique the government in daily editorials. Below I turn attention to transnational organizing, particularly to the divergent kinds of groups and associations that enable dense linkages between Guatemala's *altiplano* and *el norte*.

*Guatemalan hometown associations, informal organizations, and migrant leadership*

Increasingly, transnational ties are encouraged and become reinforced through practices at the grass-roots level. Guatemalans in the United States participate in hometown associations, sport-based organizations (primarily soccer), and church-based groups that help sustain transnational bonds between migrants' homeland and their adoptive country (Popkin, 1999; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 1999; Popkin, 1999; Wellmeier, 1998; Rodríguez and Hagan, 2000; Menjívar, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Generally, these organizations are formed by a group of people from the same community of origin and migrants with shared ethnic identities.<sup>10</sup> But, for the most part, these organizations cut across gender, generational, and class boundaries. A key feature evident in most Guatemalan groups in the United States is that the organizations formed provide a social arena for collecting funds to send to their communities of origin (a practice evident in many other Latino migrant groups).

<sup>9</sup> Past studies examining formal and informal associations reveal that these organizations generally function as an "adaptive mechanism in situations of rapid change undergone by urban migrants from peasant and tribal societies," but also help strengthen "the consciousness of a culture of origin and reproduce aspects of traditional institutional order in a new, urban oriented form" (Sassen-Koob, 1979:314-315).

<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Nagengast and Kearney (1990) observe that pan-Mixtec transnational associations formed in the United States crosscut migrants' places of origin and instead base themselves on a shared ethnicity. These associations promote development projects along with concerns dealing with discrimination, exploitation, and human rights abuses in Mixtec enclaves found in California and Oregon.

That is, the organizations look for beneficial ways to impact and change their home communities through a wide range of transnational activities and relations.

Hometown associations are successful when they depend on solidarity and strong leadership among compatriots in their places of arrival. Though in recent years hometown associations and other informal organizations emerged in U.S. localities with large Guatemalan populations (e.g., Los Angeles, Miami, Houston, Chicago, Florida, Las Vegas), as a whole, Guatemalan migrants lack strong leadership in the United States. This absence is particularly true when compared to Salvadorans, who since the onset of their civil war (1979-1992) strived to maintain powerful leadership roles in the United States. Some Salvadorans, for instance, worked to be eligible since 1990 for the Temporary Provision Status (TPS)-a legal provision in U.S. immigration policy that calls for granting temporary refuge to undocumented migrants who fled their places of origin due to turmoil until it is safe and feasible for them to return to their home countries.<sup>11</sup> And, because of Salvadorans' past political and economic acumen, they now count with both transnational economic enterprises and transnational political practices associated with their migrant populations in various U.S. cities (Landolt, Autler, and Baires, 1999).

When discussing the lack of Guatemalan leadership and support migrants often encounter in the United States, an informant echoed, "*es que el que no chilla no mama*," (he/she who doesn't cry doesn't eat [nurse]). Specifically in this case, this refrain refers to how Guatemalans working for a number of years without legal documentation (or qualifying to apply for U.S. residency status) in the United States fail to persuade U.S. immigration policy makers to respond in their favor.<sup>12</sup> This outcome also reveals the kinds of structural bureaucratic issues some migrants in the United States must contend.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent provocative discussion of how provisions such as TPS in U.S. immigration policy (re)produce Salvadoran transnational geographies see Bailey et al. (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Another example illustrating the previous absence of powerful support for Guatemalans in the United States concerns the number of immigration agencies (e.g.,



For example, migrant Guatemalan leaders in the United States echo that despite that they now comprise a representative group in the United States and that remittances sent back home sustain Guatemala's economy government officials (in this country and back home) do not provide the needed support—at the individual level or collectively towards the migrant organizations formed in the United States. Recently, in Miami, Florida, the president of the “*Coalición de Migrantes Guatemaltecos*” (Guatemalan Migrant Coalition) made a plea to the Guatemalan government to take action in designing policies to help solve migratory concerns in the United States. While the Salvadoran migrant population through hometown associations set aside \$250,000 to support their needs, particularly legal issues, this sort of action remains absent among Guatemalans (*Prensa Libre*, 2003). Echoing such views is the following commentary a Guatemalan woman recently wrote in *Prensa Libre* (Guatemala's major circulating newspaper):

Estoy muy contenta que se dé a conocer lo importante que somos para la economía guatemalteca todos los que vivimos en USA buscando las oportunidades que en nuestro país no encontramos porque la corrupción no le deja el espacio a personas trabajadoras con deseos de superar. Yo quiero que todos los guatemaltecos sepan que de la forma que somos tratados aquí por medio de las personas que trabajan en los CONSULADOS GUATEMALTECOS es una vergüenza, nos tratan muy mal y hay que hacer algo sobre eso. Si somos importantes para la economía guatemalteca ¿POR QUÉ NO SE HACE ALGO PARA QUE NOS TRATEN COMO SERES HUMANOS? Me estoy refiriendo al consulado de NEW YORK (*Prensa Libre*, April 30, 2003).

I am very happy that it is made known how important we are to the Guatemalan economy all of us who live here in the U.S.

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the Central American Resource Center [CARECEN] and El Rescate) that mostly catered to the Salvadoran population in Los Angeles. Later, these agencies also assisted Guatemalans. To fill this needed void, finally in 1997 the Guatemalan Unity Information Agency (GUIA), a non-profit organization dealing with immigration services in Los Angeles, emerged (Popkin, 1999).

searching for opportunities that in our country we can't find because corruption doesn't leave room for hard-working people with a desire to get ahead. I want all Guatemalans to know that the way in which we are treated here through those who work in GUATEMALAN CONSULATES is a disgrace—they treat us badly and we must do something about this. If we are so important for the Guatemalan economy WHY ISN'T SOMETHING DONE SO THAT THEY TREAT US LIKE HUMAN BEINGS? I am referring to the NEW YORK Consulate (*Prensa Libre*, April 30, 2003).

Such telling remarks are often heard not only abroad, but also repeatedly among those who remain at home. But again, these views can now be expressed more fully and to a larger group because of the technology and means of communications now available—indeed a feature that sets apart newer transnational migration trends from those experienced in the past. These remarks also highlight how folks can continue to participate in their home country's affairs, albeit remotely.

#### *Maya hometown associations*

To gain a better appreciation of the role that Guatemalan hometown associations, informal organizations, and migrant leadership in these groups play in crafting transnational connections, below I address the example of Mayan migrant organizations formed by San Cristobaleños in the United States. Several associations, for example, especially church and sport-related ones, have emerged in Houston, Texas. Like voluntary organizations that other Latino migrants (in Latin America and in the United States) are formed to aid community members incorporate into their new social contexts, San Cristobaleño associations in Houston form along similar lines.

Other ways that San Cristobaleño organizations created in Houston assist their home community is particularly noted through the home community's most significant social event—the *fiesta titular*. This *fiesta* constitutes a community-wide annual celebration venerating the town's patron saint—St. Christopher. Townsfolk and those in the villages

come together during this time to celebrate the anticipated event with much fanfare. Essentially, the *fiesta titular* offers community members the social space in which to symbolize the continuance of traditions, to flaunt social status and power, and to strengthen, as Lewis (1960) observes, the town's *esprit de corps*. Past Mesoamerican ethnographic studies that focus on Guatemala's highland Maya groups (e.g., Warren, 1978; Watanabe, 1992) highlight the importance of patron saints and community-wide *fiestas*.

The *fiesta titular* represents one of the most striking and apparent ways in which migration impacts San Cristóbal. While in the past the *cargo system*—a civil-religious hierarchy in Mesoamerican communities—played a crucial role in religious *fiesta* sponsorship (Chance, 1996), today migration looms as significant. Migrants arrive days ahead in preparation of the chain of events programmed for this special occasion. Overall, migration dollars allow for a greater social and material enhancement of the *fiesta*. And, for those unable to make the annual trip back to their home community, events are carefully photographed and/or documented with video cameras. In short, as Mountz and Wright (1996:416) poignantly write, “the *fiestas*... bring together the fruits of production if not the producers themselves.” Thus, at the local-level, *fiesta* sponsorship further accentuates linkages between migrants' places origin and arrival.

*Fiesta* sponsorship from organizations formed in Houston, and individuals alike, promote a variety of social events scheduled during this annual celebration. Don Luis, a returnee from Houston in his late forties explained, for instance, how several weeks prior to the festivity a committee in San Cristóbal, of which he belongs, will solicit funds from community members to sponsor music bands to play in the *parque* (plaza) during one of the *fiesta*'s main celebration days. Generally, he told me, his committee raises nearly Q3, 000 (U.S.\$350) from San Cristobaleños who remit part of their migrant earnings from Houston. But, when I asked don Luis about Los Angeles-based groups and their sponsorship, he emphatically responded:

Look, what happens is that people need to be enthusiastic with their time. There are folks around here [San Cristóbal] that have

relatives and friends over there [Los Angeles], but they don't want to give up their time to find them, to get them to collaborate, that's why there's nobody [that sends from Los Angeles].

But perhaps what may also be at play in that membership in formal and informal organizations in Los Angeles seem less cohesive and developed in that city lies on logistics. In fact, I also observed this pattern among Guatemalans in Phoenix, Arizona. In Houston, however, San Cristobaleños tend to cluster in apartment complexes. This settlement pattern has allowed San Cristobaleños to maintain substantial interactions with fellow migrants and other Maya indigenous people (Hagan, 1994; Rodríguez and Hagan, 2000).

In sum, *fiesta* sponsorship generates a great deal of prestige, power, and purview among participants in their communities of origin and arrival. During the *feria*, for example, loud speakers bellow names of sponsors to throngs of people standing and swaying to the rhythms of music bands playing marimba, salsa, and merengue in San Cristóbal's *parque*. Further emphasizing the visibility that this cultural practice endorses involves committee organizers publicly listing the names of sponsors in the town's center. *Fiesta* sponsorship, then, underscores how more established migrants—those able to afford greater material displays—gain social status and respect within and outside San Cristóbal. Put differently, they are able to “display spending power, claim status, and have it valorized” (Goldring, 1998:181). Equally significant relates to how *fiesta* sponsorship provides the opportunity in which to reaffirm community membership and fealty (Mountz and Wright, 1996; Goldring, 1998), a practice that helps enhance migrants' social position and enhance their cultural traditions within their communities of origin.

## Conclusion

This article demonstrates the multiple ways and local outcomes in which Guatemalans in the homeland and those abroad craft connections—through divergent means of communication and technology to the varying existent kinds of transnational organizing. Such

emphasis adds to discussions on transnational ties and to how these links affect migrants' places of origin. By embracing a "transnationalism from below" perspective, this entails looking from a localized level at distinctive formal and informal organizations that emerge such as the hometown associations San Cristobaleños forge in their U.S. destinations. When examining Guatemalan hometown associations, I point to how San Cristobaleños in Houston develop similar agendas as those their country fellows create in other U.S. cities. That is, to help their community of origin towards some humanitarian need and to assist fellow migrants during dire times. In San Cristobaleño associations, for instance, people come together to aid a fellow compatriot, as in the case of providing monetary assistance to send a migrant body back home for burial in the homeland.

A most striking manner in which San Cristobaleño associations contribute towards their home community is in the *fiesta titular*. In San Cristóbal, sponsorship for the *fiesta* from those abroad takes place in conspicuous ways, and in part, this relates to particular Maya mores. Traditionally, the *cargo* system serves as a mechanism to support the religious *fiesta*. In accordance with the *cargo* system, those who reach the higher levels of the ranked system of municipal offices "are called on to make large financial sacrifices to sponsor religious *fiestas*" (Chance, 1996:386). But unlike the example of U.S.-bound migrants from Oaxaca, Mexico that captures how the *cargo* system and migration closely intertwine (Mountz and Wright, 1996), this does not ring true in the Maya example of Guatemala. In San Cristóbal, this kind of structured *fiesta* sponsorship, that is, one expressed through *cargos* no longer is significant. Instead, such a cultural practice and show of wealth unfolds in a more *laissez-faire* fashion. Thus, for migrants who may have at their disposal extra financial resources (or see to have it), *fiesta* sponsorship provides the means for individuals to more quickly gain visibility, greater prestige, and to display their new social status—elements, which in the past may have proven more difficult to obtain following the hierarchical *cargo* system. In short, Maya transnational linkages are kept alive by the divergent ways in which folks abroad and folks at home stay connected. The transnational organizing at work among this indigenous group parallels in many ways that of other migrant groups.

At the same time, the case explored here is unique because of particular Maya mores as well as the relationship to the state.

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