

Indigenous Fragmentation: Mexico's Domestic and International Borders

by *Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor*

For Indigenous populations, the notion of "borders" is directly associated with a history of occupation and usurpation of their territories. In the case of Mexico, the wars that have accompanied each international border demarcation have not been limited to Indigenous populations in the north or south. The formation of the Mexican Federation was carried out with the same amount of violence and colonization. Each territorial division within the country has been imposed as a "border" for Indigenous peoples. These borders were constructed in an artificial and arbitrary manner, and were superimposed over a cultural and historical geography that dates back thousands of years.

Mexico's Southern Border

Mayan communities suffer from both domestic and international border impositions. Within Mexico, five states of the Mexican Federation (Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Chiapas), almost one hundred municipalities, and over one hun-

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dred cooperative farms and communities divide the Maya people. Internationally, the Maya area covers the borders of six nation-states (Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador). The most costly impact of this fragmentation has been on the Mayan global identity, now surviving in multiple linguistic identities (Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Quiché, Tzutujil, Quekchi, etc.). These linguistic groups have not been able to unify into one single Mayan identity.

Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs for unification, even though the Maya people continue to be fragmented. In fact, it appears that those living in Guatemala are undergoing a process of reconstruction of their global identity. Even though this phenomenon is also taking place in Mexico (albeit, in isolated instances), in the majority of the states in which Maya people live, the impact of tourism and industrialization has accelerated the tendency toward "deindianization." This accelerated "deindianization" is occurring primarily in Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. In Chiapas, despite a strong Maya cultural tradition, the Maya global identity is fragmented due to linguistic, municipal, and communal differences.

Despite this fragmentation, the states, municipalities and communities which make up the southern border of Mexico constitute a region that has historically been integrated through a common Maya cultural base. Still, the phenomenon of "borders" has had a tremendous impact on the Maya people of Mexico.

The Treaty of Limits officially demarcated Mexico's southern border with Guatemala on September 27, 1882. The demarcation with Belize dates to July of 1893, and was defined through negotiations with Great Britain. Neither demarcation process was peaceful. Wars and border conflicts preceded each accord. Even today, some Guatemalans regard Chiapas' incorporation into Mexico as an act of annexation and theft on the part of Mexico. This feeling is similar to that of Mexicans in regards to the US-occupied Mexican territories of Texas, New Mexico, and California. In reality, this kind of nationalistic rhetoric about stolen land hides the fact that the real victims of border disputes and land annexation have been the Indigenous communities on both the northern and southern borders of the Mexican nation.

On September 12, 1824, Chiapas was officially annexed into Mexico through a plebiscite. A total

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number of almost 100,000 citizens voted to include Chiapas into the Mexican Federation. However, not all of those who lived in Chiapas had the opportunity to vote on such a crucial issue. In 1824, only those who could read or write and those who could prove that they were “honorable” citizens (citizens with wealth and of mestizo or criollo ancestry) were allowed to vote. The opinion and collective perception of territory of the Maya, Quiché, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Quekchí, and Mame peoples that lived in Chiapas was never taken into consideration.

A Border in Conflict

The Maya people’s response to the fragmentation of their culture has never been passive. Hundreds of rebellions have demonstrated the Maya communities’ nonconformity with their reality as a divided people. The Maya rebellion that has lasted for more than twenty years in Guatemala and the recent Maya uprising in Chiapas are modern examples of Maya resistance against the borders and what these borders signify for them: oppression and the loss of self-determination.

The concept of “border” in southern Mexico became more tangible as a result of internal conflicts in

Central America. Thousands of political refugees crossed Mexico’s border. Many of them were Maya people who were escaping repression at the hands of the Guatemalan authorities. These people have now settled in the municipalities adjacent to the border. According to official government sources, there are almost 40 thousand Guatemalan refugees along Mexico’s southern border, with half of them in the state of Chiapas. Many believe that the actual number of political refugees who have settled in the south of Mexico is higher. As is well known, not all refugees were accounted for in these statistics. Estimates indicate that the number of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico is at least twice that of the official count.

The presence of refugees and the border’s proximity to the Guatemalan guerrillas push Mexico’s government to increase the presence of police and soldiers to guard the borders. Because of this, the one million Indigenous people of Chiapas and other border states have suffered assaults on their liberties, and all possibilities for democracy were halted. The authorities of Chiapas have consistently defied existing federal laws

by allowing certain individuals to break them with impunity.

In the last twenty years, the Maya who live along the southern border of Mexico have lived in a virtual state of war. They have struggled to achieve democracy via peaceful means. However, the authorities have responded with acts of violence and terrorism, similar to those experienced in “low-intensity” conflict areas. Violation of Indigenous People’s human rights and impunity for the violators has also been a characteristic of the past twenty years. The violence and repression against the Mayas of Mexico’s southern border has no precedence in the rest of the country. Yet, this kind of violence is not circumstantial. It is reproduced to the same magnitude in other border areas. ☺

