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Preface

Classic Maya civilization (AD 200–900) was especially influential and dynamic in the lowlands running from western El Salvador to southeastern Mexico (figure 0.1). Many epigraphers surmise that its elite written language was ancestral to contemporary Ch'orti'/Ch'olti', Ch'ol, and Chontal Maya (e.g., Hull 2003, 13–15; Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 2000; Lacadena and Wichmann 2002; Wichmann 2002). Six centuries after the last writings, the Spanish invaded and reported that the languages spoken in the southeastern half of this area were predominantly Ch'olti', Apay (Ch'orti'), Pipil Nahuatl, and the enigmatic Alaguilac, which included both Nahuatl and Apay vocabulary. By the end of the colonial period (1524–1821) only a few pockets of Apay/Ch'orti' speakers remained. Who were they? And where did the rest go? Were they killed or forcibly moved? Did they blend with the immigrant Spanish and African populations? Or are “they” still “there,” having dropped the language of their ancestors while still privately identifying with each other in juxtaposition to other postcolonial populations? Above all, how can we tell, and who cares?

When I began research among the remaining 15,000 Ch'orti' speakers in eastern Guatemala in 1991, scholars and the public alike—myself included—considered them the last of the eastern Ch'olan Mayas,¹ thus conflating language with “people.” While some ethnolinguistic maps showed Ch'orti' ethnicity spread over a range much larger than where the language was spoken,² edited volumes on Guatemalan Maya history and culture often excluded eastern Guatemala altogether. This is because historians did not consider Eastern Guatemala indigenous enough, likely

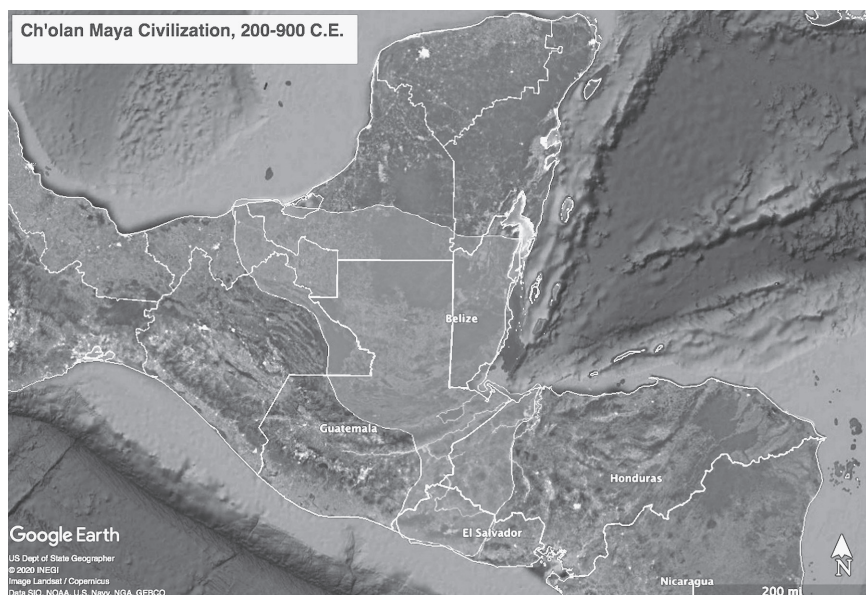


Figure 0.1. Approximate Ch'olan Maya area, 200–900 CE

measuring indigeneity by language and distinctive dress (INE 2009, 9–11; Smith 2004, 581, 600). Ch'orti' speakers did not speak the language in Ladino towns, and though so-called Ch'orti' dress was never as colorful or ornate as those of western Guatemala and Chiapas, they had almost completely abandoned their distinctive Spanish-influenced clothing except for women's dresses in a few communities. Then, in the 1990s, campesinos (semi-subsistent farmers) in *municipios*³ that had not spoken Ch'orti' in generations organized to demand Ch'orti' Maya indigenous rights. In Honduras virtually no one publicly identified as indigenous Ch'orti's in the 1980s, but in 1997 thousands of self-proclaimed indigenous Ch'orti' Mayas marched on and paralyzed the capital, Tegucigalpa. By the early 2000s as many as 80,000 impoverished campesinos had come out as Ch'orti' in 30 Guatemalan and Honduran *municipios*, with signs of indigenous revitalization in several Salvadoran *municipios* as well. What are we to make of these self-identified Ch'orti's? Do we consider them indigenous, imposters, or something else entirely? Could there be still more indigenous Ch'orti's "in the closet"? On what basis would we make such an evaluation? Scientific or political? Who has the right to investigate, report on, and by implication evaluate such matters?

I have learned that addressing these questions opens one to attack from multiple directions. They are terrible questions to ask (Forte 2013) because answers are

often theoretically complicated and unavoidably political. When I raised the question, “How do we know who’s indigenous?” at a conference in 2006, a colleague angrily voiced the refrain of indigenous leaders: “Only the indigenous can decide!” When I presented a paper in Mexico in 2010 on Honduran campesinos reclaiming indigenous heritage, a colleague exploded from another direction: “That’s a bomb! Every Mestizo in Mexico could do the same!” At a Latin American indigenous and ethnic (LASA-ERIP) conference in 2011, another colleague bristled for the opposite reason when I suggested that the indigenous could abandon their ethnicity. Colonization is imprinted on Brown bodies and can neither be forgotten nor forgiven. The very next day a colleague attacked conversely: in their view, I was unwittingly succumbing to the Salvadoran state’s strategy of dividing and distracting the working class by simply searching for repressed indigenous identity and culture. At a Latin American Studies Association panel in 2015, I rhetorically asked whether indigenous people who are biologically mixed and behave corruptly, opportunistically, materialistically, and in an ecologically destructive manner are indigenous. The discussant could hardly contain herself: once indigenous, always indigenous, and what gives the public, or me, the right to judge? From the opposite direction, in 2017 a Native North American intellectual began a distinguished lecture at my university wondering whether there would “be any more Indians” in two generations because the youth have come under the hegemony of Western education and Christianity, no longer embodying the pan-indigenous sense of time-space. Afterward I asked, “If being indigenous is based on worldview and morality, could the indigenous missionize others to become indigenous?” He carefully contemplated aloud, recalling how an Anglo on his reservation had married an Osage woman, learned the language and culture, raised their children in the Osage way long after her death, and contributed as a member until his own death. Upon hearing this exchange, an exasperated Native American woman exclaimed: “We’re not ready for that yet!” For her, indigenous membership requires ancestry if not primordial roots. She may have been a Cherokee from nearby northeastern Oklahoma, where some lighter-skinned Cherokees have fought for decades to exclude Black Freeman—people culturally, linguistically, socially, and legally Cherokee *but* with visible African ancestry—from official tribal registries and associated compensation (Sturm 2014; cf. Dunaway 2018; Jarvis 2017; Lambert 2007; and Maillard 2011 for US indigenous struggles over membership).⁴

Determination of indigenous status is fraught with animosity. The relationships between government officials, international bodies, missionaries, political parties, academics, the public, and the indigenous and the significant if inadequate compensation garnered by indigenous status is nuanced and complicated. The relationship with academics, particularly anthropologists, has long been controversial because

some of the former, while often sympathetic, have nonetheless seen the indigenous as data first and oppressed, impoverished people second (Deloria 1969). Academics have reacted to indigenous criticism generally by either ignoring it, defensively attacking indigenous movements for lack of authenticity, or engaging in research partnerships with the indigenous (Starn 2011). The project of which this book is part attempts to represent the latter approach with all its complications. Specifically, it involves partnering with Ch'orti' activists in Guatemala and Honduras to recover historical knowledge, economic security, and pride. They also seek unity with each other and the tri-border region's campesinos who feel ethnically distinct from the predominant urban Ladino (cultural Hispanic) population but often suppress it out of embarrassment or insecurity. While this is meant for an academic audience, its research has been undertaken with self-identified Ch'orti's and shared with them in other venues, including lectures, videos, websites, and exhibitions, and hopefully will be further shared via museum exhibits and university programs in the future.

Researching Ch'orti' Maya indigenous identification among people who know that it subjects one to ridicule and even danger is tricky, and having activists with me both helped and hindered in this regard. They, like others in the region, are curious about their heritage and the linkages with other campesinos but have few means to undertake their own research or even travel to recruit. My Fulbright-Hays and other funds from the University of Kansas gave them this chance but in negotiation with me. As will be apparent in some of the videos (explained below), our purposes and thus methods regarding interviews were not perfectly congruent. They tended to glorify the precolonial past, whereas I sought historical accuracy. In our joint interviews, they tried to motivate indigenous pride and ultimately recruit, while I tried to elicit open-ended local histories and latent identifications. My finances and access to academic resources tilted power in my direction, including the design of the project, which I was unable to negotiate fairly with the region's campesinos or even all of its indigenous organizations. The activists and I do share the position that indigenous peoples like themselves have been dispossessed and disempowered such that activism is necessary, and that the old approach of "ethnographer-feigns-friendship-to-build-rapport-but-is-never-heard-from-again" is unethical.

In all, the activists and I (sometimes alone) spent one month in 2003, six in 2004, and a total of four in 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 traveling to rural communities in 31 *municipios* of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, mostly in a rented, beat-up four-wheel-drive pickup truck that reliably broke down weekly. We focused our interviews primarily on campesinos, particularly elders who were considered the local historical repositories, but also on Ladino public officials, Ladino lay historians, and development experts. I preferred to start interviews circumspectly with local history, social relations, and popular regional indicators of

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Ch'orti' culture before addressing ethnic identification directly. Such indicators included: (a) the month-of-the-dead *tz'ikin* ceremony; (b) "The Payments" (Ch. *e tojma'r*, Sp. *los pagos*), or sacrifices of male and female fowl and other ritual food at planting; (c) Ch'orti' vocabulary incorporated into Spanish in some localities, like *ixchoko* (Ch. *ijchok*, girl), *kume* (Ch. *ku'mix*, youngest child), and *akukuche* (Ch. *aku-kuch*, carrying by headstrap); (d) beliefs in the moon's power over plant and animal growth; and (e) consideration, especially by men, that family planning is sinful. The *tz'ikin*, The Payments, and lack of family planning proved to be particularly useful (though not infallible) ethnic indicators, while Ch'orti' terms and moonlore were ambiguous. The *tz'ikin* involves a family paying respects to ancestors by lighting a candle for each on an altar loaded with food offerings as a prayer-giver (*rezador*, *ajk'in*) recites their names in prayer. The ancestors consume the spirit of the food, after which everyone feasts, plays music, and dances throughout the night. Traditionally, families hold *tz'ikin* any time during November, while Catholic Hispanics celebrate the Day of the Dead (Día de los Difuntos) in cemeteries on November 2 (All Souls Day). "The Payments" are made to Mother Earth and the rains (variably referred to as *Katata* "Our Father," "the angels," or "the blessing"). Christian churches and people who considered themselves "modernized" attack these rituals, which are thus typically performed in secret. Having many children is rooted in the manual, marginal campesino lifestyle—with its lack of modern technology, law enforcement, insurance, bank accounts, and social security—and family planning is often interpreted by self-identified Ch'orti's as ethnic extermination (Metz 2001b).⁵ The activists and I also followed other leads, such as distinctive foodways, greetings, linguistic conventions, etiquette, and oral narratives.⁶

Using recognized regional traits as conversation-starters does not mean I believe that their historical origins are indicative of indigeneity. As Bonfil Batalla (1996, 137 in Watanabe and Fischer 2004, 27) states:

The presence of cultural elements of foreign origin does not in itself indicate weakness or loss of authenticity within Indian cultures. The problem does not consist of the proportion of "original" traits as opposed to "foreign" traits exhibited by a culture at any given moment. Rather, the question is who exercises control over those traits. . . . [I]t is necessary to determine whether the traits are organized around a cultural project that is one's own, or whether it is foreign.

Moreover, I distinguish traditions from culture. I take culture to mean imagined or constructed realities in both the physical and cosmological senses, in which social groups have theories of how things work, means of communication, common sentiments, and shared spaces that orient their (re)production of physical reality. Culture, then, is always shifting and abstracted. Traditions, like language, are passed down

from one generation to the next but always with different cultural meanings because of changing contexts. The reproduction of traditions should not be taken to insinuate timeless culture. For my purposes, the replication of traditions did serve to indicate social interaction and thus culture distinct from those of the dominant national colonizer societies.

THE AUDIENCES

For Mesoamericanists, scholarship rarely addresses ambiguous, contingent, unstable ethnic identifications that fluctuate between Ladino/Mestizo and indigenous (Frye 1996; Gasco 2006; Little-Siebold 2001; and Sandstrom 1991 are notable exceptions). For many Mayanists in particular, the most interesting, urgent, and reassuring populations to study are the unequivocally indigenous, who, despite tumultuous change and brutal oppression, evince that Mayas are “still here.” For indisputable Mayas themselves (epitomized by Maya speakers wearing traditional dress in public), anyone ambiguously indigenous are degenerate sellouts. Dichotomous Ladino/Indian categorizations, however, overshadow the ubiquitous shades of gray, including in the very households of the indisputably indigenous (Hale 2006). Attending to such shades challenges one to reflect upon and fine-tune one’s approach to indigenous ethnicity and how it is variably imagined, lived, and altered.⁷ Explorations in the former Ch’orti’-speaking region reveal that identifications are not necessarily abandoned in conjunction with language and dress, and even people who seemingly never identify as indigenous can practice Mesoamerican traditions and occasionally ally with the indigenous. Even those who are unquestionably and publicly Ch’orti’ will be seen as an amalgamated population, and my use of “the Ch’orti’ area” is an argument that the region is a unique interaction zone,⁸ not a timeless territory. Likewise, surprising historical continuities do not mean Ch’orti’s are a God-given race, nation, or people, but they can be identified as survivors of colonialism. As such, my research attends to why, when, and how people with Ch’orti’ heritage identify in contradistinction to others.

Reflections on Mesoamerican indigeneity are relevant to conceptualizations of indigeneity generally. States, international bodies, and academics often have ill-defined, inconsistent means of evaluating indigenous claims. Some accept anyone claiming to be indigenous, thus angering indigenous people who argue that some are opportunistic imposters, while others categorically reject the status. My approach is to evaluate indigeneity as *historical*, *relational*, and *contingent*. By historical, I mean that indigenous identifications do not emerge from thin air but from colonial foundations. To make a determination, the history and consequences of colonialism must be traced. Who has been and continues to be colonially dispossessed and disempowered

may be revealed by historical records as well as contemporary social identifications, traditions, and cultures distinct from those of dominant populations. By relational, I refer to indigenous social interaction, cultural production, and identifications changing in relationship to those discriminating against them. Social practice and habitus are performed, abandoned, adapted, and invented according to what is meaningful in the present, and the rules of the game change accordingly and often unintentionally. The ultimate question about indigenous status is not whether a population has “uncontaminated” indigenous “traits,” but whether the self-identified indigenous are *a distinct sociohistorical, culture-producing group* that is identifiable by historical documentation and distinctive traditions.⁹ Being indigenous, Ch’orti, or Maya, then, are not the same in the three countries (or even *municipios*) under study because the *social* dynamics have diverged in each. By contingent, I mean that indigeneity can be largely irrelevant and latent in some moments, purposely hidden in some circumstances, and made manifest (“articulated”) by people uniting for self-defense, new opportunities, or emotional reasons. Such advantages and disadvantages, latency and articulation, almost inevitably invites questions of authenticity. I avoid using the word “identity,” which conjures something fixed, and instead employ identification, which better connotes contingency.

The e-version of this book includes YouTube links (bracketed in bold font) to 68 ethnographic video clips with English subtitles totaling 3 hours (out of 78 hours recorded during the research). For some colleagues, the very notion of video clips is irritating. “The book was perfected centuries ago, so why mess it up with undue technology? Just give us the information in quick and easy form. If you can’t say it in writing, then maybe you shouldn’t try to publish. Sorry, but video lends you no ethnographic authority.” The amateur quality of the videos, which I shot while my attention was divided by interviewing, will also make videographers cringe. Fortunately, those opposed to video can skip them, as they are supplementary to the narrative. Others, like Mesoamericanists, will appreciate them for providing more information than print and photos ever could. In fact, if I could add the senses of smell, taste, and touch (like heat and humidity) to the sights and sounds, I would. While my original goal of using a video camera was to record as much contextual information as possible while hopefully avoiding a technological imposition to interviews, it actually lent the project more authority and utility. Many interviewees were honored to be recorded or have their elders recorded for posterity. In reciprocity for the interview, I offered interviewees my coauthored Spanish ethnography, a jackknife, or a small amount of cash, which were much appreciated. The clips also literally provide a voice to collaborators (however edited and subtitled) and access to the data that Central Americans find most interesting, particularly oral histories and associated self-identification. I also hope the videos will help quell my students’

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criticism that ethnographies nowadays provide little information about people and instead are dry, lifeless, theoretical ruminations with only a few anecdotes.¹⁰

What this book does not provide is a holistic ethnographic portrait of Ch'orti' contemporary conditions, social practice, and habitus. Those can be garnered in other publications, such as Dary, Elías and Reyna (1998), Flores (2002, 2004), López García (2003), López García and Metz (2002), and Metz (2006), among others in the reference list. I do provide cursory information on the backgrounds of the campesino populations throughout the region in my exploration of indigenous identification, but my primary focus is how to evaluate Ch'orti' indigenous legitimacy in terms of history, relationality, and contingency.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 reviews four approaches to indigeneity, how they impact determinations of who is indigenous, and where I stand. Chapters 2 and 3 trace the precolonial, colonial, and independence era histories of “the Ch'orti' area.” Chapter 2 delimits and establishes the tenuous foundations of a “Ch'orti' area” before and after the Spanish invasion by reviewing archeological, linguistic, political, and cultural evidence. Central Americans themselves are fascinated with this information, including surprising continuities since ancient times, but I disrupt narratives about a glorious Maya past. Chapter 3 summarizes the invasion and colonization of the Ch'orti' area and the bases of Ch'orti's' indigeneity. With the tidbits of information available, this chapter subverts both essentialist and deconstructivist approaches but can only hint at the imagined realities of the Postclassic, invasion, colonial, and post-independence eras. It focuses more on the horrors and opportunities of colonialism and suggests how they continue to impact people today, including the indigo, tobacco, cattle, and sugarcane industries, Ladino land invasions, harsh discrimination and exploitation, and land privatizations. Indigenous identification was slowly abandoned in Honduras and El Salvador in a wave of Ladino invaders, but in Guatemala governing elites preferred to keep “Indians” segregated (Euraque 2004). Through it all, the campesinos of the three countries have continued to regularly interact, especially at the pilgrimage site of Esquipulas. Academics interested only in indigeneity per se may find all the historical details unworthy of their time, but these chapters are not essential for following the ensuing ones.

At the heart of the book are six chapters on recent history, culture, indigenous-Ladino relationality, and contingent expressions of indigenous identification—two on Guatemala, three on Honduras, and one on El Salvador. Some have first-person narratives to express the complexities of decolonizing research and determining who is indigenous and Ch'orti'. Chapter 3 reviews indigeneity in the Ch'orti'-speaking

area of eastern Guatemala, to which indigeneity throughout the entire region is related. Evaluations of indigeneity typically (and unfairly) result in comparisons with Ch'orti' speakers, such that relationality involves not only contrast with Ladinos but with speakers.¹¹ The next chapter focuses on history, contingency, and relationality in *former* Ch'orti'-speaking *municipios* in Guatemala, including the motivations for varying expressions of indigeneity, such as a common campesino worldview of animate forces, pride, political control, and attraction of development aid.

Honduras, with its recent re-emergence of Ch'orti' ethnicity, is explored in chapters 6 through 8. Chapter 6 traces the nineteenth-century Guatemalan origins of many contemporary Honduran Ch'orti's and the outgrowth of the Ch'orti' movement from campesino classist land struggles in the 1960s. In chapter 7 I present my ethnographic findings for the area in and around Copán Ruinas as well as El Paraíso to the north, revealing some commonalities of descent, culture, and identity with Guatemalan Ch'orti' speakers, but with different social dynamics. In chapter 8 Ocotepeque presents a case of campesinos holding an indigenous colonial land title in their struggle for land and claiming to be Ch'orti' Maya when early colonial documents suggest the area was mixed Nahua-Pipil, Ch'orti', and Lenca (Johnson, Gómez Zúñiga, and Kelly 2019). While Ocotepeque has a deeper history than the Honduran Ch'orti' area to the north, the lack of social distinction from the dominant population has caused the movement there to splinter. Northwestern El Salvador, covered in chapter 9, has only legends of indigeneity impacting the identities of the residents there, which is subsidiary to the class identities that came to a crescendo in the Civil War (1979–92).

The concluding chapter reviews how one's evaluation of Ch'orti' indigeneities depends on their theoretical and political approach. I support a decolonizing approach while acknowledging its difficulties and its overlap with three other predominant approaches. Seemingly enigmatic scenarios seen from essentialist and deconstructivist approaches become less so from a decolonizing one, including (1) people identifying as indigenous without the regional indigenous markers of language and dress; (2) people who are arguably indigenous holding prejudices against the indigenous generally; (3) children raised to be non-indigenous by indigenous parents and then identifying as indigenous in adulthood; (4) people with indigenous ancestry making claims based on inaccurate—and for some, disqualifying—histories; (5) people with popularly recognized “Indian” physical features (comparatively darker and shorter) practicing distinctive culture and language but rejecting indigenous identity; (6) people uniting as indigenous for material and emotional reasons and then splitting in opposing factions by challenging each other's indigeneity; and (7) NGOs and activists encouraging others to

recognize and embrace indigeneity, even when it's painful or dangerous. Most of all, the research demonstrates that indigenous identity is important to some people in the region, even if they don't always express it, while some have indeed abandoned identification and distinctive imagined realities completely.

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