

ARTICULATIONS OF IDENTITY THROUGH STRUGGLE AMONG THE CH'ORTI' MAYA OF
COPÁN, HONDURAS

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the articulation of identities among the Ch'orti' Maya in the municipal region of Copán Ruinas in Western Honduras. It traces the different categories or labels used to define the indigenous sector of Copán since the time of the colony (in the 1500s) until the emergence of indigenous activism (in the 1990s) during which indigenous people began to mobilize using the ethnic category Ch'orti' Maya. I look at how and why, during this period of mobilization, indigenous people have constructed and performed certain identities in their encounters with non-indigenous society (including public officials, tourists, and landowners) and other indigenous people. It also examines the different ways these identities are contested, the kinds of identities that are relevant in indigenous communities, and the role that the state, the tourism industry, and activism have played in the kinds of identities that are articulated.

The research for this dissertation took place over the course of 11 months between June, 2012 and August, 2013. My population sample (totaling 101 participants) included: 1) Ch'orti' Maya activists who work with the Ch'orti-Maya Indigenous Council of Honduras (CONIMCHH), 2) Ch'orti' Maya villagers from 3 different communities, and 3) non-indigenous people who work with indigenous leaders and communities. This last group included workers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists, and government officials. I used demographic surveys, participant observation, individual interviews and group interviews.

In examining how and why certain identities are articulated and performed I draw from Foucault's (1982:212) notion that an individual is both marked by and bounded to his/her own identity by "conscience or self-knowledge," and also a subject to other forces he/she depends on or is controlled by. This approach is relevant to understanding how forces such as the state, the tourism industry, and activism influence ethnic identity performances and articulations (through their expectations of indigeneity). However, I argue that beyond these articulations of ethnicity, as individuals navigate different kinds of struggles, they evoke diverse (gendered, classed, racial, and ethnic) identities that more adequately represent their realities.

I found that in response to non-indigenous society's expectations of indigeneity and ethnicity, indigenous people performed certain practices marked or narrated as Ch'orti' Maya in order to assert their legitimacy as an ethnic group and also gain access to land and other resources. Beyond the performance of narrated practices, however, people's understandings and enactment of identity reflect the intersection of multiple categories that shape one another as individuals navigate different encounters and struggles. In examining people's struggles more carefully, we can understand not only how and why an individual may inhabit multiple identities (Medina 2004), but also how our expectations of people's actions (based on categorizations) may lead us to overlook other important non-narrated practices. Although these practices are not narrated as Ch'orti' Maya, they are important to community members and also address communities' struggles on a different dimension.

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In loving memory of my mother Domnina Mejia and two other people whom I am blessed to have in my life, Cameron L. McNeil and Sue Davis.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

On a sunny Saturday morning in September, I took a motorcycle taxi with Alberto¹ from the town of Copán Ruinas, Honduras to the village of San Rafael. Alberto is in his early 20s but is already a prominent Ch'orti' Maya activist, director of a Maya culture children's museum in town, and active member of the Catholic Church. We made our way through a small dirt road along the banks of the Copan River and uphill toward the village located approximately 25 minutes from Copán by car. We were both special guests of the *mesa principal* (main table) of the *Festival del Elote*—the most important agrarian ceremony among the indigenous villages surrounding the Copán Valley. The *Festival del Elote* (literally translated as the festival of young corn) was introduced to the Copán region in the 1990s after indigenous people acquired land from the Honduran government following several strikes and negotiations orchestrated by indigenous activists in what is presently known as the Ch'orti' Maya Movement (Metz et al 2009).

The driver took us as far as the dirt road went. We arrived at a soccer field in the mountain top where one could see the Copán Valley, some large maize plantations, the Archaeological Park of Copán, the town, and even as far west into Guatemalan lands through the mountain range. We followed a narrow path, walking behind some women and children, until we reached an arch made from palm tree branches holding a banner at the center which read: Welcome to the *Festival Del Elote, San Rafael*. From afar we could see a massive altar built under a plastic tarp. A long table (the *mesa principal*) was placed in the middle and covered with a bright, white cloth, next to a podium also covered in white and marked with a cross. Around the table, the altar was adorned with maize plants, vines of black beans, and enormous green

¹ a pseudonym

leaves called *compte*. At the foot of the altar were numerous foods made from maize and beans that were placed under big metal containers and the floor was completely covered with pine needles.



Figure 1. Indigenous people walking to celebrate the Festival del Elote. Photo by the author.

Hundreds of people from different villages gathered there to witness the different events to honor the enthronement of the new queen of maize. The coronation of the queen began with a Catholic mass performed by the local priest who expressed his support for the event and argued that it was really important that *gente campesina sencilla* (humble peasants or commoners) got involved in events like this one. Mass was followed by the calling of the special guests to the *mesa principal* which included the Catholic priest, the head of the National Indigenous Council of the Ch'orti' Maya of Honduras (CONIMCHH), two other indigenous activists, a female politician running for congress representing the LIBRE political party², a former teacher running for mayor also of the LIBRE party, a powerful hacienda owner and tourism entrepreneur who also owns a big portion of the land around the village, and myself. Each of us were given the

² LIBRE is led by Xiomara Gonzalez (wife of deposed former President Manuel Zelaya)

microphone to say a few words about why we were invited to be part of the *mesa principal*. After each one of us spoke, a local theater group made a dramatic entrance to the site and delivered a performance depicting the sacrifice of a Classic Maya ruler. These performances were recently produced by non-indigenous entrepreneurs using the works of archaeologists and the few surviving Maya texts such as the *Popol Vuh* and the *Books of Chilam Balam*. The performances were originally produced solely for tourists at public and private events and only recently had been incorporated in indigenous villages' performances



Figure 2. Catholic priest blesses the Ch'orti' Maya Ceremony of Maize. Photo by the author

Everyone gathered closer to witness the ceremony. When it was over, all of the members of the *mesa principal* along with some police officers who had shown up, were invited to the adjacent building where we ate the foods from the altar. Outside of the building, leaders of the community sang songs they had written in honor of the event in mariachi style while the crowd gathered around them.

What transpired at the community of San Rafael that day is something indigenous people from that region had never seen before. The priest offered his blessing of the ceremony, in full view of its roots in pre-Columbian practices. Non-indigenous politicians seeking the vote of indigenous people went there to express their support of Ch'orti' Maya identity and culture, even though in the past they would not recognize people as indigenous or Ch'orti' Maya. Entrepreneurs in the tourism industry spoke of the value of the ceremony in attracting more tourists to the area. And lastly, indigenous activists spoke of the rights of indigenous people based on the claim that they are descendants of the ancient Maya.

This recent interest in Ch'orti' Maya identity and the events, practices, and understandings that have surfaced with its emergence, constitutes the main subject of this dissertation. Geographically, it focuses on the municipal region of Copán Ruinas and its villages. Although I am a native of Copán, I first arrived there as a researcher in 2008 with an interest in understanding the emergence of indigenous activism in the region. By 2012, when I traveled to Copán to complete the bulk of my dissertation research, my research questions had become concerned with how and why certain identities were performed, promoted, and contested in the encounters between the Ch'orti' Maya and non-indigenous society. In examining how identity operates in these encounters I chose to focus on indigenous people's encounters with public officials (including state authorities and religious figures), the tourism industry (including NGO workers, tourists, and residents of the town of Copán involved in tourism), and other indigenous people in their communities. The opening vignette illustrates these kinds of encounters as well as some of the elements that have surfaced with the emergence of Ch'orti' Maya identities. What I hope will become clear throughout the dissertation is how the indigenous sector of Copán has arrived at this point, how the conditions of indigenous people have changed over time since the

arrival of Europeans to the region, and the reasons why becoming Ch'orti' Maya constitutes such an important shift in how the indigenous sector of Copán relates to non-indigenous society.



Figure 3. Festival del Elote Altar. Photo by the author

1. Overarching Argument

The main argument of this dissertation is based on two points that surface throughout the different chapters: the intersection and shifting of identities across time in relationship to livelihood struggles, and more recently the role that anthropology has played in how categories are constructed and used by different individuals. With regard to the first point, I contend that even though identities fluctuate over time (either as something imposed by non-indigenous society or something deliberately embraced by indigenous people), all of these identities are intimately interwoven and tied to the same kind of livelihood struggles. The birth of the ethnic category Ch'orti' Maya through political activism has incited multiple understandings among

indigenous people about what it means to be Ch'orti' Maya. As I will explain later, exploring the relationship between these different understandings and specific struggles reveals a more complex dimension of identity. I will argue that as individuals navigate different kinds of struggles, they evoke and experience diverse (gendered, classed, racial, and ethnic) identities that always intersect and shape one another to the point that the realities an individual faces cannot be represented by one identity alone. For example, a female activist's identity as Ch'orti' Maya may be shaped by the fact that she is a woman, she is considered to be indigenous, or it may be affected by her class status.

The birth of the ethnic category Ch'orti' Maya has also led to the construction and performance of narrated or marked practices. These practices include the naming of certain cultural traditions as Ch'orti' Maya (e.g. public farming rituals or syncretic religious traditions honoring the dead), learning the Ch'orti' Maya language, dressing up using indigenous attire, and identifying as Ch'orti' Maya in encounters with non-indigenous people. These practices are all produced through the interplay between non-indigenous society's expectations of indigeneity and ethnicity and indigenous people's efforts to secure some sort of recognition that they are Ch'orti' Maya.

Beyond the performance of marked practices for the purposes of increasing the visibility of the Ch'orti' Maya, people's understandings and enactment of identity reflect the intersection of multiple categories that shape one another as individuals navigate different encounters and struggles. In examining people's struggles more carefully, we can understand not only how and why an individual may inhabit multiple identities (Medina 2004), but also how our expectations of people's actions based on categorizations may lead us to miss important non-narrated practices that do not fit such categorizations but are important to community members. These

non-narrated practices that take place in more intimate settings (as the last two chapters will show). Although these practices are not marked as Ch'orti' Maya, they play an intrinsic role in the life of indigenous communities and also address communities' struggles on a different dimension. An important reason why these practices are not marked as Ch'orti' Maya is that they are performed in order to address specific struggles at the community or individual level (with a degree of sacredness and privacy) not meant as public displays or not relevant to the image of Ch'orti' Mayaness expected by the state, the tourism industry, and other sectors of non-indigenous society. In other words, as I will explain later, these practices are not performed using expected cultural markers such as the use of language, traditional attire, the production of handicrafts, and even farming altars that have become associated with the category Ch'orti' Maya. Moreover, these unmarked practices give us a glimpse of the way people experience culture outside the realm of activism and the kinds of beliefs and symbols that they find relevant to their communities. In this sense, these practices also enable us to understand the Ch'orti' Maya not as just a group that constructed cultural practices to gain recognition (from the state and non-indigenous society) and have access to resources, but also as a diverse group comprised of multiple different communities with their own unique ways of experiencing identity, culture, and struggle.

For the second point, I argue that the categories constructed by anthropologists in their work with indigenous populations have a great impact on civil society—beyond academia—in how indigenous identities are constructed and contested. These anthropological categories also become problematic as other scholars expect to find certain cultural contents in association with such categories. As experts, anthropologists as well as other scholars, sometimes use their scholarly authority to determine the legitimacy of a given group based on the associations they

have established between categories and practices. Anthropological narratives may serve as guides for non-indigenous society (academics and non-academics) to construct their own expectations/assumptions of categories such as “Ch’orti’ Maya” without critically considering how this category may intersect and be shaped by other racial, gendered, and classed categories (which an individual can inhabit simultaneously). For example a Ch’orti’ Maya villager affiliated with CONIMCHH may begin to call himself *Indigena*, participate in newly introduced agrarian rituals, and even know how to speak some Ch’orti’ Maya as his fellow activists, the state, and tourists may expect these kinds of acts from a Ch’orti’ Maya person. The same person, however, may choose to work his land and sell some of his produce in the town of Copán where he would be known as *campesino*. If he is not able to subsist from working his land, he may continue to work as a *mozo* for former landowners. In this sense the same person may be associated with three different (yet interconnected) identities. His identities are interconnected in the following way: he is *Indigena* and Ch’orti’ Maya by way of his involvement with activism, he is *campesino* by being able to work the land assigned to him through activism, and he is a *mozo* since he needs to make a living outside of the limited subsistence opportunities he has as an activist and *campesino*.

1.1 Fluctuating Identities Over Time

One of the goals of this dissertation is to show the presence of livelihood-related struggles over time and how these struggles have historically become tied to specific labels/categorizations across time. Throughout different chapters I will explore how even though certain categories stand for ethnic, racial, and gendered identities, there is always an engagement of struggles related to people’s livelihoods. For example, as chapter one will explore, the *Indios*

or *naturales* of the colonial period (as Europeans named them), set demands on local governments for the protections of their lands based on their native status. During independence, land privatization, and establishment of borders, indigenous people who were evicted, tricked into selling their land, and absorbed as *mozos colonos* (as land owners and anthropologists called them), chose to stay in Honduran territory (rather than moving to the even more impoverished communities of Guatemala) under such classification in order to be able to work and practice subsistence farming. As *mozos colonos* indigenous people were forced to speak Spanish rather than Ch'orti', stop wearing traditional clothes, and discontinue practicing farming rituals.

By the 1960s, as I will expand in the next two chapters, the label *campesino* was mobilized by the indigenous sector of Copán when they joined organizations such as the National Association of Honduran Campesinos (ANACH) and the National Rural Workers Union (CNTC), in order to demand land reform which was achieved during the presidency of Ramon Villeda Morales. However, with the *coup d'état* that removed Villeda Morales from power in 1963, access to land remained precarious for the indigenous sector until the end of the 1980s when the ethnic classification Ch'orti' Maya started to surface in indigenous mobilization efforts. Meanwhile, as I will explain later, in anthropological works such as those of Schumann de Baudez (1983) and Rivas (1993) the indigenous sector is not classified indigenous, or Ch'orti', or Maya, but rather as “*campesinos* with Ch'orti' traditions”.

By the beginning of the 1990s several indigenous communities in Copán started to mobilize using the Ch'orti' Maya classification created and promoted by Honduran anthropologists. Their activism was also supported by the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 which called for indigenous people's rights to own land and set the terms of their own identities. Whereas the ethnic category Ch'orti' Maya was inculcated by indigenous

and non-indigenous activists, all the categories previously used to describe the indigenous sector (e.g. *campesino* and *Indio*) started to be used as tools for both the legitimization and contestation of identity. For example, Indigenous people begin to reverse the *Indio* derogatory connotation with which non-indigenous society have associated them in the past in order to claim native status and use it to also support the new ethnic classification of Ch'orti' Maya and *Indigena* and gain legitimacy. Though in the past they used the classification "*campesino*" (to demand resource distribution) when there was momentum behind that term, for the first time indigenous people also begin to deliberately use and emphasize the classifications "Ch'orti' Maya" and "Indigenous" in order to demand a more systematic system of communal land distribution.

Unlike previous historical moments, indigenous people also started to have some control about the terms under which these classifications were used. For instance, transnational activists began to train indigenous leaders from multiple different communities to use the classifications "Ch'orti' Maya" and "indigenous" (or what indigenous leaders refer to as *desarrollar una conciencia indigena* or develop an indigenous consciousness). Following their training, these indigenous leaders encouraged people in their own communities to also develop an indigenous consciousness and identify as both indigenous and Ch'orti' Maya. As the following chapters will show, however, the birth and promotion of these classifications led to a wide range of understandings. Although people began to use these ethnic categories they also made sense of their identity based on previously used discourses such as *Indio* and *campesino*.

One of the things that makes the 1990s different is that there is a wide international support for indigenous peoples' issues including the work of NGOs and development agencies. The increase in economic support for the indigenous sector also creates resentment among the non-indigenous sector. Non-indigenous landowners in particular question the legitimacy of

indigenous people claiming that they are either *campesinos* or *mestizos* and that the real Ch'orti' Maya are on the Guatemalan side where they still wear traditional clothing and speak the Ch'orti' Maya language (these understandings, as I explain in the next section, are partly influenced by anthropological discourses).

These kinds of criticisms encourage the Ch'orti' Maya to increase their focus on cultural revitalization initiatives—even though their initial struggles revolve around access to land. The focus on cultural revitalization initiatives further inspired the emergence of more leadership in communities, people interested in accessing their ancestral roots and histories (and thus becoming more involved in activism), and people creatively using identity narratives as livelihood strategies. All of these narrated identities may stem from how people's subjectivities were informed differently according to their position in their community or councils; however, I found that they were all not only shaped by one another but also connected to similar livelihood-related struggles. In this sense, the birth of the Ch'orti' Maya discourse may have incited the performance of narrated identities as people encountered different individuals and institutions with different expectations of indigeneity and ethnicity, however these performances are linked to the same kinds of struggles related to people's livelihoods associated with previous classifications used since the time of the colony.

1.2 Anthropology and Categories

In the new era of indigenous activism in Copán, the field of anthropology is located at the center of a debate for ethnic recognition. While, as the dissertation will show later, some anthropologists were crucial at not only helping mobilize indigenous people (by convincing them that they are Ch'orti' Maya) but also in encouraging other actors (e.g. NGOs and transnational

activists) to work with the Ch'orti' Maya, anthropologists at the National Honduran Institute of Anthropology question the ethnic legitimacy of the Ch'orti' Maya. In a letter to the government in May of 1997 the Ch'orti' Maya National Indigenous Council of Honduras (CONIMCHH) argued that the Honduran government's relationship with the Ch'orti' Maya operate in contradictory ways:

The Honduran government contradicts itself through the Institute of Anthropology and History (IAHA), who deny the existence of the Ch'orti' people and have the wrong idea about the identity of the Ch'orti' people. They have violated the rights of indigenous people and the Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization which states that the consciousness of indigenous or tribal identity should be established by each group and that people who are foreign to our culture are not the ones who should define our identity.

In referencing the specific interests of the IAHA, the letter continues

Anthropology intends to minimize the struggles and demands of Ch'orti' Maya people with regard to our land. They are very clear when they say that what interests them are the remains of the past such as ancient Maya tombs, stone artifacts, and the history of those who are already dead. Their vision is focused on tourism and generating dollars. It is evident that these people are descendants of the Spanish whose greed led them to only think about gold and not the rights of indigenous people. The arguments proposed by the IAHA are used by [non-indigenous] cattle ranchers and landowners, civil and military authorities of Copán and Ocotepeque for the same purposes.

Indeed anthropologists have played a bigger role than they probably imagined in how people have understood and used their assertions about categories such as ethnicity and race. In Copán, while the IAHA, especially since the Manuel Zelaya administration (starting in 2006), has been more supportive of the Ch'orti' Maya, their questioning of the ethnic legitimacy of this group has influenced people's understanding of ethnicity beyond academic and political circles. For the indigenous sector of Copán, becoming Ch'orti' Maya constitutes not only a switch of consciousness as indigenous leaders call it (*cambio de conciencia*) in the sense that people accept that they are indigenous, but also a link to development opportunities, education, and access to land. In this way, this ethnic identity constitutes the door to approaching class struggles, but at

the same time it incites reactions from non-indigenous society. Almost a decade before the emergence of the Ch'orti' Maya as an ethnic group, the IHAH had sponsored anthropological investigations to understand the ethnic legitimacy of the Ch'orti' Maya. As defined by Schumann de Baudez (1983) the Ch'orti' Maya did not pass the ethnicity test and thus were defined as “*Campesinos* with Ch'orti' traditions”. Other works, such as those of Rivas (1993) would follow the same assertions. In the present, works such as those of Chernier et al (1999) and Metz (2009 and 2010) have examined how identities have shifted in the context of political activism. However, the enactment of multiple identities and the reasons behind their intersection have not been sufficiently addressed. Furthermore, outside of academic circles, as my work will show, non-indigenous residents of the town of Copán as well as landowners have used the anthropological classifications of *campesino* to contest the ethnic legitimacy of the Ch'orti' Maya or the word *Indio* as racial concept not attached to cultural practices but associated with backwardness and the lowest form of social class.

As anthropologists, we often simplify people's realities in order to make comparisons, but such simplifications also distort or overlook the complexities of the realities they seek to represent. For example in conversations with some foreign scholars in the area it was common to hear them say that the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán were simply “*Indios* interested in land” or that one can only really *feel* the Ch'orti' Mayaness in the communities located on the Guatemalan side of the border. This shows, as the following section explains, that published works as well as verbal comments coming from anthropologists have the power to influence one's perception of the self and others. Moreover, anthropologists' assessments also have the power to shape the expectations of state officials and non-indigenous society.

1.3 Contributions

Through my own journey as an anthropologist, and although skeptically so, I too used anthropological assumptions. I went to the field with the concepts and categories provided to me by my own discipline. I started by looking for markers of indigeneity through cultural practices (old and recently introduced) and how these were associated with specific labels or categories such as *Mozo colono*, *Indio*, *campesino with indigenous traditions*, *Indigena*, and Ch'orti' Maya. Categories such as these are often created outside of academia by powerful forces (e.g. the colony) and anthropologists translate these categories into standardized academic categories that serve as 'ideal types' for the purposes of historical comparison.

While in anthropology (and other fields) these categories are created for the purposes of historical comparison, they play an important role on how groups understand themselves and make assumptions about others. Anthropological discussions on Maya ethnicity, as Warren (2001) explains, have, for at least five decades, placed emphasis on the construction of the dichotomous "indigenous/non-indigenous" ethnic categories. These discussions have either concentrated on cultural content (e.g. cultural markers, practices and meanings) or people's formulations of ethnic boundaries and attitudes not necessarily linked to the concept of culture. However, as Warren points out, there is a gap between these anthropological portrayals of ethnicity (and in turn how other people perceive these portrayals) and the "far more heterogeneous and dynamic realities of everyday life, cultural identities, power relations, and socio-political history" among different Maya groups (Warren 2001:90). Drawing from Warren's (2001) assertion, I will argue that in Copán, different anthropological narratives, and the way these narratives have been perceived, have contributed to the contestation of ethnic identities beyond anthropological imaginaries. Thus, anthropological designations of the Ch'orti' Maya of

Guatemala as “real” and those communities of Copán as *campesinos* with Ch’orti’ traditions not only influenced the assumptions of other anthropologists but also non-indigenous society and even some indigenous people. For example, in his work on the emergence of indigenous ethnicity in Latin America, Michael Kearney contends that “anthropologists have been predisposed to study down and must now attend more to the creation of *indigena* ethnicity as a process of image formation occurring also within the dominant sectors of society (the media, nongovernmental organizations, state agencies, anthropologists, etc.), generating new symbols and images of the *indigena*” (Kearney 1996:10-11). Such emphasis on image formation and ethnicity, as I will explain throughout the dissertation, not only contributes to the expectations of ethnicity that non-indigenous society sets on the Ch’orti’ Maya, but they also obscure the struggles that indigenous people experience as they inhabit and enact multiple other identities related to racial, gendered, and class categories that have historically infiltrated one another (De la Cadena 2001:262).

In my own research, as I worked with multiple different actors (e.g. indigenous and non-indigenous activists and indigenous people from different communities) I realized that the categories I brought to the field and used for my analysis did not aptly represent the many ways in which people experienced and situationally performed multiple identities. While struggling to make sense of the presence of so many different categories and understandings among individuals (even among individuals from a single community) I realized that economic struggles were the only constant in my observations. By trying to understand questions such as who identifies as Ch’orti’ Maya, when and why? Who identifies as *campesino* and *Indio*, why and when? I also presupposed the occurrence of a transition between identities rather than looking at how class struggles may incite the use of multiple identities by the same individuals working

with multiple discourses and opportunities afforded through the state, transnational activism, and the tourism industry. In her work with wagedworkers and farmers in the Belizean citrus industry, Medina (2004) has explored how different identities and discourses are mobilized along multiple lines of struggle in processes that involve both the subjection of individuals by larger economic structures and agencies and also how the individual produces his or her own subjectivities and evoke certain identities and categories in temporary mobilizations.

Medina (2004) contends that “Identity formation involves dual processes: (1) the construction of social categories or ‘subject positions,’ and (2) the placement of individuals within particular categories... As individuals and institutions put these categories into practice to organize both self-identities and social interactions, they come to ‘inhabit’ them, to make themselves at home in them” (Medina 2004:12-13). She continues:

...while each individual’s subjectivity—their sense of self—is shaped through discourse, those individuals are also involved in shaping the discourses that define reality for themselves and others. Discourses do not spontaneously form themselves and then travel at will; rather, human agents formulate discourses and strategically invoke them. They also adjust or rework familiar discourses or abandon them in favor of alternatives. At the same time, it is precisely the ‘subject’—located in particular social positions associated with particular interests—that can be understood to act strategically as agent (2004:13).

Borrowing from Medina’s work, I argue that the sense of self and others adopted by the Ch’orti’ Maya via anthropological discourses of ethnicity has been supplemented by other discourses of class that have been available to indigenous people in the past. For example, indigenous people have reworked categories such as *Indio* to wed indigeneity and ethnicity, while at the same time abandon the *campesino* identities only in encounters where these categories work against their activism. Class has played and continues to play an intrinsic role in how the indigenous sector of Copán has historically related to non-indigenous society. Through markers of race and class such as the classifications *mozo colono*, *indio*, *natural*, and *campesino* non-indigenous society has positioned itself as the dominant group. Through different historical moments (e.g. the colony,

the consolidation of the Honduran nation following independence, land reform policies, and the emergence of peasant movements) the multiple categories mentioned above have stood for similar struggles related to access to resources. The arrival of the Ch'orti' Maya ethnic category has coalesced multiple discourses and understandings that people evoke situationally. Thus, one of the main contributions of this dissertation is that it moves beyond the categories that circumscribe and influence our assumptions of Ch'orti' Maya identity to examine both the fluidity of identity performance and also how class is implicated in both narrated and non-narrated cultural practices.

In moving beyond anthropological categories I will rely on sources that use intersectionality as an analytical tool (e.g. De la Cadena 2001, Medina 2004, Davis 2008, and Speed 2008). As an approach that considers multiple axis of oppression, intersectionality, enables us to look at how all previous classifications for the indigenous sector of Copán play a role in the complex composite that constitutes Ch'orti' Maya identity in the present. People are Ch'orti' Maya because they have chosen to join a political movement and assert that they are Ch'orti' Maya, engage in activism activities (e.g. protest, convince people that they are Ch'orti' Maya), perform duties associated with indigenous councils (e.g. fulfill leadership positions). However, as I stated before, many people in the present also embrace the classification *Indio* as a way to reverse its negative connotation and gain legitimacy as the native peoples of the area. Embracing the classification *Indio* gives potency to the classification Ch'orti' Maya which is more easily contested by non-indigenous society based on whether or not people possess cultural elements. People also have to still grapple with class disparities and hence they continue to be *campesinos* as many people still work for non-indigenous landowners. Being *campesino* or someone who works the land is also something that gives traction to being Ch'orti' Maya

considering that many of the traditions that have been created to consolidate indigenous communities as ethnic groups have to do with farming rituals.

Ultimately, class struggles continues to affect Ch'orti' Maya communities and in situations where the articulation of identities present limitations or are not able to help solve problems, indigenous people resort to practices that are not voluntarily articulated as Ch'orti' Maya. Safety, for instance, is something that people enjoy in the town of Copán, or at least they can solve through the calling on law enforcement officials. When issues of violence emerge in the small villages, where they do not have law enforcement officials, people have to resort to collective prayers to solve the issues. Similarly, when people are sick and families are not able to afford to take them to the doctor or buy medicine, they resort to the use of shamans for prayers and also collective rituals. As the last chapter will show, the emergence of the new millennium church is another example of viewing the political activism and the emergence of the Ch'orti' Maya as the beginning of a new cycle which promises better life conditions to indigenous people. One can only make sense of the role of these unmarked practices by carefully examining and considering why they operate outside anthropological categories or the content anthropologists prescribe or expect for certain categories.

2. Thematic Overview

The first four chapters explore how identities are performed in the encounters between indigenous people and public officials. Throughout the chapters, I examine how the discourses of rights, ethnicity and gender—as tools for political mobilization—were born and have been used in the region of Copán, the different contexts under which these discourses are employed, and the opportunities as well as expectations they open up for indigenous activists. As a historical

overview, I examine the transformation of Copán as multiple different communities, tracing indigenous people's interactions and conflicts across time with public officials starting with the authorities who first represented the Spanish Crown during the colonial period. I argue that the high tension inherent in the Ch'orti' Maya's interaction with authorities and land owners and their efforts to gain recognition as Ch'orti' Maya is rooted in a history of disfranchisement and forced labor that the Ch'orti' Maya have experienced since the time of the colony. I then examine the historical moments that have transformed the identities and encounters of indigenous people with the state since the establishment of Honduras as an independent nation and Copán as a municipality. I provide an overview of the history of indigenous political activism in Copán, and the role of anthropologists, transnational activists, and NGO workers in establishing indigenous organizations.

As an analytical exercise, these chapters examine the construction and performance of racial, ethnic, and gendered identities across multiple contexts within political activism and people's interactions with state officials. I will argue that across time, indigenous people have employed multiple strategies to negotiate their access to land. During the time of the colony, indigenous people seemed to have had a little more independence in claiming their right to work and protect their land. As Honduras achieved its independence, however, and land became privatized, indigenous people have had to embrace multiple identities to maintain access to land—either as *Indio*, *campesino*, and more recently as indigenous. The goal of these chapters is to show that emergent indigenous identities constitute another strategy to secure some form of stability and protection in accessing resources, but I also argue that people have struggled to move beyond other identities which they previously embraced (e.g. *campesino*). Many indigenous activists are aware that access to resources has been historically precarious when

relying solely on the Honduran state and thus they rely on international laws such as the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 for the protection of indigenous rights and self-determination and also their alliances with transnational activists and organizations.

Starting with chapter 5, the dissertation brings tourism into the discussion via the role of identity in recent tourism development initiatives. I examine the recent creation of theater performances and reconstruction of rituals for tourism consumption. I look specifically at how these performances are constructed and the role that indigenous people have gradually played in their construction. I look at the multiple identities that are born from these constructions and explore whether or not they play a role in how indigenous people understand their history or identity. Previous works have examined the construction of identities (gendered and ethnic) either for the purposes of political activism (Fischer 1996, Nelson 1999, Warren 1998) or as livelihood strategies (Little 2003, 2004a, 2004b). I examine how the Ch'orti' Maya combine both of these strategies as a way to increase their visibility, reassert their recognition as an ethnic group, and as a way to create new livelihoods. For instance, theater performances created for the tourism industry by non-indigenous entrepreneurs create a specific image of the Maya using the work of archaeologists with scenes from Maya creation myths such as the *Popol Vuh* and the books of *Chilam Balam*. These performances also seek to wed the classic Maya with contemporary indigenous populations. By employing actors from different indigenous communities, the entrepreneurs both assign more legitimacy to the performances and introduce indigenous people to different kinds of livelihood strategies. I propose, however, that this process only contributes to the "othering" of the Ch'orti' Maya who are viewed as museum pieces (Mortensen 2009).

Furthermore, from a gender analysis perspective, performances prepared by non-indigenous entrepreneurs depict the Maya as a male dominated and warrior-like society, whereas community performances place women at the center of the ceremonies.

The last two chapters bring the community to the discussion examining the role of identity in the encounters between indigenous people and residents of their communities as well as people from other indigenous communities. I argue that even though the discourses of identity created in the context of political activism and the tourism industry are narrated in the villages and play a specific role in helping activism and also addressing livelihood struggles, other practices that are not marked as Ch'orti' Maya, constitute an equally important part of communities' identity. Anthropologist John Watanabe (1992, 1995) has written extensively about the tacit identity of Maya communities based on a sense of place and the opportunities a given place affords the individuals who inhabit it. I will argue that a Ch'orti' Maya community or "pueblo" exists in the spirit of political activism as *el pueblo Maya Ch'orti'* but each community or village that makes up the whole Ch'orti' Maya pueblo also possesses and evokes their own unique identities. These diverse identities become evident in the way different communities practice some unmarked religious traditions or the way members speak for their own communities in general meetings at the indigenous council.

3. Summary Of Chapters

3.1 Chapter 1: Copán, Its Indigenous Population, and Their Historical Struggles to Access Land

This chapter offers a historical overview of indigenous people's interactions with non-indigenous actors (*encomenderos*, hacienda owners, anthropologists, and public officials) up until the emergence of indigenous political mobilization in the 1990s. The goal is to understand how the Ch'orti' Maya have fought for and negotiated their access to land since the arrival of Europeans to the region. In tracing this history of struggle, the chapter will also explore how different identities have been constructed and abandoned across time as indigenous people continue to negotiate access to land. This chapter explores the role of colonial Spanish institutions such as the *encomienda* and the *repartimiento* which were eventually replaced by the hacienda system under the newly independent nation of Honduras in the early 1800s. In tracing this history, the chapter will also explore the birth of the Copán community and the role that archaeology and the making of the nation played in this construction. It will end with a summary of land and agrarian reform in Honduras and its role on the first peasant movements in the region.

3.2 Chapter 2: A History of Ch'orti' Maya Activism in Copán

This chapter provides an overview of how Ch'orti' Maya activism was born in Copán, how indigenous organizations were established, and some of the struggles they have endured with the growth of the political movement. This chapter traces the multiple forces, events, institutions, and individuals who in one way or another have contributed to the birth of Ch'orti' Maya activism. It describes the political context under which identity-based activism flourished in Western Honduras. In tracing this history, the chapter also explores the impact that other

indigenous activists and movements throughout Honduras and transnationally had on indigenous leaders from Copán, including the role of anthropologists (and anthropology as a field of knowledge). Furthermore, this chapter examines the different goals of Ch'orti' Maya activism and how these goals have changed over time. For example, it examines how heritage became an important activism strategy for the Ch'orti' Maya as a result of the state's and Copán's economic dependency on the archaeological site of Copán. Lastly, this chapter looks at the controversial issue of land access and distribution and how it has created inter-organizational conflicts and divisions.

3.3 Chapter 3: Constructing and Contesting the Ethno-political Discourse of Ch'orti' Mayaness

This chapter examines the construction of the Ch'orti Maya through different discourses. It looks at anthropological discourses as well as how identity is talked about and performed among indigenous people in both activism and communities. The chapter examines identity as something overtly performed and also implicitly experienced. It emphasizes indigenous subjectivities and how these are informed by various actors, for instance, how indigenous people understand the discourses of identity that have been created in political activism and whether or not they are able to perform these identities. Moreover, the chapter offers an overview of the different theoretical approaches to indigenous social movements in Latin America and then situate the case of Honduras and the Ch'orti' Maya within these discussions. Ultimately, this chapter explores the different forces (e.g. international laws, transnational activists, non-governmental organizations, neoliberal reforms, and state initiatives) that have influenced the surge of indigenous movements. In tracing how the discourse of Ch'orti' Mayaness is created

and used by different actors, this chapter emphasizes not only the important adoption of an ethnic discourse but also the use of such discourse to address both identity and livelihood struggles.

3.4 Chapter 4: The Role of Gender in Constructing the Ch'orti' Maya for the Honduran Nation

This chapter continues the analysis on identity formation paying particular attention to gender. I examine how a gendered Ch'orti' Maya identity is negotiated in people's encounters with state officials and the challenges that it represents for political activism in general. I argue that while indigenous women are proud to be the face of Ch'orti' Maya culture in encounters with public officials—by wearing traditional attire and arranging traditional food displays—they also resent being subject to mockery by non-indigenous people. In relation to this argument, I also examine Ch'orti' Maya men's refusal to wear traditional clothing as an effort to move away from markers of subjugation associated with the use of the same clothing when indigenous men were controlled by non-indigenous landowners. Moreover, in this chapter I will also examine the place of gender in political activism strategies and activists' challenges in adopting Western ideas of gender equality. I look specifically at how gender is discussed among activists during their meetings and in strategies to secure funding. I also examine the struggles that female activists have endured as they negotiate their individual rights as women with the larger goals of indigenous activism.

3.5 Chapter 5: The Mayanization of the Ch'orti': Tourism-based Development and Entrepreneurial Work. The Second Birth of the Ch'orti' Maya

This chapter continues the analysis on identity formation from political activism to the tourism industry. It examines how after the Ch'orti' Maya political movement gained national and international attention in Honduras, indigenous people gradually became involved in tourism based development initiatives that offered yet another dimension of identity. Whereas previous chapters examine identity formation as a question of rights, access to resources, and people's willingness to embrace an indigenous consciousness (*conciencia*), this chapter looks at identity as a strategy to secure new livelihood strategies. I pay particular attention to how the notion of being Maya is understood by non-indigenous tourism development entrepreneurs and indigenous people who part take in tourism development initiatives. By relying on the works of anthropologists and archaeologists, entrepreneurs are able to customize certain kind of identities that indigenous people struggle to embrace. Thus, they are able to sell images of the Ch'orti' Maya (through theater performances) that create expectations among tourists about what a Ch'orti' Maya person should look, speak, or behave like. On the other hand, this knowledge is being reclaimed by indigenous actors who formerly worked for non-indigenous entrepreneurs. One important implication is that the indigenous performers have formed their own theatre groups and are transporting the same performances to the villages where they are being incorporated into other community practices. In the villages, however, these performances do not necessarily contribute to people's sense of self or ethnic identity. Instead, identity is understood in relationship to multiple different discourses evoked at the intersection of non-indigenous society's expectations and people's notion of and experience with previous identities. For instance, a person who sells handicrafts may claim to be Ch'orti' Maya or may even speak a few

Ch'orti' Maya words in response to tourists' questions, because in this case identity plays a specific function, that is, it serves as a livelihood strategy. At the same time, this person may also identify as *campesino* because he or she worked the land or identify as *Indio* in response to the expectations of indigenous activists.

3.6 Chapter 6: Who and What Drives Ch'orti' Maya Identity in The Community?

This chapter moves the conversation of identity formation from political activism and tourism to indigenous villages or communities. Here I look at what identity(ies) look like in the community and the value that indigenous people assign to different kinds of identities. I argue that the discourses of identity born from political activism are only relevant in maintaining the community connected to indigenous councils or in people's encounters with non-indigenous society within and outside their communities. In indigenous communities, people hold different understandings of what it means to be Ch'orti' Maya, and sometimes feel ambivalent about calling themselves Ch'orti' Maya or indigenous. The chapter examines the different views that people have in the villages about the value of political activism for their communities. It also examines the role of the Catholic Church and non-governmental organizations in cultural revitalization initiatives and how villagers understand and work with these initiatives and whether or not these are helpful to inculcate a Ch'orti' Maya identity.

3.7 Conclusion: Experiencing Identity at the Intersection of Class and Tradition

In this concluding chapter I pay particular attention to how identity is lived through class differences and the challenges that these views may present to political activism and some anthropological approaches. I also examine how these views intersect in communities known as

being “more traditional”. Identifying as “poor” is something that indigenous people frequently use to describe that which they have in common with each other and which sets them apart from people who live in the town of Copán. From this point of view, boundaries are set in terms of class differences that are strictly associated with place—the village versus the town. Here I question the extent to which the identities inculcated through activism, state discourses, and the tourism industry, matter to people or the extent to which they feel comfortable embracing such identities. However, as a recognized ethnic group, the identities associated with this categories constitute something indigenous people have to live with as indigenous councils, the tourism industry, and state-sponsored cultural revitalization initiatives demand a certain degree of engagement with such identities. Moreover, I will examine how certain communities have used indigenous activism as a way to inform their “cultural logic” (Fischer 1999) and make sense of the changes happening at the community level. In this case, instead of cultural traditions contributing to the strength of activism, activism informs how certain cultural practices (some of which are not narrated as Ch’orti’ Maya practices) are emphasized but curiously separated from the identity discourses embraced through activism.

4. Methodology

This research project took place over the course of 11 months between June, 2012 and August, 2013. My population sample included: 1) Ch’orti’ Maya activists who work with the Ch’orti-Maya Indigenous Council of Honduras (CONIMCHH), 2) Ch’orti’ Maya villagers from three different communities, and 3) non-indigenous people who work with indigenous leaders and communities. This last group included workers of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local government officials. During this time I lived in the town of Copán Ruinas and traveled

by car or mototaxi to the communities. Even though the bulk of my research focused on three communities, I traveled to a total of ten communities in order to conduct observations. I used demographic surveys, participant observation, individual interviews and group interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded using ATLAS Ti. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, the dominant language used by indigenous people, NGO workers, and state officials.

4.1 Population Sample

I interviewed a total of 89 indigenous people. The average age for the indigenous participants was 41 years. The group consisted of 47 males and 42 females. Eighty percent of the interviewees were housewives and farmers, seven percent of people worked in handicraft production, seven percent worked as full time administrators for CONIMCHH, two people worked at the archaeological site of Copán, two people were educators, one person was a cook, another a mason, and one person was an entrepreneur. The average years of schooling for all indigenous participants was 3 years. In response to the question of ethnicity in the survey 69 percent wrote “Ch’orti’ Maya” and 25 percent did not know what ethnicity was. The remaining six percent identified either using the name of their indigenous organization or the word indigenous. Out of the 89 participants, 69 percent were married, 14 percent were single, and the rest lived under common-law. The average number of children per family was five. Out of the 89 people 14 percent spoke some Ch’orti’ Maya along with Spanish and the remaining 86 percent spoke Spanish only. In terms of religion, 68 percent of the participants claimed to be Catholic, 19 percent protestant, 2 percent practiced both Catholic and Protestant religions, 1 percent were part of the New Millennium Church, and the remaining ten percent did not participate in any religious

denomination. I also interviewed a total of 12 non-indigenous people. The average age for the non-indigenous group was 31 years. There were nine males and 3 females. Out of the 12 participants, three held college degrees and nine held high school degrees. Most participants claimed to be *mestizos* (with the exception of two who claimed to be both *mestizo* and indigenous). Out of the 12 participants, six were married and 6 were single.

Indigenous activists: I used a gender-stratified convenience sample to recruit 20 participants for this group: ten males and ten females. Each participant was a representative of their respective community at CONIMCHH's headquarters in Copán where they attended weekly meetings. Most interviews took place at the offices of CONIMCHH.

Indigenous villagers or subsistence farmers: There are close to 100 indigenous villages in the area of Copán and the Department of Ocotepeque located in western Honduras. I chose three of the Copán villages for this population sample based on different characteristics:

La Pintada (pop. 293) is a popular tourist destination due to its proximity to the archaeological site in Copán. This village has been targeted for several tourism-based entrepreneurial projects funded by international development initiatives

San Rafael (pop. 339) has not been targeted for tourism-based development but its leader has worked on several grassroots development initiatives like agricultural skills training and introducing culturally-specific agricultural practices (harvest rituals and rain processions).

El Corralito (pop. 386) is less popular as a tourist destination than the village of La Pintada but still receives a sizable flow of tourists to an artisan shop owned by the village's leader which funded by the World Bank.

In order to recruit the participants, I employed different methods. For the community of **San Rafael**, I worked with its leader to take a random sample of 25 households in this village.

Once each household was chosen, the participants decided which member of the family over the age 18 would participate in the interviews. I conducted the interviews at San Rafael over the course of two weekends in the month of July with the help of four research assistants. The reason behind using this approach was that many residents of Copán had warned me against spending too much time in this community as a result of different murder incidents that had occurred against people from Copán. A group of people doing local kidnappings had also been hiding in the vicinity of San Rafael. Thus I was told by several people to spend as little time as possible in this community. For the community of El Corralito, I also worked with its indigenous leader who helped draw a map of the community and enabled me to take a random sample of 25 households. Unlike the village of San Rafael, the random sample did not work in this community because people were particularly reluctant or shy about being interviewed. I was only able to interview half of the people selected in the random sample. For the rest, I had to rely on the help of another friend who had ties in the community, to be able to recruit more people. Lastly, for the community of La Pintada, it was difficult to work with the leader in terms of getting a random sample of the community because the community is divided between members of CONIMCHH and CONADIMCHH. I had to come to CONIMCHH's rural council meeting to get permission from the council members to be able to do interviews. They granted me permission with the promise that I would only interview members of CONIMCHH since they were my affiliated institution. At the meeting I recruited the male participants and then I used a snowball sample to recruit female participants. My sample for this village consisted of 22 participants. I should note that I accidentally ended up interviewing members of CONADIMCHH due to some confusion on the snowball sample on the part of the people who recommended other participants.

Non-indigenous actors (N.G.O. and State Workers): For this group I used a convenience sample to recruit people who had collaborated with CONIMCHH, worked with development initiatives, or were involved with indigenous communities. I recruited the majority of NGO workers through CONIMCHH but I also targeted a select group of people who had been working specifically with tourism-development initiatives. Moreover, I interviewed two members of the Copan municipality and two members of the Ministry of the Indigenous and Afro-descendant Groups of Honduras (SEDINAFROH). The remaining eight participants consisted of five NGO workers of different organizations assigned to collaborate with CONIMCHH, and three NGO workers who were also entrepreneurs.

4.2 Instruments for the Collection and Analysis of Data

I administered **paper and pencil demographic surveys** to each participant interviewed in individual and group interviews. Surveys elicited information on personal identification or people's ethnicity, age, marital status, gender, level of education, salary (if they worked), number of children, languages spoken, place of birth, and place of residence. The survey was read out loud for those participants who were not literate

Individual interviews: for indigenous people, I asked questions that elicited information about specific cultural themes. For instance, in relationship to the use of the identifier Ch'orti' Maya, I asked participants about when and why they began to identify as Ch'orti' Maya and if this was a term that was born with indigenous activism, or if their parents and grandparents identified as such. I also asked people about whether or not they encouraged other people in their communities to identify as Ch'orti' Maya or if other people encouraged them. In an effort to find out more about people's understandings of ancestry and identity I asked people about their

knowledge of the ancient Maya, if this knowledge was something introduced through activism initiatives, or if it was something that was passed on from previous generations.

In terms of finding out about people's sense of boundaries, I asked people if there were things that made them and their communities different from people from Copán or people from other communities. Following on the same question, I also asked people about their knowledge or practice of cultural traditions. This last question enabled me to elicit information about whether or not cultural practices are associated with identity or as a way to establish a sense of boundary between their communities and non-indigenous society. Another theme emphasized during the interviews was people's experiences with both the tourism industry, development projects, and NGOs. The reason for asking these questions was to find out more about the role of these actors and initiatives in people's understanding and performance of identity markers. Lastly, I explored the concept of discrimination, especially in people's encounters with former landowners and non-indigenous society in the town of Copán. For non-indigenous participants, individual interviews asked about the amount of time people had been working with their respective agency or institution, what the term Ch'orti' Maya meant to them, who they thought the Ch'orti' Maya people were, how they addressed the people who lived in indigenous communities, their knowledge of state sponsored initiatives in the communities, and the relationship between the municipality and other state institute with indigenous communities.

Community Workshops: I was able to conduct community workshops in two of the three villages. This functioned as a variation of group interviews. With the help of each of the communities' leaders I used a convenience sample to recruit ten adult participants from each village to conduct a workshop in which they reconstructed the history of their community and identified key moments or changes in the community that have been important for all villagers. I

paired up people in groups of two or three people and asked each group to complete the same task. At the end of the workshop, I asked them to discuss their answers together. In these workshops I also asked people to identify moments in which the community came together in solidarity or if they ever mobilized as *campesinos*, *Indio*, Ch'orti' Maya, or any other identification that was important to them. I asked them about the reasons behind mobilizing, what was at stake for them, and what the community got out of these moments of solidarity.

Participant Observation: I spent most of my time at the offices of CONIMCHH observing how leaders interacted with one another and with other representatives of the indigenous communities. This was a productive place to witness people voice their concern over community conflicts that could not be resolved in the communities. It was also a rich place to observe gendered struggles in activism, especially by attending the meetings hosted by the Council for Women. I also accompanied leaders during strikes at the Copán Archaeological Park as well as helped leaders with technical assistance regarding reports, computer software use, or taking pictures for them at different events. I also became close with several activists so I visited their homes and spent time in their communities.

For community observations, I attended as many community events as I could, during farming rituals, and rural council meetings. I spent time with people in their homes and also in the town of Copán when they came to visit or attended Catholic mass. I also spent some time at the tourism-based businesses to observe how people interacted with tourists. In order to observe non-indigenous participants, I spent time in their homes or in public spaces such as the central plaza, grocery stores, or bars where they would interact with indigenous people who usually came to these establishments on the weekends.

In order to observe some public officials, I traveled to the Bay Islands to be part of a workshop sponsored by SEDINAFROH. I first did some participant observation when the workshop was conducted among the Ch'orti' Maya and then I observed how it was implemented among the English-speaking Blacks of the Bay Islands. At the end of each day, I wrote down extensive field notes that were extremely helpful in helping contextualize certain interviews.

Data Analysis: all collected interviews were audio recorded with permission of the participants. Three research assistants (One indigenous and two non-indigenous) helped transcribe close to 80 percent of the interviews. I transcribed the rest. I used ATLAS.ti to do all of the data analysis. I came up with 45 different initial (exploratory) codes. I further refined the list to 18 subcodes that helped identify findings and patterns. The interviews were transcribed to Spanish and I translated to English the direct quotes I used for the dissertation.

CHAPTER 1: COPÁN, ITS INDIGENOUS POPULATION, AND THEIR HISTORICAL STRUGGLES TO ACCESS LAND

1. Summary

This chapter traces the history of indigenous people's interactions with non-indigenous society (*encomenderos*, *hacienda* owners, anthropologists, and public officials) across time, from the arrival of Europeans up until the emergence of indigenous political mobilization in the 1990s. I explore the different identities that have surfaced as indigenous people have fought and negotiated access to land. Of importance to this chapter, are the different labels that emerged and were used to classify the indigenous sector in historical moments such as: the establishment of colonial Spanish institutions such as the *Encomienda* and the *Repartimiento*, the birth of the *hacienda* system, the independence of Honduras as a nation, and birth of different land reforms.

2. Introduction

The Ch'orti' Maya of Western Honduras and Eastern Guatemala constitute one of the least studied of the Maya groups along Mesoamerica. A handful of ethnographic works have extensively documented the lifeways and cultural traditions of the Ch'orti' Maya in both the Honduran and Guatemalan regions (Wisdom 1940, Girard 1949, Fought 1972, Martinez Perdomo 1997). More recently, the work of Metz (2008, 2009, and 2010), Mortensen (2005, 2009), and Loker (2009) have rendered a more critical analysis of the contemporary Ch'orti' Maya in the context of political activism and the tourism industry. In this chapter, I use a historical analysis to contextualize the relationship between indigenous people and non-indigenous forces across time since the arrival of Europeans to the region. This includes interactions with colonial institutions, Spanish officials, and the Honduran government. I employ

a constructivist approach in examining how the Ch'orti' Maya have embraced different identities (e.g. peasant, *mestizo*, Indigenous) throughout time in order to maintain access to their livelihoods in the Copán region. However, I argue that it is precisely the history of precarious relationship that have existed between the Ch'orti' Maya and governing institutions since the colony that have created these shifting identities. The birth of multiple identities should be examined in relationship to forced labor systems imposed by Europeans since the 1500s and how these labor systems changed across time.

For the Ch'orti' Maya of Honduras, only a handful of works (Fuentes y Guzman 1690 [2012], Martinez 1980, Martinez Perdomo 1997, Herranz Herranz 1994, Lara Pinto 2001, Feldman 2009) have explored the conflicts brought forth by Spanish colonial institutions (e.g. *the encomienda* and *repartimiento*) up until Copán became a municipal region in 1893. Most of these draw from colonial documents—namely land titles—to understand how land use has been historically contested in this region. I argue that although these governing practices changed over time (gradually increasing indigenous people's rights), the environment of exploitation of the indigenous population continued well into the late 20th Century when indigenous activism managed to secure the first communally titled parcels of land for several communities.

3. The Community(ies) of Copán

The municipal region of Copán Ruinas is comprised of a small town of about 35,000 people with close to 100 different indigenous villages or *aldeas*. Copán Ruinas is also known simply as Copán, which is also the name of the department or province. Many people also confuse it with the capital of the department, which is Santa Rosa de Copan. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will refer to Copán Ruinas as Copán.

Because of the growth of both the tourism and the archaeology industry (Mortensen 2005) the name Copán now carries a lot of weight. Being native or non-native to Copán is important in contesting claims such as a land rights and opportunities to work in the tourism industry. However the history of Copán and its inhabitants has been difficult to parse out. With the exception of a few of colonial documents, there is very little historical information about a single place or community named “Copán”, until its inception as a municipality in 1893. Feldman’s (2009) historical reconstruction of the region constitutes perhaps the most complete picture of what and where Copán was since the arrival of the Spanish to Honduras in 1524 and who its inhabitants were. Feldman writes not about Copán, but “the many Copáns” that have existed and vanished throughout history. In this section, I will address three different Copáns until the present municipality was established. The first Copán constitutes the polity that governed the region during what has been scholarly known as the Lowland Maya Classic period (A.D. 250-900) (Andrews & Fash 2005). Although the polity no longer existed by the time the Spanish arrived in Honduras, many of the people who lived under the rule of the Classic Maya Copán dynasty remained in the area.



Figure 4. Remains of the Classic Maya ceremonial center of Copán. Photo by the author

Copán first appears in the colonial historical record via two different documents. For some scholars, it is Diego Garcia de Palacio, in his letter to King Phillip II in 1576, who first mentions the region of Copán in connection to the Maya ruins. Garcia de Palacio writes of the region as being a place formerly controlled by the Yucatan where people speak a language intelligible to those who live in the Yucatan (Herranz Herranz 1994:89). In his letter to King Phillip II, Garcia de Palacio, who between 1573 and 1580 served as an *oidor* (judge, supervisor) of the Royal Audience of Guatemala representing the Spanish Crown, offers a lavish account of his travels throughout Guatemala, El Salvador, and Western Honduras. In his first mention of Copán, he writes:

Near here, on the road to the city of San Pedro, in the first town within the province of Honduras, called Copán, are certain ruins and vestiges of a great population and of superb edifices of such skill that it appears they could never have been built by a people as rude as the natives of that province. They are found on the banks of a beautiful river, in an extensive and well chosen plain, temperate in climate, fertile, and abounding in fish and game (Garcia de Palacio, Letter to King Phillip II 1576 [1985:50])

It is important to note here, Garcia de Palacio's explicit reference to Copán as a town independent of the ruins. He continues to write of his interaction with the natives of the region, his interest in their ancestors, and the lack of any written documents about their past. He does, however, write about their oral accounts about the funder of the polity: "They say that in the ancient times there came from Yucatán a great lord who built these edifices, but at the end of some years returned to his native country, leaving them entirely deserted" (Garcia de Palacio 1576 [1985]:51).

Almost half a century before Garcia de Palacio came across the Maya ruins of Copán, however, Hernan Cortez in his well-known journey from Mexico to Honduras, passed very close to the ruins without really noticing them. But just a few years later in 1530, the region of Copán, along with other provinces, succumbed to conquistador Pedro de Alvarado who defeated

Copán's *cacique* Copán Cael (from whom Copán allegedly takes its name). This led to the first indigenous revolt, which was later crushed by De Alvarado's general Hernando de Chavez who once more took over and immediately occupied the town of Copán without really paying attention to the nearby ruins. Thus, it is Diego Garcia de Palacio who is considered the first European to have come across both the ruins and the inhabitants of the town (Comparato in Garcia de Palacio 1576 [1985:49]).

Following his defeat, Copán Cael sought refuge in a place called Citalá located in what is now El Salvador. This place was later called *Paso de la Conquista* (the road to conquest) and it is located close to the city of Brea in the Department of Ocotepeque which is currently designated as Ch'orti' Maya territory (Girard 1949:7). For some historians, Copán Cael's rulership extended into contemporary El Salvador and the people he governed were not just Ch'orti' Maya but also Chontales and Chorotegas (Comparato, in Garcia de Palacio 1576 [1985]:49).

Using another colonial document, Honduran anthropologist Lara Pinto (2001) contends that there is yet an earlier record of Copán that appears in a 1536 manuscript describing a "town of Indians" located in the Naco Valley, which was given to the then Royal Treasurer of the Province of Honduras under the *repartimiento*³ system with the name Copaninque. The name Copaninque—meaning: native of this palace or this place—she argues, may be associated with the ethnic affiliation of its *cacique* Copan Cael who may have been related to other *caciques* in the Naco Valley (Lara Pinto 2001). This would explain why a region located nearly 60 miles from the Naco Valley would be considered part of this province. In short, the Copán associated

³ In the *Repartimiento* labor system, a Spanish conquistador, official of the government, or Spanish citizen in the Americas was granted the right (by the Spanish Crown) to look over the work of the indigenous people in activities such as farming and mining. However, work conditions remained just as arduous as they were in the *Encomienda* (Leonard 2011:25).

with Copan Cael has been described by Feldman (2009:150) as the “Second Copan” or 16th Century settlement that also ceased to exist as soon as the Spanish took over and established the *Encomienda* system.

The third Copán was born with the establishment of the Spanish forced labor systems such as the *Encomienda*. Through the *Encomienda* a Spanish conquistador was entitled to a set of restricted rights to property and Indian labor granted by the Crown. In this system a group of Indians would pay tribute to their respective *encomendero* in the form of labor, money, metals, and other goods. In return, the indigenous people under the jurisdiction of a given *encomendero* would receive protection and be indoctrinated into the Catholic faith. The *encomendero* was also responsible for protecting whatever area of land was assigned to him and to pay taxes to the Crown (Yeager 1995:843).

Very little has been written about the *Encomienda* or other labor systems in relation to the Ch’orti’ Maya of Copán. In Honduras, the *Encomienda* system was implemented in 1503. *Encomenderos*, or people who were granted *Encomiendas* from the Crown, included *conquistadores*, the soldiers under their command, and other officials sent by the Crown. Although *encomenderos* were responsible for the welfare of indigenous people, overtime the system became too cruel for workers. The harsh treatment toward indigenous people led to the first protests carried out mostly by some members of the clergy, the most famous of which was Fray Bartolome de las Casas. The work of the clergy led to the passing of the Laws of Burgos (1512-1513) and the New Laws by 1542 which aimed to protect indigenous people’s rights and which influenced the *encomiendas* to gradually be replaced by *repartimientos*. As labor activities such as mining became less lucrative and the *encomienda* system became problematic in Honduras, the Spanish and their direct descendents (*criollos*) turned to agriculture. They

established the infamous *haciendas* or massive estates where indigenous people could work for wages and housing (Leonard 2011:25). One important change, in the transition from *Encomiendas* and *Repartimientos* to the *hacienda* system is the way non-indigenous actors refer to non-indigenous people. Whereas, drawing on colonial documents examined by Lara Pinto (2001) *encomenderos* use the word *Indios* or *naturales* to refer to indigenous people, *hacienda* owners began to adopt the term *mozos* (derived from *mozos colonos* or peons who work on someone else's land in exchange to be able to live there) and use it interchangeably with the term *Indio* (Schumann de Baudez 1983). Throughout my interviews with activists and villagers, when I asked people about the names non-indigenous landowners use to refer to them, the names *Indio* and *Mozo* constituted the most common responses.

4. The Birth of Copán Through Land Struggles

Before its inception as a municipal region, the third Copán is described in a land title drafted in the early 1600s as a small settlement located next to the Copán River and East of where the archaeological site is now located. The demise of that settlement has been documented by chronicler Fuentes y Guzman, but it is unclear what happened to the population at the end of the 17th Century (Feldman 2009:150). However, Lara Pinto's (2001) essay provides important details about the population. In tracing back the history of the town of Copán, Lara Pinto creates a chronology detailing land conflicts between the indigenous inhabitants of the region and Spanish *encomenderos*. The author uses historical records to describe two villages—Sesesmil and La Estanzuela—located along the banks of the Copan River and only two miles away from the town. For 12 years, between 1617 and 1629, and probably even longer, Lara Pinto explains, the indigenous population of Copán revolted against their *encomendero* in defense of their lands

and their cacao plantations. Copán's *encomendero* left the lands for a short period of time but returned with his daughter to buy two *caballerias* of land (about 66.3 acres) for an indigo dye *hacienda*. In 1629, a person named Domingo de Lizarraga appears as a witness of the purchase and he also buys a *caballeria* (33.1 acres) himself to establish another indigo plantation near the Estanzuela village. Shortly after, indigenous people continue to seek repossession of the land by legal means reporting the incident to authorities in the city of Gracias in the Department of Lempira, but they could not afford the price assigned to the lands by the *encomendero* and the other buyer (Lara Pinto 2001:3).

Although the indigenous habitants showed proof of having had lived there for a long time before the arrival of the *encomenderos* and having had cacao plantations, they could not win the legal battle. In 1722 the lands were measured again; this time indigenous people and their cacao plantations no longer appear in land titles. The next record is not until 1867 when a newcomer wants to buy not just a couple of *caballerias* but all of the land pertaining to the Copán region. Honduras had already achieved its independence from Spain in 1821 so the land belonged to the state under the old land title of San Miguel de Copán and also an *ejido*⁴ system was already in place. Therefore, the buyer was not able to buy the land inhabited by people or the territory where the Maya ruins are located. In fact, two decades prior to the purchase, new Honduran laws had declared that the archaeological site of Copán was property of the nation. Around that time, what is now known as Copán Ruinas, was simply known as the village of Copán. But the Honduran government sent a representative to measure one *caballeria* that encompassed the area where the archaeological park is located and two *caballerias* to establish the town adjacent to the

⁴ System of communal land controlled by the municipal administration and open to any petitioners of a municipal region. The *Ejido* system in Honduras was first introduced in the 1835 as an alternative for the poor sector of municipalities to acquire land. Once Honduras became a nation, land was sold to private buyers, but each municipality was assigned a limited portion of land to be distributed among poor landless communities (Stokes 1947:151-153).

ruins. The last records, between 1867 and 1873, focus on titling disputes between a private owner and the state regarding the village of La Estanzuela (mentioned prior). By 1873, even though local authorities ask the person to show the land titles of La Estanzuela and other parts of the Copán region, the village is declared property of the nation (Lara Pinto 2001:3-4).

One of the most useful observations from Lara Pinto's historical reconstruction is the back and forth negotiations between indigenous mayors and the authorities appointed by the Spanish Crown. In these interactions, markers of indigeneity associated with history land use (e.g. history of indigenous Cacao plantations), and also the authorities' understanding and construction of Indians as "defenseless", help the indigenous sector in their struggles to maintain access to land and also protect these lands from being occupied by *encomenderos* beyond established agreements. These kinds of struggles happened with frequency, according to Lara Pinto, until Honduras achieved its independence from Spain.

By the time Honduras achieved its independence, large parcels of land were privatized. Land privatization led to the creation of massive estates or haciendas around the Copán valley owned by a handful of families. In Copán, land was first controlled by its cacique, Copán Calel, and was then transferred to its assigned *encomendero*—Diego Pineda de la Peña, until the land became property of the Republic of Honduras. Immigration of *mestizo* and *criollo* (direct Spanish descent) families to the area contributed to the growth of Copán by the end of the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th. Six *criollo* families became the owners of most lands in the region of the Copán Valley. With the help of the Catholic Church some indigenous communities retained access to their land, but the vast majority were absorbed as peons. By the 1950s, landowners had purchased the rest of the land extending into Guatemala; the indigenous

communities that were established in some of these lands were displaced and further absorbed as workers of the *haciendas* (Martinez Perdomo 1997, Chernier et al 1999:224).

In interviews with both indigenous leaders and villagers, people decry the difficult conditions under which their grandparents, parents, and themselves lived as workers for different haciendas. When I asked one elder about reasons behind the surge of indigenous activism he explained that: “it happened out of necessity, because of the way we lived before as slaves to the landowners and their land, because that is where we worked”. Another leader said that when he and his family lived in one of the haciendas, they could not even leave the land to run errands in town without asking their *patron* for permission. Many other people said throughout the interviews that at times their families even had to sleep in the same places where the landowners kept the cattle. While there is an overall sense of resentment against landowners, many indigenous families have continued working closely with former *patrones* and even have good relationships with them (I will expand more about this in Chapter 2). Two decades before indigenous communities mobilized as Ch’orti’ Maya in the 1990s to reclaim land under ethnicity-based rights, several communities had joined other activism initiatives to demand land redistribution as landless peasants. While these initiatives laid the foundation for the birth of Ch’orti’ Maya activism, indigenous people’s previous participation in *campesino* movements was later used by non-indigenous landowners to question their ethnicity.

5. Looking for Indigeneity Among Campesinos

The first ethnographic work to examine indigenous people’s relationship with their non-indigenous *patrones* in the area of Copán is Schumann de Baudez’s (1983) research on farming. The author worked in the village of La Laguna whose inhabitants, as I explained earlier, she calls

“mozos colonos”. In the present, the village of La Laguna constitutes one of the most politically active indigenous communities in the Copán municipality. Some of the most influential and outspoken activists have come from this community. Schumann de Baudez argues that most of the people who lived in this village at that time of her research in the 1970s, were descendants of Guatemalan migrant workers who are actually indigenous. The author wanted to find in this village, evidence of “a more traditional lifeway in comparison to the majority of mestizo peasants of the region” (1983:198). Ethnic and racial differences were already prominent at the time research took place in 1977. Although the author calls people from La Laguna, *mozos colonos*, she argues that non-indigenous people from the town of Copán used the word *Indio* to refer to people in La Laguna as well as other nearby villages controlled by *hacienda* owners. However, Schumann de Baudez is unsure about whether or not the word *Indio* was in fact used to refer to a more or less acculturated Ch’orti’ ethnic group or if the designation was used only as a derogatory name that was synonymous with backwardness. At the end of her research, the author determined that people from La Laguna “turned out not to be Indians” (1983:198). Her assessment is based on the lack of spoken Ch’orti’ Maya language and use of traditional attire.

Furthermore, Schumann de Baudez classified all *campesinos* or peasants in Copán as *ladinos* and argued that they can be divided into three different categories: “the ‘big’ landowners (people who own more than 70 hectares of land in more ecologically favorable areas; they harvest tobacco and corn and own some cattle), the ‘small’ landowners (people who own between 40 to 70 hectares of land, and just practice subsistence agriculture),” and the *mozos colonos* who represent the landless people who live in the villages located at the haciendas of landowners. This last group work for the *hacendados* and in return, the latter gives them a parcel of land to practice subsistence agriculture (1983:202). In this sense the author groups together

what seems to be three different class-stratified groups under the *Ladino* or *Mestizo* category. In her description of the third group, she argues that they are the descendants of Guatemalan migrant workers whose culture had already been “modified” by those of *ladinos*. Women still wore the traditional dress, she contends, but the Ch’orti’ language had been replaced by Spanish (1983:203).

The Ch’orti’ Maya never entered the anthropological memory (Castañeda 1996) via Schumann de Baudez’s ethnography, which was conducted under a contract with the Honduran Institute of History and Anthropology. However, her account allows us to understand the factors behind why she could not classify the rural populations as indigenous groups; not only was she using the concept of culture as a marker of distinction to set ethnic boundaries, but she also witnessed the beginning of indigenous mobilization as *campesino* groups. One of Schumann de Baudez’s most interesting observations is the organization apparatus of indigenous communities under *campesino* activism since the 1970s. The mobilization strategies closely resemble those used in the present when communities organized as an ethnic group. At the time, 1977, indigenous people from different communities organized with National Association of Honduran Peasants (ANACH), which is one of the organizations that was born during the Agrarian Reform of the 1960s and also the UNC (Union Nacional de Campesinos).

The Agrarian Reform in Honduras occurred during the Villeda Morales’s administration in the 1960s. It was influenced by the strikes organized by the Organizacion del Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Rail Road Company (SITRATERCO), which were protesting the firing of thousands of peasant workers. Once fired, workers of the multinational Tela Rail Road Company returned to work as subsistence farmers, but the land was still owned by the Tela

Railroad Company; thus, they started to mobilize as *campesinos*, pressuring the government for land reform.

The Agrarian Reform was also influenced by larger movements across Latin America at the end of the 1950s such as the Cuban Revolution. President Villeda Morales announced the reform, however, noting that it would not have any communist or socialist components but be solely liberal and democratic. The law was written and presented to congress in 1962, and it was ratified in September of that year. The goal of the law was to, “Transform the social and agrarian structure of the country by the incorporation of the Honduran population in general, and the rural areas in particular, to a process of economic, social, and political development of the Honduran nation through the replacement of large scale land privatization by a more just system of land ownership” (INA [National Agrarian Institute], translation by the author)⁵. *Campesinos* in particular benefited from Decree 8, which was introduced on December 26 1972 and was made official in January 5th 1973. Decree 8 was introduced to address some of the most pressing problems faced by the rural population of the country—namely the lack of farming land. Through Decree 8, the state would temporarily allow the peasant sector to access land belonging to the state and ask landowners to loan unused farming land to the National Agrarian Institute so these could be redistributed among those in need. The implementation of Decree 8 was also meant to help incorporate the peasant population to different development initiatives of the country (INA).

Since Decree 8 took effect, many of the groups that became organized as *campesinos* did not live in places officially established as villages (that belong to a municipality) hence they were simply called “settlements”. By 1977, Western Honduras (especially the departments of Copán and Ocotepeque) had 32 different settlements organized with the ANACH and 34 with the

⁵ http://www.ina.hn/temporal/quienes_historia.php#decreto_8

UNC. ANACH is the oldest peasant organization in Honduras; it was created in 1962 with the help of FESITRANH, one of the most powerful trade unions at the time. The latter helped bring together union workers from banana plantations with landless peasants in order to pressure the Honduran government and land owners for land re-distribution. One of the main strategies was to send *campesinos* to occupy *haciendas* that were not using the land. As a result, the government, through the recently created National Agrarian Institute (INA), distributed up to 105 Hectares of land to individual communities of settlements (Schumann de Baudez 1983:212).

Although these settlements were represented by the *campesino* organizations, each village had their own internal politics outside of the organizations. For instance, the author argues that in the 1970s, each village had a representative or liaison between his/her village and the town hall (or *municipalidad*) who travelled from the village to the municipal building in town the 15th of every month. These representatives also served as civil authorities who kept the order in their communities. In addition to the civil representative, there was a representative from the military who volunteered and was entitled to carry a firearm with him. It was his job to arrest those who committed any crimes and take them to jail or before the judge in town. At this time, the municipality of Copán Ruinas (511 km²) had a population of 13,317 inhabitants, 3,500 lived in the town of Copán and the rest in 28 different villages. Out of the 28 villages, 14 are identified as *mozo colono* by Schumann de Baudez and they depend on or constitute the labor force of 20 different non-indigenous landowners from the town of Copán under the *hacienda* system (Schumann de Baudez 1983: 203-207).

The present form of organization in the villages is similar to the dynamics described by Schumann de Baudez, however, each community now reports to either one of the indigenous organizations rather than the town hall. Moreover, indigenous activism did not completely

replace *campesino* groups. Some *campesino* groups continue to mobilize in the Copán region, sometimes even competing with Ch'orti' Maya activists for parcels of land. The following chapter will shed light on these encounters and continuing struggles for land. While land struggles have determined how the Ch'orti' Maya in the present understand their notion of Copán and their sense of belonging, there is also the Copán born from tourism and archaeology. In the making of this “new” Copán, indigenous populations played only a minor role until the emergence of indigenous mobilization.

6. The New Copán

In 1891, Harvard's Peabody Museum sent the first formal archaeological expedition to Copán⁶. At the time, the area was considered a village of the Cashapa municipality (presently known as Santa Rita de Copán). The work of Stephens and Catherwood (1969 [1841]) had already made the Maya Ruins famous through their lavish descriptions and drawings, but it was the interest in formal excavation and restoration work that turned the area into a place of national interest (Fash and Agurcia Fasquelle 2005).

At the time Stephens and Catherwood arrived to Copán in the early 1800s, the ruins were located in the property of a private owner from whom Stephens allegedly bought the site for fifty dollars. However, the purchase was retracted a few years later when the ruins became property of the state. The veracity of the account is questionable since later research indicates that the person who sold the property—Jose Maria Asevedo—did not actually own the land but was leasing it for 80 dollars a year and in turn he leased it to Stephens and Catherwood for a period of three years so they could do their drawings (Mortensen 2005:93-96).

⁶ Although in 1834 Guatemalan President Mariano Galvez sent Irish-born expat Juan Galindo on an exploratory archaeological mission (Mortensen 2005:101) but no formal excavation took place.



Figure 5. Peabody Expedition. Archaeologists from Harvard and indigenous workers in Copan the 1890s. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM# 2004.24.27 (digital file# 130060028)

John Lloyd Stephens was an agent from the U.S. Government and also a treasure hunter. Although he inspired other explorers to seek treasures at Copán⁷, his romanticization of the ruins did inspire a long line of other people to come to region and gradually turn Copán (both the archaeological site and the town) into the tourist attraction it is today. Two decades before the Peabody expedition, the Honduran state had created laws that protected the area of land where the ruins are located; it prohibited the destruction and/or removal of any monument and it protected the place from any exchanges (Mortensen 2005:103). By the time the Peabody expedition arrived, some agreements had been made between the Museum and the Honduran government: in exchange for excavation and reconstruction, the Peabody Museum would keep

⁷ For example Mortensen, quoting Thompson describes “In 1854 British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston, sent his charge d’affaires, Carl Scherzer on a mission to Copán with the following instructions, “It appears...that these ruins are held in little or no estimation by the natives of that country...You will be careful, therefore, that in making inquiries in pursuance of this instruction, you do not lead the people of the country to attach any imaginary value to things they consider at the present as having no value at all” (Thompson 1963:222 quoted in Mortensen 2005:97).

part of the artifacts found (Rodriguez Mejia 2011). But changes in government administrations only permitted the Peabody to excavate until 1895. Two years earlier, Copán was declared a municipality, a phenomenon likely influenced by the interest the state took in the region as a result of the archaeological work taking place.

Although the Peabody expeditions accomplished significant excavation work, they only played a minor role in the creation of the town itself; but that would change when now prominent Mayanist figure Sylvanus Morley came to the area. It could be said that Morley changed the fate of Copán, not only in terms of the work conducted at the archaeological park but his influence in building rapport with the growing Copaneco community (Mortensen 2005:115). Morley arrived to Copán in 1910 and gave continuity to the work on epigraphy already done by other Harvard scholars such as Alfred Maudslay, Gordon, and Herbert Spinden. In 1920, he produced his renowned tome *The Inscriptions at Copan*, which made significant contributions to the decipherment of Copán's famous Classic Maya Hieroglyphic Stairway and the stelae⁸ for which the site is so famous today (Fash and Agurcia Fasquelle 2005:7-8).

By the 1930s, Copán's town's hall or *municipalidad* was in charge of overseeing the archaeological site. Morley donated a second copy of his 1920 work as a result of the increased interest in visiting the site. The *municipalidad* had begun to charge entrance fees to people who wanted to see the ruins, which were not yet restored. In 1934, Morley singlehandedly secured an agreement between the Honduran government and the Carnegie Institute of Washington (CIW) for a collaborative and multiyear initiative to work on the archaeological site of Copán and convert it into a tourism park similar to what Morley did with Yucatan's Chichén Itzá (Mortensen 2005:125).

⁸ Tall sculpted stones (similar to a statue) created by Classic Maya and which depict rulers and other deities.

The Carnegie Era in Copán, as it is called, was most prominent in the 1930s and 1940s under the direction of celebrated archaeologist in Copán, Gustav Strömsvik, who was responsible for restoring the broken stelae, building the first museum in town, erecting a famous fountain that still rests at the center of Copán's main plaza, and bringing the first car from Guatemala. An airstrip was built right next to the archaeological site allowing the first airplane to land there in 1934 (Mortensen 2005:126-127). The collaborative effort between the CIW and the Honduran government played a significant role in how archaeology was conducted in the Maya region. First, the state became more involved by financing workers to work on restoration projects. Second, there was a heavy emphasis on conservation to protect the monuments for the future and also to help foment a national identity. And third, the project devoted considerable attention to building the necessary infrastructure (e.g. air strip, a visitors' center, a museum) to turn Copán into a tourist destination (Fash and Agurcia Fasquelle 2005:8).

Within a decade, Copán went from being just a small village with a half a dozen *bajareque* (mud and straw) houses when Gustav Strömsvik arrived there in 1935, to housing around 1500 people when the Carnegie ended its contract in 1945. By then, Copán had electricity, running water, a new road to Guatemala, and an airstrip that was enhanced to receive flights every two days from Honduran and Salvadoran airlines. At this time, the majority of the population who comprised the town of Copán were non-indigenous (*mestizo*) families who had immigrated from other parts of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Moreover, a community of expatriates from the United States and Europe was beginning to form. The hills around the town of Copán were (as they remain today) populated by indigenous families who lived in the property of non-indigenous land owners. As it continues to happen in the present, indigenous families would hike down from their villages to the market place in town and hang out at the

plaza or side streets where they could socialize with indigenous people from other communities (Mortensen 2005:134-9).

By 1946, then Honduran President Tiburcio Carias had sponsored the first Mayanist conference in Copán—*First International Conference of Archaeologists of the Caribbean*—with the purpose of showcasing the Maya ruins and stimulating tourism initiatives. The attendees, most of whom were considered experts at this time, spent several days exploring Copán and discussing different conservation and protection strategies. The town was not yet prepared to host an event of that magnitude so all the necessary features (e.g. tables and beds) were transported from Tegucigalpa. The conferences inspired the creation of the first guidebook for the ruins (written by Strömsvik) and the further construction of more hotels, one of which is now famous Hotel Marina Copán. By 1952, as Longyear (1952:2 Cited by Mortensen, 2005:141) explains Copán had become the most visited archaeological site in the Maya region. This, along with the conference, led to the creation of the Institute of Honduran Anthropology and History (IHAH), which was under the direction of Jesus Nuñez Chinchilla until his death in 1973. In the 1960s, institutions such as the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) had already done studies to assess Copán's potential as a tourist destination since Honduras as whole was already hosting around 52,000 foreign tourists per year. From the 1970s on the Honduran Secretary of Culture and Tourism maximized its efforts to advertise Honduras as a culturally rich destination for tourists. In 1974, a Copan born physician—José Adán Cueva Villamill—became the director of the IHAH. He was not formally trained as an archaeologist but had a strong passion for Copán and began to work on the economic development of the region through tourism. By then, foreign visitors to Central America had increased from 744,000 to 1.7 million. In Copán alone, foreign visitors increased from 7,500 in 1969 to about 27,000 in the year 1978.

The IHAH established standard entrance fees at the ruins. In the 1970s, also, UNESCO, which had just sponsored the World Heritage Convention, financed several studies to assess the quality of protection at the archaeological site of Copán and to develop the town for tourism. As Mortensen explains “This was the first time that the town and the site were considered parts of an integrated whole, although their history had been propelling them towards this realization for many years” (Mortensen 2005:141-144).

In the 1975, the BCIE sponsored the first conference that brought together Central American archaeologists, investors, and economists to Tegucigalpa to discuss a tourism plan for the area of Honduras with a strong archaeological component. This conference helped promote the famous multiyear archaeological project *Proyecto Arqueológico Copán: Primera Fase y Segunda Fase* also known as PAC 1 and PAC 2. The subsequent evolution of archaeology and tourism development (ongoing today) at Copán following this project have been well documented by Mortensen (2005), Fash (1996), and Fash & Fasquelle (2005). Copán continued to grow as a cultural hub now hosting some 150,000 people (some of them semi-permanently) yearly from all over the world. Although I further explore these topics in chapters 3 and 4, the point was to explore how this new tourism and archaeology based in Copán was constructed and the role that the Ch’orti’ Maya have played (if any) in such construction.



Figure 6. International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (Copán 2012). Photo by the author

Important to the next few chapters, is Mortensen's careful examination of the historical transformation of Copán "into a national monument, a major tourism attraction and an international hub of scientific research, and how these different identities [have] allow[ed] groups to position themselves as stakeholders in the construction of heritage" (2005:ix).

Although the Ch'orti' Maya do not figure as powerful stakeholders at the beginning of the archaeology industry and many in Copán argue that Ch'orti' Maya only recently have developed a relationship with the archaeological site, early researchers have shown otherwise. Eric Thompson wrote, for instance, that "The Chorti were interested in the ruins, for while Carnegie Institution was working there [in the 1930s], copal and candles were repeatedly offered on a small altar in the eastern court" (Thompson 1963:220). As I will explore throughout other chapters, although activism has contributed to bringing the Ch'orti' Maya closer to the politics of heritage representation it does not mean they were ever detached from the site itself.

7. Unifying the Multiple Copáns in the World of the Ch'orti' Maya

For a long time, the indigenous people have been present in the labor force in both archaeological projects and only recently they have had the opportunity to become stakeholders in the construction of Copán. Borrowing from Castañeda (1996), I propose that, just as the archaeology industry has helped produce Copán, socio cultural anthropology helped produce the Ch'orti' Maya whose identities later became reified through the tourism industry, transnational discourses of indigenous rights, and development initiatives.

With a focus on the Yucatan, Castañeda (1996) examines the historical relationship between anthropology, the concept of culture, the tourism industry, and the idea of “invention” and reinvention of peoples, communities, identities, ethnic classes, and archaeological sites. One of Castañeda's most useful contributions is his analysis of how communities enter or are excluded from what he calls “anthropological memory”. He focuses on the community of Pisté, a place historically excluded from initial anthropological discourses of Maya culture. Castañeda contends that anthropology (in particular) and later tourism mapped out and classified certain places in relation to others in a type of topography where degrees of “progress” and of culture (using the notion of “zero degree” culture) are evaluated between sites. Castañeda writes about the massive multidisciplinary project directed by Sylvanus Morley (known as the Chichén Project) in the early 1920s, which was sponsored by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and whose focus was to study the Maya of Yucatan and a later collaborative project (early 1940s) sponsored by the same institution and directed by Robert Redfield, which focused on studying Yucatec society (1996:6, 37-38). These collaborative projects carried out ethnographic mappings of 6 Mayan communities: Mérida, Dzitas, Chan Kom, Tusik, Pisté and the archaeological community of Chichén. However, the topography of Redfield only focused on the first four

communities arguing that these represented a “single continuum of Yucatec Maya culture-civilization” (1996:38) excluding the other two communities from anthropological interest.

It is from this process of inclusion and exclusion that Castañeda argues began a comparison that positioned different communities in a “primitive” versus “civilized” plane and/or in a topographical space where Maya culture was imagined and not imagined according to Redfield’s descriptions. In short, because the community of Chan Kom was depicted and classified by Redfield as a Mayan village, and Pisté was not, the latter, as Castañeda argues, did not become part of the anthropological memory in part because it was perceived as a “zero degree” cultural place. Castañeda explains that Pisté, different from its neighbor Chan Kom, “...has not entered into anthropological memory and its imagination of culture. Indeed, it has been erased from the ethnographic mappae mundi through which anthropology plots its contesting classifications of sociocultural forms to their proper space localities via the operation of theory building” (1996:39). Using Castañeda’s analysis, I understand Copán as a place that entered the anthropological memory via the archaeology industry and through the Maya ruins (Mortensen 2001, 2005, 2009). The communities around the archaeological site, however, never made the cut until Honduran anthropologists in the 1990s decided that some of the communities in the Copán region were indeed Ch’orti’ Maya (I will expand on this in chapter 2). Since its inception as a municipality, dozens of works have been produced about Copán, the archaeological site, but little has been written about the actual town, its social dynamics, and its indigenous population.

Up until the emergence of the Ch’orti’ Maya Movement in the early 1990s, indigenous people’s struggles were manifested in terms of class disparities and land claims; but ethnicity-based activism has bridged the struggle for land with a cry for identity revival and rights to

inclusion in the image of the new Copán. In addition to helping reclaim land, ethnicity-based indigenous activism has also contributed to a different kind of visibility for indigenous people in a town where discussions of ethnicity among its inhabitants only emerged as a result of the indigenous movement. It is surprising then that the few works on the Ch'orti' Maya do not seriously address a Ch'orti' Maya identity vis-à-vis a *Copaneco* identity. Although, as a relational concept, a Ch'orti' Maya identity can only be examined in relation to other people's identities, there seem to be two levels of identity operating for the Ch'orti' Maya. First it is the identity ascribed to indigenous people by scholars and the state and second, is the identity that indigenous people experience. The Ch'orti' Maya, for instance have come and gone in state records and scholarly accounts as Indians, *mestizos*, *campesinos*, and indigenous. In this level of identity, scholars and government officials as "experts" control and determine a group's degree of indigeneity or the legitimacy of ethnicity claims. On the other hand, the identities of indigenous people exist, operate, and are constructed on entirely different grounds reflecting the intersection of class, gender, and race within specific community dynamics. For instance, while scholarly works have depicted the Ch'orti' Maya as representing multiple kinds of identities, little emphasis has been placed on the role of both territory and people's sense of belonging and how these are intimately tied to their identities.

What I hope this dissertation will make clear is that the struggles of the Ch'orti Maya for both land and ethnic recognition date back as far as the arrival of the Spanish to Copán and the establishment of *encomiendas* and *haciendas*. I hope it encourages readers to view the changing identities of indigenous people not as a sign of economic opportunism but as a history of struggle embedded in very specific historical moments across time involving multiple different actors. Indigenous people became free laborers as *encomenderos* incorporated them in their forced labor

systems as *Indios* or *naturales*. They became known as *mozos colonos* as landowners incorporated them into the *hacienda* system and exploited them for hundreds of years viewing them as an inferior race and paying them meager wages. They mobilized using the *campesino* category as labor unions incorporated them in their activism to address land struggles, and finally they mobilized as Ch'orti' Maya as emerging international laws offered support for the rights of indigenous people worldwide.

This chapter has traced different historical moments in the community of Copán that have contributed to its transformation and the emergence of different identities or categories that have been ascribed to or embraced by indigenous people. The chapter has also shown how different identities are woven together and co-produced across time as indigenous people have navigated their livelihood-related struggles and also tried to understand a new sense of belonging. The subsequent chapters will continue to explore the interplay between the enactment of different narrated identities and livelihood opportunities but also look at the role that unmarked practices and identities play in people's lives.

CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF CH'ORTI' MAYA ACTIVISM IN COPÁN

1. Summary

This chapter traces the multiple forces, events, institutions, and individuals who in one way or another have contributed to the birth of Ch'orti' Maya activism. I will start by outlining the history of indigenous activism in Copán and describing the political context under which this particular kind of identity-based activism flourished in Western Honduras. In tracing this history, the chapter also explores the impact that other indigenous activists and movements throughout Honduras and transnationally had on indigenous leaders from Copán, including the role of anthropologists (and anthropology as a field of knowledge). Furthermore, this chapter examines the different goals of Ch'orti' Maya activism and how these goals have changed over time. For example, it examines how heritage became an important activism strategy for the Ch'orti' Maya as a result of the state's and Copán's economic dependency on the archaeological site of Copán. Lastly, this chapter looks at the controversial issue of land access and distribution and what has created inter-organizational conflicts and divisions.

2. Becoming Ch'orti' Maya: Building Indigenous Activism of Copán

In 1987, a group of scholars from the Honduran National University (UNAH) and the National Pedagogical University (UPN) traveled to several indigenous communities around the Copán Valley to teach people preventive measures to contain a cholera outbreak. Although these communities were known as peasant or *campesino* one of the leading scholars—anthropologist Lázaro Flores—determined that they possessed enough cultural elements (e.g. native religious practices and local governance structures) to be classified as the ethnic group Ch'orti' Maya. He

proposed that above anything, what defined *campesino* communities as indigenous was their willingness to embrace an ethnic consciousness and determination to recuperate their cultural heritage. Flores and his students began to raise awareness of the existence of an ethnic group in the Copán region inside academic circles and also promote this classification among *campesino* leaders. One indigenous leader remembers, “[Professor Lazaro Flores] began to get that through our heads... he said ‘these are the Maya... the Ch’orti’ Maya’, that is where that name came from”. Flores further conducted an ethnographic project among several indigenous communities and Copán and also carried out a census. This consolidated what members of CONIMCHH refer to as the “academic recognition of the Ch’orti” (<http://en.conimchh.org/>). Flores’ work was further complemented by the activism work of other well-known Honduran anthropologists such as Adalid Martinez Perdomo and Eliseo Fajardo, and also Cándido Amador Recinos—one of the first and most important indigenous leaders in Copán whose work I will discuss later in this section.

While Flores and Amador Recinos had been talking to people individually, raising awareness about the topics of ethnicity and rights, the first large scale mobilization in Copán began in 1988 when 45 families from the village of Choncó took over 56 hectares of hacienda land that belonged to different non-indigenous landowners. The families claimed that these lands belonged to them but they were displaced after a border dispute between Honduras and Guatemala in 1934. After taking over the land, the families received death threats, were physically attacked and removed by the army. There were 10 families who refused to abandon the land so they were sent to prison. This event led to the opening of a legal case between the National Agrarian Institute and the landowners resulting in 42 hectares of land for the indigenous families (Metz 2010:295). Meanwhile, throughout Honduras, indigenous organizations

representing the Tolupanes, Garifunas, Pech, Tahwaka, and Misquitos, which had emerged in 1970s, were consolidating their activism efforts, training indigenous leaders and raising awareness about ethnicity-based rights (Anderson 2007:393).

In matters of indigenous rights, the 1980s in Honduras marks the emergence of a nationwide movement framed in terms of ethnicity-based rights or the existence of different “pueblos” (peoples). The reasons behind the emergence of multiple activist groups around the same time throughout Honduras serve as a useful starting point to contextualize the experience of Ch’orti’ Maya activism, which emerged relatively late in comparison to other groups. According to Barahona and Rivas (1998), some of the reasons that the indigenous movement emerged in Honduras include, first and foremost, land displacement as a result of economic expansion and by the hand of Honduran business people, the military, and even some *campesino* or peasant families; the formation of alliances between pro-indigenous organizations, institutions, and individual activists; the weakening of previous popular movements such as labor, student, teacher, and *campesino* organizations that had been active since the 1950s; the diffusion of new concepts pertaining to indigenous groups by the hand of European and Latin American anthropologists working with activists in Latin America; the intrinsic role played by the Catholic Church in inculcating notions of equality, self-esteem, and indigenous identity and consciousness among several groups; and lastly, the support that indigenous groups received from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media throughout Honduras (Barahona & Rivas 1998:82-84).

For Barahona and Rivas (1998:89), the process of indigenous self-recognition has been gradual and uneven as different groups throughout Honduras have faced their own specific challenges. For instance, as the authors explain, regions such as the Lenca and Ch’orti’ Maya,

which were more predominantly populated and controlled by the Spanish, experienced a higher degree of transformation such as language loss and cultural syncretism, which led some scholars, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, to identify them as “*campesino* with indigenous traditions”. This would also explain why the Ch’orti’ Maya were one of the later groups to join the indigenous movement and receive support from other organizations.

The consolidation of the indigenous movement in Honduras took the establishment of several organizations. Surprisingly, it was the state that first contributed the unification of indigenous organizations through a workshop coordinated by the Honduran Planning Agency (SECPLAN [Secretaría de Planificación, Coordinación, y Presupuesto]). SECPLAN, whose role within the Honduran Government, constitutes the management of national programs for social and economic development, first helped activists from different indigenous groups in the 1970s to establish federations and communicate with one another; these federations eventually became the representatives of their respective indigenous groups once they had been official registered as indigenous organizations (Anderson 2007:393).

In 1987, SECPLAN organized the first seminar/workshop that brought together members from the Lenca, Garífuna, Miskito, Pech, Tolupán, and Tahwaka groups to share some of the issues inherent in their respective communities. At the end of the workshop, the representatives of the different groups collectively wrote out a list of demands for the Honduran government. Some of the demands included the writing of a Law for the Protection of Autochthonous Ethnic Groups, the redistribution and titling of land, the protection, revitalization, and endorsement of native languages and cultural traditions, the protection and recognition of indigenous practices of organization, the right to access and exploit natural resources, and the right for political inclusion, including in the National Congress (Anderson 2007:393-394).

The SECPLAN workshop and other activities that brought indigenous organizations together occurred thanks to the activism work of the Garifuna of the Honduran North Coast. The Garifuna constitute one of the two African-descent groups in Honduras. They were one of the first groups to mobilize under the discourse of cultural and land rights. Their activism contributed to bringing together indigenous groups throughout Honduras with a discourse that “identified both indigenous and black peoples as ‘autochthonous’ Hondurans” (Anderson 2007:394). CAHDEA, was one of the first organizations to emerge using this discourse. It was first created in 1986 under the name Comité Hondureño de Promoción Indígena (COHPI) [Honduran Council of Indigenous Promotion] (Cordoba et al 2003:66). CAHDEA was formed by Garifuna activists from The Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH). Formally established in 1978, OFRANEH was the first organization in Honduras to deal with indigenous rights framed in terms of both cultural identity and land (<http://www.ofraneh.org/>).

OFRANEH’s founders, especially Sara Irióna, were inspired and influenced by the African American Civil Rights Movement, the activism of Malcolm X, and also the Black Panthers Movement (Garcia 2014:71-72). In a crucial move, OFRANEH promoted the term *Grupos Étnicos Autoctonos* (Autochthonous Ethnic Groups), a category that does not emphasize a group’s racial identification and one that includes both black and indigenous peoples. The word “autochthonous” in particular, as Anderson points out, “can serve as a racially ambiguous label while maintaining the connotations of an indigenous or native status. Once understood as “autochthonous,” Garifunas could be represented in the same terms as indigenous people—as long-standing occupants of a territory, as bearers of non-Western languages and cultural “traditions,” and as beneficiaries of the same set of collective rights as indigenous peoples” (Anderson 2007:394). The establishment of CAHDEA served to promote this framework

and its founders played a big role in the training of many other indigenous activists throughout Honduras and the establishment of indigenous organizations (Garcia 2014:82). Once other indigenous federations began to emerge, CAHDEA was replaced by the Confederation of Autouchtonous People of Honduras (CONPAH) which was established in 1992 as a collective organization for the consolidations of the emerging indigenous leaders (Anderson 2007:394).

CONPAH further contributed to the growth of the activism work of the same groups it consolidated. For instance, the Lencas of the Department of Intibucá in Western Honduras who had been organized with CONPAH formed the Civic Committee of Popular and Indigenous Organization of Intibucá (COPIN). COPIN became one of the most active indigenous associations orchestrating several protests and marches to Tegucigalpa to pressure the Honduran government to work with indigenous communities (Metz 2010:295-296). Awareness of the condition of indigenous peoples throughout Honduras, initiated during the first activist march to Tegucigalpa which took place on July 11, 1994 and was composed for the most part by Lenca activists supported by other indigenous groups. The purpose of the march was to demand infrastructural changes for indigenous communities in matters of health, education, communication, land, and natural resources (González 1998:73-74). According to Cordova (2003:18), this march exerted pressure on the Carlos Roberto Reina administration to sign the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 the same year.

The signing of the Convention in 1994 signaled the beginning of a new era for indigenous groups in which their position *vis-à-vis* the Honduran government was to an extent mediated through international laws and actors. Just the year before, the United Nations had declared 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous people, which influenced several countries to sign the ILO Convention 169 (González 1998:73). All the signatory nations

of the Convention, including Honduras, were required to recognize indigenous groups and endorse their economic, social, and cultural rights (Mortensen 2005:259). Following the ratification of ILO Convention 169, indigenous and Garifuna activists quickly formed alliances throughout Honduras and continued to mobilize marches and strikes in the capital asking for official recognition of indigenous groups and pressuring the Honduran government to comply with the stipulations set forth in the Convention. President Reina, however, initially refused to recognize some indigenous groups, including the Ch'orti' Maya arguing that "true Indians were vanquished in the conquest and the protestors were culturally no different than Tegucigalpa's slum dwellers" (Metz 2010:296).

The Reina administration first compared the condition of indigenous people to that of slum dwellers in Tegucigalpa to make the point that there were poor people all over the country and that the condition of indigenous people was the fault of previous administrations. Reina argued that the National Party (the main rival of the Liberal Party to which Reina belonged) was responsible for organizing the indigenous marches as a tactic to fight against the Reina administration (Barahona & Rivas 1998:124). In response to the mobilization of so many indigenous communities, the government devised implicit tactics to dismantle some of the most influential groups. For instance, the Honduran military led by an army man named Jose Vasquez attempted to create their own indigenous movement composed of indigenous people recruited to join the army. Their movement would run parallel and attempt to divide the existing Lenca political movement in the Department of Intibucá. Vasquez even proposed to form a Maya-Lenca coalition of indigenous soldiers, promising to recruit at least 15,000 people. He gave up when he only managed to enlist 300 people to his indigenous army (Barahona & Rivas 1998:124).

The Lenca organization COPINH also claimed that the Honduran government attempted to dismantle their activism through the Fondo Hondureño de Inversión Social or Honduran Fund for Social Investment (FHIS), which attempted to form their own group of activists and charge each community 10,000 lempiras (500 U.S. dollars) for membership, taking away economic support from them. But for the most part, the government's central strategy to counteract indigenous activism was refusing to honor the accords reached between activists and the government during the first marches. Thus, the year 1994 saw the emergence of more marches. The second march to Tegucigalpa took place on October 1, 1994. It gathered 20,000 indigenous people and was named "Pilgrimage for the Peace, Development, and Demilitarization of Society". The main accomplishment of the march was the dismantling of the parallel organizations formed by the military (Barahona & Rivas 1998:124-5).

On April 4th, 1995, 1,500 people gathered to carry out the third march in solidarity with indigenous activists from Chiapas. Reina refused to meet the activists, and in turn, they responded with a hunger strike at the Honduran Presidential Palace (Barahona & Rivas 1998:125). Reina realized that unless his administration took action, the marches would not stop. In 1996, he finally signed the "Declaration of Tegucigalpa"⁹ from which the National Commission of Ethnic Groups was born. The commission was responsible for bringing together Honduras, as well as private agencies, to respond to the demands of indigenous people.

Although Lazaro Flores helped the Ch'orti' Maya establish the National Ch'orti' Maya Indian Council of Honduras (CONIMCHH) in 1994, they were excluded from the first negotiations between indigenous activists and the government because, until then, they had not played a significant role in the overall indigenous movement in the country (Metz 2010:297).

⁹ Through this declaration, President Reina committed to allocating one million dollars for development work among 32, 500 minority families from 8 different ethnic groups (*La Nación*, Nov. 18, 1996, San Jose Costa Rica).

CONIMCHH, which later became two different indigenous organizations, was the first federation to legally represent and negotiate the demands of indigenous communities in the Departments of Copán and Ocotepeque in Western Honduras. In addition to mobilizing communities to protest, CONIMCHH oversees land claims and redistribution and serves as liaison between development (and other) NGOs and organized indigenous communities.

3. Formally Establishing Activism in Copán

The story of Ch'orti' Maya activism in Copán involves several different protagonists. Together they helped the Ch'orti' Maya go from being one of the least recognized indigenous groups in Honduras to becoming one of the most intrinsic groups to the overall indigenous movement in the country. Undoubtedly, as this chapter explains later, the proximity of Ch'orti' Maya communities to the world-renowned classic Maya Copán Archaeological site and indigenous people's historical ties to the site has contributed to a different kind of relationship between the Honduran government and Ch'orti' Maya activists—one that differs from other groups throughout Honduras. Although heritage-based claims have contributed immensely to the growth of a particular kind of activism in Copán, Ch'orti' Maya activism began under a different context.

While in 1994, other indigenous groups had organized the first marches and negotiations with the Honduran government, the activism of the Ch'orti' Maya was just getting started. The Christian Organization for the Development of Honduras (OCDIH), played a major role in the establishment of indigenous activism. It was OCDIH, who, with the support of DIAKONIA, an international faith-based organization from Sweden, began to work with 10 indigenous communities, implementing initiatives that targeted social organization, food security, and

literacy. Teaching people how to read and write was done specifically with the purpose of disseminating knowledge about the ILO Convention 169, which had been introduced to indigenous communities the year before by Lázaro Flores (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:8).

The first indigenous commission was formed in Santa Rosa de Copán in November of the same year. It was comprised of 6 *campesino* leaders, one from the Department of Ocotepeque and other five from the villages of Choncó, Tapexco, and Carrizalón in Copán. According to some of the first indigenous activists, the leaders who formed this first commission came from the same communities that Lázaro Flores and Amador Recinos had visited. Lázaro Flores, who initially taught these leaders about the ILO Convention 169, also told them of the existence of a Honduran indigenous movement. These leaders held multiple meetings until they agreed on a name and established the first commission that later became CONIMHCHH (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:8). Gradually, other activists from the adjacent Department of Ocotepeque joined the group to reclaim land that was once titled in colonial documents under the San Andres brotherhood.¹⁰ It was difficult to recruit the first community leaders and activists since they still lived in landlords' property. Several activists received death threats and others felt unsure about embracing an indigenous identity. The following year, while activism continued to grow, several of Copán's landlords formed a vigilante group that monitored the activities of newly formed indigenous activists and with the help of the police, precluded them from getting together in the town to become organized. By then, however, indigenous activists received the support of the Catholic Church, European NGOs such as OXFAM International, Cooperacion

¹⁰ The San Andres Brotherhood is a religious congregation from the municipality of San Andres Itzapa. In the present, they continue to carry out processions which in the past, according to Copan indigenous villagers, may have extended into what is now Honduran territory. Their famous "Migration" procession constitutes the transferring a patron saint from village to village accompanied by prayers and celebrations in each community (Metz 2010:303).

Irlandesa APSO, and Cooperación Española (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:8, Metz 2010:297).

In 1995, Amador Recinos and the first president of CONIMCHH—Maria de Jesus Interiano—established communication with members of CONPAH, who, as I previously pointed out, had already organized other indigenous groups around Honduras. Shortly after Amador Recinos and Interiano requested that the Ch’orti’ Maya become members of CONPAH, the organization sent a commission to Copán to evaluate if the communities possessed cultural elements such as language and distinct cultural practices to be classified as Ch’orti’ Maya. Amador Recinos played an intrinsic role at securing membership with CONPAH. At a young age, he moved from Copán to the city of Progreso, Yoro (100 miles from Copán) where he used to sell newspapers and put himself through school. Eventually, he obtained a teaching degree, returned to Copán where he worked as a tour guide at the archaeological park, and studied law and Maya culture on his own (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:40). His activism efforts included promoting the Ch’orti’ Maya language throughout different communities, collecting oral traditions from different elders, teaching people about the ILO Convention 169, collecting documents to legalize land parcels for indigenous communities, representing the Ch’orti’ Maya as a leader of CONPAH and CADEAH, and writing a history of the Ch’orti’ Maya which played an important role in the state’s ethnic recognition of the group (Mortensen 2005:192, Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:40). During the first meeting in Tegucigalpa, where Ch’orti’ Maya activists met with members of CONPAH, Amador Recinos was elected as secretary of CADEAH (Natividad Perez, Personal Communication). He became a liaison between CAHDEA and the Honduran government and initiated the fight for land rights

for the Ch'orti' Maya. His efforts and the support of foreign NGOs inspired 15 different communities to join the indigenous council (Metz 2010:297).

By 1996, the Ch'orti' Maya had extended their activism efforts to the neighboring department of Ocotepeque where the first official conference took place and created the different *consejerías* or positions within the organization. They created a *Consejería* for land issues, communication, health, and women. During the second conference, the leadership added the word Maya to the acronym CONICHH—becoming CONIMCHH or National Ch'orti' Maya Indian Council of Honduras (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:40). This was a crucial move by the leadership which, as I will explore later in this chapter, gave more traction to the organization, creating a link between the contemporary indigenous communities with the ancient Maya. Their activism gradually began to incorporate demands that included land rights, heritage, and identity.

By then, OCDIH began to work with indigenous communities, primarily through CONIMCHH. It joined efforts with the National Pedagogical University, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Rights (CONAPRODEH), CONPAH, and CADEAH, all of whom had already been working with indigenous communities. Prior to the work of these organizations, the kind of indigenous activism that existed in Copán was influenced by state-sponsored programs such as the Development Strategy for the West of Honduras (PLANDERO) and the Honduran Fund for Social Investment (FHIS), especially the “Our Roots” program which funded cultural revitalization initiatives (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:8). The support of NGOs and national activism enabled leaders to become more independent from government agencies and also expand their demands. The focus on land claims represented a

threat to non-indigenous land owners and their large estates, and thus a different kind of conflict started just a year after CONIMCHH had been legally established.

Amador Recinos, who was pressing the Honduran government through the National Agrarian Institute (INA) to redistribute land to indigenous communities, was murdered on April 12, 1997. According to most indigenous leaders, the assassination was orchestrated by landowners who thought killing the most charismatic leader would intimidate other activists. However, it only created more outrage among activists all over Honduras. Some Ch'orti' Maya leaders also argue that the landowners first tried to kill Maria de Jesus Interiano (CONIMCHH's first president), but she was not home when they went looking for her. Another prominent indigenous leader—Ovidio Pérez—was murdered the same month and the houses of some indigenous families were burned causing the death of more people, including children. The fear of persecution from landowners and the military, caused 4 communities to withdraw from CONIMCHH, but indigenous people throughout Honduras continued to support them.

Close to 3,000 people (including indigenous people from every single group in Honduras) gathered in Copán for Amador Recino's funeral. As he had been receiving death threats, he left instructions that in the event of his death that his body would be marched throughout Copán. The congregation of that many indigenous people in Copán created fear among non-indigenous residents who closed their doors thinking their houses would be broken into. Amador Recino's body was buried in the village of Rincón del Buey, but 45 days after the burial, his body was exhumed to perform an autopsy. The Guatemalan government also requested the transfer of Amador Recinos' body to be buried right next to the remains of the renown Guatemalan K'iche' Maya leader Tekun Uman since the former was believed to be the last great Ch'orti' Maya leader (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:35). Amador

Recinos' work played such an important role to the consolidation of indigenous communities in Copán, and his activism legacy continues to have a significant impact on people's identities, as I will explain later in this chapter.



Figure 7. Indigenous activism event. Indigenous people from different communities gather at Copán's central plaza to commemorate the anniversary of Amador Recinos' death in 2013. Photo by the author.

Amador Recino's death as well as the other events that unfolded in April of 1997 caused outrage among the indigenous population leading to the first Ch'orti' Maya march to Tegucigalpa on the 1st of May of the same year. People from other groups also joined the nearly 1,000 Ch'orti' Maya on the 226 mile pilgrimage to demand the investigation of Amador Recinos' death and pressure the government to buy land for the Ch'orti' Maya in Western Honduras. Once they reached the Honduran capital, 25 people held a hunger strike until President Reina agreed to meet them and settle for an agreement. On May 13, Reina signed an agreement to purchase 14,700 hectares of arable land for the Ch'orti' Maya. He also agreed to transfer 2,500 hectares with 2 months of the meeting and promised to address other problems

with regard to health, education, human rights, infrastructure and most importantly to order the investigation of Amador Recinos' death. Meanwhile, the Organization of Farmers and Ranchers of Copán Ruinas (AGRACOR), which represented the non-indigenous landowners, lobbied the Honduran government to stop the redistribution of land, arguing that the protestors were not Ch'orti' Maya, but an agreement was still reached (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grimany 2006:35, Chenier 1999:225).

The government was initially hesitant to purchase the land because only a handful of people spoke the Ch'orti' Maya language throughout the communities, and members of AGRACOR argued that the Ch'orti' Maya activists were actually Guatemalan migrants and people of mixed ethnicity and race. Meanwhile, 20 more communities joined the indigenous council and the number of Ch'orti's was calculated at 4,200 (Rivas 1998:85-86, quoted in Metz 2010:298). The Honduran government purchased 350 hectares of land for the region of Copán by December of 1997, but the purchase created several conflicts. First, the land purchased from landowners and distributed through CONIMCHH was sold at up to three times its original value, and it was non-arable. Second, only 5 out of the 17 indigenous communities organized that year benefited from the transfer. Third, the National Agrarian Institute distributed public land, which created conflicts with the municipal government about titling and management responsibility. Lastly, the government failed to provide support for any programs to trained communities to become independent farmers. Instead, the government sponsored small development projects such as the constructions of a municipal center in the Rincon del Buey village, a health center, an elementary school, and an office for CONIMCHH (Chenier et al. 1999:225, Metz 2010:298, <http://en.conimchh.org/>).

The first step by CONIMCHH, once the first land transfers took place, was to contact NGOS to assist them with the transition. An active organization was the Catholic NGO Caritas International. They joined forces with the Network for Collaborative Natural Resource Management (COLABORA) to establish a Community Based Natural Resource Management program. During 1998, both organizations carried out workshops with representatives of 8 different communities in the Copán municipality to aid in the transition to managing their own resources, training leaders, teaching about indigenous people's legal rights, and conflict resolution (Chenier et al 1999:226:228). In addition to land distribution, the government had also promised that 25 percent of the revenue obtained from tourists' entrance fees at the archaeological site of Copán would be transferred to the Ch'orti' council, but it never happened (Metz 2010:298).

4. Incorporating Heritage in Activism Efforts

By August of 1998, the government had not delivered on any of its promises, including the purchase of the rest of the land; thus, the same month the Ch'orti' Maya organized a second pilgrimage to Tegucigalpa, carried through another hunger strike, and took over the embassy of Costa Rica, but the protestors were violently removed. On September 1 of the same year, hundreds of Ch'orti' Maya villagers with the help of other indigenous activists from around Honduras closed the international highway in the Department of Ocotepeque and blocked the entrance to the Copán archaeological park. Most tourism activities were paralyzed in Copán as no tourists, the site's personnel, or researchers were allowed in the park for 12 days. The protestors were once again forcefully removed from the site, and eight people were shot in Ocotepeque, one died. Following these events, the Ch'orti' Maya immediately organized another

protest by taking over the offices of the National Agrarian Institute in Tegucigalpa. In order to end the protest, 1,715 hectares of land were purchased for the communities of Boca del Monte, Carrizalón, el Chilar, La Laguna, La Estanzuela, and San Rafael. Moreover, the state provided funds to hire Guatemalan language teacher Rigoberto López to teach Ch'orti' Maya among selected activists (<http://en.conimchh.org/>, Mortensen 2005:25).

Taking over the Copán Archaeological Park constituted the first time identity politics were used in such a public display, making indigenous people more visible to international audiences. Mortensen (2005:258-259) contends that “one reason that heritage centers, as opposed to other kinds of tourist attractions... become so susceptible to identity politics, is that they are public spaces that both inherently and overtly display, reify and construct identity. Copán serves as a center at which identity claims emerge and are contested. It is also a place where the display of a particular national past takes on a dramatic form.” By taking over the archaeological site, indigenous people strategically asserted their ancestral ties to the ancient Maya (a move that started in 1996 when leaders added the word “Maya” to the CONICHH acronym), paralyzed the tourism economy, and pressured the government to allocate all of the land it had promised.

By the year 2000, only 10 percent of the land promised had been purchased and money from the archaeological park was never transferred, so activists took over the site once more. This time, the Honduran government allied with the Copán Chamber of Commerce, the local police, and the army. Soldiers threw tear gas at the protesters from a helicopter, injuring close to 200 protesters (including children). Fifteen people were hospitalized, and one pregnant indigenous woman lost her child due to the effects of the tear gas (Metz 2010:299). This was perhaps the most dramatic of the activism events at Copán. An urgent meeting was called by the

transnational activists working for the OXFAM and APSO NGOs. One of the strategies was to document the outcomes and share them with the international media. When Honduran officials realized the attacks on demonstrators would become an international human rights issue, they quickly sent representatives to negotiate once again. Through transnational alliances, dozens of international donor agencies became involved, offering economic support to the several Ch'orti' Maya communities. Just six months before, in June of 1999, international donor agencies from different countries had convened in Stockholm, Sweden to agree on a donation plan for Honduras and Nicaragua, which were critically affected by Hurricane Mitch in November of 1998. At the Stockholm meetings, one of the stipulations for Honduran representatives was that the plan for national recovery following Hurricane Mitch should include a special program for indigenous, afrodescendant, and Miskito groups. Following these meetings, the demands of the Ch'orti' Maya were met more fully by the state. More land was purchased and more health and education programs were implemented, but there was a dramatic decrease in help and work with indigenous communities when Ricardo Maduro was elected as president (2001-2005). Many indigenous leaders consider Maduro's term the most difficult for indigenous people in terms of negotiating their demands (Fernandez Pineda & Vinent Grmany 2006:36)

The conflict between the Ch'orti' Maya continued in 2000. Only 1,716 hectares had been purchased through the National Agrarian Institute. Representatives of the latter explained that land had been so difficult to buy because landowners increased the price of the land up to three times its original value. In a strategic move, landowners went from being ardent opponents and critics of indigenous activism to becoming supporters. The fall of the tobacco industry had significantly devalued the prices of land, and this was their only opportunity to sell their properties quickly. Whereas less than a decade before, landowners sent indigenous people to

prison and violently evicted some from their lands, now they were inviting them to “invade” their lands so the government would purchase them. When the government did not respond, however, landowners continued to evict them (Metz 2010:299).

Following the violent displacement of protestors in the year 2000, the Ch’orti’ Maya have taken over the archaeological site almost every other year. Although the demands of the Ch’orti’ Maya are not always fully addressed, negotiations are achieved faster and the government has abstained from using violent methods. For instance, several administrations have contained the demands for land by purchasing only percentage of land and promising to buy the rest in the future. An exception was the administration of ousted President Manuel Zelaya during which indigenous people obtained the most support. During the time I conducted my fieldwork, the Ch’orti’ Maya took over the archaeological site on March 12, 2013. I obtained a written copy of the close to 25 different demands set forth by the Ch’orti’ Maya through CONIMCHH. The document began by acknowledging representatives to 87 different communities present in the protest who gathered there together to protest: first and foremost the government’s failure to allocate all of the 14,700 hectares of land originally promised in 1997, 20 million lempiras the government promised for the Ch’orti’ Maya in 2005, and 90 million lempiras that it promised in 2008. The other demands were related to health, infrastructure, education, scholarships for students, jobs at the archaeological site of Copán for indigenous people, and even the petition of 30 temporary work visas for indigenous people to come to the United States. This particular protest lasted 3 days and the government was able to negotiate by meeting just a small set of the demands. It promised to secure tenure track teaching positions for recently graduated Ch’orti’ Maya teachers (from the Intercultural Bilingual Education program), expand the job positions for indigenous people at the archaeological site, and resolve some pending land disputes.

5. Indigenous Councils, Land Recovery, Political Identity, and Intra-organization

Conflicts

The establishment of CONIMCHH marked an important step in the history of indigenous activism in Copán; it offered indigenous people a medium to negotiate with the Honduran government, establish alliances with other activist groups nationally, and also receive aid from international donor agencies. Most importantly, establishing an indigenous council afforded indigenous communities the opportunity to develop a political identity based on concepts such as solidarity, commitment to their organization, and willingness to mobilize for similar causes.

Moreover, although the demands of the Ch'orti' Maya have been only partially addressed and their activism experiences proved to be extremely difficult (physically and emotionally), most indigenous people consider the Ch'orti' Maya Movement a major achievement. While not enough for every single indigenous person that has been involved in activism activities, the small percentage of land that has been secured has helped several indigenous communities become more economically self-reliant. The creation of a communal land system has enabled people to build their own houses (rather than living in land owners' premises) and practice subsistence agriculture. Land acquisition alone does not help alleviate many of the economic hardships that most indigenous communities face while inevitably integrated in the market economy, but it has led to some degree of independence and enabled communities to construct their own localized identity markers and institutions (I expand on this in later chapters).

The political unity that CONIMCHH brought to indigenous communities and the success in securing at least a percentage of land claims inspired more people to join the organization. By 2001, CONIMCHH had secured the membership of 68 different indigenous communities in the area of Copán and also the area of Ocotepeque, becoming one of the most important

indigenous organizations of Honduras supported by several international organizations¹¹ (Mortensen 2009: 249). By then, the national census noted 37,052 Ch'orti's becoming number 4 among indigenous groups in Honduras in terms of population size (Metz 2010:299). While CONIMCHH's political success secured the support of more communities, the government's failure to purchase land in some communities and deliver on its promises of development initiatives also contributed to some communities withdrawing their support. This raised more criticism among non-indigenous land owners who continued to claim that members of Ch'orti' Maya Movement constituted a group of peasants simply interested in land. These attacks caused the initial leaders of the movement—who had previously welcomed as many members as possible—to emphasize that the movement's most important goals revolved around “ethnic recovery” (Metz 2010:300). Leaders then began to organize a series of ethnic revitalization initiatives that included the hiring of more Guatemalan Ch'orti' people to teach the language to indigenous children in Copán and the revival of traditional Ch'orti' ritual practices, such as *tzik'ins*.¹² Moreover, disagreements around land management and titling, followed by conflicts between the leadership, have caused major divisions among activists. The next section explores the political structure of CONIMCHH. It also traces how the leadership conflicts have influenced the present state of Ch'orti' Maya activism.

¹¹ Some of these include: OXFAM International, the Agency for Personal Services Overseas (APSO/Ireland AID), the World Association for Christian Communication, the World Bank, UNICEF, the Mennonite Commission for Social Action, the Comisión Cristiana de Desarrollo and Caritas Internationalis (Mortensen 2005:65-67, Chenier et al. 1999:226).

¹² *Tzik'ins* are celebrated during November and are associated with indigenous people tribute to and communication with the dead by means of altars (Metz 2009:169, Flores and Mejia 2007:26). The *festival del elote*, which involves the election of a *maize* queen and several other traditions (chapter 4 expands on these traditions).

5.1 The Structure of CONIMCHH and Intra-organization Conflicts

On October 12, 2012, CONIMCHH celebrated its *Asamblea General* or general elections. The *asamblea* takes place every two years to elect new leaders in all positions of CONIMCHH. I was fortunate to be able to participate in this particular *asamblea* since for the first time, the event was celebrated at newly constructed building—*Templo del Dios del Sol*. This is a modern facility with multiple rooms for conferences and to house out-of-town guests. It was donated to CONIMCHH by Fondo Hondureño de Inversion Social or Honduran [Fund for Social Investment] (FHIS) and financed by the World Bank under a credit agreement of 15 million dollars with the Honduran government for a program called *Nuestras Raices* (our roots). The goal of the program is to stimulate participation of the nine indigenous groups in Honduras in development programs.

Since this was the first time the *Asamblea* took place at this building, hundreds of indigenous people from all of the communities associated with CONIMCHH attended the event. The two day event involved several speeches by different special guests and people from the administration in place. What was most surprising was seeing members of the LIBRE party there trying to gain the vote of indigenous people for the primary elections that took place at the end of that year. There was also a strong sense of nationalism as newly elected leaders held a large Honduran flag and sang the national anthem of Honduras. Each leader to be elected for the CONIMCHH office or to represent their communities was nominated by a member of the audience and also seconded by another member. Once there were two competing candidates for a position, a vote was called and the votes were counted by several designated. One other aspect that caught my attention was the important role that gender played on the nominations. Two female activists in particular were very vocal about nominating and electing a fair representation

of men and women, while others were being scrutinized for having had left the organization at some point. There was a lot of discussion about loyalty and commitment to CONIMCHH and people's motives for wanting to take on a leadership position.



Figure 8. Indigenous people casting their vote at the Asamblea General, 2012. Photo by the author.

The *asamblea* offered an opportunity for the most charismatic leaders to voice their individual concerns about the organization, propose solutions, and present themselves as potential candidates for a position in the administration. Whereas transparency and commitment toward the organization were central topics of discussion, the issue of gender equality in terms of leadership became a heated discussion because female activists were pressuring the public to elect female leaders. During the second and last day of the *asamblea*, the morning was devoted to discussing points of concern regarding the organization. At this point, each *técnico* or

employee hired by the organization in positions such as accounting, development facilitator, and grant writing, gave a report of his or her work during the two year term. Especially their work with international development agencies. The most controversial topic was debt. The one *técnico* spoke about all of the money that several communities owed to the organization in terms of membership fees. An envelope with specific numbers and names of communities was passed around for each representative to take home. Another section of this part involved talking about pre-requisites to being elected for a position in CONIMCHH. It involved being able to read and write, having had held a position in the organization before without quitting, and not being involved with any political party as a running official.

Before breaking for lunch, people elected a *mesa provisional* or group of individuals to oversee and monitor the election. It was comprised by a general coordinator, a secretary, and a moderator. Just the election of these three individuals created a great deal of commotion and disagreement among the audience. For instance, one of the elected moderators had a history of abandoning his *cargo* or position which made people skeptical about his return. He had to give a speech explaining the reasons why he previously abandoned his cargo and promised to remain loyal to any position if they choose to elect him. Others argue that it was irrelevant to argue about this since this was simply the election of the group to oversee the elections and not the actual elections. Once the *mesa provicional* was elected we broke for lunch. I sat with some of the *técnicos* who told me that the best part of the *asamblea* was yet to come in the afternoon, meaning the final election of the new leaders. The head of the organization, about to transfer his position, sat with us and talked to our table about how much he would miss being the head of CONIMCHH and all of the work he had done. He seemed sad and nostalgic.



Figure 9. Indigenous people during lunch break at the General Elections. Photo by the author.

Following lunch everyone reconvened at the main room for the election of new officials. The election of officials was heated and messy as the *técnicos* predicted. One of the main issues revolved around gender equality. The process to elect an official involved the coordinator of the *mesa provicional* to count until 3 and the first person to stand up would have the chance to nominate someone for a position if someone else would second it. Up to 4 people would be nominated and another member of the *mesa provicional* will ask people to raise their hands to count the votes for each candidate until the one with the majority was elected for a position. This created a lot of turmoil especially with some members who demanded that every other person nominated should be a woman. Women from the internal Council for Women were particularly pushing for the inclusion of women. Everyone agreed with the strategy. Thus every other nomination, a woman would stand up and nominate a fellow female leader for a position. This worked temporarily until one of the women who stood up to nominate somebody, to the shock of the female leaders, nominated a man and argued that it was not fair that a woman was

restricted to nominate only other women. One man said he felt compelled to nominate another fellow male leader as well when he would want to nominate a woman. One female leader stood up and said that one woman was forced to nominate a male candidate because she was afraid of her husband. This created even more commotion until order was called to the meeting by the officials overseeing the process, and the elections continued. In the end, they nominated three women and five men to the eight major positions in CONIMCHH. Moreover, a Commission for Transparency, comprised by three men, was also elected.



Figure 10. Newly elected officials to CONIMCHH, 2012. Photo by the author

What happened at the CONIMCHH general elections that day reveals some of the deep seeded challenges that Ch'orti' Maya activism faces at the political level, especially pertaining to the politicization of gender struggles in the leadership realm. For example, as I will explain in the following chapter, while international donors have demanded that gender equality be at the core of political organization and economic development initiatives, for people it is difficult to

navigate these concepts as they cut across multiple understandings of gender roles ranging from home to community dynamics and political leadership. Moreover, the training that activists have had with transnational actors have enabled them to become well versed with the political discourse used by other politicians across Honduras. Thus there are issues of mistrust with regard to the elected officials. Some of the most outspoken members of CONIMCHH are able to speak openly about corruption cases among officials, which further creates an environment of scrutiny with elected officials. For instance, there is a system of economic promises from the central CONIMCHH administration to the indigenous rural sector with regard to economic development projects and the allocation of more land, and thus each general meeting serves as a space where different rural representatives can hold leaders accountable for their promises. This is the same system that the top leaders utilize to hold government officials accountable for their promises. In this form of “accountability politics,” activists pressure governments to fulfill their promises. Using the case of the state, “Once a government has publicly committed itself to a principle—for example, in favor of human rights democracy—networks can use those positions, and their command of information, to expose the distance between discourse and practice” (Keck & Sikkink 1998:24). Accountability politics is central to the principles of Ch’orti’ Maya activism from the small rural councils to the top national officials.

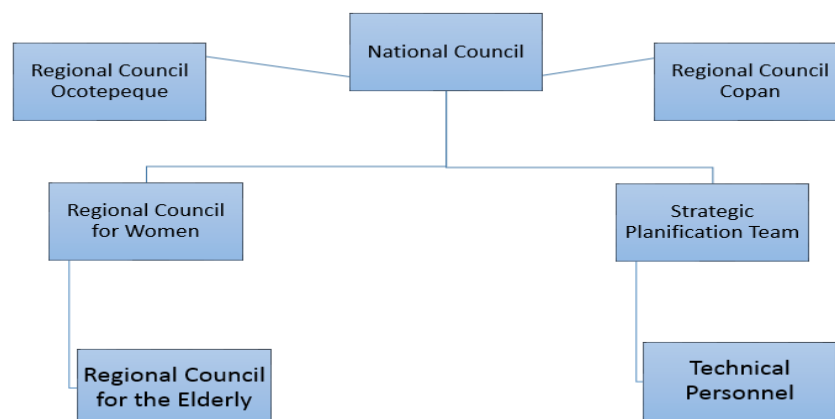


Figure 11. Basic structure of the CONIMCHH leadership units

When CONIMCHH was first established, the first members of the administration decided to have two different regional offices in the Departments of Ocotepeque and Copan since both regions have been historically inhabited by Ch'orti' Maya speaking people. The National Council, whose headquarters are located in Copán, oversees both regional offices. The National Council has access to ministers, congressmen, and the Honduran president and its role is to submit proposals to the Honduran government regarding different needs of what they refer to as the *Pueblo Ch'orti' Maya* in general. Proposals are not divided by region or communities. Instead, they demand large scale programs such as education reform, land claims, and infra-structural development projects in general. Each major unit of the council at all levels (i.e. National, Regional, and Rural), with the exception of the Technical Personnel Unit, has a president and vice-president which they refer to as *Consejero Mayor* and *Consejero Menor*. The Technical Personnel Unit is comprised of, for the most part, non-indigenous specialists in the fields of accounting, economic development, and agricultural engineering. The Regional Council is further divided into several other *cargos* or positions such as the Council for the Environment and Land Distribution Affairs, and the Council for Fiscal Affairs. Each leadership position at the regional level is also mirrored at the rural level. For instance, just as the Regional Council has a *Consejero Mayor* and *Consejero Menor* (President and Vice President) so does each community. Each *cargo* or position lasts for two years with the opportunity for re-election. The more *cargos* a member fulfills, the higher the chances to be elected for some of the top ranking positions.

Each week, CONIMCHH holds general meetings where representatives from each village have the opportunity to report on pressing matters affecting their community. The issues range from land-use conflicts to general complaints regarding the duties of people holding a given

cargo. The meetings take place early in the morning and sometimes go as long as 7 hours. The meetings, which take place in the largest room at the CONIMCHH headquarters, is not spacious enough to hold the big crowd that often attends. For most people, it is impossible to stay for the entire meeting without taking short breaks in the poorly ventilated room. The meetings are conducted, for the most part, in a very serious and formal tone where every person who speaks seems to always be advocating for themselves as though they were campaigning. *Para el bien del pueblo Maya Ch'orti'* (for the wellbeing of the Ch'orti' Maya), for instance, is an expression often used after a person talks about a resolution to a problem or a critique of something. Despite the amount of time it takes to go through the issues in each village, most members remain engaged in the meetings and make sure their opinions are heard. Although sometimes people do not get through all issues, the system of reporting works well. The rural *consejeros* report to the *consejero mayor* in each village where they also meet once a week. If the latter can solve a problem within the village meetings he or she will do so. Otherwise, he or she reports to the regional *Consejero Mayor*, who in turn reports to the National Council at their own weekly meetings. Lastly, the National Council write their own reports and requests to the Honduran government.

5.2 Inter-Organizational Divisions

Don Cesar Rivera is one of my closest collaborators in Copán. I have worked with him since 2008. On February 2011, we met for coffee so I could interview him about his experiences as a community leader and activist. He is usually timid, soft spoken, and gets uncomfortable making eye contact. Sometimes it is hard to get any opinion from him about any controversial topic because he is non-confrontational; he tends to agree about most things. That afternoon,

however, the topic of internal conflicts among activists of CONIMCHH came up. Four years earlier, several activists had left CONIMCHH as a result of disagreements centered on land titling and corruption. When I asked Don Cesar about this topic, his tone of voice changed, he seemed upset about the cases of corruption and some activists' intentions to propose individual land titles. In 2004, some of the separated leaders had mortgaged the main building where CONIMCHH is still located in the present and spent all of the money obtained from the loan. According to several activists, this led to a complete overhaul in operations at CONIMCHH. Several of the leaders involved in the incident were removed, and a transparency commission was established. Organizations such as OCDIH have called this, the beginning of the "New CONIMCHH". Those who were separated started their own indigenous council in 2005. They called it the *Coordinadora Nacional Ancestral de Derechos Indigenas Maya Chorti* or National and Ancestral Coordinator of the Rights of Ch'orti' Maya Indigenous people (CONADIMCH).

Whereas at some point about 105 indigenous communities became united and mobilized under the umbrella of CONIMCHH, 22 communities separated to join CONADIMCHH. One of the most dramatic events occurred on June 5, 2011. In the community of La Pintada (one of my research sites), close to 50 indigenous people from both CONIMCHH and CONADIMCHH were involved in a physical altercation. Those involved in the fight, used machetes and threw stones at one another. Five people were severely injured and hospitalized. According to members from both organizations, the dispute occurred as a result of different understandings of how the land transferred by the government should be used and distributed among community members. While CONIMCHH's mission has always been the allocation of communal titles, members of CONADIMCHH feel that each member should be entitled to an individual title of land. As

several activists pointed out during interviews, one of the fears was that people would join indigenous organizations just to secure land that later they could sell to anyone.

Eventually, organizations such as OCDIH and APSO, which I mentioned earlier, have been able to mediate and create platforms of collaboration for the two organizations. On an internal memorandum that a former APSO worker and transnational activist helped draft for CONADIMCHH, he argues that both organizations need to recognize and respect one another, that they also need to realize that they share similar aspirations and goals: to fight for the rights and land of indigenous people, access to basic services and tools to battle poverty, and promote the integrated development of the communities. He reminds them that if the government “catches them divided and fighting, it will interpret it as a sign of weakness and it is not going to resolve anything but only give them ‘lies’. On the other hand, if the government understands that you are two strong organizations representing the Ch’orti’ people... for sure it will help you resolve land conflicts and other important issues”.

As I explained earlier in this chapter, by 2012, when then President of Honduras, Pepe Lobo, celebrated the International Day of Indigenous Peoples in Copán, representatives from both organizations were invited to the event. In Lobo’s speech he promised to take one representative of each organization with him a United Nations summit in New York City. In interactions with public officials, both organizations give out a sense of harmony, but several activists on both sides continue to resent one another. Whereas CONIMCHH has the majority of the communities and receives more funds than CONADIMCHH, the latter continues to grow. Although, I informally spoke to several representatives of CONADIMCHH, for the purposes of this research project, I worked in collaboration with CONIMCHH since the communities where I chose to do my research are all affiliated with this council.

Thus far, this chapter has explored the context under which Ch'orti' Maya activism flourished in Western Honduras. It is evident that their activism does not constitute a straightforward peasant to Ch'orti' Maya identity transition. What I found is that becoming an activist in itself represented a risky decision that resulted in displacement and eviction from landowners properties (including not being able to work for them anymore), the disruption of friendships and relationships to these landowners (some of which indigenous people still value), mobilizing outside of people's communities (which in itself represents a completely new experience), creating new gender dynamics, and even receiving death threats.

I contend that becoming Ch'orti' Maya and acquiring an indigenous consciousness represents one of several elements that emerged from people's willingness to mobilize. People not only acquired a new ethnic identity (by calling themselves Ch'orti' Maya), but they also embraced and changed the negative connotation of racial identities such as *Indio*, they acquired a new economic identity as subsistence farmers (rather than peons or *mozos colonos*), a new territorial identity (by re-establishing their communities as places independent of landowner's control), and above all, a new political identity or what activists called *incidencia politica*. All of these elements coalesce into what, in the present, we know as the Ch'orti' Maya—a group which non-indigenous society has gradually (and reluctantly) come to perceive as an ethnically different group. Moreover, although activism has led to the transformation of indigenous communities, it is important to note (and I will expand on this later) that the ties between indigenous villagers (and even some activists) and former *patrones* or landowners have not been entirely broken. The continuity of the patron/worker relationship despite indigenous people acquiring their own land, reveals some of the complexities and instability of emergent labels and the role of economic power relationships on whether or not certain identities are performed.

This chapter has traced the roots, beginnings, and growth of indigenous political activism in Copán. It is evident that the discourses and practices associated with the label Ch'orti' Maya were built by non-indigenous and indigenous actors who were concerned with livelihood struggles. For example, in conversations with some of the indigenous activists who first participated in different forms of mobilization, when I asked them why they decided to mobilize, one of the most common answers was *por necesidad* or out of necessity. Some of the transnational activists who first worked with indigenous communities also understood that mobilizing as indigenous and Ch'orti' Maya would be the most effective way to get the government's attention since other groups had already mobilized using ethnicity discourses. Moreover, what makes this moment unique is the role that anthropologists played in promoting an ethnicity-based label (using discourses of rights and heritage) which had been questioned by other anthropologists in previous decades.

Anthropologists' validation and promotion of the ethnic discourse "Ch'orti' Maya" helped to introduce new ways of understanding the indigenous sector of Copán for both the state and NGOs. In other words, the support from some anthropologists backed by international laws favoring indigenous peoples' rights, enabled the indigenous sector of Copán to successfully mobilize their livelihood-related struggles using a discourse they had not used before. As this chapter showed, mobilizing for access to land was something that drew criticism from non-indigenous society, leading people to contend that the Ch'orti' Maya were actually *mestizo* and *campesino*. Hence, the Ch'orti' Maya emphasized other goals in their activism that involved the recovery of cultural elements. This emphasis on culture helped create narrated identities to attempt to satisfy the expectations of non-indigenous society. In this sense, the classification Ch'orti' Maya and indigenous began to not only stand for livelihood struggles but also pushed

the indigenous sector to fill-out this classification with the cultural contents that non-indigenous society expected. Moreover, the important presence of livelihood-related issues within activism, became evident with division the CONIMCHH into two different organizations as a result of people's disagreements on how land should be distributed and managed. The next chapter will continue this conversation by exploring how narrated practices emerge and the role that they play in the different understandings and subjectivities that have surfaced in different communities.

CHAPTER 3: CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING THE ETHNO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF CH'ORTI' MAYANESS

1. Summary

This chapter examines the construction of the Ch'orti Maya through different discourses. It looks at anthropological discourses as well as how identity is talked about and performed among indigenous people in both activism and communities. The chapter examines identity as something overtly performed and also implicitly experienced. It emphasizes indigenous subjectivities and how these are informed by various actors, for instance, how indigenous people understand the discourses of identity that have been created in political activism and whether or not they are able to perform these identities. Moreover, the chapter will examine different discussions about how the state, transnational activists, non-governmental organizations, and neoliberal reforms have influenced the surge of indigenous social movements in Latin America. Ultimately, it will discuss how the case of the Ch'orti' Maya offers a unique take on neoliberal governance in comparison to the experiences of other indigenous groups in Honduras.

2. Introduction

One of the goals of this chapter is to tell the story of how the Ch'orti' Maya became Ch'orti' Maya in Copán. Not all of the protagonists of this story agree with each other about what being Ch'orti' Maya means and how and when people began identifying as such. The multiple different threads through which the story of the Ch'orti' Maya is woven makes it a difficult one to tell. Thus, this chapter focuses on the perspectives and experiences of activists, their efforts to move beyond previous *campesino* or peasant identities, and the challenges they have faced as non-indigenous society contests the legitimacy of their indigenous and ethnicity

claims. I argue that indigenous subjectivities have been overlooked in previous discussions of indigenous activism and suggest that a closer look at people's understandings and lived experiences with identity reveals the many challenges that have come with the seemingly triumphant indigenous social movements.

Labels and classifications are an important part of this chapter and, as I will show throughout the dissertation, there is an intrinsic difference between the labels used by academics, the state, the tourism industry, non-indigenous landowners and indigenous people themselves. For instance, being indigenous, belonging to an ethnic group, being *Indio*, or being *campesino* or peasant, are things that mean different things for different actors either in the activism realm or in the communities. Being *Indio*, for example, carries sentiments of both pride and discrimination. People understand the label as something historically used by non-indigenous society to refer to indigenous communities in a derogatory way, meaning backward or inferior. In the present, indigenous people use the term as both a symbol of racial pride and a way to differentiate themselves from people who live in the town of Copán. Being indigenous, on the other hand, is something people associate with activism, being affiliated with an indigenous organization, and international discourses of rights (e.g. the ILO Convention 169). Being Ch'orti' Maya or being part of an ethnic group is something much more complex and understood differently across different communities and indigenous activists. Some people do not have any knowledge of what it means to be part of an ethnic group or feel ambivalent about calling themselves Ch'orti' Maya. For others, being Ch'orti' Maya is associated with a wide range of meanings: the practice of ancient cultural traditions, ancestral ties to the ancient Maya, being part of an indigenous organization, and inhabiting specific localities. Despite the multiplicity of labels and varying meanings attached to these labels from actor to actor, it is important to note that

Ch'orti' Maya activism constitutes a fight for ethnic recognition, a struggle to show the Honduran government that the Ch'orti' Maya are a distinctive ethnic group, not just different from Copán's non-indigenous society, but different from other indigenous groups around Honduras. However, being Ch'orti' Maya is also intimately dependent on other labels such as being indigenous (by claiming rights to land) or being *Indio*, a strong label of difference associated with discrimination and race. In this sense, Ch'orti' Maya activism uses both discourses of indigeneti and ethnicity in advancing its goals. It deals with indigeneity in the sense that it claims rights to land and recognition based on continual occupation of land in the Ch'orti' Maya region of Honduras and Guatemala and ancient Maya ancestry. And it deals with ethnicity in the sense that it has targeted the revitalization of language and cultural traditions throughout different communities in order to establish a sense of difference between the Ch'orti' Maya and non-indigenous society.

Another goal of this chapter is to offer a better understanding of how democratization, neoliberal reforms, and the ratification of international laws have played a role in indigenous activism. The creation of government agencies for indigenous affairs, the purchase and redistribution of communal land, and the sponsorship of cultural revitalization initiatives are particularly important to the story of the Ch'orti' Maya. The chapter will also explore the challenges and benefits that neoliberalism has brought to indigenous groups in Latin America and more specifically to Honduras. With the goal of exploring the divergence of neoliberal practice from doctrine, this section also examines how each indigenous group's specific geographic location, positionality, and historical relationship with the Honduran state plays an important role in how they are able to contest or work within a neoliberal political framework.

3. Understanding the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán Through the Anthropological Lens

A discussion of how the discourse of ethnic identity developed in Copán requires an analysis of the important role that anthropology has played in its construction. The first ethnographic accounts of farming practices of Copán (Schumann de Baudez 1983 and Rivas 1993) write about contemporary Ch'orti' Maya communities as “*campesinos* with Ch'orti' traditions”. As I explained in Chapter 1, whereas for Schumann de Baudez (1983) it is the absence of the Ch'orti' language that precludes them from being classified as an indigenous group, for Rivas (1993), it is the long-term processes of acculturation that have diminished a Ch'orti' Maya culture to a handful of practices that are not sufficient to create ethnic boundaries in relationship to *mestizos* (Mena Cabezas & Flores Mejia 2007:25, Mortensen 2009: 248, Metz 2010:295).

Although, by the mid and late 1990s, some scholars (Martinez Perdomo 1997, Chernier et al. 1999) begin to refer to the Ch'orti' as an ethnic and also a Mayan group, it is not until the last decade that some authors have begun to more carefully address the birth of these ethnic classifications, their implications for identity formation among Copán's indigenous people, and their construction through indigenous activism. While several discussions (Chenier et al. 1999, Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejia 2007, Metz, McNeil, Hull 2009, Mortensen 2009, Loker 2009, and Metz 2009, 2010) have examined the inception of Ch'orti' Maya mobilization in Copán as well as addressed different contributing factors to the surge of a “Maya identity” among indigenous leaders, none of the works has sufficiently explored the different mechanisms through which a Ch'orti' Maya identity is constructed, transferred, and adopted among different political actors and community residents.

Some of the earlier works rendered contradictory conclusions about Ch'orti' Maya identity. Chernier et al. (1999) for example, argued that, although the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán share both Mayan and Spanish ancestry and no longer speak their native language, their cultural identity remains "largely intact." Though the authors offer no discussion of what constitutes a Ch'orti' Maya cultural identity vis-à-vis a *mestizo* identity, using a class-based critique, they purport that until the emergence of indigenous mobilization in the 1990s, the long history of displacement and labor exploitation of the Ch'orti' Maya, going as far back as the 1800s, is responsible for their cultural invisibility (Chernier et al. 1999:225). Conversely, more recent discussions (Mena Cabezas & Flores Mejia 2007) purport that it is precisely the subordination, racism, and social exclusion to which the Ch'orti' Maya have been historically subjected by *mestizos* in Copán, coupled with the intra-ethnic relationships they have maintained with the Ch'orti' Maya of Guatemala, that has allowed them to retain feelings of ethnic belonging and differentiation. Ethnic differentiation, argued the authors, is further accentuated by the presence of religious practices rooted in pre-Columbian traditions such as *tzikines* and *padrineos*¹³ (2007:25).

While Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejia (2007) present a case for identity formation based on the reformulation of cultural continuities, authors such as Metz (2009, 2010) have analyzed the "(Re)-Emergence" of the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán using a social construction approach. According to Metz (2010), prior to the 1990s, the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán had denied¹⁴ any links to an indigenous past and, only in the context of indigenous mobilization, have they organized as an indigenous group. Metz argues that the instability of ethnic identities among indigenous

¹³ Processions practiced during times of drought and community tensions. This ritual involves the sacrifice of a chicken or turkey whose bones are taken to sacred places (usually water springs or small lakes) along with other offerings and buried after the chanting of prayers by a spiritual leader (Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejia 2007).

¹⁴ I would argue that in the past, rather than denying a link to indigenous ancestry, the Ch'orti' Maya had no reason to claim such a link because there was no reason for them to do so.

people in Copán in the advent of “an era of indigenous rights and remuneration lends strong support to the social construction approach to group identity” (2010:289). Although, for Metz, identity can be marked by both the existence of pre-colonial cultural continuities and also by the modern construction of distinct cultural practices not necessarily grounded in indigenous roots, his argument seeks to challenge social constructions of a Ch’orti’ Maya identity formulated for material gains. Metz proposes that indigenous legitimacy for the Ch’orti’ Maya of Honduras should be evaluated with regard to people’s willingness to adopt “Ch’orti indigenous values” such as “communalism, recovery of local forest, and language revitalization” and not simply by means of switching from a *mestizo* to an indigenous identity for the purpose of gaining material resources (2010:306).

Moving away from dichotomous categories, other ethnographic work in Copán (Mortensen 2009) suggests that a Ch’orti’ Maya identity in this region constitutes a controversial debate among state officials, academics, and even indigenous people themselves. For Mortensen, “cultural tourism” is one of the elements that has more strongly fueled Ch’orti’ Maya ethnic revitalization initiatives (2009:247). Mortensen argues that “by providing a market for cultural distinction, and thereby ascribing it economic value, cultural tourism potentially can provide the means and motivation for reviving cultural traditions, language, and pride” (2009:251). However, she is also skeptical about issues of control over cultural representation in Copán’s tourism industry and its implications for the Ch’orti’ Maya. Mortensen posits that the homogenous image of the “Maya” produced as a result of the archaeology and tourism industries can subvert contemporary groups’ desire to form their own cultural image (2009:252). For the Ch’orti’ Maya, who just recently have begun to embrace an indigenous identity, it has yet to be examined how the tourism industry impacts their own notions of Mayanness. Typically, as

Mortensen points out, in the context of economic development, international development organizations seek to implement projects among indigenous people that target tourists' expectations and cultural consumption. World-Bank-sponsored initiatives have engaged several Ch'orti' Maya communities in culturally-specific economic development initiatives (e.g. ceramic workshops, textile cooperatives, production of artifacts from corn husk) that, in spite of economically benefiting some indigenous communities, also "reify the highly marketable image of Ch'orti' as the 'ethnic other.'" (Mortensen 2009:252). I expand on the role of tourism development on identity in chapter 5.

Although these recent discussions have offered important insights about how discourses of identity were transformed at the end of the 20th Century, scholars have not sufficiently addressed the different mechanisms through which identity formation can occur among the Ch'orti' Maya, if indigenous people situationally promote different kinds of Ch'orti' Mayanness, and how these different notions may compete with one another. Metz's (2010) important work on the activism of the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán has examined different claims to identity. For Metz, some of these claims are based on people's genuine desire to be indigenous (e.g. "communitarian environmentalists") while others claims are made for the purposes of material gains (e.g. "corrupt materialists"). Metz contends that "in disputes between 'the corrupt materialists' and the 'communitarian environmentalists' one should err towards the latter as the best indigenous representatives, depending on the historical context of each group (Metz 2010:306). I agree with Metz that materialism and corruption constitute some of the most pressing challenges to Ch'orti' Maya activism in Copán, but I also argue that there are multiple reasons why people claim to be Ch'orti' Maya and many times these reasons intersect; thus we should more carefully examine how different struggles are linked to people's identity claims and

also how people's interests may situationally shift. For example, Metz (2009) as well as Loker's (2009) found that the Ch'orti' Maya, while faced with criticism of claims to cultural legitimacy, resorted to importing cultural revitalization initiatives precisely for the sake of maintaining a level of economic support from national and international supporters. Moreover, the work of both Metz (2009) and Loker (2009), examine how claims to Ch'orti' Maya ethnicity have become politicized among indigenous leaders and their critics as a result of the economic benefits linked to emergent ethnic classifications in Copán. Both authors explain how the same landowners who have historically referred to their workers (traditionally people who are now organized ethnically) by the derogatory nomenclature *Indio*, as a way to establish differentiation, are now the main actors who question their authenticity as Indian. While this is a revealing finding, we need to further scrutinize: a) if and how the Ch'orti' Maya themselves perceive ethnicity in terms of legitimate versus illegitimate claims; b) if the identities mobilized for economic goals differ from those mobilized for cultural goals; and c) how notions of Ch'orti' Mayaness are understood among villagers rather than activists.

For instance, some works (Kufer 2009) have rendered useful discussions about the cultural significance of natural-resource-use by Ch'orti' Maya communities in Guatemala (located just 20 kilometers from Copán). For Kufer, the most salient cultural elements that have helped the Ch'orti' Maya of Guatemala to claim a cultural identity and distinguish themselves from *mestizos* are found in the different ways they interact with the environment. For instance, focusing on language recovery initiatives, Kufer (2009:198) proposes that the most significant traces of the Ch'orti' Maya language in communities where the language is no longer spoken are found in people's naming of plants and the use of other environmentally-related practices. Some of these practices include: the value placed on building their own houses using natural materials,

the value placed on the collective planting and harvesting of *milpas* and the rites associated with it, and their extensive knowledge of local plants, most of which are named using Ch'orti' Maya words. Drawing from these findings it is important to ask: what understandings of ethnicity and identity are born from cultural revitalization projects, activism work, and tourism development? Do the identities mobilized in people's encounters with public officials and tourism based initiatives reinforce or compete with other understandings of identity lived in the communities? The findings discussed in the following section as well as subsequent chapters will hopefully offer a clearer picture of what Ch'orti' Maya identity looks like in the present and how and when it becomes relevant.

4. Ch'orti' Maya Identity Today

On August 9th, 2012, the Ch'orti' Maya celebrated the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples at the Copán Archaeological site by hosting representatives from all indigenous groups in Honduras. In addition to the then President of Honduras Porfirio Lobo Sosa, the event was also attended by the ambassador of Panama in Honduras, the ambassador of Honduras in Guatemala, a representative from the United Nations, and other local authorities. Close to 2,000 indigenous people attended the event in 90 degree weather. Representatives from CONIMCHH set up a table with traditional food and drinks including *chicha*—a corn-based alcoholic drink made and consumed mostly in indigenous villages. There was a group of *danza folclórica*¹⁵, a group of Ch'orti' Maya theater performers, and representatives from both Ch'orti' Maya councils. I ran into several activists I had interviewed before, and it surprised me that I could barely recognize the women who dressed in traditional attire for the event.

¹⁵ These are different from current theater groups in the sense that they dance to songs that celebrate Honduran identity borrowing from both indigenous and Spanish influence.

A couple of months earlier, I had interviewed one of the most charismatic female indigenous leaders who was there at the celebration dressed with a bright orange traditional outfit. At the interview, she said to me that if she would have known I was going to formally interview her, she would have dressed in her typical attire. Another activist I had interviewed did something similar. Before I turned on my recorder, he was joking around with me. He asked me if I was ready to interview him and as soon as I started to record the interview, he put on a different kind of persona, he became serious, and spoke ardently about his activism using words such as identity, indigenous rights, Maya ancestry. He is a tour guide at the archaeological site where his identity plays an intrinsic role in his encounters with tourists but not necessarily with his fellow *mestizo* co-workers who consider him to be *mestizo* as well. But his affiliation with CONIMCHH, among other things, enables him to claim that he is indigenous. He has developed a *conciencia indigena* that allows him to recognize his indigenous roots and self-identify as such.

Thus far, I have examined different anthropological discussions that have attempted to define the Ch'orti' Maya based on cultural traits or practices. However, I contend that indigenous subjectivities and the context that inform these subjectivities has been largely overlooked. In my research, I found that Ch'orti' Maya identity is contextually constructed, imagined, and performed. Identity becomes relevant in encounters such as those described by the above vignettes—encounters between indigenous people and state officials, researchers, and tourists. If identity becomes relevant in people's every day encounters with other forces, how do people understand and live their identity? What does it mean to them to be Ch'orti' Maya? The next closing sections will hopefully paint a clearer picture of how indigenous identity is understood, embraced, and performed by indigenous people and also how it is contested by non-indigenous society.

4.1 How is Identity Talked About and Lived by Indigenous Activists?

During interviews with indigenous activists, I noted that those who spoke more confidently about Ch'orti' Maya identity in Copán, did so employing a combination of discourses: first and foremost, being Ch'orti' Maya for people meant developing an indigenous consciousness (or accepting that they are Ch'orti' Maya) and being part of one of the indigenous councils. For people, developing an indigenous consciousness meant overcoming, to an extent, a sense of oppression associated with being the worker of a landowner. The development of this consciousness is directly tied to the work that the first activists did among a handful of rural communities and what many activists refer to as their “awakening”. Being “organized”, as they refer to being affiliated with an indigenous council, requires people not only to accept that they are Ch'orti' Maya but to show that they are willing to practice revitalized traditions and encourage their children to learn the Ch'orti' Maya language.

Second, indigenous activists spoke of their right to identify as Ch'orti' Maya and own land based on international laws such as the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 and the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. As I explained earlier, the initial activists traveled from community to community handing out copies of the ILO's Convention 169. Learning about international laws, gave people a sense of belonging to a larger community of support that encouraged them to join activism in Copán.

Third, people spoke of geographic location. For some activists, being born in the Copán municipality plays an important role in identifying as Ch'orti' Maya. In fact, several activists refused to recognize the word *mestizo* arguing that everyone born in Copán was *Indio*. As one activist explained: “I am very surprised when sometimes at meetings... meetings with people who, like me, did not realize they were Ch'orti', they stand up and say ‘I am not indigenous. I

am not *Indio*’ or ‘I am not Ch’orti’ Maya’. It surprises me because I have had the chance, on many occasion, to hear these people and then I tell them: ‘so, what are you then? Are you *gringo*? or are you *Indio*? because there isn’t any other race [here]. We know that the Ch’orti’ Maya live here... they are in the Department of Copán and Ocotepeque. There are only *Indios* here. The only thing is that you have not yet identified as such or you don’t feel that identity; you don’t have that identity yet. But one is for sure, you are *Indio* and not *gringo*.” Similarly, another activist said, in reference to European colonizers: “They would open the doors, grab the *Indio* women and rape them. When they raped them they became pregnant by the white ones and that is why we came out mixed, you have blonde ones, there are white ones and dark ones, but no matter what we are still *Indio*... because we are from the same territory, that includes everyone, even you.”

Fourth, people referenced the history of colonization and indigenous peoples’ loss of culture as a result of colonial forces. In the same vein, they referenced culture, using some of the few traditions still practiced in the villages, and anecdotes from classic Maya creation myths connected to themes depicted on the sculptures of the archaeological site of Copán. Activists also spoke of their parents and grandparents in terms of the use of the Ch’orti’ Maya language and the practice of traditions. For many activists, being Ch’orti’ Maya is new to them in the sense that they did not know they were Ch’orti’ Maya until they joined the social movement. However, they contend that their parents and grandparents knew that they were Ch’orti’ Maya, they practiced many traditions that are now lost, and even spoke to them only in Ch’orti’ Maya, but when landowners privatized the land and people became workers, the subsequent generations lost that sense of identity. Furthermore, when people were forced to attend schools in Spanish, their teachers would punish them if they spoke Ch’orti’ Maya. Through these discourses

indigenous activists are able to speak of cultural legitimacy and belonging as well as seek to strengthen their own notions of identity through their training with Guatemalan activists. While indigenous activists use their training and ties to Guatemalan communities as a way to assert their legitimacy, indigenous villagers are also highly connected with their relatives on the Guatemalan side and visit them regularly. As I will explain in Section III of this dissertation, some communities have maintained syncretic pilgrimage traditions that encompass the whole Ch'orti' Maya region and cut across political borders.

Lastly, people spoke of language recovery as a sign of identity formation. A common conception among activists is that their generation were the most affected in terms of culture loss. Their parents and grandparents spoke Ch'orti' Maya and now their children are required to learn it at school. The first class of the day in each elementary school consist of Ch'orti' Maya lessons taught by young activists who have been trained by Guatemalan linguists and graduated with a teaching degree from the Intercultural Bilingual Education program (IBE) that was implemented in Honduras since 1994. This program, which was signed into law by President Reina in 1995, targets the nine different indigenous groups in Honduras. It provides scholarship for indigenous people to obtain teaching degrees and learn their native languages, and then they are placed in schools throughout different communities to teach the language to indigenous children.

One of the challenges of this program is that all of a sudden hundreds of students claimed to be Ch'orti' Maya in order to receive the scholarship and become a teacher. While attending the first graduation of teachers in 2012, I noted that there was a clear division between the few indigenous people from rural communities that graduated and those who were not affiliated with any indigenous organization. All of the students were required to wear traditional attire as

mandated by the indigenous organizations, which made many of those not affiliated with any indigenous organization uncomfortable and resentful. In his speech, the head of the Honduran Education Ministry said that it was very pleasing to him to see many Ch'orti' Maya graduate, even though only less than 10 percent of the 236 students identified as Ch'orti' Maya. He continued by saying that he was very proud that when these students first began their studies they were not Ch'orti' Maya, but now after graduating they were Ch'orti' Maya. One could hear some students murmuring in disapproval and others giggling in embarrassment as he said this words.

Moreover, non-indigenous teachers who already teach in indigenous communities resent the new education policies of the Intercultural Bilingual Education Program. During a conversation with one teacher, she argues that “it is very unfair that *mestizo* teachers have to fight many years after graduating with a teaching degree before they can get a good *plaza* (tenure track position).” “Indigenous teachers”, she said, “have their *plazas* guaranteed. They send them to get a teaching degree right out of sixth grade and when they graduate they have their *plaza* waiting for them”. She contends that it is difficult to work in communities that are organized because the *mestizo* teachers no longer have a say in any of the school politics. She argues that, “Everything is now organized according to the rules established by the indigenous organizations” and that she was angry because “the indigenous teachers did not have any experience, which made them bad teachers, but that the government insisted in securing *plazas* for them”. Even though hundreds of indigenous and non-indigenous people continue to enroll in the IBE program, the municipality of Copán alone only has 40 permanent positions available for teachers. While non-indigenous teachers resent these changes, people in indigenous villages are pleased with the hiring of indigenous teachers. Ch'orti' Maya children are now receiving basic

Ch'orti' Maya lessons and are required to memorize the Our Father and the Honduran National Anthem in Ch'orti' Maya.

4.2 How is Identity Imposed or Expected?

There are three ways in which the Honduran government attempts to contribute to identity formation: 1) institutionalized language recovery programs such as IBE, 2) cultural knowledge workshops (*capacitaciones*) that teach indigenous people about the ancient Maya and seeks to encourage and expands people's knowledge of their ancestry, and 3) in public encounters and speeches directed at indigenous people. During the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples celebration in 2012, for instance, the Honduran president delivered a speech in which he invited indigenous leaders to accompany him to a United Nations summit in New York City. He invited them first to the presidential house but warned them that when they came to see him, they should not wear any formal attire but be proud and come dressed as they usually do in their traditional attire. Ironically, it is not the men but women who often wear traditional attire representing their organizations as the bearers of "mayan culture" (Little 2003), even though they are subject to mockery by non-indigenous society and even sometimes in their own communities.

Indigenous activists also feel that they must comply with government expectations. As one activist explained, "for me, identity is something that allows you to be recognized as indigenous... not just because you are affiliated [with an indigenous organization] but a cultural identity it is something we need to practice in order to be recognized by any state ministry". A useful way to think about people's obligation to perform their identities is Foucault's (1982:212) notion that an individual is both marked by and bound to his/her own identity by "conscience or

self-knowledge,” and also a subject to other forces he/she depends on or is controlled by. For indigenous activists, their encounters with Honduran officials is where identity matters most, specifically because indigenous communities depend mostly on the state for land distribution, policy making, and the implementation of large scale initiatives (e.g. Inter Cultural Bilingual Education programs) that benefit indigenous people.

In addition to feeling obligated to perform an indigenous identity in encounters with state officials, some indigenous leaders themselves expect indigeneity to look a certain way. For some activists, migration to urban areas introduces people to Western styles of dressing, haircuts, mannerisms and even ways of speaking, which they perceive as being detrimental to indigenous identity formation. Similarly, another activist provided a rich description of how indigenous people should look like, describing certain form of dress, items they should wear, or even farming tools that he considered to be strictly indigenous.

While some activists are glad to play the identity role in front of government officials, others are more skeptical of these engagements. One of the most politically engaged leaders I interviewed, for instance, argued that in supporting indigenous people, the government benefited more than them. He explained: “When they [the government] sell the country’s culture, they receive donations in dollars so that they distribute these donations to indigenous communities, but these projects never make it here. CONIMCHH has to negotiate directly with other countries that support indigenous people around the world. So, the Honduran government receives an influx of funds and pretend that they are helping but are far from supporting the indigenous population”.

4.3 How is Identity Contested?

While indigenous people are expected to perform certain identities, they also face some challenges while doing so. I argue that a Ch'orti' Maya identity is performed and embraced by indigenous activists as much as it is contested by non-indigenous society. In Copán, for hundreds of years, people of mixed ethnicity and race (*mestizos*) have set themselves apart from the indigenous sector by using class and racial classifications such as *Indio* and *campesino*. However, when the indigenous sector began to use other categories of difference (e.g. Indigenous and Ch'orti' Maya) that are also associated with different rights and access to livelihoods, the *mestizo* sector reacted by questioning the legitimacy of their claims. For instance, I conducted an interview at a restaurant with two female indigenous activists who were telling me about their rights to land based on their ancestral roots and the cultural traditions practiced by their families. When the interview was over, I escorted the women to the exit and returned to the table to pay for their lunch. A *mestizo* land-owner, having heard our conversation, approached me laughing. He said, “when the [the government] was first giving land away, I asked them to give me a piece of land; they [indigenous people] are no more Maya than you and I are; they were *campesinos* (peasants); they only became Maya when there was land to be gained, fucking *Indios*,” he said, “the true Ch'orti' Mayas are over there in Jocotán [Guatemala]; over there they still wear that typical string around their waist. Well,” he continued “you should buy my lunch too,” then continued laughing hysterically.

Anthropologist Lena Mortensen, who has worked in the area for many years, argues that the Ch'orti' Maya, “must invent new traditions and ethnicities in order to survive in new circumstances... [but also] be careful not to succumb to the limiting expectations of global elites who appreciate them most as living museum pieces, not human equals” (Metz, McNeil, and

Hull 2009:159). But despite the invention of new traditions or efforts to re-introduce the Ch'orti' Maya language, the non-indigenous sector of Copán refused to fully accept people as indigenous and especially Maya. Many *mestizos* contend that “true” Ch'orti' Maya communities only exist across the Guatemalan border, and ironically, the construction of Ch'orti' Maya identity via their Guatemalan ties, is actually rooted in the same non-indigenous forces that question their legitimacy. For instance, both indigenous and non-indigenous interviewees agree on one thing: indigenous people were (and still are) brought to Copán from Guatemala by different sectors of *mestizo* society. Land owners, for instance, have since the early 1900s brought people to work on tobacco plantations and cattle ranches. Some of the workers have ultimately stayed in the Copán region where their children were born as Hondurans. Feldman's (2009) work has demonstrated the ambiguity of how borders were delimited in the 1900s cutting across the Ch'orti' Maya region and creating the divide between the Honduran and Guatemalan Ch'orti', further compounding disputes over identity.

Other ways in which identity is contested include: the use of derogatory names such as *tacamiche* (people who originally invaded other people's land in the Atlantic coast of Honduras) to refer to the Ch'orti' Maya and the use of people's physical traits. One of the activists I interviewed argued that people would tell her that it was impossible that she was indigenous because of her fair-skin complexion to which she replied that she was indigenous in her blood¹⁶ and that if they went to Guatemala they would see white indigenous people. Another indigenous activist who was criticized for the same reason responded that “*Indios* are white, dark, blonde, curly, whatever, but we always have indigenous blood”. Some kinds of religious affiliation are other obstacles to identity formation reported by activists. Being part of any evangelical church,

¹⁶ The word *sangre* or blood is typically used by people to refer to personality traits that are associated with certain groups. In Honduras for instance, in a derogatory way, someone may tell you that you have the *indio en la sangre* or that you have Indian traits in your blood if you have a bad temper.

for instance, automatically precludes anyone from being part of an indigenous organization or engaging in activism or cultural revitalization initiatives which are considered evil. Many evangelical leaders are especially opposed to the revitalization of traditions rooted in pre-columbian practices because of the use of symbols and idols which are strictly forbidden in all evangelical churches in Copán.

4.4 Identity and Power Differentials

Although identity is overtly contested by some sectors of Copán's non-indigenous society, sometimes, even those who support indigenous activists inadvertently contest their identity or cultural revitalization efforts. For example, one of my closest collaborators' daughter was going to be elected as her community's queen of maize, and I traveled there with another indigenous activist and a local catholic priest who performed the blessing mass for the ceremony. At the end of the ceremony, I was invited along with the priest and couple of other people to eat a dinner in honor of the ceremony. During the dinner, the priest, who is an ardent supporter of indigenous people in his sermons, began to talk negatively about indigenous communities. He said that indigenous people were unable to identify as indigenous, that they needed to preserve their adobe and straw houses so that government officials give them money when they came to visit their communities. Then he argued that it was impossible to recover the Ch'orti' Maya language in the communities because indigenous people were not capable of learning it. Finally, he said that indigenous people should be smarter, that they should designate one person to become fluent in the language and such person should be designated to meet with government officials, speak only in Ch'orti' Maya, and bring an interpreter so that the officials really believed in their language legitimacy. Don Cesar, another one of my closest collaborators and

most respected indigenous leaders, was there. In our one-on-one conversations, he spoke effusively about rights, identity, and language recovery. But when the priest was talking condescendingly about indigenous people, he just lowered his head and did not say anything. It was clear that he felt embarrassed and was unable to speak his views and knowledge about the actual success of some language revitalization efforts in his community or the fact that he has a strong sense of identity even though his house is not made of adobe and straw.

Similarly, even the most experienced activists, have had a difficult time moving beyond the power relation structures which connected them to landowners and former *patrones*. In conversations with one of the first foreign activists to work with the Ch'orti' Maya, he remembers an episode when he was in the central plaza of Copán talking to indigenous leaders about the value of self-esteem, independence from landowners, and formation of indigenous consciousness. At the time of the conversation, a powerful landowner, who formerly employed some of the leaders being trained, walked by. Most of the indigenous leaders took off their cowboy hats as a sign of respect for the land owner. The foreign activist was so upset that he told them that if he ever saw them do something like that again he would never work with them. Lastly, while indigenous activists and leaders received land to build their own houses and plant their own crops, for many of them it has been difficult to break their relationships with former *patrones*. I found that some of the most important leaders for the Ch'orti' Maya remain active in political activism and resorted to subsistence agriculture once land had been transferred to their communities; however, they continued to work for their former *patrones* without the knowledge of indigenous councils because they needed the money. Indigenous councils have placed expectations on their members to live their lives according to the new identity that emerges from a relationship between communities, councils, and other supporting entities. However, for

indigenous people, who depended on their former *patrones* for decades, it is not easy to renounce their *campesino* identities which were born precisely from this patron/worker relationship and also become economically independent.

Indigenous activism has brought forth monumental changes to indigenous communities in the municipality of Copán. Similar to other indigenous movements throughout Latin America, the activism of the Ch'orti' Maya has pressured the state for constitutional changes in matters of recognition, education, and the establishment of channels of communication between indigenous communities and the government such as the creation of DINA Froh (Dirección de Pueblos Indígenas y Afrohondureños). As an ethnic group, the Ch'orti' Maya have also received land and some form of infrastructural support such as the creation of schools and cultural centers. However, all of this support has also set expectations of indigeneity that circumscribe people's actions and are sometimes impossible to meet.

For instance, no matter how much indigenous mobilization has fought to improve the status of indigenous people in Copán, non-indigenous society remains ambivalent and skeptical about indigenous identity. The Ch'orti' Maya find themselves in the middle of a paradox: non-indigenous society resents the support the indigenous sector has received from foreign donors and the state. First, some argue, "the Ch'orti' Maya are not really Indians, they are mestizos," then, "they are not really Maya, and if they are, then so are we," third, "if they are Maya, then they are not Honduran, they must come from Guatemala," but "if they come from Guatemala, then they do not have any right to claim an indigenous identity that is linked to the ancient Maya who built the Mayan ruins at Copán." In challenging these criticisms and negotiating the practice of new identities, indigenous people continue to borrow from multiple discourses and enact certain practices in order to defend their right to define themselves as "Ch'orti' Maya" and

meet the expectations of authenticity for state officials. Neoliberal reforms, democratization, international laws in support of indigenous people, and the growth of transnational activism may all have played an intrinsic role in advancing the goals of indigenous movements across Latin America as previous discussions have shown, but it does not mean that an indigenous population simply emerged from the confines of a *campesino* identity to embrace an ethnic identity with open arms. As this and the following chapters will show, for the Ch'orti' Maya, becoming indigenous has brought as many benefits as it has brought challenges and responsibilities that sometimes have created more problems than solutions.

5. Ch'orti' Maya Identity in the Political Realm

So far, this chapter has examined how the narrated identities that have emerged through political activism are understood, performed, and contested by different individuals. These identities, as well as the activism strategies through which they are constructed, are intimately tied to larger political processes that influence the relationship between the state and indigenous people. Thus the remainder of this chapter will explore how the activism of the Ch'orti' Maya has navigated their interactions with the state. The experiences of the Ch'orti' Maya bear some similarities with the those of other indigenous groups throughout Latin America, especially in their struggles for land, political representation, and cultural revitalization projects to support a peasant-to-indigenous identity transition. However, one aspect that makes the case of the Ch'orti' Maya unique, is the matter in which the Honduran government has responded to their demands based on the particular context and activism tools used by the Ch'orti' Maya. What will become clear in this chapter is how different from other groups around Honduras, such as the Garifuna who have been violently displaced from their lands as a result of land privatization and

the expansion of markets such as the tourism industry, the Ch'orti' Maya have been able to use specific mobilization tactics to negotiate with the Honduran government. I will argue that such mobilizations tactics represent a unique way in which indigenous people can navigate neoliberal governance.

5.1 Democratization and Indigenous Mobilization in Latin America

The 1980s constitutes an important decade for Latin America in matters of political changes. The continent experienced a massive wave of democratization that brought important changes to how civil society set demands on their states. These political changes were also influenced by international institutions. For example, Jackson and Warren (2205:552) propose that in the shift to democratization, international agencies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund pressured Latin American states to adopt neoliberal reforms that in addition to promoting decentralization and economic liberalization, would adhere to a “social adjustment” model to build a “pluralist” and “participatory” state. These expectations from international institutions played an important role in the emergence of indigenous movements.

Taking advantage of the state's new commitment to building pluralist and participatory civil societies, like Yashar (1998, 1999) explains, indigenous activists were able to challenge political exclusion by mobilizing using discourses of identity. This focus on identity constituted an intrinsic difference between the way in which the new neoliberal state engaged indigenous peoples in comparison to previous regimes. As Yashar contends, using a historically grounded comparative approach¹⁷, the democratic regimes (and even some of the authoritarian states) that preceded neoliberal democracies afforded indigenous people more local political autonomy and

¹⁷ The author compares corporatist regimes in Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru

access to resources through the opportunities that indigenous people had to form alliances with corporatist or populist groups. Although these corporatist models¹⁸ (many of them enacted in 1970s) subverted individual democratic rights (e.g. political expression and suffrage), they often promoted other social rights such as health care, education, credit, subsidies, communal land ownership, and local political autonomy, which are diminished in the transition to “neoliberal citizenship regimes”¹⁹ (Yashar 1999:80, 1998:32, Sieder 2002:2-3).

The work of scholars such as Charles Hale (2004, 2005, 2006) has also criticized the way the state (in the neoliberal era) has dealt indigenous demands. For Hale—who argues that neoliberalism encourages the reorganization of “political society” through government decentralization, securing human rights, and the establishing of minimally functional democracies—the state has responded to indigenous cultural and material demands through a new form of governance which he calls “neoliberal multiculturalism” (2005:12). According to Hale, neoliberal multiculturalism allows the state to defuse political opposition and favor non-indigenous ruling elites by bestowing indigenous people with cultural rights, which allows it to contain other material demands.

Furthermore, as a cultural project, Hale (2004) argues that neoliberal multiculturalism creates indigenous subjects who are able to “govern themselves in accordance with the logic of globalized capitalism” (2004:17). For Hale, neoliberal multiculturalism—rather than constituting a new force of empowerment—has created divisions among indigenous people through a new dichotomy of indigenous subjects—the *Indio permitido* (authorized Indian) and its

¹⁸ For example, in the case of Mexico, during the 1970s the state invested in agricultural projects, land redistribution, and food programs. All of these programs were terminated during the 1990s with the Salina’s administration (Yashar 1998:35).

¹⁹ In many countries, the transition to neoliberalism encouraged practices such as private land titling, the abolition of collective rights, and exploitation of natural resources, which mostly affected the indigenous sector (Sieder 2002:2-3). Many of the services previously provided by the state, were now relegated to NGOs and foreign donor agencies. As I explain later, some of these reforms worked differently in Honduras, especially for the Ch’orti’ Maya.

“dysfunctional Other.” According to Hale, while authorized Indians have joined the neoliberal march, “learned to be both authentic and fully conversant with the dominant milieu,” and hence venerated by the dominant society, their counterparts, who are conceived as recalcitrant, malicious, and problematic to the neoliberal project, continue to be marginalized (Hale 2004:19). According to Hale, through these dividing strategies, neoliberal multiculturalism both delineates and challenges collective action by pushing indigenous people to spend their energies proving that they belong to the authorized Indian group and away from discerning and emphasizing the true inequalities lived in Guatemalan society (Speed 2005:34).

While Hale, as well as Horton (2006), conceive of neoliberal multicultural reforms as new and threatening forms of governance devised to contain indigenous peoples’ demands in tacit ways, other discussions (Postero & Zamosc 2004, Speed 2008, Fischer 2009), though acknowledging the relevance of and even partially agreeing with Hale’s propositions, have opened up new lines of inquiries about the subject matter. For instance, with regard to Hale’s concept the *indio permitido*, Fischer (2009:10) contends that while it exemplifies neoliberalism’s influence in shaping indigenous politics as well constituting “a case of governmentalities at work,” it is worth asking: “Are indigenous civil society actors co-opted and corrupted? Even if the goals they achieve are centered around compromised ends, are these not still important improvements?” These questions echo some of the concerns explored by both Postero & Zamosc (2004) and Speed (2005, 2008).

Postero & Zamosc, for example, argue that in examining the impact of neoliberal reforms in different Latin American indigenous groups, it is important to carefully consider each group’s historical role in the “life of the nation,” the relationship of social class and ethnicity in articulating indigenous struggles, the ratio of indigenous to non-indigenous people in each

country, and the alliances that indigenous people have established with other political actors (2004:4-5). This will become important as I examine the case of the Ch'orti' Maya and its relationship to Honduras and transition from a homogenous *mestizo* to a multicultural nation. Moving away from a simple governance/resistance scheme, Postero & Zamosc contend that neoliberalism has thoroughly changed the context in which political struggle takes place—affording opportunities for indigenous groups to both participate in and contest state reforms (2004:20). For instance, the authors propose that neoliberalism's trimming down of the state has provided “new freedoms” and opportunities for indigenous people and also organized peasant groups to form alliances with cultural organizations, political parties, and international NGOs where they articulate their struggles using a discourse of indigenous identity (Postero & Zamosc 2004:22, Fischer 2009: 8-11). In the following section I contrast the case of the Garifuna of Northern Honduras to the case of the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán in order to explore different dimensions of neoliberal governance.

5.2 Neoliberal Policies in Honduras

Neoliberal reforms began to surface in Honduras in 1982 when the country had its first democratic election and elected Roberto Suazo Cordova as president. Prior to this period, Honduras was under the military control of General Policarpo Paz Garcia who was on close watch by the U.S. government for its ties to Colombian drug cartels. For close to 20 years, prior to Suazo Cordova's election, Honduras had been almost continuously under military rule. Thus, Suazo Cordova's election is considered the start of democratization for the country. Suazo Cordova's government decreased its intervention in the economy and reinstated relations with foreign financial institutions with heavy support from President Ronald Reagan. However, the

Cold War disrupted this shift when the U.S. exponentially increased its economic aid to the country in order to conduct military operations to counteract the Nicaraguan insurgency. According to *The Wall Street Journal* by the year 1985, the U.S. had sent around \$229 million in aid to Honduras, almost ten times more than it did the following decade. The overflow of economic aid to the government disrupted the neoliberal economic changes that Suazo had started and created an environment of corruption (Hoksbergen & Espinoza Madrid 1997:41)

By 1989, the Honduran economy had collapsed as a result of the U.S. removing its military support. In the year 1995, jobs in the agricultural sector dropped by 37 percent and families in the rural sector were subsisting by working less than 2 hectares of land with wages of approximately 70 dollars annually, and only 1 percent of the urban population held jobs in the formal sector. In the same decade, the Honduran elite with strong links to USAID began to set the stage for what would turn the country into a neoliberal state. The establishment of think tanks and associations between powerful business leaders marked the beginning of a new way of conducting businesses with a strong emphasis on nontraditional export economies. Rafael Leonardo Callejas—the Honduran president known for formally implementing neoliberal policies in Honduras—came out of this elite group (Brondo 2013:40).

What Brondo (2013) refers to as Honduras's "full on turn to neoliberalism" took place when the country elected Callejas in the year 1989. Prior to his election, he had already negotiated a series of economic reforms with USAID, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Callejas's "Structural Adjustment Program included the devaluation of the lempira by 50 percent, tax increases on consumption, elimination of price controls, tariff reductions and abolitions, cuts to the public sector workforce, and the advancement of privatization" (Brondo 2013:40). These series of changes came to be known as *el paquetazo* or

heavy duty reforms (Hoksbergen & Espinoza Madrid 1997:41), most of which continued in the administrations of Presidents Carlos Roberto Reina, Carlos Flores Facussé, and Ricardo Maduro Joest. At the same time, the indigenous movement was growing in Honduras and contesting some of these policies.

As an utopian doctrine, neoliberalism equates human well-being with the assertion of individual rights such as entrepreneurial freedom, free trade and markets, and private property (Harvey 2005:2). In social science scholarship, however, the term has had a wide range of uses. Thus it is worth noting that this chapter examines two dimensions of the term: 1) economic policies: the impact of constitutional reforms (on trade policies) on indigenous, afro-honduran and peasant groups' rights and access to resources and 2) in the Foucauldian sense, it examines how subjects are created through specific neoliberal governing practices. Rather than thinking about neoliberalism as just a "set of highly interested public policies that have vastly enriched the holders of capital, while leading to increasing inequality, insecurity, loss of public services, and a general deterioration of quality of life for the poor and working classes," the goal is to locate those effects as well as the productive spaces that emerge when neoliberal states' actual policies diverge from the ideal neoliberal doctrine (Ferguson 2009:170-71, Harvey 2005).

In Honduras, one of the immediate effects following the election of Callejas, was the rise of transnational investors (especially in the maquiladora industry), and the creation of so-called "free zones," or areas designated to process exports. The 1990s in Honduras were characterized by unstable economic conditions and a severe rise in crime. At the same time, Honduras saw the rise of a business-oriented elite (which replaced the landed oligarchy) and the emergence of a new class of workers moving to urban areas to work in maquiladoras. Meanwhile, in many rural areas, indigenous, campesino, and Garifuna communities began to increasingly depend on and in

many instances be displaced by multilateral support agencies and their development policies that aimed to modernize the agricultural sector, diversify the economy of the Honduran North Coast, and strengthen the tourism economy in other parts of the country (Brondo 2013:41, Barahona 2005).

One of the ways in which these policies affected indigenous groups in particular was through a heavy focus on strengthening the tourism economy. To this end, different strategies worked out differently among groups. This chapter already examined how the Garifuna resorted to mobilizing as indigenous in order to contest and survive the effects of land privatization. For instance, the Garifuna's rights to inhabit certain places used to be protected under Article 107 of the Honduran constitution. The article stated that any land located on the shores of either Honduran sea, those bordering other departments, those located 40 kilometers inland from the coast and which belong to the state, indigenous communities, and municipalities may only be owned by people born in Honduras, companies whose majority of members are Honduran, or state run institutions. The land inhabited by the Garifuna, located within 40 kilometers of the North Coast, were protected by the constitution until in the 1990s neoliberal reforms propelled constitutional changes to allow foreign ownership. The Decree Law 90/90, for instance, which was passed in 1990, allowed foreigners to purchase and develop land previously protected by article 107 as long as these were designated tourism zones by the Ministry of Tourism. Subsequent reforms such as Decree 31-92 further contributed the displacement of Garifuna communities. The latter, also called Law for the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural sector (passed in 1992), allowed the privatization of coastal land, and it sped up the process of land titling for investors by enabling people who were members of land cooperatives to take their own private parcel of land and sell them to investors. This law was initially designed

by USAID with three objectives in mind: “(1) to eliminate state intervention in the agrarian sector, (2) to limit expropriations and promote private ownership, and (3) to promote new foreign and domestic investment in agriculture (because the law available was intended to increase the amount of [legally titled] land available on the market)” (Brondo 2013:42-43).

Neoliberal reforms, as I explained earlier in this chapter, were most heavily contested during the Reina administration who was pressured to sign the ILO’s Convention 169 in 1994. Convention 169 offered the legal basis for the Garifuna to challenge the neoliberal agrarian laws given that the country had to recognize indigenous groups’ collective rights. The Garifuna as well as other groups in Honduras, mobilized repeatedly to make sure the state was fulfilling the stipulations set forth in the convention. These include recognizing indigenous groups’ rights to be in control of their own institutions, cultural traditions, economic development initiatives, their collective identities, and their religions and languages. The convention also calls for the rights of indigenous people to manage not only the territories they have traditionally inhabited but also those which they use for subsistence purposes. It is the responsibility of the state to safeguard and ensure the rights of indigenous groups to land ownership in the event that these lands are being claimed (Brondo 2013:44-45).

The works of Brondo (2007, 2013) and Anderson (2007, 2009) have shown the multiple strategies that the Garifuna have employed—including mobilizing as indigenous—in order to secure communal land ownership and other rights. The Honduran North Coast, which for a long time has been the subject of land struggles between peasant groups, local elites, and transnational corporations (c.f. Euraque 1998), is not the easiest place to secure land ownership. Thus, time after time, the Honduran state has found a way to either displace some communities or ensure that privatization still takes place. For instance, Brondo shows how through activism, Garifuna

communities were able to obtain communal land titles. However, these titles only encouraged more foreign investment and privatization. As the author explains, “The disincentive to invest in land that is not securely held translates into production inefficiency, meaning that the land is not meeting its potential in terms of market output. In effect, the communal titles encouraged investment by legalizing community limits, opening up property beyond borders for private purchase” (Brondo 2013:46).

With the exception of Manuel Zelaya’s government (2006-2009), other administrations since Callejas’ term have marked different sets of changes, challenges, and negotiations for the Garifuna and other indigenous groups in Honduras. Prior to the 2009 *coup d’etat* which ousted him, Zelaya had introduced legislation for a new land reform. The last democratic land reform in Honduras, which actually worked, took place in 1962 during the Ramon Villeda Morales’ administration. A year later, he was ousted by General Oswaldo Lopez Arellano who was a close ally of large landowners’ groups such as the National Federation of Agriculturalist and Stockraisers (FENAGH). Following the 2009 *coup d’etat*, land privatization and displacement constitute two of the most insidious outcomes of neoliberal reforms. One of the most wide-covered issues has been the assassination of more than 55 campesino activists in the Bajo Aguan sector in the North Coast. Both Garifuna and Campesino groups have been displaced or forced into selling their property by the hands of the Dinant Corporation chaired by multimillionaire Miguel Facuseé. Since the 1990s, when privatization became possible, *campesinos* argued, Dinant tricked them into selling their lands for absurd prices when they were members of land cooperatives. These lands became large palm oil plantations specifically for export. About 22,000 acres of land (approximately 1 fifth of the Bajo Agua territory) now belongs to Facuseé. By June 2011, 300 families, who had inhabited the Bajo Aguan for more than 10 years, were

forcefully expelled by police officers and army soldiers, their houses bulldozed. Zelaya's land reform would have given titles to peasants and indigenous groups as long as they had occupied and worked land for at least 10 years (Council on Hemispheric Affairs 2014, IC Magazine 2014).

In sum, in the north Coast of Honduras, the implementation of neoliberal policies have ultimately brought more benefits to foreign investors and the Honduran elite and gradually imposed limitations on the rights of Garifuna and *campesino* groups, including self-determination, land ownership, and autonomy. Although Brondo has pointed out some of the productive dimensions of neoliberal policies, such as, support for individual rights, some degree of transparency with regard to the implementation of international law agreements, and opening spaces, especially for women, to situate themselves as a central component to development and eco-tourism initiatives due to their close ties to livelihood strategies and cultural traditions, she ultimately reveals the deep-seated challenges that the Garifuna face as they continue to negotiate with the neoliberal Honduran state against the privatization of land that is intrinsic to their survival as an ethnic group (Brondo 2013: 43-46, 113, 199).

5.3 Neoliberalism and the Ch'orti' Maya

Approximately 160 miles South West from the Garifuna territory, the Ch'orti' Maya have had a somewhat different experience with neoliberal policies. As Brondo pointed out, in the Honduran neoliberal case, "categories of people, who are identified and positioned in particular ways, received differential access to resources and opportunities" (2013:97). For the Ch'orti' Maya, for instance, their particular history, role in the Honduran nation, localities, and geographic location have led to a very specific relationship with the Honduran state and the neoliberal policies in place. Their experiences reveal both the contradictions and the productive

opportunities provided by neoliberal policies. The assurance of individual rights and democratization has allowed indigenous groups such as the Ch'orti' Maya to mobilize and emerge as political contenders backed by international laws such as the ILO's Convention 169 and the UN's Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Mobilizing for land redistribution and the way the state has taken action constitutes one of the most important aspects of how the case of Ch'orti' Maya is unique. For instance, the property law that was passed by the Honduran legislature in 2004, which calls for the modernization of property ownership affected the Garifuna and other groups differently. This law was accompanied by a program funded by the World Bank called *Proyecto de Administración de Tierras* (PATH). PATH was allegedly implemented in order to ensure the legality of land titles. The project claimed to democratize access to land by promoting foreign and national investment in land (Anderson 2007:384-85). Unlike the contentious North Coast, where transnational corporations and local elites have been interested in securing land, land in Western Honduras has been historically controlled by local elites comprised by coffee farmers, tobacco plantation owners, and cattle ranchers. In this sense, land displacement and the transformation of indigenous communities as the work force has been happening there since long before Honduras became a nation. Thus, at the same time that Honduras was implementing neoliberal reforms and reconstructing the country as multicultural, the Ch'orti' Maya were able to mobilize and secure permanent communal titles of land that were not in high demand to foreign investors. It also helped that non-indigenous owners of tobacco plantations and cattle ranches went bankrupt with the collapse of the tobacco industry (Loker 2009), and thus they were interested in selling rather than buying land. The government paid up to three times the value of land, as explained earlier, to redistribute some land to indigenous communities. Moreover, although the Law for the Modernization and Development of the

Agricultural Sector (LMA) would have enabled Ch'orti' Maya land holders to divide their communal titles into individual plots, CONIMCHH's strong stance against individual titles has precluded any member from selling land. The big organizational divide that occurred at some point, as explained in the last chapter, was a result of the attempt of a handful of members to obtain individual titles and sell their land parcels. The issue with land distribution is that, depending who is the head of CONIMCHH, land gets distributed differently among different members of the community. Moreover, as I will show later, the organization has the power to take land away from anyone for any minor violations (such as not paying a membership fee), so several members have expressed concern over the instability of land access and use with communal ownership. Some members feel that their activism work should entitle them to individual land titles or be able to do what they want with their land. Other people feel that communal land ownership is the only way keep people united.

Following land transfers, a second point that is crucial to understanding the particular experience of the Ch'orti' Maya with neoliberalism is the role that NGOs played in establishing new Ch'orti' Maya communities. As a doctrine of “political economic practices,” as Harvey (2005:2) explains, neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” In attempting to implement neoliberal policies, however, many states have diverged from neoliberal doctrine according to the politics particular to specific sites and localities (Ferguson 2009:170). One commonly known neoliberal practice, which has had a very particular application among the Ch'orti' Maya, is the relegation of socio-economic responsibilities from the government to other parties such as donor agencies and NGOs. During the 1970s in Latin America, humanitarian

NGOs emerged in order to help different social sectors cope with the repercussions of dictatorships (Petras 1997). In the 1980s, however, several authors view the proliferation of NGOs in this decade as a phenomenon complicit with neoliberal governance in the sense that state responsibilities are relegated to both NGOs or projects sponsored by foreign donors. NGOs have been understood as agents of change aiding states' democratization, especially by helping strengthen and offering support to different sectors of civil society. However, some scholars have argued that "the agentic role prescribed to NGOs is not an innocent one but one that foretells a reworking of democracy in ways that coalesce with global capitalist interests" (Kamat 2004:156). For some, the increasing role of NGOs has not only exacerbated the withdrawal of the state from social provision (Harvey 2006), but the role that NGOs play in civil society is highly circumscribed by the donor agencies that finance them, limiting the input of civil society (Wallace 2004, Xaba 2015).

The role of NGOs among the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán helps to uncover a few dimensions of neoliberal governance that challenge the governance-resistance dichotomy proposed by some works. Scholars like Guillermo de la Peña (2005), have written about neoliberal multiculturalism as an emancipatory project that has opened up to road to significant changes for indigenous societies throughout Latin America. On the other hand, as I pointed out earlier, the work of Charles Hale (2004, 2005) and Lynn Horton (2006) discuss it as a new and more threatening form of governance. Borrowing from other works (Speed 2005, 2008, Postero 2007, Ferguson 2009), I propose that the case of the Ch'orti' Maya shows a particular engagement with neoliberal practice that moves away from the above noted dichotomy. For example, Speed's take on the Zapatista mobilization is important in terms of more carefully scrutinizing the role of indigenous agency in indigenous movements' negotiations for autonomy with the Mexican

government and also in considering the role of other actors who mediate indigenous peoples-state negotiations. She proposes that for indigenous people in Chiapas, examining their “rights” not in terms of how they are established by legal regimes of the state but rather through their ability to exercise them or based on their subjective experiences and needs, allows them to contest the logic of the neoliberal state. According to the logic of neoliberalism, the state’s main responsibility constitutes maintaining stability and establishing law and order as a way to ensure that markets operate freely. In this arrangement, “the neoliberal state thus governs by creating ‘responsible’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ subjects, on the one hand, and maintaining the structure of law on the other” (Speed 2008:163).

The way in which the Law for the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector affected the Garifuna and the Ch’orti’ Maya differently, shows that the agency of communities plays an intrinsic role of how these laws are exercised or contested. Another point has to do with the creation of entrepreneurial subjects. For instance, earlier works such as Hoksbergen & Espinoza Madrid (1997) demonstrate that even NGOs working in Honduras and Guatemala have used a neoliberal framework in their development work with indigenous and peasant communities and they also refused to inculcate values of individualism arguing that people are better off working in community with one another. For years, the authors argue, NGOs have employed neoliberal ideas such as to develop marketable techniques, offer low rate loans for housing, help with the improvement of agricultural methods, teach literacy, and encourage the participation of people in the market. However, many of the NGO leaders are highly aware of the limitations while working with communities. As the authors explain, “many of them see neoliberalism as a macrolevel program distorted by the reality of a corrupt and entrenched system. They are also inclined to take a cautious stance toward the ideology

underpinning the neoliberal program. They are not fully convinced, from their own experience in their own countries, that neoliberalism is truly moral” (Hoksbergen & Espinoza Madrid 1997:48-49).

The Ch’orti’ Maya have been able to use certain activism tactics to contest neoliberal governance practices. In theorizing how power relations operate in the neoliberal era through what she calls “post-multicultural citizenship,” Postero argues that “neoliberalism is not an all-encompassing or hegemonic paradigm that dominates society but rather a philosophy that is expressed in various policies, practices, and institutions, that are constantly being conserved and/or contested” (Postero 2007:18). The Honduran state’s heavy emphasis on tourism in the neoliberal era needed to sell a multicultural image of the nation wherein the Ch’orti’ Maya played an intrinsic role through their ancestral links to the Classic Maya who built the Maya ruins in Copán. The archaeological park of Copán constitutes an invaluable source of revenue for the state (via tourist entrance fees) and to local entrepreneurs via tourism servicing. When the state refused to honor the Ch’orti’ Maya’s land demands, activists quickly mobilized communities using a discourse of ancestral and heritage rights and took over the archaeological park. They continue to do this in the present in order to pressure the state to continue to buy the number of acres it promised to buy in 1997. As previous sections showed, although the state used violence to displace activists, the fact that Copán is in the spotlight via wide media coverage, forced the government to gradually negotiate in peaceful means. Taking over the archaeological site meant making one of the most profitable products of the Honduran tourism industry unavailable; thus the take-overs forced the state to adjust its approach.

A third point concerns the governing of subjects through and by the market. Indeed, NGOs have worked in Copán using a neoliberal framework. For instance, conservation NGOs

have trained leaders to target the cultivation of medicinal plants, market them as Ch'orti' Maya, and sell them to local businesses in Copán. Other NGOs, sponsored by the World Bank have targeted a handful of indigenous families to start tourism servicing business (most of which have failed), and others have trained indigenous families to create handicrafts to attract people in their communities or send their children to town and sell what their parents produce. These handicrafts, as the chapter on tourism will explain, have forced families to compete with one another and invent creative ways to sell their merchandise, which has instilled some sense of individualism in them. However, NGOs have also introduced people to practices that have become intrinsic in community-building. OCDIH serves as an excellent example of an NGO that helped create the PAC (*Productores Agrícolas Campesinos*) agricultural system that enabled people in the community to work collectively in their lands. Leaders from the same NGO helped people recreate community agricultural rituals that in the present are celebrated by multiple different communities and allow them to develop their own sense of identity. Other NGOs have trained indigenous leaders to be able to pressure the government for funds to create cultural revitalization initiatives such as history of the Maya, language training, and the formation of spiritual leaders. Other organizations have actually targeted what they refer to as *incidencia politica* or political awareness. Thanks to this kind of training, indigenous communities are now aware of the role that their vote plays in local elections and thus they are able to negotiate with local politicians for projects in their communities before deciding who they would vote for.

There is no denying that all the identity revival work sponsored by the state and NGOs has also incited (or implicitly coerced) the Ch'orti' Maya to perform an identity that satisfies the gaze of international donor agencies as well as tourists. Although for indigenous people, the performing of indigenous identities is an intrinsic part of their newfound rights, a way to assert

their ethnic legitimacy, and as a new livelihood strategy, it also contributes to their commoditization, the growth of the market (via heritage tourism) and the flow of international donations to the Honduran government for indigenous groups. Many indigenous leaders are aware of how their presence helps the Honduran government receive more donations and thus they are able to strategically mobilize people to further their demands on the state.

Moreover, education constitute another way through which neoliberal reforms have impacted indigenous communities. An initiative prominent throughout Latin America has been the Inter-Cultural Bilingual Education programs (*Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* or EIB), which have attempted to institutionalize the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in specific indigenous sectors. In his work in Bolivia with the Guarani, Gustafson (2009) challenges the notion that through neoliberal education reforms the state is able to exert complete control of populations. He examines the instances in which Guarani activists are able to productively contest state reforms and use the tools they have learned through education to secure a place in the Bolivian pluri-ethnic nation. In Honduras the EIB was implemented through the passing of Decree 93-97 in 1997, first introduced by President Reina in 1994 with the goal of “preserving and stimulating the native cultures of Honduras” and which benefit 1576 indigenous communities and close 1,000 people (Zapata Martinez and Washington Eden 2002).



Figure 12. Bilingual Intercultural Education students. Indigenous and Non-indigenous students graduate from the EIB program in 2012 in Copán. The state required all students to dress with typical indigenous attire for the occasion. Photo by the author.

For the Ch'orti' Maya, as a previous vignette explained, through EIB indigenous students from different villages get scholarships to obtain a high school degree with specialization in bilingual teaching. Once teachers graduate, they return to their villages where they replace some of the non-indigenous teachers who have been assigned to those particular grade schools. This has created a lot of controversy among non-indigenous teachers who have been encouraged to register to the same teaching degree as indigenous in order to become eligible to teach in villages. The nature of the program is not intensive, and other than teaching the Honduran national anthem and the Our Father prayer in Ch'orti' Maya, the rest of the lessons are in Spanish. At same time, non-indigenous teachers are encouraged to claim an indigenous identity in order to compete for different job openings in the communities which in turn draws criticism

from community members who see these teachers as opportunists. This topic will be explored more in depth in the community dynamics chapter.

Lastly, another form of neoliberal governance through which the state has attempted to influence indigenous people's values, has been through the implementation of cultural revitalization initiatives, organized through DINAFROH (Government Office for Indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples), among the nine different indigenous groups in order to build the Honduran multicultural nation. I was fortunate to work with a group of consultants hired by DINAFROH to teach these "development with identity" workshops among the Ch'orti' Maya. The workshops consisted in history lessons about the Classic Maya and teaching them about their links to the Classic Maya. Although chapter 4 will examine this topic more comprehensively, it is important to briefly comment in these workshops here. I found that although certain sections of the week-long workshops did teach people about entrepreneurship and how to strategically use their identity to succeed in the tourism market, many other sections inculcated values related to identity, community-building, and even tools that would help indigenous people contest government policies or learn the language to be able to write grants for their communities using a discourse of rights supported by international laws.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has traced the transformation undergone by indigenous society in Copán as they have, in the realm of activism, transitioned from identifying as *campesino* to embracing an indigenous identity. Becoming Ch'orti' Maya has come with a price. Increased discrimination and resentment from non-indigenous society, ruptured relationship with former *patrones*, community divisions over land management and inter-organizational disagreements, activism-

related violence, and above all a new set of community responsibilities and performance expectations that come with the indigenous package. While previous works (e.g. Schumann de Baudez 1983 and Rivas 1993) emphasized the presence or absence of cultural elements in determining whether or not certain communities in Copán were Ch'orti' Maya, in the present, as my research shows, indigenous identity is broken down in multiple different spheres. Identity, is shaped through indigenous people's encounters with other individuals and institutions, the social dynamics of their own communities, and struggles related to livelihood strategies.

In activism discourses, the transition of the Ch'orti' Maya from peasant to indigenous is associated with Honduras' own transition from dictatorial regimes to neoliberal democracies—a transition that has impacted different indigenous groups throughout Honduras unevenly. The relationship of the Honduran state with the indigenous sector of Copán paints a unique picture of neoliberal practices that differs from how these have impacted other groups such as the Garifuna. The particular history between the Ch'orti' Maya and the Honduran state through the country's dependency of the Copán archaeological site has afforded indigenous people the opportunities to contest neoliberal policies in a way that the state is compelled to respond to these demands. The following two chapters will expand on this topic.

The argument of neoliberalism as a governance scheme to “govern *for* the market” (Medina 2015) is partially addressed in this chapter. In the macroeconomic sense, neoliberalism has impacted the Ch'orti' Maya insofar as the Honduran state has let other parties take over many of its responsibilities toward indigenous communities. Training for land management, health, and literacy, and the incorporation of indigenous people to the market has been implemented by NGOs who have simultaneously worked with community-building strategies.

The tourism industry has been emphasized as the most productive field to incorporate indigenous people in the market and it is in this last field that neoliberalism has operated in Copán in the Foucauldian sense—that is, “linked less to economic dogmas or class projects than to specific mechanisms of government, and recognizable modes of creating subjects” (Ferguson 2009:171). The Ch’orti’ Maya, in order to ensure that the state responds to their demands, perform their identities in their encounters with government officials as well as tourists. The more salient the Ch’orti’ Maya become, the more they contribute to the multicultural state who benefits from foreign donations and the revenues yielded by state-run archaeological touristic destinations. Citing Foucault (2008), Medina (2015:274) contends that “in a neoliberal context, rather than governing the market, states are admonished to ‘govern *for* the market,’ ‘arranging conditions’ so as to integrate new domains of life into market exchange and subject them to the rationality of the market.” For Medina, indigenous subjects such as the Mopan Maya of Belize, whose introduction to ecotourism has occurred via the relegation of state responsibilities to conservation NGOs, are able to be governed by the market and the rationalities of the market they have acquired, “than through the exercise of power by the state or the NGO to which state power had been devolved”. By relegating its responsibilities to the Belize Audubon Society NGO, the state control over market operations decreased, and the NGO was use education tactics to teach villagers about conservation as a form of livelihood with ecotourism (Medina 2015:275-77).

Similarly, the Ch’orti’ Maya have depended heavily on NGOs to address many of their economic concerns. The work of NGOs has indeed contributed to the formation of the Ch’orti’ Maya as leaders, activists, and ethnic subjects, which in turn enables them to set specific demands on the state based on their new found ethnic attributes. The training that activists have received by different NGOs, perhaps more importantly OCHDI, OXFAM, and APSO, has played

an important role in shaping the conduct of communities. NGOs have trained activists to organize their communities in a way that community dynamics and conflicts are, to an extent, monitored and mediated through the rural branches of indigenous organizations. To many indigenous people, as my findings shows, being Ch'orti' Maya means being part of an indigenous organization, participating in political events associated with activism, and taking on specific roles within the organization to address different sectors of indigenous villages (e.g. being a counselor for environmental issues, for the elderly, for education). However, there are intrinsic elements of the community, as the last two chapters will show, that operate outside the jurisdiction of indigenous councils, and that also play an important role in the identity of indigenous people in more implicit ways.

The organizational framework created by indigenous leaders with the help of NGOs has played an important role in how indigenous people view themselves and act according to their specific responsibilities within their localized councils. In this sense, being governed according to a market rationality, constitutes for the Ch'orti' Maya one of several elements born between the interactions of specific NGOs, indigenous councils, and the particular indigenous communities that are targeted for different projects; for example some NGOs have emphasized and inculcated particular values related to gender equality, while others have targeted specific religious values, the environment, health, and education—all of which have contributed to specific forms of conduct. Ultimately, for the Ch'orti' Maya, along with NGOs, the state still plays an intrinsic role in shaping indigenous conduct. As chapter 4 will make more clear, in granting ethnic recognition to the Ch'orti' Maya, sponsoring cultural revitalization initiatives, setting expectations of indigeneity on communities, the state is ensuring the visibility of the Ch'orti' Maya. Such visibility, however, constructs the Ch'orti' Maya through a series of

narrated practices performed in response to the expectations of both the state and the tourism industry. While such narrated practices play an important role in how the state and the tourism industry relate to the indigenous sector of Copán they only represent a partial picture of Ch'orti' Maya identity. The next two chapters will continue the discussion on narrated identities with particular emphasis on the role they play in addressing gendered and livelihood struggles.

CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE FORMATION OF CH'ORTI' MAYA ACTIVISTS AND IDENTITY

1. Summary

This chapter examines the intersection between identity, activism, and gendered struggles. It looks at the role of women in representing Ch'orti' Maya culture in encounters with non-indigenous society and also how female indigenous activists navigate their struggles in the political leadership of their organizations. I argue that while indigenous women are proud to be the face of Ch'orti' Maya culture in encounters with public officials—by wearing traditional attire and arranging traditional food displays—they also resent being subject to mockery by non-indigenous society and that indigenous men do not represent this part of Ch'orti' Maya culture. This chapter also examines the place of gender in political activism strategies and activists' challenges in adopting Western ideas of gender equality. I look specifically at the role of gender in how activists understand their role in their organizations and the conflicts they encounter in their homes and communities.

2. The Role of Ch'orti' Maya Women in Activism

“In terms of identity, it is how one chooses to identify... so for example my identity is Ch'orti' Maya, my identity is Honduran, and my identity is that I am a woman”. Ch'orti' Maya female activist

One late afternoon in July, 2012, I took a mototaxi to a remote *barrio* (neighborhood) of Copán located on the northern mountain range. It was so far and the dirt road in such bad shape, that the mototaxi driver said he would not be able to pick me up. I was even surprised the *barrio* was not considered a village considering the distance. The purpose of my trip was to visit Doña Anita—a female shaman and activist who later became a close friend and research collaborator.

When I entered her property, I saw her sitting in the front porch of her *bajareque* (mud and straw) house accompanied by her grandchildren and another lady. She welcomed me into her house and immediately began to talk about Maya traditions and beliefs. Her grandchildren were timidly laughing at her stories, whispering to one another in embarrassment. I asked her to tell me about the history of indigenous activism in Copán and the famous female activist who served as the first head of CONIMCHH. She broke into laughter and said “well, here she is”, pointing to the other lady next to her. Doña Maria is her name. I introduced myself and noted that she had suffered some kind of facial paralysis in the left part of her face. She was there to seek a natural treatment from Doña Anita. Although she did not feel well and seemed very shy, she agreed to do a group interview together with Doña Anita.

Although we had a lengthy conversation, one of the topics they spoke more passionately about was their activism work on the rights of women within their indigenous organization and general activism practices. I was curious to find out why, when CONIMCHH was first established, they elected a female activist as the head of the organization. My assumption was that foreign donor organizations had demanded the inclusion of women in the organization and thus electing a female president would fulfill these demands. To my surprise, her election was influenced by longstanding gender-based leadership struggles at the community level that later found a place in transnational discourses and support for gender equality and the inclusion of women in leadership positions. According to Doña Maria, when the first activists were electing the group of leaders to create the CONIMCHH administrative body, her *compañeros* (male comrades/activists) nominated her as a candidate to lead the organization assuming that, a) she would be intimidated and decline the nomination, and b) she would not get enough votes to be elected. To their surprise, she earned more votes than any male candidate and was elected the

first head of CONIMCHH. It was a challenge. Her role required extensive traveling, public speaking, and administrative tasks that only men were trained to perform and were atypical of the role of women in her community. Threats of violence were another challenge. One of her *compañeros* (Candido Amador), as chapter 2 showed, was murdered around the time the council was established. Someone with information about the death threats informed her that there was a list of 12 people to be killed, and her name was one of them. She was discouraged from serving as president of the organization, but she continued and completed her term anyway.

Doña Maria as well as other women who later joined the organization recount their struggles in terms of increasing the role of women in both activism and leadership positions and also negotiating their role as the organization changes administrators every two years. As Doña Anita noted, “Men always want to undermine women’s positions and keep the leadership for themselves. [For example], we had our own office, our own administrators, our own equipment for the office, and when the current administration was elected, all of that was left behind, and I don’t know what we are going to do to bring back women’s issues”. Another activist, recalls how indigenous people who refused to join CONIMCHH and chose to stay in the *haciendas* were resentful of people who became activists. But the fact that women were also involved, incited even stronger reactions. In some villages, it is atypical for women to be out of the house after 7 PM, so she received death threats because some men would see her walk home in her village after a meeting in town late in the evening. This, as well as other experiences, which I expand on later in the chapter, offer a point of departure to contextualize the case of the Ch’orti’ Maya in relation to scholarly debates regarding the role of feminism or Western notions of gender equality in indigenous social movements. In this chapter, I question the view of feminism as a concept strictly associated with western values of individualism and ethnocentrism, which are

imposed onto passive indigenous receivers. Rather, I examine indigenous feminism as a set of struggles that take on different shapes as indigenous women navigate their household dynamics, their indigenous organizations, their livelihood strategies, and their encounters with non-indigenous society.

3. Beyond the Individual Versus Collective Rights Debate

The role of Ch'orti' Maya women in the indigenous activism of Copán has been an important one. The election of a female activist as the first president of CONIMCHH, as some transnational activists have pointed out, helped Ch'orti' Maya activism to obtain support from different organizations whose initiatives focused on gender equality. Yet female indigenous activists have experienced different degrees of subjugation in their attempts to secure leadership positions in both CONIMCHH and in their communities. These kinds of struggles have been discussed by some scholars in terms of a debate regarding individual versus collective rights. Individual rights are associated with the idea that Western discourses of feminism help indigenous women resist cultural practices that are detrimental to their individual rights. On the other hand, supporters of collective rights contend that culture should be “the principal source of validity of right” (Speed 2006:207). In examining the experiences of Ch'orti' Maya women, however, I found that it is necessary to look beyond the individual/collective rights dichotomy in order to get a deeper understanding of subordination.

Works such as those of Richards (2005), Speed (2006), and Hernandez Castillo (2010) have also documented how indigenous women have navigated subordination in their political movements. An important factor to consider is how different discourses of rights are actually adopted on the ground. Richards (2005:199), for instance, posed a series of relevant questions

regarding these processes: “Can a human rights paradigm oriented around a liberal conception of individual rights be used to promote the collective rights of indigenous peoples? What are the limitations of dominant notions of gender when applied to the actualities of indigenous women? Is it possible to speak of indigenous women’s rights and simultaneously be loyal to the struggle of a people as whole?” (2005:199).

In cases such as that of Zapatista activists in Chiapas, indigenous women have contested both discourses. For instance, Hernandez Castillo explains that female indigenous activists in Chiapas have developed “their own political discourse and practice from a culturally situated gender perspective that questions equally the sexism and essentialism of indigenous organizations and the ethnocentrism of hegemonic feminism” (2006:58). In navigating these struggles, however, indigenous women have had to adhere to a “double militancy” framework in which they combine their struggles based on gender with the struggles for land and autonomy in their communities (Hernandez Castillo 2002). For Hernandez Castillo (2006), as well Richards (2005), indigenous women engaged in activism have contested dominant discourses of feminism by international movements as well as the state, that challenge their cultural values and instead call for “the right to reconstruct, confront, and reproduce that culture... on terms established by the indigenous peoples themselves in the context of their own internal plurality” (Hernandez Castillo 2006:67).

The above arguments are useful in exploring how indigenous women have navigated the individual versus collective rights issue with particular emphasis on the association between certain cultural practices and acts of subjugation. I will add to these arguments by more critically exploring not only the historical roots of subordination for indigenous people but also how subordination occurs at the intersection of multiples spheres including culture, class, gender,

race, and ethnicity. By paying attention to the “interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination” an intersectional approach to gendered struggles in indigenous activism can offer a more in depth analysis of how subjugation occurs (Davis 2008:67). The case of the Ch’orti’ Maya, as the next sections will explain, offers an opportunity to examine women’s efforts to contest subordination practices in the realm of activism and also locate subordination at the intersection of gendered, class, and ethnic struggles. I contend that by more carefully scrutinizing the specific ways in which subordinating takes place (for both indigenous men and women) we can discern other factors—beyond cultural norms—that also contribute to subordination.

By examining the experiences of Ch’orti’ Maya female activists, I found that subordination is intimately tied to economic opportunities and struggles stemming from activism. While Ch’orti’ Maya women may experience subordination in their communities, as the chapter will explain later, such acts of subordination have more to do with patriarchal practices shared across ethnic boundaries (i.e. performed by indigenous and non-indigenous men) and how activism has rearranged social dynamics in communities, than with cultural practices. In her work on inter-ethnic relationships in Peru, for instance, De la Cadena (1992:28-29) explores the complexity of subordination as issues of class, race, and gender intersect. She argues, for instance, that an indigenous landowner may be considered and respected as a *Misti* (landowner) in his community, but he is discriminated against as an *Indio* as he travels to the city. As an *Indio* the same person may be subordinated by a *mestizo* woman but a *mestizo* woman may not subordinate a *mestizo* man. A *mestizo* man, on the other hand, can subordinate both *Indio* men and women. Along the same lines, as I will show later, symbolic acts of subordination among the Ch’orti’ Maya, like encouraging women to wear traditional attire while men dress like *mestizos*,

have to do with men's attempt to move away from the subordination they were subject to when they worked for non-indigenous landowners and wore that attire, than with some cultural norms²⁰.

Another interesting example among the Ch'orti' Maya where ethnicity and gender intersect, is the veneration of male activists over female activists. The Ch'orti' Maya, for instance, have used the work and death of their leader Candido Amador to represent the goals of their organizations even though female activist Maria de Jesus Interiano (the first CONIMCHH president) fought along side Amador Recinos for the rights of the Ch'orti' Maya. In any given community, one finds images of Amador Recinos in people's doors, walls, and school murals, represented as the Ch'orti' Maya hero. This may play an important role in how people understand the role of women in the political leadership of CONIMCHH, but the few female indigenous leaders who are currently part of CONIMCHH are also playing a crucial role in transforming these ideas.

Rocio Tabora has examined the same practice among the Lenca of Western Honduras. Tabora contends that the struggle and political exclusion of indigenous women within their own organizations has to do with how indigenous activists emulate the *mestizo* political framework which symbolically elevates a male hero (or warrior in the case of indigenous people) in the political realm. Just as Honduran mestizo society praises the image of Francisco Morazán (as a great Honduran leader) so does the Lenca society, for instance, venerate the image of Cacique Lempira (as the defiant indigenous warrior who died defending indigenous lands against the Spanish) after whom the Honduran currency was named (Tabora 2005:348-349). Emulating

²⁰ See for example the work of Carol Smith (1995) examining how the practice of indigenous women being the bearers of their cultures in Guatemala, dates back to the time of the colony when Europeans established ways to control and separate women's mating and marriage practices according to class, gender, and race. Indigenous women for instance were confined to their communities where there were supposed to only marry men from their communities and stay in those communities. Men on the other hand were allowed to be more mobile.

mestizo society among male Ch'orti' Maya activists is something that also contributes to some of the struggles experienced by Ch'orti' Maya women in the realm of activism. The rest of this chapter will highlight the context under which some of these struggles take place.

4. Gendered Struggles in Leadership

The previous chapter offered a glimpse into women's struggles in their own political organizations as well as their role performing a Ch'orti' Maya identity in their encounters with government officials—a transaction that is intrinsic to indigenous activism as a whole with regard to receiving support from the Honduran government and donor agencies. This chapter offers a more in-depth exploration of the gendered struggles that have surfaced as Ch'orti' Maya women and men compete for leadership opportunities as well decide who best represents their culture in relation to non-indigenous society. Two findings in particular offer new insights to the individual/collective rights debate: women's strategies to fight for their individual rights without harming the image of their nascent culture and the origins of women's initiatives in their own communities to contest subordination.

Ch'orti' Maya women in Copán have experienced the same sense of “double militancy” as other indigenous activist women in places like Chiapas, Mexico—they have fought for leadership positions and at the same time are expected to defend the overall goals of their political movements and most of the time perform the role of “bearers of Maya culture” (Smith 1995, Little 2004). However, for fear of damaging the image of the Ch'orti' Maya as a whole, they are not as outspoken about their subordination in activism. Although foreign and national organizations have worked to increase the presence of women in CONIMCHH's leadership, demands for the political inclusion of women emerged from different communities long before

the Ch'orti' Maya received training from different organizations on concepts such as feminism and gender equality. Borrowing from Mohanty (2013:967) I argue that indigenous feminist activists should not be understood as passive receivers of hegemonic ideas of gender but rather on the basis of their own "historical and cultural specificity... [and] their complex agency as situated subjects". In order to paint a clearer picture of this argument, in the sections that follow, I will examine the gendered struggles of both Ch'orti' Maya men and women as they navigate their encounters with non-indigenous society and among themselves. It will become evident that the state's (and even indigenous people's) expectation of Ch'orti' Maya cultural displays falls on women as a result of how they have been constructed by colonial forces and more recently the media and in tourism discourses in other parts of Mesoamerica, as the bearers of their culture. In chapter 5, I will come back to this argument with emphasis on how tourists and development agencies have imagined Ch'orti' Maya culture with particular emphasis on women.

5. International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in Copán

Public displays of identity and culture are a useful point of departure for examining the gendered dimensions of Ch'orti' Maya struggles. In previous chapters, I wrote about the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. In 2012, the Ch'orti' Maya served as hosts to the celebration in Copán. Despite the current political division of the Ch'orti' Maya, both indigenous organizations gathered their members to attend the celebration, which took place at the Archaeological Site of Copán. The event was attended by then President Porfirio Lobo Sosa and members of his administration, ambassadors from other countries to Honduras, and representatives from the United Nations. Additionally, there were representatives from the eight other indigenous groups in Honduras. The most visible people at the celebration were Ch'orti'

Maya women who were displaying an array of traditional foods, handicrafts, and wearing colorful traditional clothing. Most Ch'orti' Maya men, on the other hand, were dressed with blue jeans, long sleeve shirts, cowboy boots, and cowboy hats. In the following images we can see the different ways in which women have been targeted to represent the Ch'orti' Maya in public encounters. In the first figure one can see women wearing traditional clothes and displaying handicrafts that they learned to make during development workshops, which target women for tourism servicing businesses. In interviews with female activists, I asked them why men did not wear these outfits. They told me that they were embarrassed.



Figure 23. *Ch'orti' Maya women display artifacts. A visit by President Pepe Lobo. Photo by the author.*

Similarly, in the following two images we see the stage with ornaments representing mostly women.



Figure 14. Indigenous man and woman wearing different attire. These images demonstrate the different styles of dress between men and women during encounters with officials. Photo by the author.

Now here is a tricky part, in the next image, we can see a theater group comprised only of men, about to enter the stage to deliver a performance. These men are dressed in what would be considered traditional attire, but it is evident to the public they are actors performing for an audience, dressed this way temporarily. Women, wearing their traditional attire, on the other hand, are representing culture in their “natural” milieu or something understood not as a performance but as a permanent way of dressing. Moreover, looking at the outfits that these men are wearing, one can discern a mixture between an imagined traditional dress accompanied by the tools for subsistence farming—something that is typical of *campesinos* who worked for hundreds of years under hacienda owners. The outfits themselves represent, then, a symbol of subjugation from previous land owners to indigenous men, hence it is important to consider why indigenous men refuse to wear them. It is also important to note that the people who design these

outfits for theater or school groups are non-indigenous entrepreneurs who either profit from producing the outfits or selling the performances to foreign audiences.



Figure 15. Dance performed by an indigenous theater group. Photo by the author.

Women's outfits on the other hand, carry a different kind of symbolism associated with tradition and culture rather than subjugation. In fact, while some women may resent men for not sharing the responsibility of wearing traditional dress, they also feel proud to play a role that helps their political movement as a whole, and in their own words, see it as a source of *empoderamiento* [empowerment]. During a focus group with members of the Council for Women within CONIMCHH, for instance, women also discussed the gendered dimensions of wearing traditional attire. When I asked women why men did not wear their traditional attire during encounters with state officials, one of the participants answered, "[it is] machismo. They tell us that we should all dress like that [traditional attire], but men do not like to. Similar to us, women, we rarely like to [dress like that]". Participants explained how every time they dress

with the traditional clothes non-indigenous people from Copán would ask them with a tone of mockery “where is the dance?” Another participant says every time she would walk around the market with her outfit, people would yell, “the witch is coming”. Despite describing these episodes with resentful tone, women continued to use the word *empoderamiento* to refer to wearing this attire. “It has to do with rescuing our culture” one participant stated, “it is a form of empowerment that means that we also can do it.” Another participant said “we need to empower ourselves from that which is ours and so should men”.

One of the most revealing findings from this conversation, is that men, when they travel with women as group to other countries or cities in Honduras, happily wear their traditional attire. Women contend that men are able to do this because nobody knows them in those places. This is another crucial point to understand that the feelings of embarrassment and refusal to embody this part of Ch’orti’ Maya identity is intimately tied to indigenous men’s particular history of subjugation between themselves and former patrons as well as other non-indigenous people. In other words, men used to wear traditional attire when they worked for former landowners. Even though the same attire has been re-introduced as a symbol of culture and pride, for most men it is reminiscent of the times when they lived under landowners’ control. By emulating the dress of non-indigenous society in Copán, men are actually resisting a symbol of subjugation rather than trying to assimilate. In this sense, Ch’orti’ Maya identity is both constructed as well as dismantled in indigenous people’s encounters with non-indigenous society. Thus it is important to consider the gender dimensions of wearing traditional attire not as a simple “men subjugates women” practice, but rather the particularities of how indigenous people’s experiences with subjugation have been gendered.

Following up on the issue of *empoderamiento*, by representing Ch'orti' Maya culture before public officials and foreign donors, women are able to advance the goals of their movement in terms of establishing the Ch'orti' Maya as a legitimate ethnic group, and at the same time they have the opportunity to advance their own goals as women. In the following picture you can see, for instance, a group of indigenous women with President Lobo Sosa. In one of the banners a message that reads, "We indigenous women also need land to farm".



Figure 16. Indigenous women with President Pepe Lobo. Photo by the author.

These kinds of demands occur specifically as a result of how Ch'orti' Maya women have been subordinated in their own organizations and communities. For instance, in an interview with Doña Julia, one of the most influential activists in CONICMHH, she talked about how land that is transferred to indigenous organizations is actually controlled by men. Doña Julia, who convinced her husband to join the Ch'orti' Maya movement, recounted her difficult experiences when her husband left her for another woman once he had achieved power in the leadership. She said: "I feel very isolated now since my husband and I separated... my husband took away my rights because I can't go anymore to my land that the government bought for me because my

husband now lives there with his new partner”. The same happens when the husband of someone dies, instead of the land going to his wife, it is up to the indigenous council to decide who keeps it. Usually the land is either given to her sons or brothers, if she has any, and the decision takes place at the level of indigenous rural councils. If a conflict cannot be solved through the rural council, then the case is brought to CONIMCHH’s national council.

This is a pattern that has been identified throughout Latin America as Deere & Leon (2000) point out, where in many countries, the collective rights to land do not mean that land is equally distributed but rather it is determined by each group’s local form of governance (cited in Tábora 2005:357). The term *Usos y Costumbres* (uses and customs), which is used to describe many indigenous and *campesino* governance systems, is often associated with the subordination of women in Mexico and countries in South America (Hernandez Castillo & Ortiz 1996; Tabora 2005). And it is in response to these *Usos y Costrumbres* that initiatives for the individual rights of women have been devised. Unlike these communities, the term does not apply or exist in Copán given the relative infancy of their communities and the fact that indigenous people lived under the control of the *hacienda* system for many decades. There are some local governance structures that are informally applied according to each community’s norms and values and sometimes these structures vary by family, but these are not specifically associated with the subordination of women. Instead, as I will explain later, the subordination of women is more evident in the realm of activism. The saliency of subordination in indigenous activism does not mean that the subordination of women does not occur in other places outside of the activism (e.g. home), however, such subordination is not exclusive to indigenous populations and are tied, more generally, to forms of patriarchy inherent in most sectors of society.

6. Gendered Activism Struggles Within Indigenous Organizations

The role of women in CONIMCHH increased since 2002 when a feminist indigenous activist—Doña Maria Marcelina—became the head of the organization. The years that preceded Doña Maria's term saw some initiatives to incorporate women in CONIMCHH's leadership positions, but it was difficult since, according to female activists, women were afraid of their husbands. Before Doña Maria's election, "women were marginalized" says one of the participants, "[men] did not take us into account. Sure, there was a woman representing us here in CONIMCHH, but our entire lives they have never given us the chance to speak, but maybe all women were afraid or embarrassed". According to activists, women began to become involved in activism as a result of the workshops (that focused on the rights of women) carried out by other female Ch'orti' Maya activists who trained with foreign NGOs and visited several indigenous communities. One of the activists stated that "women from the community could not come to town [to take workshops] because their husbands would not let them".

One of the changes brought forth by Doña Maria was the establishment of The Council for Women, which emphasized many of the struggles experienced by women in particular. Still, it took about three years since the establishment of the Council for Women and the proliferation of women's rights workshops in the communities for women to become more involved in the leadership of CONIMCHH. Traveling to the communities was in itself a struggle for those involved in giving the workshops. Three of the activists involved in the focus groups recounted an experience in which, during their journey to one of the communities, someone fired a gun at them before they were able to reach the community. One of the activists recounts, "they did not see who fired the shots. We, women have experienced some difficult moments when we have travelled [to the communities], and that is why we don't travel on foot anymore. Back then we

would take the risk, but not anymore”. Even if women were welcomed in some of the communities, they are were not able to teach the workshops. One activist explained that when the NGO OCDIH trained them as leaders with a gender component in mind, they travelled to the communities to train other leaders, but indigenous women would hide from them so they began to target men as well in hopes that their wives would be encouraged to attend the workshops.

The establishment of the council temporarily increased the presence of women at CONIMCHH, but ultimately, some of struggles encountered in the organization as well as their homes discouraged women from continuing to attend. For instance, some of the men who are supportive of women’s struggles contend that women are rarely given the chance to talk at general meetings. In a conversation with two men at CONIMCHH, they pointed out that women, even if they are active members of the Council for Women, are very shy during meetings but have a lot to say when men are not around. One of the men argued that they do not want to say anything in public because they are afraid of men or they do not want to *quedar en mal con los hombres* (disappoint men). The other man, also argued that women had a lot of insightful criticism of some of the leaders when they travel outside of the town, but still they felt intimidated by them and would prefer not to make any comments during general meetings.

Women contend that the struggle experienced by women in their encounters with other activists in their own organization is rooted in the disruption of household dynamics. For instance, women argue that men are not comfortable with or used to women traveling so much outside of their houses, even if it is just to go to the town of Copán for the general CONIMCHH meetings. But ultimately, even if women want to go, they would not be able to without money to travel and eat and most husbands are the ones who hold jobs in the household. One activist argued “if I become a leader in the Council for Women, and I have to travel, the first challenge I

would face is when my husband would tell me “how long are you going to be? When are you coming back? Look, you are going to leave your chickens behind, your children... that is our first challenge”. Another activist pointed out, “some men would even tell us, ‘you are probably looking for another husband’”. The situation is different, as another activist pointed out, for women married to men who themselves have served in the leadership of their organization because they understand the kinds of duties involved in serving as a leader.

Initially, they recruited many women to participate in CONIMCHH, but less than a handful ended up staying because their marriages were starting to suffer, and even if some women placed more emphasis on their activism work they faced some limitations. To reiterate the economic limitations, one of the activists explained, “You have to also consider the economic factor because sometimes men would say to their wives, ‘if you have money then go [to the council meetings], but if you don’t have any, then don’t go’”. Along the same lines, another activist argued that the majority of problems have to do with “the issue of economics. Many women have to travel from far away [to come to the meetings] and sometime they do not bring any food and they come to sit in these meetings and be hungry all day”. They continue to argue that some other times, single mothers would choose to become activists as well, but men in the organization take advantage of their position and recruit them to cook and clean the offices of the organization when they cannot afford to leave their children alone at home or work without pay.

Ten years after the Council for Women was established in CONIMCHH, the role of women in the leadership of CONIMCHH has increased together with the presence of women at the general meetings. However new struggles continue to surface. From the focus group, I also found that women are encouraged to run for office in the country’s political elections even

though the bylaws of the organization state that if an individual runs for public office he/she is not allowed to run for any position in the CONIMCHH leadership. Thus, many of the women who tried to secure a leadership position were not able to do so. As a result of these and other challenges, women argue that in their work for CONIMCHH, they prioritize the rights and benefits of women over the benefits of CONIMCHH. This includes generating ideas and proposals that target women in particular. An important section of the focus group dealt with the kinds of development work that the Council for Women has targeted and the challenges they have encountered while working with western organizations. The following chapter will expand on that issue.

7. Conclusion

The case of the Ch'orti' Maya reveals some of the challenges in advocating for either individual or collective rights in indigenous activism. I return to Patricia Richard's (2005:199) question, "What are the limitations of dominant notions of gender when applied to the actualities of indigenous women? Is it possible to speak of indigenous women's rights and simultaneously be loyal to the struggle of a people as whole?" I found Shannon Speed' (2008) work useful in answering this question. Speed (2008) has argued that the individual versus collective right dichotomy constitutes an unresolvable tension. The author contends that focusing our analytical efforts in resolving such tension actually only helps to obscure the lived experiences of women (in terms of both resistance and oppression). She argues that, in fact, indigenous women's gender demands are often "constructed in active engagement with discourses at the intersection of individual and collective rights (2008:119). Setting demands at the intersection of both individual versus collective rights is something that has worked for the Ch'orti' Maya due the

influence of foreign donors and also the leadership work of several female Ch'orti' Maya activists.

The Ch'orti' Maya find themselves in a unique position as a result of their relatively recent emergence as an indigenous group and the crucial role that western donor agencies and other NGOs have played in their formation as an ethnic group. The infancy of the Ch'orti' Maya as an ethnic group and the close relationship the group has developed with many different organizations, has allowed for certain elements to be incorporated in the image and goals of the group—gender is one of them.

Since the inception of activism at Copán, local organizations such as OCDIH (with the help of European NGOs) have emphasized the idea of gender equality in training Ch'orti' Maya activists. OCDIH as well as the many other organizations, including those hired by the Honduras state, that have worked with the Ch'orti' Maya, have assigned as much importance to gender as they have to other goals such as language revival and the introduction of farming rituals. In this sense, it is possible to speak of the rights of Ch'orti' Maya women as embedded in the overall struggle of the group. One of the reasons is that, unlike many other groups who have contested western impositions of gender, the Ch'orti' Maya have welcomed as much aid from organizations as possible, some of which has focused specifically on leadership training for women. OCDIH, for instance, the Christian Organization for the Integral Development of Honduras has worked along with CONIMCHH since its inception emphasizing a gender equality framework. Since 1998, with the support of the Swedish NGO DIAKONIA and the German Cooperation for Social and Technical Services, OCDIH began a revision to their *políticas de género* (gender policies), with “the objective of providing more opportunities for the participation of women at the institutional and community level” (OCDIH 2003 [translation by

the author])). The organization's initiatives drew support from other organizations as well as Honduran laws for the rights of women²¹. The main objectives were to inculcate among men and women the concept of gender equality which the organization believed would alleviate the "female sector's economic and emotional dependency" (OCDIH 2003). OCDIH was responsible for training the female leaders to offer gender equality workshops for men and women in the communities.

Following initiatives such as those of OCDIH, the Ch'orti' Maya embraced a gender equality framework in the slogans and speeches they give in front of state officials or during meetings with the representatives of donor organizations. In the general elections of CONIMCHH, an event that is attended by many politicians and representatives of organizations, CONIMCHH is also open and supportive of electing female leaders. Despite some degree of friction and disagreement, the Council of Women was able to secure some important positions for women during the last elections. As the above vignettes show, gender-based struggles, however, occur in more intimate spaces where the role of gender as identity is not politicized in the same way.

In other words, gendered displays of culture, such as wearing traditional attire or displays of traditional foods, and gendered displays of political inclusion, such as CONIMCHH's election of male and female leaders, are all elements of the kind of narrated Ch'orti' Maya identity that is expected by the state and foreign agencies. However, the experiences of Ch'orti' Maya activists (men and women) show that the stipulation for gender equality encouraged

²¹ These include: a) Articles 59, 60, and 111 of the Honduran Constitution against any form of discrimination based on gender, race, age, and class. B) A convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and which was ratified by the Honduran government in 1982. C) The Law Against Domestic Violence (Decree 132-97) passed September 1997, and D) the Law for Equality on Employment Opportunities for Women (Decree 34-00) passed in the year 2000 (Rodriguez 2003).

through different NGO workshops (e.g. equal political representation, access to resources, cultural displays) are not compatible with the realities and history of oppression experienced differently by Ch'orti' Maya men and women.

On the one hand, women continue to encounter struggles as they navigate their duties as activists and attempt to overcome the conflicts embedded in the disruption of traditional household and community dynamics. Indeed the very concept of *género popular* (gender), as is taught through NGO workshops, constitutes an alien idea for many men and women in their communities. Hence it is not surprising to witness different kinds of conflicts unfold not just between husbands and wives but between different members of a community. Precluding a woman from becoming an activist or supporting activism events (through limited economic support or violent threats) has as much to do with men's traditional views of marriage (views that are not inherently indigenous) as it does with the fear of disrupting community norms and values. This is evident in the kinds of criticism directed from both men and women to female leaders who are able to secure leadership positions, which in turn create more individual economic opportunities and upward social mobility. Thus, while the individual rights of women are highlighted in the public sphere, more intimate encounters reveal situations wherein gendered struggles are intrinsically linked to issues of class disparities, individualism, and notions of community. For instance, a female activist's success in things such as establishing a business or securing a leadership position, may be celebrated by foreign donors, development NGOs, or the state, but in the community, the same activist may experience criticism or resentment based on her new position of power in the community. These are the kinds of struggles that call for an intersectional approach. In this case, oppression or inequalities do not stem from a single source, rather the intersection of multiple vectors (e.g. being a woman, being an entrepreneur, being an

activist, being a member of a community) contribute to the subjugation of women not just from men, but from other women, and community values.

On the other hand, the moments of subordination experienced by female activists, have also contributed to the formation of their own internal movement and the creative transformation of their struggles to what they call *empoderamiento* or empowerment, as in the case of wearing the traditional attire. Having the duty of wearing a traditional attire for the sake of their political movement also means that they can use this position to advance their own activism goals in matters of land distribution and development initiatives specifically for women. The gaze of government officials as well as foreign donors who imagine and construct Ch'orti' Maya women as the bearers of Maya culture also enables female activists to set forth their own demands without harming the image of Ch'orti' Maya culture. Rather criticism is directed specifically at men. In a powerful quote by Stephen (1997:7), the author call us to

...understand what the political, economic, and cultural restraints on women's political mobilization are, and yet be equally committed to unraveling how women see themselves, how they experience and give meaning to structural context, how they interpret what happens to them on a daily basis, and how they come together through the process of political activity to form movements that push back on structural conditions of inequality.

The experiences of Ch'orti' Maya women involved in activism in Copán enable us to look beyond the individual versus collective rights debate and understand gendered struggles as being part of a larger whole comprised of cultural, economic, racial, and political struggles all of which play a role in defining how the Ch'orti' Maya understand themselves, their identity, and the new positions of power and duties they have to perform. The teachings on *equidad de género* or gender equality proliferated via many different organizations, are not considered by women as Western impositions on their values, rather they see these teachings as a tool to strengthen their position within their own movements (initiatives that some indigenous women started long before organizations began to work with them) and an opportunity to carve out their own

identity, one that involves being Ch'orti' Maya, being indigenous, being poor, and being a woman. Ultimately, and in line with this dissertation's main argument, the important role that Ch'orti' Maya women have played in securing economic support for their organizations as well as serving as the face of Ch'orti' Maya culture, constitutes an important intersection of gender and ethnicity as a narrated Ch'orti' Maya practice. While these gendered practices have opened up spaces for women's leadership positions in places where narrated identities are necessary, the same *empoderamiento* generates conflict in their homes and communities as people (both men and women) compete for livelihood opportunities. Such intersection of gendered and class struggles enables us to see a much more complex dimension of oppression. The following chapter will shed more light on similar intersections in the context of the tourism industry.

CHAPTER 5: THE MAYANIZATION OF THE CH'ORTI': TOURISM-BASED DEVELOPMENT AND ENTREPRENEURIAL WORK. THE SECOND BIRTH OF THE CH'ORTI' MAYA

1. Summary

This chapter focuses on the role that indigenous identity plays in Copán's tourism industry. After the political movement of the Ch'orti' Maya gained national and international attention in Honduras, indigenous people were gradually involved in tourism-based development initiatives. These initiatives offered yet another dimension of possibility for people to mobilize their identities in creative ways. Whereas previous chapters examined identity formation as a question of rights, access to resources, and people's willingness to embrace an indigenous consciousness (*conciencia*), this chapter considers the mobilization of identity as both a livelihood strategy and a political stance. I pay particular attention to how the notion of being Maya is understood and used by non-indigenous entrepreneurs and indigenous people who are part of these tourism development initiatives. By relying on the works of anthropologists and archaeologists, tourism entrepreneurs are able to construct particular kinds of identities that indigenous people are encouraged embrace. Thus, they are able to sell images of the Ch'orti' Maya (through theater performances) that create expectations among tourists about what a Ch'orti' Maya person should look, speak, or behave like. At the same time, these strategies are used by indigenous actors who formerly worked for non-indigenous entrepreneurs in order to take advantage of their own position as Ch'orti' Maya. As a result, this chapter highlights how indigenous people creatively use their identities and political activism to both contest and compete with non-indigenous society in the commoditization of identity.

2. Tourism-based Development and Ch'orti' Maya Identity

In the summer of 2008, when I began my research in Copán, I traveled for the first time to El Corralito—one of the three villages I chose for my dissertation research. I took a horseback tour with my brother, a tourist from Switzerland, and the owner of a tourism agency who sold us the tour. We made our way slowly under a light rain on horses that were far too small for us. We traveled for 3 miles until we reached the foot of a very steep hill. It had been raining for 4 days so the roads were in terrible condition. The village—located atop the hill—was only reachable on foot or by horse. The main purpose of our journey was to meet an indigenous family who were helped by the World Bank through a project called *Fondo Prosperidad* (prosperity fund) to establish their own business making traditional jewelry out of different kinds of seeds.

They were one of 64 families in the region of Copán who received financial support from tourism-related development projects but were one of only three who were indigenous. We made our way through the village until we reached the building of the family business. It was a tall and new building, which stood apart from the adobe houses in the village. A colorful wooden sign at the entrance read, “Mayan Princesses. This project is financed by Prosperity Fund”. Underneath the title was the logo of the Honduran Ministry of Tourism and the World Bank. When we went inside, there were three older women and young girl working with different kinds of seeds. The walls were filled with their products. A banner hanging from the wall read “Ch'orti' Maya Jewelry”, and it displayed pictures of all of the different kinds of seeds used to make the crafts. I approached one of the young ladies who was working with an electrical machine to pierce the seeds. I began asking simple questions such as who collected the seeds, where, and how. Doña Dolores (a pseudonym), the owner of the store—who later became my closest collaborator—was extremely helpful with information. She was very open, detailed, and unafraid to speak. I

immediately noted that her tone of conversation was different from other indigenous people I tried to speak with when I first worked in Copán. We hung out at the store for a while. While we ate lunch together, she started talking about Prosperity Fund (*Fondo Prosperidad*). She was lamenting the fact that only three indigenous families benefited from the sixty-four projects. The other two projects were sponsored at the village of La Pintada and village of Carrizalon. They consisted of a restaurant and textile manufactures for the first and a ceramic shop for the second.

Doña Dolores argued that non-indigenous families in Copán were the ones who benefited the most from the World Bank initiative due to the land requisites that the project asked the participants. Applicants were required to own a parcel of land and propose a business idea. A committee would evaluate the feasibility and creativeness of the project and would award the grants based on these qualities. According to Doña Dolores, some people got up to half a million lempiras (25,000 US dollars). She said she was praying and crying just so they would give her the opportunity, despite the humiliation it caused. I understood that part of that humiliation was having to deal with a committee composed mostly of people from the urban sector who often discriminate against not only indigenous people but all people from rural areas. In the end it paid off, she said. That day alone, the tourist in our tour spent 80 dollars worth of merchandise from her store.

The year I visited El Corralito, tourism activities in Copán were beginning to involve the indigenous sector. Horseback riding tours to communities were rare. Most contact between tourists and the indigenous sector occurred in the encounters between handicraft vendors (children for the most part) who traveled from the village of La Pintada to sell corn-husk dolls. Four years later, when I began the bulk of my dissertation research, tourism activities involving contemporary indigenous people had increased exponentially. The number of children selling

dolls had more than quadrupled. Non-indigenous entrepreneurs had created theatre groups to sell performances for tourists. Tour guides from the Copán Archaeological Park had begun taking tourists to different villages, and CONIMCHH had secured temporary employment for some indigenous people at the Archaeological Park.

In economic terms, these activities only help indigenous people minimally. In terms of identity, I found that they do not play a significant role in helping people feel any more Ch'orti' Maya than they already do. However, they contribute to making Ch'orti' Maya communities more visible and known to tourists. Of particular importance has been the emergence of theater performances for tourists. These performances, produced by non-indigenous entrepreneurs, attempt to recreate events from the classic Maya Copán dynasty and are based in the work of western archaeologists and epigraphers. The producers hired indigenous people from different communities and train them as actors to participate in these performances. And, as I will explain later, the hiring of indigenous people from communities affiliated with CONIMCHH have played an intrinsic role in contesting the right to make money off of these performances.

3. Tourism-based Development to the Business of Heritage and Identity

Since the 1960s, with certain periods of fluctuation in between decades, the World Bank has provided funding for tourism-related development initiatives as a poverty reduction strategy around the world. Honduras is among the few selected countries that since the 1960s has qualified to borrow money for tourism-related development. In the 1990s, Honduras declared tourism to be equally important to manufacturing and agriculture as a poverty reduction strategy. The tourism industry grew in Honduras with Callejas' administration's turn to neoliberalism and the passing of laws to facilitate tourism initiatives (see chapter 3). The same decade saw the

worldwide emergence of “sustainable development” as a new approach to targeting poverty reduction. The concept of “sustainable tourism” came out of this strategy coupled with a focus on the environment and “social sustainability”. Furthermore, during this decade, “projects with direct or indirect tourism involvement and benefit were mainly oriented toward environmental, cultural, and social themes” (Hawkins & Mann 2007:353-357). *Fondo Prosperidad* came out of this approach of sustainable development and tourism.

Fondo Prosperidad’s predecessor was the Interactive Environmental Learning and Science Promotion Project (Also known as Profuturo). Profuturo constituted the first initiative sponsored by the World Bank for the region of Copán. It was implemented through the Copán Association (lead by Ricardo Agurcia who is Honduras’ most celebrated archaeologist) and aided by the National Pedagogical University of Honduras (UPN). It allocated 8.3 million dollars for sustainable development initiatives in 1999 by “encouraging and expanding scientific, environmental and cultural knowledge and management” (Junho Pena & Johns Swartz 2002:1).

Although the majority of the Profuturo funds were destined for management projects at the Copán Archaeological Park, one component of the grant focused on “Pre-hispanic Heritage”. In this last component, the program’s objectives were to “provide scientific knowledge for teachers and students, [and] promote ownership among indigenous peoples” (ownership in this context has to do with the Copán Archaeological park). Eighteen indigenous people from three different indigenous communities were chosen by members of CONIMCHH to participate in training workshops targeting biodiversity, archaeology, communication, astronomy, English language lessons, history of Honduras, museography, and tourism guiding (Junho Pena & Johns Swartz 2002:2).

World Bank reports that, “As a result of this training program... Chortí villages are beginning to make plans for tourism in their villages and for possible employment in the park... The training program was timely and it has served as a catalyst for the aspirations and ideas that the communities have for tourism. By providing knowledge and skills training, it has empowered the communities to provide their own guiding and other services, rather than rely on intermediaries” (Junho Pena & Johns Swartz 2002:2). While a handful of families were encouraged by this program to apply for further funding (through *Fondo Prosperidad*), they encountered a lot of conflict in their own communities as they became financially better-off in comparison to other families. Furthermore, only two tour-guides to the archaeological site came out of the training programs and no tour-guides for the communities were trained. What *Fondo Prosperidad* projects did, instead, was put these communities on the radar of tourists who travel from the town on horseback riding tours sold by non-indigenous entrepreneurs. This issue of ownership is precisely one of the components of sustainable development for which World Bank projects have been criticized. Hawkins & Mann (2007) contend that while the idea of sustainable development gave donors and NGOs an impetus to work with tourism initiatives, several studies found an enormous gap between ideology and practice created by the issue of who ends up benefiting from or owning tourism development projects (2007:352). *Fondo Prosperidad* has been highly criticized for that reason in the sense that most of the people who received the help were people from the town who did not really need the projects nor were they considered part of marginalized people. For some entrepreneurs in Copán, cultural difference is a good source for identity based tourism, but they argue that indigenous communities do not have the necessary tools or training to sustain a tourism business.

Anderson's (2013) essay addresses some of these points opening up with a 1999 quote from James Wolfonson, then president of the World Bank—"There are development dimensions of culture. Physical and expressive culture is an undervalued resource in developing countries. It can earn income, through tourism, crafts, and other cultural enterprises" (Yudice 2003:13 cited in Anderson 2013:276). For Anderson, the promotion of culture as a "source of value" is associated with many Central American nation's move toward neoliberal multiculturalism. In this strategy, as Anderson contends, the goal is to promote, through tourism, the value of ethnic difference. Borrowing from Hale's work on "Neoliberal Multiculturalism"—defined, partly, as a governance strategy by multilateral institutions to produce and circumscribe ethnic difference—Anderson also examines it as a "strategy of capital accumulation". The author contends that "By exploring how value is produced and appropriated out of ethnicity, we can also analyze how multicultural projects induce multiple responses from ethnic subjects enticed to participate by the promises of recognition and inclusion" (2013:277). Similar to the case of the Ch'orti' Maya, Anderson found that Garifuna residents of the Sambo Creek community in Northern Honduras, criticized the tourism industry for using their culture in order to benefit wealthy non-Garifuna and foreign residents living in their community.

Some authors have pointed out the potential for tourism to also contribute to identity formation. Mortensen (2009), for instance, suggests that "cultural tourism" is one of the elements that has more strongly fueled Ch'orti' Maya ethnic revitalization initiatives. Mortensen argues that "by providing a market for cultural distinction, and thereby ascribing it economic value, cultural tourism potentially can provide the means and motivation for reviving cultural traditions, language, and pride". However, Mortensen is also skeptical about issues of control over cultural representation in Copán's tourism industry and its implications for the Ch'orti' Maya. The author

explains, for instance, that the homogenous image of the “Maya” produced as a result of the archaeology and tourism industries can subvert contemporary groups’ desire to form their own cultural image (2009a:247-252). This constitutes an issue that has figured more prominently in recent years with the emergence of performances for tourists, which I examine in the next few sections.

In addition to benefiting some individuals, ethnic difference also contributes to the state’s goal of making Honduras an appealing multicultural place to visit. In the business logic of tourism market, according to funding agencies, “local ethnic groups can participate in tourist markets—beyond the role of workers—to create business, sell goods and services, and take advantage of their cultural distinctiveness” (Anderson 2013:278). Indeed, a few indigenous actors have benefited from the tourism industry in Copán, but ethnic difference has been mostly exploited by non-indigenous society. An event that exemplifies the exploitation of ethnic difference by the state and non-indigenous society was the celebration of the end of the 13th Baktun in the Mesoamerican long count calendar or so-called ‘Mayan apocalypse’ on December 21st 2012. This celebration took place in Copán as well as other Mesoamerican tourism sites in Mexico and Guatemala, and it undressed some of the contradictions of identity and heritage-based tourism initiatives.

By 2012, in Copán, tourism servicing had become more popular as a livelihood strategy for indigenous people, but just like any other money-making activity in Copán, it also became contentious among indigenous people themselves and between indigenous and non-indigenous society. As the rest of the chapter will illustrate, once Ch’orti’ Maya identity became commoditized and left to the forces of the tourism market, non-indigenous actors took advantage

of the value added to cultural difference. At the same time, indigenous people resorted to activism as a way to compete with other actors.

Scholarship on Maya identity and tourism has discussed the disconnect between indigenous mobilization for cultural goals and indigenous mobilization as livelihood strategies. In Chiapas, for instance, Van de Berghe (1995:576-583) has proposed that indigenous mobilization has prioritized land distribution and political autonomy over the opportunities afforded through the growth of ethnic tourism. In line with the previous discussions, Van de Berghe contends that tourism development often turns identity into a “marketable resource,” but *non*-indigenous elites are the ones who actually benefit from it as a result of their “political, economic, locational, and linguistic advantages”. Moreover, Little (2004b:43), argues that scholarship on Maya social movements has downplayed “the dynamic between work and political identity.” With a focus on the Kaqchikel Maya of Guatemala, Little (2003, 2004a, 2004b), proposes that, while Pan-Maya activists have mobilized their cultural goals and strengthened their identity through their activism, other indigenous people choose to strategically mobilize and simultaneously construct their identities in the marketplace. They do this in order to maintain their livelihoods and avoid committing to political values that could endanger their position in the workplace (Little 2004a:8-9, 18, 2004b:43). The case of the Ch’orti’ Maya of Copán allows the bridging of these two arguments in how the Ch’orti’ Maya navigate mobilizing their identity at the intersection of their activism and the tourism industry. At the same time, the bridging of political activism with tourism-related livelihood strategies, as the next few sections will show, allow the Ch’orti’ Maya to compete with non-indigenous forces for the adequate representation of their culture and for livelihood opportunities.

4. Celebrating the End of the 13th Baktun

The third week of December 2012, thousands of people from around the world crowded the streets of Copán. The crowds had come to be near a site like Copan (or similar centers in neighboring areas of the Mundo Maya) to celebrate the end of the 13th Baktun. Many actors, including the Honduran government, Copán's Chamber of Commerce, non-indigenous entrepreneurs, and even foreign filmmakers had a stake in the week-long celebrations that preceded the 21st of December—promoted globally as the “end of the world.” To commemorate the date, government ministries, and local and foreign tour companies sponsored specialized tours of the archaeological park, which, as a UNESCO World heritage site renowned as a Classic Maya city, provided both the central attraction and the rationale for the events at hand. But the architecture of “celebration” extended well beyond such expected tours or the site itself. Government agencies also planned VIP receptions, non-indigenous entrepreneurs prepared large-scale theatrical performances depicting Classic Maya traditions for tourists and a local organizing committee hosted exhibit openings, film screenings, and performances by national icons, sponsored in part by global communications giant, Tigo.

In stark contrast to these various scales of spectacle, CONIMCHH prepared a more private commemorative ritual in a remote section of the archaeological site. This ceremony, attended by council members and a handful of outsiders and news reporters, offered an important counterpoint to the many efforts seeking to capitalize on global interest in the ancient Maya. The vast array of promotional events were organized through the Comité 2012—a planning committee comprised of local non-indigenous intellectuals and entrepreneurs. Comité 2012 began holding events as early as March of that year, including monthly lectures with renowned archaeologists, conferences, and tours to different museums. And even though, according to their

website, the goal was to “remember” the traditions of the ancient Maya, there was no mention of the Ch’orti’ Maya in any of the events and associated tours. In some ways, this is not surprising. The relationships among the Ch’orti’ Maya, representatives of the State, local non-indigenous elites, and the archaeological park itself are characterized by the ongoing history of tension and conflict explained on chapters 1 and 2. As mentioned earlier, almost yearly since 1998, the Ch’orti’ Maya have staged protests at the Copán archaeological site, preventing access and effectively shutting it down as a dramatic means to pressure the Honduran government to comply with promised land transfer agreements and other rights-based concerns that have remained unfulfilled for nearly two decades. High profile tactics such as these “take-overs”, followed by negotiations, have slowly yielded results: the Ch’orti’ Maya have been granted small parcels of land every year as well as a few temporary jobs at the Archaeological Park and local museums

However, in the tourism industry, the Ch’orti’-Maya have experienced perhaps a greater shift in local social relations, thus their absence and exclusions from 2012 planning remains somewhat curious. In the same two decades, “ethnic difference” and particularly Maya indigeneity have come to be recognized as “added-value” (Anderson 2013) in the cultural tourism sector, offering opportunities for both non-indigenous and indigenous entrepreneurs, leading in some cases to unprecedented, though still tentative, partnerships. For instance, as I pointed out previously, many tour guides and companies now incorporate visits to a handful of Ch’orti’ Maya villages, located in the hillside peripheries of town, into horseback riding packages and other tours that seek to showcase a broader sense of local cultural experiences. As well, the Honduran state—during the administration of Pepe Lobo —made more explicit efforts to incorporate the indigenous sector in the tourism industry.

As the previous chapter showed, the year 2012 also saw the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (August 9) in Copán hosted by the Ch'orti' Maya. The celebration took place at the Archaeological Site of Copán with the support of Salvador Varela, then head of the Copán Archaeological park. In addition to thousands of indigenous people from Copán and the rest of Honduras, the event was attended by Honduran president Pepe Lobo, other public officials from Central America, and representatives of the United Nations. That day, to the outrage of many non-indigenous Copanecos, Lobo proposed that the name Copán Ruinas should be changed to Copán Galel, in honor of the famous Ch'orti' Maya cacique who fought the Spanish in the early 1500s. All of these events signaled a closer relationship between the state and the Ch'orti' Maya, at the very least through the narrow lens of tourism potential which began early in the 2000s when a few families were included in the *Fondo Prosperidad* project. Yet the presence of the latter seemed strangely marginal at the 2012 festivities. This shows that even though the state may be in support of indigenous communities' greater involvement in heritage tourism, the Ch'orti' Maya continue to face some challenges as non-indigenous society (exemplified by the actions of Comité 2012) employs exclusionary strategies to exclude them from certain tourism contexts.

5. A Ch'orti' Maya Ceremony

In the cold, pre-dawn hours of December 21, 2012, I stood near a reconstructed patio of a small archaeological park two miles east of Copán, next to a reporter from CNN and another one from a local channel. We were waiting for representatives of CONIMCHH who were there to perform a ceremony, honoring the end of the 13th Baktun. They were visibly excited as participants began to arrive dressed in traditional indigenous clothing. As the ceremony began,

reporters shuffled with their equipment, causing commotion that conflicted with the quiet and solemn atmosphere that had been established. The shaman calmly asked everyone to refrain from taking pictures, and the vast majority complied. The two cameramen who ignored the request were scolded by other members of the crowd for continuing to film or take pictures while the ceremony took place.

Whereas the official opening and closing ceremonies were well advertised to the public, the ceremony sponsored by CONIMCHH was not only excluded from the main list of events, but it could not be performed at the main archaeological site since that space had already been claimed by the Comité 2012. As a result, CONIMCHH was sent to the less visited area of La Sepulturas located a mile east of the main site. CONIMCHH, however, is also well connected to national media reporters whom were invited along with a handful of scholars, including myself and two other anthropologists—Lena Mortensen and Adalid Martinez Perdomo. We had all assembled at the site by 4 AM, waiting for the shaman and the other participants of the ceremony, which was to take place at dawn. Performing the ceremony at this particular site and at this particular time, enabled the Ch’orti’ Maya to set themselves apart from both the more commercial ceremonies that were attended by thousands of tourists and the highly staged events targeting exclusive audiences. The liminal status of the site – on the edges of the archaeological park, but still within the boundaries of the protected area – helped lend legitimacy to the event without fully appropriating it into the state-sponsored program. In effect, this very separation allowed members of CONIMCHH to transform a routine act of marginalization into a mediated opportunity to assert their legitimacy as an ethnic group. At the end of the ceremony, the assembled news reporters were once again eager to interview all of the participants. But this

time, in this space, discussion of ritual ceremony and indigenous rights over the Maya ruins and beyond circulated as complementary rather than dissonant discourses.



Figure 17. Female shaman being interviewed following the Dec. 21 ceremony. Photo by the author

A week after the December 21st festivities had ended, I ran into Doña Anita, one of two female shamans hired by the planning committee to perform the opening ceremony for all of the events organized for the “end of the world” week. She seemed tired. She said the planning committee had made her rehearse for many days for the event, and in the end, they only paid her 500 lempiras (or 25 dollars). She was hired specifically by Jose (pseudonym), one of the most active non-indigenous entrepreneurs who had also hired her before for other events. “They also put me in a difficult position with CONIMCHH,” she said, because they did not want to invite CONIMCHH to be part of the planning committee, and she is an active member of the organization but also needs to make a living.

The same week I was typing up my field notes at a local Café when Jose approached me. He seemed agitated. As a member of the Comité 2012, he was heavily invested in planning many of the events that took place that week. I asked him how everything was going with the planning of the events and his voice escalated. He said he was very angry at the other female shaman, Doña Marta, who performed the closing ceremony because when she had finished she began to speak to the crowd about indigenous rights and the rights of their organizations to manage the archaeological site of Copán. He said that he pulled her aside and scolded her, telling her that those kinds of discussions did not have a place in that context and that she should know when to bring them up. Seven months later, Jose invited me to a gathering he had organized, including some Guatemalan archaeologists, at a local bar to talk about the possibility of organizing a “Maya” ceremony at the official opening of the Rastrojón, another small archaeological site. At the gathering, he continued to insist that ceremonies such as those would bring indigenous people closer to their patrimony. When I asked him if he thought that Dec. 21st events brought indigenous people closer to their patrimony, he became defensive, since he thought I said it with an accusatory tone. To counter, he argued that their exclusion was CONIMCHH’s fault for refusing to come up with a ceremony that would work according to the program designed by the 2012 Committee.

Jose’s case is interesting in the sense that he openly supports indigenous activism and criticizes non-indigenous elites and how they have treated the indigenous sector over the years. In an interview I conducted with him, he mentioned that although he would not be considered indigenous, he was interested in sending blood samples to National Geographic to determine what percentage of his genes were Maya. Although he often criticizes the dominant presence of Western archaeologists in Copán, he writes the performances based on the work of these foreign

archaeologists. He also did his undergraduate studies in the United States and an MA in human resources in Germany.

Jose contends that his professional goals have always revolved around helping rural and indigenous groups in Copán. When I asked him what the word Ch'orti' Maya meant to him, he argued that it meant his ancestors and a living culture. Since he was in elementary school, he said, teachers had taught him that Maya culture was dead but that to him it represented a living culture and a culture that "lives inside our genes". Even though to most people, Jose would not be considered indigenous, he actually argued that the only difference between him and Ch'orti' Maya people is the fact that he was born in Copán and they were born in the communities, but that they are the same. Also, according to Jose, there should not be a difference between the term ancient Maya and Maya Ch'orti'; his training of indigenous people to participate in performances locally and outside of Copán, he argued, only contributes to empower many of them who still feel shy about saying that they are Maya. He further argued that it also contributes to the visibility of indigenous people and represents a way to connect them to their ancestors. He makes a valid point. Jose's initiatives have played an important role in putting the Ch'orti' Maya in some tourism related work. Prior to his initiatives, the word Maya in the tourism realm, was strictly associated with the Classic Maya archaeological site and history.

Jose's theater group plays two different roles. On the one hand, they portray the Ch'orti' Maya as timeless and exotic figures that appeal to foreign tourists and are consumed as "museum pieces" (Mortensen 2009). On the other hand, they make the existence of the Ch'orti' Maya known to many people who previously had only associated the word Maya with the archaeological site of Copán. For instance, a few months prior to the Dec. 21st celebrations, he was hired to take indigenous actors to San Pedro Sula to the premiere of the film *2012: The*

Beginning. During the premiere, which took place in the theaters of one of the city's biggest shopping malls, he prepared a performance in which indigenous people, dressed as (he imagined) people would have during the Classic Maya era, walked around while people took pictures with them and asked them questions about their lives and communities. During a previous conversation with him, he pointed out that one of his dream was to be able to have a group of indigenous actors walk around the Copán Archaeological Park dressed in the "Classic Maya" costumes so tourists could interact with them and ask questions about their communities. According to Jose, these practices bring indigenous people closer to the distant Maya past that is known to tourists. As he put it, "being involved in these projects helps them believe more in their culture and recognize their own identity and to feel proud about the fact that the Maya were not those mercenaries that we see in the movies... but that they were artists, they knew the art of dancing, the art of loving nature...". For instance, Jose also claims to have taught indigenous people to be comfortable playing the role of a shaman or medicine person—a concept that is often associated with evil and sorcery by many people in Copán—which he argues is an important part of their culture.

While the actors in Jose's group (close to 50 people) were comprised mostly of people from indigenous communities affiliated with CONIMCHH, the organization never interfered with or complained about Jose's business ventures. One of the reasons is that Jose, with the help of other aficionados of ancient Maya culture, had created performances strictly about the ancient Maya that did not borrow any elements of contemporary Ch'orti' Maya culture. In fact, the only connection between Jose's performances and the present Ch'orti' Maya were the actors themselves whom he hired for their physical appearance. Community leaders were not happy that these projects were managed by people whom they consider non-Ch'orti'-Maya, but as Jose

explained, people in the communities do not have the resources to compete or form their own groups. It turns out that this was not the case.

A few months after I conducted the interview with Jose, one indigenous leader decided to take action. The fact that many of the actors belonged to communities affiliated with CONIMCHH inspired the leader to convince them to form their own group and become affiliated with CONIMCHH as a theater group. The indigenous leader who led the separation invited me to have coffee with him and explained that he thought the actors were not compensated as well as they should be and that it was fair that they had an indigenous leader. Jose, on the other hand, argued that the previous manager of the theater group (also non-indigenous Copaneco) paid them barely any money for their performances. When Jose took over the group, he argues, he asked the participants how much money they wanted to earn per performance because he wanted them to be well compensated—some of the actors have contested these claims. Most participants left the group anyway. By 2012, they had begun applying for grants with the Honduran State (through the office of SEDINAFROH) to become established as the official theater group of CONIMCHH. They called themselves *Grupo Ajaw* (lord). As of September of 2012, the *Grupo Ajaw* had started delivering their first performance in an indigenous community as part of the *Festival del Maiz* ceremony which I talked about in the introduction (See figure below).



Figure 18. Ajaw Group performing at San Rafael's Festival del Elote. Photo by the author.

One important detail to note is that while *Grupo Ajaw* does intend to sell their performances during tourism events, this particular performance was done in order to support CONIMCHH and the San Rafael community's efforts to promote Ch'orti' Maya identity. In fact, the vision of the group's leader was to make these performances a permanent element of the *Festival del Elote* and increase the visibility of their communities for both tourism and government officials. The separation of the actors from the first theater group denotes another strategy of contestation made possible by their becoming affiliated with CONIMCHH. Jose argued that indigenous people did not always trust working with him for fear of being exploited (as the previous non-indigenous manager did). However, Jose claims that he was very clear with the participants that he would hire them to work for him but that they were free to perform independently for their communities. That level of distrust, he argues, exists not only with him but most *Copanecos* because they have never done anything beneficial for indigenous people.

Theater performances are perhaps the most lucrative of the identity-based tourism livelihood strategies. One of the group members noted that some tourism groups would pay up to 2,000 dollars per performance. It make sense, then, why these performances quickly became a

commodity inside as well as outside of Copán. While the indigenous theater group now competes with non-indigenous entrepreneurs in Copán, the latter compete with other theater groups that originated in other (non-Maya) regions of Honduras. For the December 21st festivities, the Committee 2012, for instance, hired another theater group to deliver a performance during the day, while the Copán's theater group delivered a performance in the evening (See figures below).



Figure 19. Theater group from Copan depicts a sacrifice ritual in honor of Copan's Dynasty founder K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. Photo by the author



Figure 20. Theater group from outside of Copan performing a depiction from the Popol Vuh Maya creation myth. Photo by the author

Theater performances are also a difficult livelihood strategy to participate in since they require a significant investment for costumes, make up, traveling expenses, and renting performance spaces which the average indigenous family would not be able to afford. In a sense, then, the indigenous performance group is mostly beneficial to activism in helping give legitimacy to their communities and also to the Ch'orti' Maya as group who now also use the theater group when government officials come to visit Copán. Other less lucrative strategies, as the following section explores make use of contemporary Ch'orti' Maya identity in more creative ways.

6. Las Muñecas de Maiz

Las Muñecas de Maiz or corn-husk dolls is an expression that has become famous in Copán to refer to the children who travel to the town from the village of La Pintada to sell this handicrafts to national and foreign tourists. Sometimes, it is hard for them to distinguish tourists

from locals. Often, some of the locals have to say “I am not a tourist” for them to stop asking if you would buy the dolls. With tourists, however, they are relentless. If a tourist ignores them, they continue to follow him/her. As I explained earlier, late 1990s, during the founding years of the Ch’orti’ Maya Movement and the establishment of indigenous organizations some development NGOs facilitated workshops that would teach people identity-based livelihood strategies involving the tourism market. One of these initiatives involved the production of these corn husk dolls together with textiles. When I began doing interviews in 2008, there were only a handful of children selling these dolls; the following year, the number of people selling them had more than tripled, and by 2012 more families were producing them and sending their children to town to sell them.

The need is so great in some of the communities that selling these dolls is the only form of subsistence for many families, thus the children are very persistent. For instance, if a tourist refuses to buy the dolls, they offer to sing the Honduran national anthem in Ch’orti’ Maya or recite the Our Father. These are two things they have learned and memorized from the EIB (Inter-Cultural Bilingual Education) initiatives implemented throughout many indigenous schools. For the region of Copán, indigenous as well as non-indigenous teachers (against their will) are now required to teach the Ch’orti’ Maya language from elementary school to high school. Although it has been a difficult program to implement, in the sense that the teachers are not fluent Ch’orti’ Maya speakers, they have ensured that they learn these two things. Thus, it is fascinating to see the children creatively put these cultural elements to use while asserting their identity for economic purposes.

In the tourist’s eyes and even to Honduras’ non-indigenous society, the selling of corn-husk dolls is a symbol of identity that construct the Ch’orti’ Maya as a unified ethnic group with

at least some usage of their native language. I argue that one of reasons parents and activists have encouraged children to sing the National Anthem and recite the Our Father is to both assert the identity of their communities (whom are mostly Catholic) and contest the criticism of non-indigenous Copaneco society that the Ch'orti' Maya are Guatemalan. By singing the Honduran National Anthem in Ch'orti' Maya they are able to also assert their identity as indigenous and Hondurans. Using a play on words by Dario Euraque (2002) who writes about the Mayanization of other indigenous groups in Honduras, I view this practice as the *Hondurization* of the Ch'orti' Maya who for years have been criticized as being Guatemalan due to the strong family ties that they maintain across the border (See chapter 2).

While in Copán, the children who sell the dolls target specific areas or restaurants in town, in the communities, families compete to produce these handicrafts. One indigenous women who works with dolls and textiles explains, for instance, that tour-guides only take tourists to buy their products to one specific part of her community, forcing those who do not live in that section, to send their children on a 45 minute walk to sell the products in the town of Copán. While interviewing people in this community, I learned that a local non-indigenous teacher who had moved to that community was the one who encouraged the children to sign the Honduran National Anthem in Ch'orti' Maya and recite the Our Father. In March (2013), the first time I traveled to the community of La Pintada to meet with their rural indigenous council, the moto taxi would only take me to side where the school, the community center, and the so-called *casa de artesanias* (artisans' house) are located. There I was greeted by several children carrying the same dolls who thought I was a tourist. I told them I was looking for the *Consejero Mayor* (head) of the community. A young girl said “you must be looking for my uncle German. He lives on the other side of the community” she said as she pointed far into the distance. I

walked for 20 minutes and arrived to the other side of the village where tourists rarely visit and where the children that sell the dolls in Copán live.



Figure 21. Indigenous children from the community of La Pintada selling dolls. Photo by the author

Other than the dolls, textiles, and natural jewelry, another family tried to open a restaurant with funds from the second World Bank project, but it did not work. The third project, in the community of El Carrizalon, obtained a grant to build a ceramic shop. This shop, in particular, employs other people from the community, and it is owned by the woman who was the first head of CONIMCHH. While this is perhaps the project that has yielded the best artisan products out of those sponsored by the World Bank, the community is so far from the town of Copán (bordering Guatemala) and cars or mototaxis can only take people to a certain point before they have to walk for a half hour to reach the community. Hence, although the community is regarded by many indigenous people as the “most traditional” and “indigenous” out of all of the communities, due to having several people there who still speak Ch’orti’ Maya, it is rare (ironically) that tourists travel there. Furthermore, the ceramic artifacts are too fragile to be mass-transported to the town of Copán hence the business is not too lucrative.

7. Discussion / Conclusion

The role and involvement of the Ch'orti' Maya in the tourism industry of Copán reveals some of the limitations and inadequacies of development initiatives with a focus on tourism and identity. One of the obvious points has to do with the sustainable economic element of the approaches. As Hawkins and Mann (2007:359) pointed out, tourism has been deemed an “unstable and volatile [industry]... with destinations at the mercy of trends and fashions for their popularity, dependent upon fluctuating political and economic conditions worldwide”. The Ch'orti' Maya, for example, suffered a major setback, economically and politically during the ousting of President Manuel Zelaya. A large number of tourism projects sponsored by the World Bank's *Fondo Prosperidad* initiative actually collapsed during the political crisis propelled by the 2009 Coup d'état. Furthermore, the work the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (under Dario Euraque's administration) was doing with the Ch'orti' Maya to increase their involvement with the Copán Archaeological Park was also discontinued after the Coup.

During the Pepe Lobo administration, as I have pointed out throughout this dissertation, the Ch'orti' Maya received some support related to tourism with the creation of the government unit SEDINAFROH (Secretaria de los Pueblos Indigenas y Afro-descendientes [Ministry for Indigenous and Afro-descendant Peoples] funded in 2009). The role of SEDINAFROH (presently called DINAFRO) has been to appoint representatives chosen from the nine indigenous and afro-descendant groups to serve as liaisons between the groups and the state. In an interview with Kenia Ramirez, a representative of SEDINAFROH, she argued that this state unit was born after the Coup d'état and it helped president Lobo to consolidate indigenous efforts that had been disrupted as a result of the Coup, and it also helped to restore trust between indigenous leaders and the government

For the Ch'orti' Maya, SEDINAFROH helps bring their demands to the government as well as sponsored development workshops. The first focused on these kinds of workshops took place in 2012 (32 workshops were facilitated nationwide). I attended the one implemented among the Ch'orti' Maya. The workshop, which was titled, "History, culture, and sustainable development with identity", lasted 3 days and was facilitated (by consultants of a private agency from Tegucigalpa) among 50 indigenous leaders from different Ch'orti' Maya communities chosen by CONIMCHH. The workshop covered four different units: 1) The origins and history of indigenous and afrodescendant peoples of Honduras, 2) Identity and culture among indigenous and afrohonduran peoples, 3) The rights of indigenous and afrohonduran peoples, and 4) the concept of "Buen Vivir (to live well)" and sustainable development with identity. The last unit focused on teaching indigenous people how to write grants for both national and international granting sources strategically using their positionality as indigenous. The other unit that was emphasized was identity formation or as one of the facilitators explain, teaching people how to be more Maya or how to embrace a Maya identity. Many times throughout the workshop, for instance, when any of the participants would refer to the ancient Maya, as "the Maya", a facilitator would quickly correct them and say, "you need to say 'us Maya'". Another aspect that took priority was teaching people the connection between the contemporary Ch'orti' Maya, the Archaeological Park, and the ancient Maya.

These kinds of initiatives, as Kenia Ramirez (a representative of SEDINAFROH), explained, help people think about who they are—"Am I Garifuna? Am I Ch'orti' Maya? Am I Lenca." However, she also argued that while these initiatives help consolidate the image of Honduras as pluri-ethnic and multicultural nation, they encourage *mestizos* to also want to belong somewhere so they start claiming that they are Ch'orti' Maya or Lenca, especially

politicians trying to win the indigenous vote. The notion of belonging has become contentious in both the tourism industry and other elements such as education opportunities²². Other than opportunism, the launching of tourism development projects create a sense of ethnic reflection whereby people begin to consider the value of identity but also begin to compete for the opportunity to use identity as a source of income. Cases such as the *Fondo Prosperidad* where 90 percent of the funds were allocated to middle (and some upper) class non-indigenous families exemplify this contention. As a project whose third main objective was to “Rescue, preserve, and promote the cultural, archaeological, and ethnic identity of region”, it is surprising that so little emphasis was placed on the indigenous sector. Yet on the cover of one of their final reports the only projects that are showcased through the pictures are those that benefited the few indigenous families that were part of the initiative (See figure below).



Figure 22. Cover of one of Fondo Prosperidad's final reports.

²² See Chapter 2's discussion of the mestizo students who passed as indigenous to be able to get a state-sponsored scholarship to obtain a teaching degree.

Similarly, the popularity among tourists of performances depicting ancient Maya events has increased the demand as well as competition over the creation of theater groups in and outside of Copán. In the case of Jose, who has been criticized by some indigenous leaders for selling Maya culture through these performances and using Maya actors, he defends himself by arguing that “we are all indigenous”.

Claims to ownership and issues of competition for job opportunities are also prominent in the tourism industry in the context of archaeology. From 2006 to 2009, when Dario Euraque was head of the Honduran Institute of Anthropology & History, the institute signed an agreement with the Ch’orti’ Maya establishing support to train indigenous leaders in matters of cultural resources such as cultural heritage, and archaeology. They even trained people to collect oral histories in their communities and hired Ch’orti’ Maya linguists from Guatemala to travel to Copán’s indigenous communities and teach language lessons. All these projects were also discontinued in 2009 during the coup. Recently the state started involving the indigenous sector again in the activities at the archaeological site. In an interview with Salvador Varela, who was the head of the Copán Archaeological Park during the time of my dissertation research, he claimed that archaeology was intrinsic for the economic development of indigenous people. Varela spoke for the potential to open small archaeological sites and museums in indigenous communities as well as the promotion of living cultures so tourists can visit communities.

While Varela is an avid supporter of Ch’orti’ Maya activism and has worked closely with CONIMCHH to open 12 rotating posts at the site for indigenous people, he also believes that in Copán all people have indigenous blood and should identify as Ch’orti’ Maya. Furthermore, he contends that 30 years of archaeological research in Copán have found that Copán’s indigenous population was comprised of a Lenca/Maya mixture, and hence identity claims are problematic.

This issue is even more problematic considering that since its inception, the Honduran state has promoted the Copán Archaeological Park as one of Honduras most valuable source of national identity and heritage (Euraque 2002), hence it is not surprising that all people from Copán claim the Maya ruins as theirs. While state-sponsored initiatives (e.g. SEDINAFROH) and internationally funded tourism development projects (e.g. ProFuturo) inculcate among indigenous people a sense of ownership over the Maya ruins, the promotion of the park as a national patrimony built by the ancestors of all *Copanecos* encourage everyone to not only feel a sense of pride over the ruins but also contest indigenous claims. The promotion of the park as a national patrimony is something that is talked about in social studies and history books at the elementary school level, but in Copán, in particular it is something teachers always encourage people of Copán (indigenous and non-indigenous) to think of the Maya as their ancestor and the archaeological park as theirs. This is encouraged through other practices; for instance, if you are born in Copán, your entrance to the park is free. You just have to show your national identification card showing that you were born there.

The neoliberal era in Honduras, which started during the Callejas administration, opened up the path of sustainable development initiatives betting on the tourism industry as a valuable asset. These initiatives took place in conjunction with Honduras' re-branding of itself as a multicultural nation. Such re-branding gave the indigenous sector a chance to emerge as important actors in the new demographic make-up of the country and thus be able to set multiple demands. For the Ch'orti' Maya, as I explained in previous chapters, economic demands (e.g. land and education) have been minimally met, while the state has focused on increasing the cultural capital of indigenous communities (e.g. language training, cultural knowledge, identity formation). This has occurred strategically to play a role in the tourism industry. As Anderson

(2013:277-78) explains “The tourist industry attempts to profit from culture not simply (or even primarily) by churning out cultural commodities (handicrafts, performances, food, and so on), but also by using images of ethnic difference to bolster the image of Honduras as an attractive destination”. A poor yet culturally diverse destination makes Honduras an ideal candidate for sustainable development funding with a focus on tourism and the “economic rhetoric espoused by powerful actors promises that the tourist industry will benefit marginalized peoples” (Anderson 2013:278). However, as the case of the Ch’orti’ Maya reveals, tourism-based development initiatives have only helped increased the channels through which identity has become commoditized. Left to the forces of the market, then, Maya identity in Copán has been mostly exploited by those with greater economic, political, and social capital. In this scenario, indigenous people have resorted to their activism channels in order to be able to compete in a market that has commoditized their identity. For instance, in the events of December 21st 2012, CONIMCHH strategically used its connections with the media and its image as an activist group to provide an alternative and less commercial cultural performance and assert their legitimacy. Another example is the work of indigenous leaders in forming their own theater groups and performing at their own communities in order to secure the support of CONIMCHH and be able to apply for funding from both the Honduran government and NGOs.

The tourism industry is perhaps one of the contexts in which the use of marked identities is most salient. One of the reasons is that, unlike other contexts (e.g. encounters with public officials), where identity is mobilized specifically for the advancement of activism goals, the tourism industry also affords people the opportunity to make a living. Narrated practices, as I explained in previous chapters, have contributed to increasing the visibility of indigenous communities as well as give the Ch’orti’ Maya some cultural legitimacy in relationship to the

expectations of non-indigenous society. The tourism industry, however, opens up the opportunity for the overt performance of narrated practices that yield individual economic benefits. Thus people have found creative ways (e.g. singing the national anthem in Ch'orti' Maya to sell handicrafts) to compete with others in using their identity for livelihood purposes. Moreover, the role of anthropology, via archaeological works, continues to be crucial in informing people's (indigenous and non-indigenous) understandings of ancestry and ritual practices.

While accessing archaeological works has enabled non-indigenous entrepreneurs to construct their own performances (specifically for tourism consumption) depicting ancient Maya society, indigenous activists have also used information from these works to re-created their own rituals for the purpose of increasing their cultural legitimacy. Ultimately, what makes narrated practices in the context of the tourism industry unique is that they can simultaneously stand for both activism and livelihood struggles because of the way identity has been commoditized and also some of the strategies that indigenous activists have used to mobilize their goals using the discourse of heritage.

CHAPTER 6: WHO AND WHAT DRIVES CH'ORTI' MAYA IDENTITY IN THE COMMUNITY?

1. Summary

This chapter moves the conversation of identity formation from political activism and tourism to indigenous villages or communities. Here I look at what identity(ies) look like in the community and the values that indigenous people assign to different kinds of identities. I argue that the discourses of identity born from political activism are mostly relevant in establishing a link between the communities and indigenous councils, because not all residents agree with the terms under which these discourses have been crafted. On the other hand, people feel strongly about community traditional practices and somewhat have a sense of unity but not necessarily under the name Ch'orti' Maya. The chapter examines the different views of people in the villages about the value of political activism for their communities. It also examines the role of the Catholic Church and non-governmental organizations in cultural revitalization initiatives, how villagers understand and work with these initiatives, and whether or not these initiative encourage people to identify as Ch'orti' Maya.

2. Constructing the Ch'orti' Maya Community

The community is important because it is typically seen as: a locus of *knowledge*, a site of *regulation* and management, a source of *identity* and a repository of 'tradition,' the embodiment of various *institutions* (say property rights) which necessarily turn on questions of representation, power, authority, governance and accountability, an object of *state control*, and a theater of *resistance* and struggle (of social movement, and potentially of *alternate visions of development*) (Watts & Peet 2004:24).

Too often the public eyes of the international media and academic community assimilate all Maya to a homogenizing category of a uniform identity. Many have noted the way archaeological and touristic discourses construct an image of the Maya as mysterious and living outside of time. Similarly, the discourses that celebrate the Maya as a culture and people surviving oppression, modernity, and capitalism through struggles against the national (and racist) elite, create a

monolithic stereotype that erases the heterogeneity and cultural diversity of the Maya (Castaneda 2004:37).

Since the rise of the field of Maya studies, several works have attempted to conceptualize the idea of the Maya community. There are two academic approaches that are useful in contextualizing the concept the Maya community for the case of the Ch'orti' Maya of Honduras. One of the academic approaches has to do with the discursive construction of the Maya in State, tourism, and academic discourses and the second one has to do with understandings of how the Maya define themselves in relationship the particular territories and communities they inhabit. As I explained in the methods section, my research examined three different indigenous communities within the Copán municipality: La Pintada, San Rafael, and El Corralito. The community of La Pintada is the closest to the town of Copán, hence it has become the most popular indigenous community for tourists due to its proximity. The majority of families in La Pintada are affiliated with CONIMCHH, but some families still belong to CONADICH. As indicated in previous chapters, La Pintada was the place where indigenous families had a violent encounter as a result of land use and titling disagreements, which caused the split of CONIMCHH into two different indigenous organizations. La Pintada is also where corn-husk dolls and textiles are produced and where tour guides take tourists to experience what they portray as the “traditional Maya community”.

San Rafael, the second community, is relatively close to La Pintada, yet receives no tourist visitors. It is home to the first indigenous high school in the region and the community emphasizes farming and conservation and is one of the most vibrant in terms of community traditions. Their *Festival del Elote*, highlighted in the introduction, is one of the most well attended and venerated indigenous practices in the region. The last community, El Corralito, is home to some of the most important and active indigenous activists. Candido Amador, the

indigenous martyr and founder of the Ch'orti' Maya Movement, was born in this community. El Corralito, receives a few tourists, mainly to visit the Natural Jewelry story illustrated in the previous chapter and is also where the monumental Casa del Sol is located. This is a building that the FHIS (Honduran Fund for Social Investment) donated to CONIMCHH and where the Ch'orti' Maya's elections are held every two years.

My research experience, from recruiting participants, interviewing, and conducting participant observation, was unique in each of these communities and enabled me to discern different layers of identity. While Ch'orti' Maya identity is promoted under political activism in all of the different contexts highlighted throughout this dissertation, each community and their internal dynamics produced their own particular identities (marked and unmarked). Those identities that were not marked (or promoted) as Ch'orti' Maya, played a bigger role in the life of the community than on the ethnic identity promoted outside of them.

3. Anthropological Approaches to the Maya Community

Anthropologist Diane Nelson contends that, until the mid-1980s, the word “Maya” constituted a discourse that circulated primarily among archaeologists (referring to the people who built the renowned Classic ceremonial centers such as Tikal in Guatemala, Copan in Honduras, and Palenque in Mexico, among others), linguists (who used the term to classify a group of interrelated languages), and state-sponsored advertising campaigns to attract tourists. The surge of Maya activism from Chiapas to Honduras has mobilized or redeployed the term to refer to the more than 20 different ethno-linguistic groups that comprise Mesoamerica's Maya population. Prior to the emergence of activism, as Nelson points out, these groups “traditionally identified primarily with their communities of origin, secondarily with their ethnolinguistic

group, and only distantly if at all as indigenous” (Nelson: 1999:5, cf. Eiss 2008:53-4). Therefore it is important to examine how different indigenous communities in Copán (and each community’ particularities) influence the production of both marked and unmarked identities.

The ethnographic work of John Watanabe (1992) in Guatemala constitutes an important contribution to understanding Maya identity as something shaped through emergent encounters and tacit cultural conventions that are shared among members of a community. Building from Watanabe’s work, I understand the tacit identities of different Ch’orti’ Maya communities as an important component of people’s sense of being and belonging. However, I will also look at how these tacit identities operate in relationship to (and sometimes even informed by) narrated identities produced through activism, the state and the tourism industry.

In working to assemble a dialectical concept of the Maya community, Watanabe focuses on the use of conventions or understandings between individuals. Watanabe argues that, for the Maya community he studied, it was the “life-long associations between individuals [that] tended to produce conventional understandings that were tacit, widely shared, highly personalized, and densely interwoven” (Watanabe 1992:11). In this view, Watanabe emphasizes peoples’ intimate knowledge of a particular locality and other individuals who share the same space and knowledge. For him, culture is also constructed through this interplay or the ongoing relationship between people, the place they inhabit, and the specific conditions and possibilities that may emerge from their interaction. As Watanabe (1992:12) explains, the Maya community constitutes “the emergent, relatively bounded sociality of individuals who, by virtue of continuity in time and contiguity in space, come to recognize common commitments and concerns as well as conventional ways of dealing with those concerns, regardless of how they change through time” (Watanabe 1992:12). The role of mutual commitments and concerns in the life of the community

is something that I find particularly important to understanding the identity of Ch'orti' Maya communities and their relationship with activism (I will expand on this topic late in this chapter).

Lastly, Maya communities, as examined by Watanabe, are not comprised of primordial cultural patterns but rather they are born from the pursuits, understandings, and opportunities that the larger world affords their members. Furthermore, the members' identity is also influenced by how they localize their engagement with the world. In other words a Maya worldview does not involve seeing the world in specific "Maya ways" but rather from specific Maya localities and along with "particularly Maya neighbors" (Watanabe 1992:15). In looking at the case of the Ch'orti' Maya of Copán, who share much history and cultural ties with their Guatemalan neighbors, the work of Watanabe is crucial to understanding the role that cultural continuities have played in indigenous people's understanding of themselves. However, I will argue that the ongoing and ever-changing conventions that indigenous people participate in are not simply informed (or localized) by the community as a territory, but rather these conventions are continually influenced by forces that operate both inside and outside of the community. I will argue that forces such as activism, the tourism industry, and the government have provided their own discourses and expectations of ethnicity and identity that have informed conventions or created new channels through which people can access their history and make such sense of their identity from their community and outside of it (Medina 2003). However, these channels are not available to all interlocutors in a community, which makes power an intrinsic angle through which we can make sense of different levels of engagement and understanding of identities according to an actor's positioning in the community.

4. The Maya Communities of Copán

Before the emergence of indigenous activism in Copán, the localities that in the present are known as indigenous communities or Ch'orti' communities, used to be known simply as *aldeas* or villages. I argue that Watanabe's theory of the Maya community would have been more applicable to understanding the villages of Copán prior to the surge of ethnic discourses. The birth of activism-based Ch'orti' Maya identity in Copán have added multiple kinds of discourses and understandings of identity that are unevenly accessed by different individuals. Anthropologist Tania Murray Li contends that "a group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous is not natural or inevitable, but neither is simply invented, adopted, or imposed. It is, rather, a *positioning* which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular pattern of engagement and struggle" (2004:339). Li's emphasis on "positioning" and "struggle" is intrinsic to understanding the case of the Ch'orti' Maya considering that transnational activists, in their work with local communities, capitalized on the concept of struggle in order to inspire many of the indigenous activists that were born at the onset of the Ch'orti' Maya Movement. Positioning was intrinsic here as activists targeted specific rights-based discourses (e.g. ancient Maya ancestry and tradition).

As these discourses have traveled to different communities, they have been put to use in creative ways as communities have started to establish themselves as something other than the *aldeas* or villages for which they were known before the surge of indigenous activism. This is important because there is an extensive sector of *aldeas* in the north part of the Copán Valley where people do not identify as indigenous. Establishing themselves as Ch'orti' Maya communities, has enabled people to set themselves apart from *mestizo* villages, but these

communities themselves have crafted their own identities according to the different opportunities afforded to them through different relationships, histories, and geographies. For example, all indigenous communities in Copán affiliated with CONIMCHH or CONADIMCH may be labeled as Ch'orti' Maya, but those communities geographically located closest to the Guatemalan border are considered to be (even in discussion among indigenous people) “more traditional” or *mas indigena*. Moreover, as I will explain later, other communities have become known for their emphasis in specific initiatives (e.g. San Rafael's *festival del elote* or El Corralito's activism work).

Another way to examine identity in Ch'orti' Maya communities is through the theory of articulation developed by sociologist Stuart Hall. Hall looks at how certain ideological pieces are weaved together within a discourse under specific conditions. For Hall, what is important is understating if and how certain ideological elements are or are not articulated in specific encounters, by specific subjects; enabling one to ask

how an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the necessary and inevitable thoughts which belong to it; it enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position (Hall 1996:141-142 quote in Li 2004:342).

Hall's idea of an ideology discovering a subject, rather than the other way around, is problematic in the sense that it does not account for agency (i.e. who is actually enacting the ideologies?), however, it enables us to look at the discourse of identity within and beyond the community. A useful application constitutes paying attention to the role of national and transnational activism in how certain discourses are articulated and encouraged. For instance, Li contends that “Activists draw upon the arguments, idioms, and images supplied by the international indigenous rights movement... But the discourse of indigenous people has not simply been imported. It has, rather, been inflected and reworked as it has traveled” (Li

2004:345). Drawing from this statement, I contend that Ch'orti' Maya identity in the communities, rather than just representing a tacit understanding of the world constructed by mutually intelligible conventions between individuals in a community and their neighbors, is also constantly “inflected” and encouraged by leaders and activists to ensure the survival of the ethnic group. The ethnic ideology for the Ch'orti' Maya, however, has not simply empowered people to make sense of their historical situation and think beyond their “socio-economic or class location”, instead, people invoke certain ideologies of ethnicity and ancestry in their encounters—within and outside of their communities—with other individuals and institutions who also set their own expectations for individuals.

Ethnic ideologies at the community level, rather than discovering people, compete with other ideologies of class, race, and gender that still play a fundamental role in how people understand themselves, others, and their world. For example, the majority of participants from all three communities in my sample, when asked about the ethnic differences between their communities and the people who live in Copán (known as *mestizos*), understood their differences in terms of class. “Us poor people live here, and the rich live over there” said one of the participants pointing toward the direction of the town of Copán. In addition to understanding ethnic differences in terms of class disparities, people also mentioned differences in how people dressed, spoke, and their attitude. Many indigenous people mentioned the concept of humility, arguing that indigenous people were more humble than *Copanecos* (people from Copán). When I chose the three communities for my research, in addition to being interested in what kinds of differences they possessed in terms of embracing identity discourses from activism and tourism, I was also interested in how members of the communities understood themselves *vis-à-vis* people from the town of Copán.

I was interested in differences as a result of how communities are homogenized in tourism, state, and activism discourses. People's collective identity is something that came up predominantly in state and activism discourses referring to how people self-identified and felt about being both indigenous and Ch'orti' Maya with the emergence of activism. In my research, however, I found not only different understandings of identity or identities between communities, but I also found that these were influenced people's different struggles and their position in their communities. Scholars such as Floya Anthias (2002:491) have argued that "the concept of 'identity' is of limited heuristic value... [and] that it may instead be more useful to deploy the notion of narratives of location and positionality for addressing the range of issues normally thought to be about collective identity" (Floya Anthias 2002:491). This is reminiscent of intersectionality and our need to understand how different narratives intersect as indigenous people's lived experiences with identity do not fit into one category. Indeed, for the indigenous communities examined, I found that their subjectivity was informed by different "narratives of location" and also people's positionality in their own communities and *vis-à-vis* non-indigenous Copaneco society. As I pointed out earlier, different from the identity lived in political activism and the tourism industry, there are many different angles and components that make identity at the community level more complex. The following sections will provide a series of vignettes illustrating such complexity.

5. Diversity of Identities in Ch'orti' Maya Communities

Drawing from Watanabe's work, I contend that the three different indigenous communities examined made sense of their identities based on the proximities and territorial relationships they have established among themselves or with other people who have inhabited

and also visited their communities. For instance, while in different communities, a person's understanding of their identity may be overtly influenced by community leaders, who, in all communities, encourage people to not be afraid to identify as indigenous. Different understandings of their identity may also vary according to factors such as, their involvement in activism, their relationship with their indigenous councils (both regional and rural), and their relationship with non-indigenous society. I did find that geographic location and the particular dynamics of each community played different roles in how people navigated different identities. Members of the community of El Corralito, for instance, have had longer and friendlier ties with people from Copán in comparison to the other two communities, hence, even though some of the most influential activists have come out of this community, many of the residents are not comfortable identifying as indigenous and see themselves as Copanecos. Perhaps more than any other community, people from El Corralito felt more ambivalent about identifying as Ch'orti' Maya because, as I will expand upon in the following section, people originally identified as Ch'orti' Maya as a result of being affiliated with CONIMCHH but many people have left the organization as a result of land disputes.

People from La Pintada are much more straightforward about identifying as Ch'orti' Maya. However, this identification is associated with tourists' expectations. La Pintada is in close proximity to the Copán archaeological site and it is also home to Los Sapos archaeological site which draws a significant amount of tourists. Tourists do not interact with all members of the community; they interact for the most part with handicraft vendors. According to participants, when they interact with handicraft vendors, they ask questions such as, "why don't you speak the Ch'orti' Maya language? Why don't you wear typical attire? Do you visit the Maya ruins? If not, why?" Efforts to bring the Ch'orti' Maya closer to the ancient Maya occurs both through tourists

expectations and through activism work. As one of the participants explained, “they [indigenous leaders] always tell us that the [ancient] Maya are our ancestors but we always forget”. Another participant said that he only tells rich people and tourists that he is Maya Ch’orti’. A third participant explained that his community’s leader tells him that in order to sell more souvenirs to tourists he needs to dress up using traditional clothing. Moreover, as a result of tourists visiting this area, other members of the community, such as a non-indigenous elementary school teacher who moved there, have reacted in creative ways to help the community by coming up with the idea that children should sing the Honduran National Anthem and recite the Our Father in Ch’orti’ Maya. Lastly, tourists ask people about the name of their community and ask women to show them how to cook traditional meals. In comparison to the other two communities, La Pintada has been constructed as a tourist destination, showcased in tourist brochures, and decorated with visual imagery (e.g. maps and murals) that establish a connection between the community and the ancient Maya (See below images).



Figure 23. Map of La Pintada created for Tourists. It shows its proximity to Los Sapos Archaeological site and the places to buy handicrafts. Photo by the author



Figure 24. La Pintada's school mural depicting the Altar Q, a famous Classic Maya structure of the Copan Dynasty. Photo by the author

In contrast to La Pintada, the other two communities have been exposed to ancestry workshops sponsored by the state and World Bank workshops but due to the lack on tourism, they do not feel pressured to perform their identity. Another important difference between the three communities examined was the different kinds of relationships they have established with the landowners. El Corralito, for instance, was never controlled by a sole land owner, instead people have owned small parcels of land because this particular community benefited from the Ejido systems since the 1950s. Not depending on a landowner for subsistence means that people do not show the same sense of fear and intimidation toward non-indigenous people as members from the two other communities do. Hence their identity was mostly tied to activism. For example residents there show a strong sense of pride about the fact that Candido Amador—the founder of indigenous activism in Copán—was born there and also the fact that the Templo del Sol, the colossal indigenous conference center (see chapter 3) is located in the community. On the other hand, in La Pintada I found that people continued to maintain close ties with their former *patrones* and even continued to work for them even when they had acquired their own

land. The patrón/peasant relationship constituted an important part of people's identities, ways of viewing the world, and ways of subsisting before the emergence of activism, and thus people have had a hard time detaching from these relationships. The community of San Rafael, on the other hand, has not had the same cordial relationships with the two non-indigenous land owners who used to own most of the land in the community. Hence when people remember their life prior to the arrival of activism, they speak about being treated like slaves, living in horrible conditions, or having to ask permission from the land owner to be able to do anything, including visiting the town of Copán. More than the other two communities, people from San Rafael showed the most support for indigenous activism. If La Pintada's identity is influenced by tourism, and El Corralito show signs of ambivalence, San Rafael's identity seems to revolve around its strong connections with the Catholic Church, the creation of new farming rituals and the maintenance of old traditions (See figure below). For instance when I asked participants about their identity, they often mentioned being affiliated with CONIMCHH and their farming and conservation initiatives (I expand on this in the next section).



Figure 25. Village home mural. In the village of San Rafael one could find home drawings such as this depicting people's affiliation with the Catholic Church (I am Catholic) as well as their support of the environment. In this mural a family depicts its corn, coffee, and flower plantations, their animals, a woman carrying firewood, and a farmer with his traditional water bottle (tecomate). Photo by the author

Another interesting difference between the communities was the degree of distrust that people assigned to the indigenous organizations. More than any other community, people from El Corralito voiced their concerns over cases of corruption among activists; they complained about people who were kicked out of the organization for not being able to pay the yearly fees and how their lands were taken away from them. As one of the participants explained, “They took the land away from my father who was very old, around 72 or 79 years old.” When I asked why CONIMCHH took away his land, he responded: “He was not able to pay the 120 Lempiras (6 dollars) membership fee. Two or three days after they took away his land, he died of depression, because of that, because they took away his land.” Two other participants also expressed frustration about this incident. Some other participants expressed disappointment at how land distribution has been handled by different indigenous leaders. For instance, one participant argued, “The same land that was given to some of us was also taken away and given to other people... that is an issue of control, because I had my piece of land... that the first leader gave me, he was good to me, but the next leader gave it to someone else.” For the other two communities, although there were some isolated incidents regarding land distribution conflicts, the majority of participants expressed their support for their organizations.

6. Finding Common Threads Between Communities

6.1 Land Struggles

Several observations and responses from participants revealed common attitudes, beliefs, and practices between residents of all three communities. The first one is a topic that I have addressed throughout this dissertation; it constitutes the association of being indigenous, first and

foremost, with being affiliated with an indigenous organization. In all three communities, people equated being Ch'orti' Maya with being part of their indigenous organization. One of the problems with this outcome, is the fact that people also argued that being affiliated with an organization also had to do with having access to land, in other words, participants talked about land as one of the major motivations for joining the Ch'orti' Maya Movement. As a result, there is a contradiction between indigenous leaders who encourage people to identify as Ch'orti' Maya, yet discourage others from joining their political movement arguing that there is no more room to join because there is no more land to be distributed. One participant explained that there will be more space to join the organizations as soon as the Honduran government buys more land for the Ch'orti' Maya.

Land struggles also constitute a gendered issue, as explained in Chapter 4. For example, single women, even if they were involved in activism, were not given land, since land transfers are typically only given to men. As one female participant explained, she was a member of CONIMCHH for 3 years, was active in the organization, and paid all her fees, but still did not get any land. Gendered struggles in all three communities were not limited to land distribution. In all three communities, female participants expressed their frustration about being excluded from the rural council community meetings where only men were encouraged to attend. Most women have no say in the decisions that are made at the community level and have to make room for their concerns at CONIMCHH's regional meetings. The support that women receive at the national and regional level of activism is futile when such support is rejected at the community level.

6.2 Identity Ambivalence

Another common finding across communities was people's ambivalence when referring to themselves as Ch'orti' Maya. When I asked people how they identify, many people used 2 or 3 other identifications before saying Ch'orti' Maya. For instance, people would quickly respond with the words *Indio* and *Indigena*. Although, as I explained earlier, the word *Indio* used to carry a negative connotation, people in the communities (as well as non-indigenous people in the town of Copán) now use it in the form of jokes or as slang (the equivalent would be the word "dude"). The word *Indigena*, on the other hand, is used more in relation to activism and as a source of pride and support for the movement. For example, even when I was not asking people about their identity, the expression "somos *Indigenas*" (we are indigenous) is something that would come up in conversations when people talked about activism, their rights, and their struggles with accessing land.

Another lesson for me as anthropologist was my assumptions about the kinds of labels used in the communities. For example, the word identity (translated in Spanish as *identidad*) was problematic. Another prominent answer to what people understood as "identity" had to do with being Honduran. If people did not understand when I asked them "How do you identity yourself?" I would say, "What does it mean to you to have an identity?" Many participants responded, "It means having my national identification card" or being "Honduran" because one of the uses of the word *identidad* is the national identification card. When I got this response, I would follow up the question with, "What does it mean to you to belong to an ethnic group?" Some did not know what it meant to be part of an ethnic group, and the majority of people answered that it meant being affiliated with CONIMCHH. However, only a few participants used the word Ch'orti' Maya as a first answer when referring to identity unless I would mention the

category. Getting some of these answers made me realize that: a) the concepts that are formulated in academia (e.g. ethnicity and identity) may not be relevant or known by many people in communities hence their use is sometimes problematic, and b) a few people did know about these concepts due to having a longer history of involvement with activism and being used to answering questions about identity.

Another factor with regard to my questions on identity that created confusion among some participants was the fact that their parents wore traditional attire and spoke the language but did not identify as Ch'orti' Maya. Many participants argued that their parents knew they were Ch'orti' Maya but did not identify as such because it was not necessary and they were afraid of violence. As one participant explained, her parents "were Ch'orti' but never identified as such... because they were afraid since in the past they used to kill indigenous people." This is a sentiment shared, for the most part, among people whose parents migrated to Honduras from Guatemala escaping the civil war (c.f. Metz 2008). Although some parents did identify as Ch'orti' Maya, they did not tell their children that they were Ch'orti' Maya. One participant explained, "Yes, they identified [as Ch'orti' Maya], but us, we had no idea, but the organizations began to discover that indeed we were [Ch'orti' Maya]... We had lost that, when you do not know, you lose your identity... [and] you stop belonging to your race, but through the institutions, through their teachings, we began to rescue those ideas." Once again, here it is important to consider how categories or labels such as Ch'orti' Maya may be unified in identity discourses (deployed by the state, activists, and the tourism industry) with cultural practices, but in the past these cultural practices were passed on from parents to their children without necessarily being associated with the term Ch'orti' Maya. Thus, it is not surprising that for many people, being Ch'orti' Maya simply means to belong to an indigenous organization.

People also expressed ambivalence when talking about ancestry-based identity. Even though members of the communities who were heavily involved in activism were likely to speak of the ancient Maya as their ancestors and as the root of their identity, several people throughout the 3 communities had little knowledge about the ancient Maya or did not know if they were their ancestors. For instance, when one of my research collaborators asked a participant about what the ancient Maya meant to him, he said he did not know. The interview continued: “Do you think they were your ancestors?”, “Mmm, no”. “But do you think you are a descendant of the Maya?”, “Well, that is what they say.” “Who says that?” “Well, that is something I have heard, about *Indios*, because we are descendants of the Ch’orti’ Maya *Indios*.” In this case the participant acknowledges that he has heard about his Maya ancestry but it is uncomfortable confirming the claim and instead uses the word *Indio* and Ch’orti’ Maya. Instead, the participant uses whatever knowledge or understanding available to her to make sense of these claims to ancestry imposed on her by others. In other cases, people talk about the ancient Maya using popular community narratives such as: “they were stronger than us”, “they ate a lot of vegetables”, “they conducted sacrifices with children”, or “they performed rituals”. The participants who were most informed about the ancient Maya were also people who used to work in archaeological projects and shared what archaeologists told them with other members of their community.

6.3 Understanding Identity(ies)

One of the oldest participants I interviewed among the three communities was Don Bernardino who was 86 years old at the time. Here the problem of labels and assumptions came up again. When I asked him about what identity meant to him, he responded: “Identity is the

only safe thing that you can have. Without identity, we are like a horse without a horseshoe”. It took me a while to realize he was referring to his Honduran identity card as a sign of security and a sense of belonging to a place. He was born in Guatemala and moved to Honduras with his parents when he was little. His parents spoke Ch’orti’ Maya only and he grew up speaking a few words. Although he did not know what it meant to be part of an ethnic group he remembered that the first time he heard about the concept of being Ch’orti’ Maya was in the 1930s and it was used to refer to the people, who like his parents and grandparents, spoke the Ch’orti’ Maya language. For Don Bernandino, being affiliated with CONIMCHH did not mean that he is Ch’orti’ Maya or that it is part of his identity, it means that he no longer depended on landowners for work and he could work on his own land. In this sense, identity is not something that required articulation for him, but rather something he experienced.

Indeed, for most of the participants interviewed, being part of an indigenous organization is the ultimate proof that they are Ch’orti’ Maya. For instance, one participant responded when asked about her identity, “the moment you become affiliated [to an indigenous organization], you belong to the Ch’orti’ Maya ethnic group, even if you do not speak the language, but we are [Ch’orti’ Maya] because we live inside of the territory of the Ch’orti’ Maya ethnic group”. Living inside of a territory inhabited by other indigenous people is something that came up in all three communities. Also, the idea of being granted an identity by affiliation and the fulfillment of certain obligations (*cargos*) is something that people take very seriously. What is interesting about these obligations or duties is that people used to fulfill them before the emergence of indigenous activism either through their role with the Catholic Church or their relationship with the municipal government as I explained in Chapter 2. Although there is little relationship in the present between communities and municipal governments, the Catholic Church still works

closely with community leaders in organizing people and distributing different responsibilities in the performance of ceremonies. People also fulfill certain *cargos* for their indigenous organizations, which are separate from the Catholic Church. Every two years, different members of the communities take turns in fulfilling different duties related to either representing their communities during regional meetings at the indigenous council or being part of the rural council.

For people, being affiliated represents the ethnic boundaries; the cultural content is filled in later as people acquire land, bring back old traditions and create new ones. People's feelings of obligations or *cargos* is reminiscent of Watanabe's idea of how people mutually construct their world. When I asked one participant about what it meant to be Ch'orti' Maya, he responded, "it means to fulfill the obligations, to pay our dues as we call them, and also to be in agreement with the activities that the rural and national councils organize, be present at all of the meeting, and all of the activities organized by the indigenous council".

Although it derives from being affiliated with an indigenous council, identity also informs different kinds of subjectivities, making Ch'orti' Maya identity a complex concept to define. Self-esteem and gender are two important components that are often tied to identity. A female participant explained, for instance, that being part of an indigenous organization and receiving different kinds of training provide her with her identity as a woman. "We began to value ourselves," she argued, "to know that even us women, we are invaluable, because before [being part of the organization] nobody placed value on us or what we did, but today they do". This statement is important for understanding, as I explained in Chapter 4, why women, despite all of the struggles they face, are proud to be the face of Ch'orti' Maya culture in encounters with non-indigenous society.

Environmental identity was another factor that came out of being organized as indigenous and Ch'orti' Maya. For example, as I pointed out earlier, when I asked some community residents about the identity work that leaders have done in their communities, they immediately spoke effusively about farming and caring for the environment; these were the elements that they valued the most from the work that their leaders brought from the councils to the communities. For instance, one participant explained: "we know that we are Ch'orti' because, first, we have the roots of our ancestors, and then we farm corn and beans, and we take good care of our Mother Earth; we recognize that we have a Mother Earth which in Ch'orti' we call *pacha mama*²³ and that is what gives us our identity". The work that leaders take to their communities is important to how people adopt specific ideas or value specific elements under the umbrella of indigenous organizations. Leaders also use the concept of "receiving support" in order to convince people to identify as indigenous. Multiple people recount stories of their leaders telling them to identify as indigenous in order to receive help from the state or development organizations. In other words, Ch'orti' Maya identity may only be relevant to certain individuals as they are required to be articulated for the sake of interacting or engaging with non-indigenous forces.

Lastly, and perhaps at the heart of communities' identities reside indigenous ritualistic practices. These are at once part of and separate from indigenous activism. One of the assumptions coming from non-indigenous society is that the Ch'orti' Maya do not constitute a legitimate ethnic group if they do not practice their traditions collectively. Thus, activism has emphasized the introduction of new rituals such as the *Festival del Elote* and encouraged residents' participation in other traditions such as the Day of the Dead (known among the

²³ It is interesting that the participant understood this phrase as Ch'orti' Maya since it is something borrowed from Inca mythology and used mostly by Andean indigenous people. It also says something about how activism discourses travel transnationally.

Ch'orti' Maya as T'zikins). However, I found that in all the three communities I researched, as well as several other communities I visited, indigenous traditions of ritual character are practiced both collectively (as a community) and also individually as in people's homes.



Figure 26. A resident of San Isidro Village at her home. In the back through the door one can see an altar that she built to celebrate certain traditions such as Tzikins and the Day of the Cross. Photo by the author.

People have continued to practice their own individualized traditions, such as farming according to the cycles of the moon, taking care of health problems using beliefs inherent in their communities, and their own, individualized death rituals (e.g. the nine day prayers following person's death), and the construction of their own altars to venerate different holidays throughout the year. One surprising finding was how big of a role the Catholic Church played in the

maintenance of ritualistic practices both new and old. When I asked people about the prominence of ritualistic traditions, they often referenced Day of the Dead and farming rituals, which are organized strictly through the Catholic Church and for the community. For instance, the famous Tzikin (Day of the Dead) are always organized by the members of the communities who also represent these communities with the Catholic Church. As one can see in the image below, the rituals involve a combination of Christian and pre-Hispanic elements.



Figure 27. Tzikin altar at the community of El Carrizalon. Photo by Gerardo Torres.

People's increasing participation in these practices have helped indigenous activists make a case for the ethnic legitimacy of their communities, and thus it makes sense that at events such as the *Festival del Elote* leaders would invite prominent public officials and members of the tourism industry in order to assert their legitimacy. While these events are important for the

community and are meant to be open to the public, there are other collective rituals that are practiced in more intimate settings. For instance, I found that during times of crisis in some communities, leaders would gather a few prominent people in the communities and travel to the forested areas in their village where they would perform prayers all night in order to help with the crisis. In the present, people still travel to designated water spring areas to pray during environmental crisis (e.g. drought or heavy rain). People also still rely heavily on *rezadores* (prayer shamans) who perform private rituals for the sick using the same kind of materials that other Maya communities use in places like Guatemala. Unless someone asks about these practices in specific or is there to witness them, these are not advertised or voluntarily shared by leaders as something that is part of Ch'orti' Maya identity. There are part of the community and people's shared "cosmological understanding of life" (Medina 2003). In other words, there are practices that indigenous activists, through the advice of transnational activists and anthropologists, have articulated as Ch'orti' Maya as a way to assert their legitimacy before the Honduran state, but many other traditions, as I will explain in the next chapter are practiced without the need of being articulated as any form of identity.

7. Making Sense of Different Subjectivities

Throughout this chapter I have explored people's narratives of identity that compliment and sometimes contradict some of the discourses and expectations of Ch'orti' Maya identity formulated through political activism, the tourism industry, and the state. What is evident is the need to articulate certain identities only as far as these identities are expected by non-indigenous societies or they play specific roles in how indigenous communities relate to other actors. At the heart of my observations, and as my next chapter will address more fully, are those practices that

in a way give communities some form of identity that does not need to be articulated. John Watanabe's work understood Maya communities with an emphasis on people's mutual understandings of themselves based on place and long standing community duties that have persisted despite other social changes experienced by communities. For the Ch'orti' Maya, even though they have been historically displaced, their communities dismantled, and their people massively absorbed as peasant workers for haciendas, there is tacit sense of community identity that exists outside of the articulations enacted for activism.

Ch'orti' Maya activism has accomplished some significant work in matters of indigenous consciousness building, in promoting indigenous identity outside of communities, in emphasizing the reintroduction of cultural practices and creating new ones. However, the kind of collective identity that is expected by activists, and the kind of cultural content and display that is expected by tourists and the state has only contributed to making identity in the communities an amalgamation of rich and diverse discourses and understandings, some of which are not voluntarily associated with a Ch'orti' Maya identity. Some of the discourses that are articulated, are indeed useful in helping people work out power struggles—especially in access to resources.

As Watts and Peets (2004:25) contend

forms of community regulations and access to resources are invariably wrapped up with questions of identity... these forms of identity (articulated in the name of custom and tradition) are not stable... and may be put to use... by particular constituencies with particular interests to the extent that communities can be understood as differing fields of power—communities are internally differentiated in complex political, social and economic way (Watts & Peet 2004:25).

However, I would also argue that not all practices and traditions are embedded in struggles to access resources; many different practices, as this chapter has shown, do not need to be articulated as culture or identity but are rather implicitly practiced as the way of life in the community.

Indeed, Ch'orti' Maya communities, especially as they have emerged from political activism, have been constructed amid “differing fields of power” where articulating an identity is strictly linked to a person's position in the community or specific needs and circumstances that necessitate such articulation. However, it does not mean that all identities need to be articulated. Once again, intersectionality is useful in understanding how identity may be situationally deployed. For instance, an educated activist with extensive knowledge of the history of colonization and the ancient Maya may be better positioned to proudly embrace an identity based on ancestry (which resonates well with the expectations of tourists and the state), whereas someone with little access to education or experience in activism, may feel ambivalent about claiming an identity or even making sense of what the words “Ch'orti' Maya” mean, but they may practice traditions that are important to the identity of the community but may not need to be articulated as Ch'orti' Maya.

In another example, a person who has had a bad experience with indigenous activists or councils may choose to stop identifying as Ch'orti' Maya when they are no longer associated with activism but they continued to identify as indigenous. “Struggle” is a word that aptly captures the reasons behind people's need to articulate their identity. An articulated Ch'orti' Maya identity in this sense has as much to do with a sense of belonging via becoming organized with indigenous councils as it has with being able to farm indigenous lands for the first time, to feeling valued as a woman, to remembering when your parents spoke Ch'orti' Maya, and knowing about the history of the ancient Maya while recognizing that they were your ancestors.

The power of knowledge, the role of positionality, and value of articulation, constitute important elements of how identities are understood and performed inside and outside indigenous communities. However, parallel to these reworked identities are those tacit

performances, conventions, and unmarked cultural practices that are mutually understandable to the members of the community and curiously situated outside those activism discourses of identity. Those mutually understandable acts are what make each community unique and what situates them beyond the homogeneous ethnic discourse with which they have been labeled. Such unmarked practices are no more genuine or legitimate than the ones overtly performed for non-indigenous society, but I argue that they help us understand how certain identities are experienced as a way of life. Ultimately, as the next chapter will explain, these unmarked practices play a central role in helping address problems beyond the milieu of activism—including solving crises such violence, illness, natural disasters, and poverty. Throughout the dissertation I have examined how different historical moments have influenced the enactment of different identities. The emergence of marked ethnic identities constitute a unique moment for indigenous people in their establishment as the Ch'orti' Maya ethnic group. However, looking closely at how both marked and unmarked identities are enacted, enables us to see a more complex picture of identities and how they are (and have been for a long time) intimately tied to indigenous people's economic struggles.

CONCLUSION: EXPERIENCING IDENTITY AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLASS AND TRADITION

I met Profesor Adalid Martinez Perdomo, a prominent Honduran anthropologist, during an archaeology lecture in Copán. El Profe, as people call him affectionately, was a crucial actor in helping and encouraging indigenous communities mobilize when Profesor Lazaro Flores took him there in the 1980s. Martinez Perdomo wrote one of the first ethnographies about the Ch'orti' Maya titled *La Fuerza de la Sangre Ch'orti'* (The Strength of the Ch'orti' Mayan Blood). He is charismatic and loved throughout all the Ch'orti' Mayan communities. His research emphasizes cultural traditions, and he uses these cultural traditions to highlight the differences between ethnic groups throughout Honduras. I became close to El Profe Martinez Perdomo and learned many things from him. He took me on several trips to communities, which are known for being the “most traditional” ones among the Ch'orti' Maya region of Honduras. I had already been working in Copán for six months, when he first took me to San Antonio Tapexco. This trip, as well as subsequent visits to this community, completely challenged my assumptions and understanding of the Mayan communities.

In the last chapter, I wrote about the different kinds of identity discourses that have surfaced in the communities as a result of political activism, the state, and the tourism industry. I briefly touched on different community elements related to tacit conventions located at the margins of, and not as relevant to, political activism. I also touched briefly on people's struggles and construction of boundaries based on class differences. These two elements were particularly salient at the community of San Antonio Tapexco. As I became more familiar with the role that these elements played in dynamics of the community as well as the relationship between Martinez Perdomo and its residents, I realized that there was something special about certain

community practices in San Antonio Tapexco, which were also shared by other communities. Martinez Perdomo had been writing about these practices for years; yet they never made their way to state or tourism discourses as important elements of Ch'orti' Maya identity and culture. I had accidentally witnessed some of these practices in other communities and wondered why they were not mentioned by people when they talked about cultural practices and Ch'orti' Maya identity. Then, I understood that people were aware of outsider's expectations of culture and identity so they would always mention the same two rituals—*festival del elote* and *tzikins*—as symbols of Ch'orti' Maya culture. These elements were emphasized because anthropologists supporting indigenous activism had written about them and encouraged people to talk about them when sharing their narratives about identity and culture. However, there were others that, for some reason, were not included in people's narratives. The following is one of them.

I was once invited to serve as a graduation *padrino* (Godfather) for a Ch'orti' Maya teacher in the community of Monte Los Negros. After the ceremony, which took place in the town of Copán, we drove several miles back to the community located on the southern mountain range adjacent to the Copán Valley. The sun had already set by the time we reached the community. The hosts began preparing the table to serve the food while other people from the community continued to arrive to celebrate the graduation. I stepped outside of the house for a minute to talk to some people who were bringing more food for the celebration, when far in the distance I saw a red light moving really fast across the mountain and moving in the direction of the house. I quickly went to get Doña Berta—the host—and asked her what the light was. She laughed and asked me to wait until the light came by the house. It was a group of people carrying a figure of baby Jesus with lit red candles. Each house in the village had the responsibility of hosting the baby Jesus procession every night until December 24th when the procession is taken

to the community's church. This was a practice that involved the participation of all members of the community as much as the *Festival del Elote* but was never talked about as a Ch'orti' Maya or a community practice. When I asked Doña Berta, she argued that this practice was only relevant to her community in particular and not tied to activism. I started to notice similar practices in other communities.

1. The Traditional Communities

San Antonio Tapexco, similar to El Carrizalón, are communities located far away from the town of Copán and sometimes difficult to access by car during the rainy season. Hence, even though they are known as two of the most traditional indigenous communities in the Copán region, people (including tourists) have shown little interest in visiting them. When I first visited San Antonio Tapexco with Martínez Perdomo, the first thing that surprised me was how the community had established its physical boundaries. There was a big wooden gate guarding the entrance to the community like I had not seen in any other community before. Words imprinted on the gate read “This is the community of San Antonio Tapexco” (see figure below).



Figure 28. Gate at the entrance of the community of San Antonio Tapexco. Photo by the author.

I also noticed that the houses in this community looked different than the other communities I had visited. Most of the houses were made from adobe and had thatched roofs rather than cement blocks and clay tiles like in other communities. According to Martinez Perdomo, it was because this community was more traditional. I later found out that it was because members of this community did not have as much resources or access to development projects as the other communities closer to Copán did.

I felt such a strong sense of remoteness and isolation when we arrived to this community. I had just finished reading Mexican author Juan Rulfo's celebrated novel *Pedro Paramo*, which constitutes one of the best explorations of peasant/landowners relationships in rural Mexico and is a nuanced critique of class disparities. Being there in San Antonio Tapexco reminded me of Rulfo's heartbreaking descriptions. The community is located atop one of the mountain ranges to the west of Copán bordering Guatemala. From the community, one can see the Copán river flow through a small valley into Guatemalan lands. We parked the car as far as we could go and walked the rest of the way to visit the house of Ernesto Zúchite, one of the most controversial indigenous activists among the Ch'orti' Maya who had initially advocated for the split of CONIMCHH into two different organizations. It was Martinez Perdomo's research site so when we arrived there, I just sat and listened to him ask all the questions. From the onset of the conversation, Martinez Perdomo's questions were about cultural traditions. However, Zúchite's responses always ended up addressing questions of class struggles. One of Zúchite's most revealing comments was the difference between Ch'orti' Maya communities that used to be *apatronadas* or controlled by a non-indigenous landowner and those that were not. In my research I had noticed the difference between certain communities' relationship to non-indigenous society and the Catholic Church; but I had not made the connection about the

influence that former landowners may have exerted on these relationships. My assumption was that if a community had become independent of a landowner's control, they would do anything to cut ties with them and the institutions (e.g. the Catholic Church) with which these landowners were also associated. Instead, I found that people did not really cut ties with either, but rather found a way to remain connected with them and found some form of support for their activism initiatives—including the re-introduction of new farming rituals.

Communities that were *not apatronadas* on the other hand, had a harder transition working with indigenous councils or receiving help from development projects. But these communities, such as El Carrizalón and San Antonio Tapexco, were admired among other indigenous communities for being more traditional or even more Ch'orti' Maya. Class struggles in these communities are more evident than in the other communities I observed. I would argue that class struggles take precedence in people's understanding of themselves in relation to non-indigenous society. However, Martínez Perdomo contends that the power of cultural traditions and beliefs is what influence people to differentiate themselves from non-indigenous society. For instance, the fact that indigenous people in these communities bury their dead by wrapping them up in *petates*²⁴ rather than using coffins, is something Martínez Perdomo sees as a sign of resistance to non-indigenous practices rather than an issue of economic limitations.

Martínez Perdomo continued to talk to Zúchite while his wife served us a plate of black beans with freshly made corn tortillas. Zúchite told us that prior to the indigenous movement most communities were organized using class-based approaches such as joining *campesino* or peasant movements. The problem, he argued, was that these organizations, especially the National Association of Honduran Peasants (ANACH), never gave indigenous communities their

²⁴ These are thing bedrolls made out of the fibers of certain palm trees. Petates, which are usually of rectangular shape, are either placed on the floor or attached to wooden sticks in the form of a bed.

land titles. They would keep and sometimes lose the land titles, he said, because that was the only way they could ensure that indigenous people continued to pay the membership fees. I realized that many communities, including the ones I researched (as I showed in the last chapter), were dealing with the same kind of class-based struggles within their own indigenous organizations. I contend that we need to pay careful attention to these class-based struggles not only in how they inform people's subjectivities in regards to new conceptions of the self, introduced by activism, but also in how we, as scholars, make sense of these struggles.

In an effort to understand cultural traditions or document some sort of core to indigenusness, many Honduran anthropologists with whom I interacted understand certain indigenous ways of life as forms of resistance. Sleeping in *petates*, for instance, as well as using medicinal plants, consuming certain foods, or building their houses using particular construction materials were all seen as forms of resistance by these anthropologists. While I agree that certain traditions play an important role in helping indigenous people claim an ethnic difference in comparison to *mestizo* or non-indigenous society, I argue that we should carefully scrutinize how and why these practices are performed. We left Zúchite's house and continued to walk in search of a local spiritual leader for the Iglesia Milenaria del Nuevo Siglo (New Millenium Church), a church that has become, for many local anthropologists, one of the most salient proofs of cultural Maya continuity in the region (I will expand on this later). On our way there, we stopped by the house of Doña Tiba, who had been a close collaborator to Martinez Perdomo for many years. She lives in a very small house. A thin *petate wall* divides the tiny kitchen from the rest of the house consisting of another small room. I asked Doña Tiba if she lived there alone, but she said her entire family lived there.

During another trip, we went to see Doña Tiba, and I talked to one of her sons. A few weeks back, I had been talking to another Honduran anthropologist who told me that it was customary for Ch'orti' Maya families to all sleep in one small room in their adobe houses. He said this was tradition. I asked Doña Tiba's son about this. He said that indeed 13 people sleep in the tiny room of their house some in plain *petates* and others in *petate* beds called *catres*. He said they slept and lived under those conditions *debido a que no podemos* (because we can't afford anything else). He also said that they would rather have mattresses than *petates* because it got really cold to sleep on the floor during the winter.



Figure 29. Typical kitchen at San Antonio Tapexco. Doña Tiba's kitchen similar to those in other houses throughout the Copán communities. Photo by the author.



Figure 30. Typical house of San Antonio Tapexco. Photo by the author.

During a third trip to San Antonio Tapexco, we were supposed to meet Domingo, one of Doña Tiba's son who was going to take us to the Nuevo Siglo Church. The following, is an excerpt from my ethnographic journal from this experience that also challenged my assumptions about tradition versus class struggles.

El Profe and I walked toward the house. He went ahead of me. When I got there I found Domingo under the influence; his eyes red; as though he had been crying... His mother seemed completely calmed; she was destuzando some maiz Nuevo (removing the husks from the corn). The rest of the family was in the little kitchen. El Profe said to me "Domingo se nos adelantó" or he went ahead of us and started drinking before we got there. Then Doña Tiba said, "We have been at a velorio (funeral) all night." "Where?" asked El Profe. "Here in our house" she said. El Profe's face immediately changed. Domingo's daughter had died. She was only 12 days old. "Do you want to come inside and see her" said Domingo. "Yes" said the El Profe. "Come in, Fredy", he

called me. I didn't want to go. But I went. The little girl was in the room right next to the kitchen. She was laying on top of two old car batteries, wrapped up in a manta blanket (coarse cotton cloth). Two lit candles were by her side, and some lime leafs in her little nose. Right next to her was a rolled-up petate that Domingo had gone and gotten from Copan. He said they didn't have enough money to buy a coffin. "I don't want to be disrespectful" said El Profe "but may I take a picture?" Domingo said "yes". I walked out of the room hoping he wouldn't ask me to take the picture. I was not feeling so well and seeing the little girl there just revolted my stomach. But then El Profe asked me to come back inside to take a picture. I just handed him my camera and walked outside again to talk to Doña Tiba, but El Profe asked me once more if I would take a picture. I felt extremely embarrassed. I had no idea about the state of mind the family was in. I just didn't want to be an anthropologist at the moment. But I went to take the picture as quickly as I could and left the room. I started talking to Doña Tiba, asking more quotidian questions to distract myself from the incident. I asked how the holidays were (Christmas). She said they made tamales and went to bed at midnight. I asked how often she went to Copan, and she said very little. I asked her then about the little girl. She said she (the little girl) had been crying all night and then she just died. Shortly after, El Profe came out of the room and gave Doña Tiba 100 lempiras (5 US Dollars) and asked her to make some soup for lunch. We both gave them our condolences and left for the Nuevo Siglo Church.

After witnessing this episode, I left confused. I questioned if it was fair to categorize all traditional practices as culture without critically exploring people's choices and limitations. Did I construct in my mind an episode of suffering and Domingo's desire to bury his daughter in a wooden coffin? Did I romanticize Doña Tiba's family living situation or were her son's comment an adequate representation of people's desire to live/sleep in different conditions? Was this community really poor in comparison to others or did I just imagine it as a result of my own assumptions? The only way I could reconcile these questions was by thinking that poverty may

be a western construct, but struggle is not. I thought about the meeting I attended at the Indigenous Women's Council where many of the members expressed, with frustration, to the male leaders that they were tired of being pressured to apply for cultural revitalization development initiatives because there were other pressing matters in their communities that needed to be addressed. I also thought about the people who were kicked out of the indigenous councils for not being able to pay the membership fees or the people in other communities who had mentioned that the only difference between them and non-indigenous society from Copán was that the latter communities were more "civilized" and had money. All these thoughts and questions made me realize that livelihood struggles perhaps mattered much more than I had anticipated and in turn made the journey toward identity formation much more political. The words "Us poor people live here and the rich live over there" is something that I heard from so many people and I realized it was something easier for them to say instead of saying something like "we are the Ch'orti' Maya and those who live over there are the *mestizos* or *ladinos*". Being poor and oppressed is something that people could more easily identify with. And although in the present some indigenous people recognize that there are many non-indigenous people in Copán who have also faced major economic struggles and who are also discriminated against from a class standpoint, most communities can, for the most part, make sense of Copán's non-indigenous society as a group of people who are economically better off than they are.

From the start of this dissertation, tracing the history of the Ch'orti' Maya, everywhere I looked, whether it was the imposition of colonial labor systems such as *La Encomienda*, the birth of the Honduran nation, the emergence of the hacienda system, the work of *campesino* movements, or the recent emergence of indigenous activism, one factor that was always present was indigenous people's struggles for access to land and resources. In this sense, the history of

the Ch'orti' Maya since the arrival of Europeans has been a history of struggle. Thus, examining how indigenous people's struggles occur at the intersection of different categories gives us a more complete picture of how identity is experienced or the multiple positions indigenous people occupy as they navigate their struggles.

Throughout this dissertation, my goal has been to show the different kinds of identities (e.g. ethnic, gendered, racial, and class) that have surfaced and sometimes competed with one another as indigenous activists have tried to consolidate different communities to fight for indigenous rights, land, and development initiatives to help people transition from being landless peasants to becoming a nationally and internationally recognized indigenous group. I have also tried to locate the encounters under which these identities have been performed or have been precluded from being performed and how these identities changed according to particular encounters. What I did not expect to find in my research, were the continuities and "cultural core to Mayanness" that scholars such as Fischer (1999) and Medina (2003) had written about before. Long before I decided to do my research in Copán, I had heard non-indigenous people, including some prominent archaeologists, question the authenticity of the Ch'orti' Maya of this region by arguing that the few cultural continuities practiced in the communities were equally practiced in the town of Copán by people who did not consider themselves indigenous, or that the majority of the Ch'orti' Maya leadership constituted non-indigenous people pretending to be indigenous (See Warren 1998 for a similar critique of the Pan-Maya Movement in Guatemala). To an extent, these narratives influenced me to think that I would find nothing more than what scholars like Lazaro Flores and Adalid Martinez Perdomo had already written about before. In conversations with other Honduran anthropologists, I found that people thought of the work of Flores and Martinez Perdomo as essentialist and with the sole purposes of advancing the goals of Ch'orti'

Maya activism. If this was the case, then, I followed Jackson and Warren's (2005) advise that anthropologists should move beyond the essentialist/constructivist debate and focus, rather, on examining why and how "cultural essences" are constructed among different indigenous peoples and movements, and how this construction is related to intersections between the local and the global (c.f. Medina 2003).

2. The Implicit Role of Cultural Practices

While looking at how cultural essences such as farming rituals, religious traditions were constructed and re-introduced throughout communities, I did find a link between their practices and re-introduction to the encouragement of indigenous leaders who themselves were pressured by NGO workers and transnational activists attempting to revitalize the cultural content of indigenous communities. However, I did not expect to find that certain practices were not only not advertised in indigenous activism, but purposely separated and sometimes hidden from public observers. While accidentally witnessing and finding out about some of these practices as well as being fortunate to be part of some of them, I always returned to my readings on Watanabe's work and the value of these practices to the community members. Was there something missing in my observations of the communities that I really was not making sense of? One of the ways I resolved these questions was by turning to Edward Fischer's ideas of the "Maya cultural logic", defined by him as "generative principles realized through cognitive schemas that promote intersubjective continuity and are conditioned by the unique contingencies of life histories and structural positions in political-economic systems" (1999:473). During my last trip to San Antonio Tapexco I had an experience that gave me at least a little glimpse into how these practices operated at the community level and how they may give residents a different

relationship to activism. A relationship that is simultaneously influenced by activism but operates outside its main discourses of identity.

About two months before I concluded my dissertation research, I went to look for Don Luciano (an elderly from San Antonio Tapexco) at the offices of CONIMCHH. He was the only one at the office since CONIMCHH had organized a strike at Copán Archaeological site and all of the activists were at the site. I was eager to interview Don Luciano but when I got there, it was clear to me that he was not really interested in talking to me about my research questions. He seemed afraid and quiet. He told me, though, that he wanted to invite me to a special ceremony in the community and that I should also invite El Profe. When I said I would attend his attitude changed. He had a big smile in his face now and told me that the motive of the celebration was to honor the fact that Don Guillermo Garcia, the Guatemala-born Mayan priest in the community was going to stay with them a while longer (that is with the Nuevo Siglo Church). He kept on saying “es que se lo querían llevar los de arriba” (from above, they wanted to take him). I understood to mean that members of the Church in higher positions wanted to take him to a different church. However, what he meant was that God wanted to take him to start work “arriba” (above); that his time on earth was done. But that Don Guillermopleaded and God gave him a little more time. So the community was going to honor this news with a celebration. This was a very special time for the community since something like this that had not happened in the community since 1978, when Don Guillermo first got the calling to be the guardian and messiah of the Nuevo Siglo Church and mission.

According to anthropologists Mena Cabezas & Flores (2007), The Nuevo Siglo Church, constitutes just another competing religious movement that has accompanied Ch’orti’ Maya activism with a different approach from Catholic and Protestant communities. The tenets of the

Nuevo Siglo Church are based on conceptions of death and regeneration, prophecies, ancient Mayan symbology, veneration of nature, and rituals in honor of the dead. It is called the Nuevo Siglo (or new millennium), because the members believe that the world will be restored in the current century bringing a better life to the Ch'orti' Maya as long as the past century is buried. Although this cyclical understanding has its roots in ancient Maya practices and beliefs, the church also appropriates and re-defines elements of Christianity such as angels, a parish house, the use of the holy cross, and the belief of Don Guillermo as a messiah. Though Don Guillermo was born on the Guatemalan side of the border, his calling as a shaman included his caring of his own village and the community of San Antonio Tapexco. He does not know how to read and write, and when he speaks he uses a combination of Spanish and Ch'orti' Maya. Even though the Nuevo Siglo Movement was born in Guatemala at the end of the 1970s, Don Guillermo did not establish the church in San Antonio Tapexco until the 1990s, around the same time that the indigenous movement was born in the region. He argues that his gift came in 1978 when he died for a few hours and God sent him back to earth to heal people, talk about the prophecies of the old century, protect the community from evil spirits, and help solve family and community disputes. He is venerated in San Antonio Tapexco as well as in his own village in Guatemala where he leads another ceremonial center (Mena Cabezas and Flores 2007:32).

Both ceremonial centers on the Guatemalan and Honduran side, are adorned with sticks, palm leaves, and compte leaves (used throughout other communities), the altar inside is decorated with crosses, candles, figures of saints and virgins, different kinds of offerings, copal incense, and written prophecies on paper and wood surfaces. The church has designated scribes who document Don Guillermo's messages and prophecies, which are often about the defense of Ch'orti' Maya cultural values, the birth of a new generation of Ch'orti' Maya people, the return

to values of solidarity and communal reciprocity, the dangers of “external contamination”, issues of punishment according to the failure of performing designated *cargos* or duties, and calls to defend what Don Guillermo calls the “golden grain” (corn or *maize*), and “the golden sheet” (tortillas). Some of the ceremonies celebrated in conjunction to those introduced by indigenous activism, include processions to heal the sick, listening to prophecies, and community sacred dances where men carry wooden rifles and machetes to protect the messiah, while women prepare *atoll* (corn soup), tamales, and the traditional Maya alcoholic beverage *chicha* ((Mena Cabezas and Flores 2007:33-36).

I called El Profe, who lives two hours away from Copán, after receiving Don Luciano’s verbal invitation. He said he would come to the ceremony and bring some of his students with him. El Profe arrived to Copán on March 18, 2013 to pick us up. I invited one of my brothers to join me. We left for San Antonio Tapexco around 5 PM when the sun was setting. When we arrived at the community El Profe gave his students a lecture. We sat in the back of his pickup truck listening to him talk about the role of the Spanish in the oppression of the Ch’orti’ Maya, the birth of the Hacienda systems, poverty and the prominent sentiment of humility among indigenous people, the role of the Catholic Church in the communities fairs and patron saints, and he concluded with a talk on Marxism. “Religion is the opium of the people” he exclaimed, quoting Marx, as we made our way uphill toward the Nuevo Siglo Church trying to avoid the torrential rain that was about to fall. Don Guillermo was waiting for us already. He said he had been waiting since noon, but that he was happy to see us. The rain came down hard by the time we arrived and the students seemed scared at the strong sound of the thunders. There were many families at the ceremony, especially many children and there was an overwhelming smell of *ocote* (pine wood) and *copal*. We entered the church and Don Guillermo immediately started to

prepare the ceremony. The students who had come from a different part of the country were astonished at all of the materials used for the ceremony.



Figure 31. Nuevo Siglo Church ceremony. Don Guillermo and one of the scribes preparing Copal incense for the ceremony. Photo by the author.



Figure 32. Women and children gather around for the ceremony. Photo by the author.

Once the incense was ready, Don Guillermo asked El Profe to start reading a document that described the purpose of the ceremony. Then he asked all of the adults to gather around in a circle. He began to speak some more about the ceremony but it was difficult to understand him. Then he called El Profe, Don Luciano, and me to be the guides of the ceremony and he designated the rest of the audience as members of the church. Before Don Guillermo continued the ceremony, he asked where everybody was coming from. El Profe said “my students and I came from a different city and Fredy and his brother are from Copán”. He quickly reacted to his comments and separated me and my brother from the rest of the circle and exclaimed: “estos son de los nuestros” (these two belong to our group). He then proceeded to read the fire (or interpret the meaning of the flames) while reciting the prophecies. He asked us all to sign a document acknowledging our presence in the ceremony. Then he instructed me to write a passage which he said was very important to the ceremony. The passage said that all of us had arrived to the ceremony with the strong rain and thunder which had not fallen in the community since November of the year before. He talked a while longer and concluded the ceremony with the burning of incense.

We were then invited to go outside and wait for the women to bring the tamales to eat and the *chilate* to drink (a Mayan corn drink prepared with toasted squash seeds and sugar). It was pitch dark after the rain had ended but in the house adjacent to the church, women and their children gathered around the fire. I went to go talk to them but they were shy. Their children were not. I stayed with them for a little while and then walked to the third house where the other women were preparing more *chilate*. They were wearing traditional head scarfs and also traditional outfits, the smoke getting in their eyes from the fire. Their outfits and scarfs were old and did not seem as shiny as those worn by the activist women who received President Pepe

Lobo the year before. The women at this community also seemed serious. It was evident that they were tired and perhaps uncomfortable with my presence. I left after asking them a few questions and then they came out with the *chilate*. All of the attendees drank it and then we made our way back to Copán.

If I had glimpses of important community practices that were not evident in activism discourses in other communities around Copán, the ceremony at San Antonio Tapexco made me reflect more carefully on the meaning of these practices. Rather than thinking they offered contributions to Ch'orti' Maya activism, I realized that Ch'orti' Maya activism actually enabled these practices to re-emerge in communities such as San Antonio Tapexco in a way that reflected the Mayan priests and the residents' "cultural logic". Fischer (1999:474) posits that examining Maya cognitive models allows us to understand how modern constructions of cultural practices and beliefs are rooted in continuities that are inevitably "conditioned by social, political, and economic contingencies." Other contemporary depictions of Maya communities throughout Mesoamerica (Watanabe 1992, Fischer 1999, Medina 1999, Hervik 1999, Hervik and Kahn 2006, Metz 2008, Kuffer 2009), especially people/environment interactions, have shed light about how cultural practices are re-contextualized in the present rather than being strictly constructed. Many of the Maya communities examined in these works do not see themselves as bounded cultural groups, but rather, as Hervik and Kahn explain (in reference to a Q'equchi' Maya community), "they consider themselves part of an enduring, yet ever-changing, network of relations—social and cosmological linkages that connect them to deities, outsiders, owners, and other beings who constantly shift back and forth between positions of power, personae, visibility, and meaning" (Hervik and Kahn 2006:2). For the Ch'orti' Maya, especially in communities such as El Carrizalon and San Antonio Tapexco, the Ch'orti' Maya Movement has been interpreted as

the regeneration of the Ch'orti' Maya, the beginning of a new era that leaves behind and buries the *campesino* years, that calls, in the words of the Maya priest, for communal unity and solidarity, veneration of subsistence crops (maize), protection of the community from outside forces (contamination), and the fulfillment of specific cargos or obligations within the community.

The Nuevo Siglo Church constitutes a movement in itself which blends Christian imagery and symbology with pre-Hispanic elements but one that does not really advertise its practices through CONIMCHH or any other indigenous organizations. Many residents of San Antonio Tapexco are, in fact, active members of CONIMCHH, but the community dynamics are more influenced by the presence of a priest than by the governance of CONIMCHH. For instance, instead of having a rural council, community decisions and conflicts are worked out through the Nuevo Siglo Church. At the same time, however, this degree of separation from indigenous organizations, precludes the community from receiving more community projects that not all but some residents would like to welcome.

3. The Future of a Movement

There are now close 100 indigenous communities affiliated with CONIMCHH and CONADIMCH. While communities may be united under the banner of activism, each locality and their proximities, actors who inhabit them, outsiders that visit them, institutions they have established partnerships with, and relationships they have established overtime with non-indigenous society, all play an intrinsic role in how each community understand themselves and the world around them. The goal of this dissertation has been to understand how Ch'orti' Maya identities have emerged and intersected one another in the contexts of indigenous activism, the

tourism industry, state discourses and initiatives, and the community. I closed with the topics of livelihood struggles and cultural practices because they are crucial to understanding how diverse the Ch'orti' Maya experience has been since the emergence of activism in the region in the 1990s and how important it is to recognize the difference between identity performance that are overtly articulated (marked) and those that are part of indigenous people's lived experiences. Looking back at my introductory chapters which trace the historical displacement and exploitation of the indigenous sector in Copán from colonial labor systems to land privatization and the emergence of powerful landowners, it seems almost incredible that Ch'orti' Maya are now a recognized ethnic group, with at least ownership of some communal lands, partnerships with national and international development agencies, and transnational activism networks, initiatives for language revitalization, with members of their councils teaching in their own communities, and some indigenous leaders running for public office. Although all of these seem like success stories (and they are for many), indigenous activism continues to face struggles as different political administrations continue to fail their promises of land distribution (made since the 1990s) and as economic development initiatives continue to focus on the volatile tourism industry. Many communities refuse to accept new members in their rural indigenous councils arguing that people are only interested in land and there is no more land to be distributed.

Although some development initiatives, such as those that have focused on farming, have been successful, tourism-based development initiatives have failed to implement projects that benefit communities as a whole. Instead, a handful of entrepreneurs draw resentment from other members of their communities for winning certain development opportunities (e.g. handicraft stores) and they also compete with non-indigenous society in order to sustain their livelihoods. Moreover, the gendered dimension of ethnicity and class struggles in both activism and the

communities undresses some of the contradictions in the indigenous movement as they attempt to reconcile international discourses of individual rights (especially for women) with the struggles experienced by both men and women at the community. In this case, it is useful to more carefully examine the roots of oppression as well as how it occurs at the intersection of multiple axes of identity. For example, while women are tasked with wearing traditional clothing in their encounters with public officials (despite being subject to mockery), men refuse to wear these kinds of traditional outfits. However, men did not wear these clothes in Copán because it represented a symbol of oppression since they used to wear these clothes when they worked and lived under the control of non-indigenous land owners.

Throughout the chapters in this dissertation I attempted to tell the story of the Ch'orti' Maya through different historical moments and changing relationships between non-indigenous society and the indigenous sector. I examined the surge of multiple identities across time (some ascribed to indigenous people by non-indigenous society and some deliberately embraced and mobilized by indigenous people). By studying the emergence of the Ch'orti' Maya as an ethnic group I was able to look at how these multiple identities and categorizations (e.g. *Indio*, *campesino*, *mozo colono*, *Indigena*) have been reworked and combined with the discourse of Ch'orti' Mayaness. The work of anthropologists has been far more important, than I ever imagined, in informing and influencing how multiple actors (e.g. the state, academics, and non-indigenous society in general) understand, construct, and set expectations on the Ch'orti' Maya. In response to this finding, and at the heart of this dissertation, is the assertion that one must look beyond these categories in order to understand the complex set of struggles that these categories stand for. In looking or moving beyond these categories I argue that it is more important to focus on how struggles occur and are resolved at the intersection of different categories. By looking at

these intersections we can see how people inhabit multiple identities (Medina 2004) instead of the one ascribed to them by non-indigenous society. For instance, as I explained before, a person defined as Ch'orti' Maya by the state or in anthropological discourses may still work as a *mozo* for former *patrones* because they need to make a living, they may consider themselves *campesino* because they subsist by working the land, or they may embrace the *Indio* category in their effort to revert the negative connotation associated with this category.

Looking beyond these categorizations also means recognizing the limited ways in which they are conceptualized. Non-indigenous society (including anthropologists) may look for signs of Ch'orti' Mayaness in the use of marked and expected cultural practices such as language, dress, or public rituals. However, in placing too much emphasis on these marked or expected practices, one may overlook other important practices, that although unmarked or unfitting to the notions of established categories, are meaningful to people and their sense of community. Being Ch'orti' Maya constitutes the weaving of marked and unmarked practices, identities, and categorizations that help indigenous people navigate the same kinds of livelihood struggles that they have experienced for hundreds of years. Some of these struggles may change as new generations of Ch'orti' Maya students and activists are further re-synthesizing understandings of identity-based development, gender, and ancestry. As Li (2004:343) contends, “identities are *always* about becoming, as well as being, but are never simply invented”. It remains to be seen what shape Ch'orti' Maya identity takes in years to come, what discourses will be favored over others, and how issues of class, race, gender, and ethnicity will be re-worked and negotiated in the process.

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