

# In Search of Other Borders: Guatemalan-Mexican Communities in Southern Mexico\*

## En busca de otras fronteras: Las comunidades mexicoguatemaltecas en el sur de México

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### ABSTRACT

Accounting 35 years after arriving to Mexico, Guatemalan families with Mayan ethnic origins created a trade type economic niche, connecting agriculture production with market practices, in the Mexican cities of Chetumal and Cancun. With in-detail ethnographic research, this article provides evidence on this population's three-decade evolution from Guatemalan refugee into communities of Mexican tradesmen developing innovative economic practices. This given transformation may be observed in the context of cultural losses, showing lack of public policy under the Mexican integration aftermath; e.g., loss in the sphere of linguistics.

*Keywords:* 1. Mexican-Guatemalan communities, 2. integration, 3. spaces for trade, 4. agriculture, 5. social organization.

### RESUMEN

A 35 años de su llegada a México, familias guatemaltecas de origen maya han creado un nicho económico de tipo comercial que conecta la producción agrícola con prácticas mercantiles en ciudades como Chetumal y Cancún. Mediante un trabajo etnográfico detallado, en este artículo se documenta la evolución en las últimas tres décadas de poblaciones de refugiados guatemaltecos a comunidades de comerciantes mexicanos que desarrollan una práctica económica innovadora. Tal transformación se produce en el contexto de pérdidas culturales, –por ejemplo en el terreno lingüístico– a falta de políticas públicas posteriores a la integración en México.

*Palabras clave:* 1. comunidades mexicoguatemaltecas, 2. integración, 3. espacio comercial, 4. pluriactividad, 5. organización social.

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## INTRODUCTION

Quintana Roo was one of the three southern Mexican states neighboring Central America where refugee camps were established for Guatemalans in the 1980s. The communities of Maya Balam, Kuchumatán, and San Isidro La Laguna<sup>1</sup> were founded in this state; they are currently part of the municipality of Bacalar and are less than an hour from the capital, Chetumal, connected by paved and dirt roads, and various public transport services. People in these pueblos still speak mam, q'anjob'al, and q'eqchi'.<sup>2</sup> Their families discovered, through agricultural production and labor diversification, the means of their social reproduction, gaining a place in the popular consciousness as *very organized groups of workers*. Almost three years after their arrival in this part of Mexico's southern border, the kind of work they did, in a framework of pluriactivity—linking the primary sector with that of services—was being consolidated at the intraregional as well as the transnational level. Family and community organization was instrumental in this process. This is the subject of this study, seen through the experience of Kuchumatán and Maya Balam (Map 1).

This population, upon its arrival in Mexico as part of the *Refugio Guatemalteco* [Guatemalan Refugee] program, was able to get by and become more integrated as a result of international help and government assistance.<sup>3</sup> The conditions of their settlement meant that early research into these communities saw them as having certain limitations, such as a lack of “social regulations” with a pronounced individuality centered in family development to the detriment of community cohesion (López, 1997). Another interpretation highlighted their “fragmented process of integration” and the numerous programs of social assistance that helped make them somewhat dependent for a long time (Cárdenas, 2011). For this population, these dynamics of protection, with their strong indigenist component of

<sup>1</sup> Maya Balam has 2 018 inhabitants, Kuchumatán 1 019, and San Isidro La Laguna 860: <http://mexico.pueblosamerica.com/i/maya-balam/>; <http://mexico.pueblosamerica.com/i/kuchumatán/>; <http://mexico.pueblosamerica.com/i/san-isidro-la-laguna-2/>.

<sup>2</sup> These languages are found in the Catalogue of National Indigenous Languages (2008), part of the country's 68 linguistic groupings; they are recognized as being of Guatemalan origin in this decree.

<sup>3</sup> La Coordinación General de la Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR, the Mexican Commission to Aid Refugees) and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were the main national and international agents to provide protection and assistance to the refugees. The issue is quite extensive and has been widely documented by Freyermuth and Godfrey (1993), Ruiz Lagier (2013), and Fabila Meléndez (2002), among others. The COMAR was created July 22, 1980 (Secretaría de Gobernación, 1980).

*community building*, meant that they had the housing basics within a framework of subsistence agricultural production (agricultural plot, backyard garden). As the refugees say, *We only produced to eat*.

MAP 1. Geographical region of Kuchumatán and Maya Balam



- 📍 Guatemalan-Mexican Communities
  - Cancun and Chetumal: Guatemalan-Mexican places of commerce
- Source: Ecosur-Chetumal

When the national and international organizations withdrew from their work with the Guatemalan refugees in the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo,<sup>4</sup> upon the termination of the Proyecto de Apoyo a la Integración Definitiva (PAID, Project for the Support of Permanent Integration), these communities suffered certain maladjustments given that, as the pioneers say: “We were left to ourselves . . . They left us to our fates” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2015). The urgent need for work, following discouraging results from an integration project to provide training in various trades and for setting up cooperatives, among others, led them to emigrate. By the last decade of the 20th century, various migratory routes had been established. It did not take long for the Guatemalan population established in Quintana Roo to develop a history of mobility in the various settings of their personal, family, and community life. Falla (2015), in his studies of these processes, emphasized that economic migration in Guatemala was an established fact in the 1970s with the transregional labor insertion of the peasants of Huehuetenango into the cotton and coffee work in areas toward to coast due to the impoverished nature of their land; another period of mobility was produced around the land development project under the Maryknoll order, in the region of Ixcán, which attracted marginalized peasant groups to a program of agricultural settlement (Falla, 2015). Following these adjustments, the civil war interrupted, forcibly displacing the population toward the Mexico-Guatemala border in the 1980s.

Once in the refugee camps in the Mexican state of Chiapas, the Guatemalans resumed their labor mobility, as documented in fieldwork: one, clandestine, close by, and others in incursions to neighboring states where the refugees were taken to temporarily work in archaeological zones. While this was happening, the relocation of the Chiapas camps to Campeche and Quintana Roo was planned, where the integration project included work diversification, which involved the Guatemalans’ incorporation into urban jobs in cities with a lot of tourism and other business activity.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there was the option of returning home to Guatemala; some who returned were not able to reintegrate there and went back to Mexico. Some also went to the United States. Against this backdrop, the then *ex-refugees* from the communities of Maya Balam and Kuchumatán in Quintana Roo opened new

<sup>4</sup> Financial help came from the European Union and was aimed at promoting the productive activity of peasants, both refugees and Mexicans.

<sup>5</sup> For more details about the labor training projects, see Aguayo Quezada and O’Dogherly (1986), Carvajal Correa (2012), and Díaz (2002).

pathways, consolidating intermittent itinerant regional and transnational trajectories to their places of origin and also for a long time to the United States.

While the peasant family's pluriactivity was a factor in its income, no business background was known of in the history of this population. Mercantile activities were largely immaterial. The families lacked the economic resources necessary to deal with the expenses involved in running a company, and did not have access to federal programs that would grant them status as Mexicans, as the naturalization process was still pending. Without networks for labor insertion, with little information about the labor markets, and minimal knowledge of Spanish, the women inserted themselves initially as domestic workers and the men as bricklayers or hotel janitors in the tourist destinations of the Costa Maya.<sup>6</sup> The need to find sources of employment and resources to pay their families' expenses led them to explore new options; now that the population was growing, opportunities were ever more scarce and the land inadequate. The various labor training courses<sup>7</sup> lacked options for business; at the time, the cooperatives performed their function, *such as in the livestock projects that did work*.

Such skill sets and training, pledged under the integration project, proved fruitful until changes occurred. Important advances that took place in the agricultural production of the communities in question show the results of the transformations and the integration processes they underwent, allowing them to develop a strategy and economic niche in the most important markets of Quintana Roo: one in the downtown Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, in the state capital, and the other in the *tianguis* (outdoor markets) of the most prosperous tourist destination in the country, Cancun. The uptick in agricultural operations and the creation of spaces for trade are at the center of this empirical and ethnographic study done through fieldwork in Kuchumatán and Maya Balam, with the goal of understanding the organization of the family, community, production, and trade, as well as the cross-community dynamics. The vendors were accompanied in their daily work by the researchers in order to understand the trading system and interrelationships between the Mexican-Guatemalans with clients, established tenants, and business authorities at the Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas del Río in Chetumal and in the outdoor

<sup>6</sup> The Costa Maya is in the south of Mexico in the Mexican Caribbean, ranging from Punta Herreros to Xcalak, Bacalar, Mahahual, and the city of Chetumal in the state of Quintana Roo.

<sup>7</sup> Despite being an activity promoted in the former encampments, beekeeping only lasted during the stage it was provided by the COMAR, as the practice was not adopted.

markets of Cancun in Quintana Roo. Various periods of fieldwork took place between December 2015 and May 2016 in various settings. There was interaction with the population in its community, family, and work settings.

### *INTEGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT*

Once the refugee process concluded, the Mexican-Guatemalans consolidated their integration<sup>8</sup> through their social reproduction. This occurred through bringing together their own cultural elements with those of the Quintana Roo region, such as lifestyles and spending patterns. These are interactions that have brought them to move in the world of social innovations or in what Bartolomé calls “ethnic transfiguration,” which, far from producing “ruptures or neglect,” guides forms of “perpetuating identity and making it compatible with what the dominant society presents” (Bartolomé, 2006). As this author says, it is a kind of “strategic adaptability” to the new regional and global settings faced by these peoples of Mayan origin; this adaptability has helped them live and be creative in the various settings where they have arrived to work or remake their lives.

The various paths of adaptation cross the areas of labor, organization, self-management, and education, guiding one of their collective expectations toward economic innovation through the agricultural market and trade. There are various examples in the experiences of indigenous Mexicans involving trade as a vehicle for ethnic reconfiguration in contexts of high itinerant migrant mobility, both at the national and international level. This has developed into settlements and networks in tourist

<sup>8</sup> Integration is a widely discussed concept in various disciplinary fields and depends on the national agenda of each country. In the case of countries with original inhabitants, such as Mexico and Guatemala, the issue has centered on the study of nationalist projects (Villoro, 1987; González, 2007). In other latitudes, the controversy expands both to native groups and immigrants, for example, the studies of Kymlicka (2013) of Canada, or the citizenship, socio-cultural, and political questions in policy debates in the United States (Walzer, 1982; Huntington, 2004.) The studies involving Spain are extensive; see Garreta (2003), among others. On another note, more recently, because of the process of deportations or returns of individuals and families from the United States to their places of origin such as Mexico, the concept has regained importance, above all at the labor insertion and educational levels. In the case of international assistance, the institutional concept refers to social, demographic, cultural, and economic aspects, but above all of the security and dignity of the people in surroundings that guarantee their physical and moral integrity, such as development through reestablishing daily life. In this regard, see the documents from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (2015).

and business centers, including at the northern border in emblematic cities such as Tijuana. Among the documented cases are the Mixtecs of Oaxaca (Velasco, 2002) and the Nahuatl artisans of Guerrero (García, writing as García, 2008a), who through their ethnic references and their community organization, extended their business ties to the national level, and, in a parallel way, on a South-North scale, used migratory routes to the United States to diversify their labor insertion. With that, they instituted cultural practices in their thinking about migration, trade, and work in general. For example, among the Nahuatl the establishment of the social categories of *travelers* and *northerners* refers to the social construction of merchant craftsmen and international workers, whose trans-community dynamics engendered new ritual ties between the place of origin and the national and transnational destinations (García, 2008b). In the indigenous world of the Americas there are other groups anchored in these processes, such as the Otavalo of Ecuador, recognized traders in various cities around the globe.

In the Mexican-Guatemalan communities these *traditions* of trading and traveling increasingly form a constitutive element of their community life, articulating spaces of cultural scope through the same multiethnic and multinational composition in the main sites of the trans-community itinerary such as Chetumal and Cancun, also poles of massive consumption of goods and services. The populace of Maya Balam and Kuchumatán faced all kinds of challenges, but became pioneers and strong implementers as a result of the strengthening and social cohesion that took place through their collective struggles to conquer and create a market niche. The construction of a social process of identification in spaces of trade and contexts of competition not only meant a dispute over something material, physical (square meters of floor space for their businesses) but also promoted the existence and coexistence in that space of “theirs” and “ours” (Bartolomé, 2006). This encounter and development of the business day-to-day define the symbolic patterns in self-representation and hetero-representation: as they are seen and want to be seen, according to the instrumental use of identity.

### *TRADE IN CHETUMAL*

Known as the *new market*, the Lázaro Cárdenas del Río is an important shopping hub for the supply of fruits and vegetables where the Mexican-Guatemalan Mayan traders set up shop to sell their agricultural products. This market was a milestone in the productive and business activity for rural populations close to Chetumal,

intensifying exchanges with the capital city and with various localities of the municipality close to Bacalar, such as Canlumil, Miguel Hidalgo, Ávila Camacho, and the Mexican-Guatemalan communities of San Isidro La Laguna, Maya Balam, and Kuchumatán. These last two have as their economic activity the sale of fruits and vegetables in the *new market* and this constitutes one of the main sources of family income. The traders say that it was a little after their placement in the refugee encampments in Quintana Roo, in 1986, when the COMAR<sup>9</sup> took people to Chetumal, Cancun, and areas bordering the state to work in various jobs as vendors, bricklayers, and agricultural workers (for example, in sugar cane, banana, and papaya plantations).

The oral history refers to Doña Manuela, of Kuchumatán, as one of the women who began selling in the market. Now, she and her family are in Guatemala, as they returned to their country of origin following the 1996 peace accords. But those spaces that had been filled at first by Doña Manuela and other women continued to be occupied by fellow Guatemalans who went through the naturalization process and stayed in Mexico. Thus, the sales of fruits and vegetables at the retail level in the Lázaro Cárdenas market proceeded to the point where they became the Guatemalan-Mexicans' own economic niches, which continue today. This trade began along the side of the central market building; the vendors were relocated in 1996 to a place they still occupy, on the extension of Francisco Coria street, which intersects the central avenue of Héroes de Chapultepec. Their sales stalls are found in what is popularly known as the *zone of the Guatemalan women*, although there are men.

From the beginning, the trading activity of the Mexican-Guatemalans has been exposed to various attempts to displace it because of internal conflicts in the market. Since 1987, after the inauguration of the Mercado 5 de Abril, on Francisco J. Mújica street with Guadalupe Victoria (15 minutes from the Lázaro Cárdenas market, on the way out of Chetumal), there have been various attempts to relocate the *Guatemalan women* in Mercado 5 de Abril's environs. This has not been formalized for various reasons. One is that the distance involved has been an element of resistance for moving there. Also, the poor administrative organization of the municipal authorities (lack of management for sales permits and not identifying exactly where the vendors the authorities seek to remove would be relocated) has

<sup>9</sup> This agency was created in 1980 (Secretaría de Gobernación, 1980), continues to function, and attends to requests for refugee status from foreigners once they have moved to Mexico; its website has copies of the paperwork needed.



helped stave off this proposed transfer of *the Guatemalan women* from the Lázaro Cárdenas market. This uncertainty has caused a face-off between market authorities and the Confederación Regional Obrera y Campesina de México [Regional Confederation of Workers and Peasants], which the market vendors' union members belong to.

Some tensions about the hours of sale have emerged around this conflict: "They have been asked to sell from 3 in the morning until 9 in the morning and not from 3 until 12" [as takes place. There has been a dispute and over space because] "they give the market a bad image." [Also, *The Guatemalan women*, a market representative said,] "don't pay anything like the established tenants pay" (Anonymous, personal communication). One more complaint is about the type of sales that the Mexican-Guatemalan traders, female and male, make; they sell their products on a retail basis (in bags), unlike the established tenants, who sell by the kilo, which is the trade standard. The argument goes, "The people (customers) prefer to buy in bags" (Anonymous, personal communication), which represents *a disadvantage* for the established tenants. To resist these actions of hostility and exclusion, the Guatemalan vendors joined together and selected a community representative. Their *union* finally was able to settle these issues, with vendors staying put and keeping their current working hours. Now there are 40 spaces distributed among 87 vendors of the communities of Maya Balam, Kuchumatán, San Isidro la Laguna, Canlumil, Miguel Hidalgo, and Ávila Camacho; they are the first to go beyond the ties of kinship and friendship in terms of business expansion. In her case, Doña Cruz has her sales itinerary in Chetumal and Cancun, and has been able to place her sons in various business spaces with their own stalls in those cities (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Family business realm

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Sales sites</i>	<i>Cities</i>
Doña Cruz, trader	Mercado Lázaro Cárdenas Tianguis Tierra Maya	Chetumal Cancun
Son Rodolfo, trader	Tianguis Región 100 Villa de Mar	Cancun
Son Luis, trader	Tianguis Las Casitas Parque Las Casitas	Chetumal
Daughter María, support	Tianguis Tierra Maya	Cancun

Source: Compiled by authors.

The daily routine covers the entire week for men and women who go to this market to offer their products; their itinerary begins inside the communities with various activities. In the afternoon they gather the products for sale; there is the harvest of the two hectares of land that the traders have; later they integrate the production of other residents who are only farmers, and with this acquisition they complement the stock for the day of sale. The agricultural lands are distributed according to business interests and family situations, such as having workers available for production. The merchandise they generally transport to Chetumal include fresh, recently cut fragrant herbs (cilantro, *epazote*, mint, squash blossom, and *chipilín*), vegetables (radish, nopal cactus, white cucumber, sweet potato, yucca, *calabaza criolla* or green pumpkin, chayotes, and corn), fruits (banana, guanábana, pineapple, watermelon, limes, and sweet and bitter oranges), and other products such as banana leaves and *chaya* (sometimes called tree spinach), beans in the pod or freshly removed from the pod, white beans, *ibes* (a white bean), *espelón* (tender bean), and habanero chilies.

The entire family participates in putting together *the sale* that leaves from the communities in a journey to collect the products in the streets. At 10 at night the trip begins in Kuchumatán. A bus contracted with the ADO bus chain (Autobuses de Oriente [Buses of the East]) makes the trip through the pueblo; the young loaders place the boxes and sacks filled with merchandise in the bus. The collection of the products for the market lasts nearly an hour and shows the organization and articulation of this community's trade network. But not everything ends there. Following the same pattern, the bus goes to Maya Balam and to the localities of Canlumil, Miguel Hidalgo, and San Isidro La Laguna, in that order. Following the night journey, the bus loaded with fresh products arrives in Chetumal around 3 in the morning. There, in the market, they finish stocking *the sale* of the day. That is, when these vendors from the Mexican-Guatemalan communities lack *out of season* products or when the traders don't produce the products, the sellers resort to other providers. In the pueblos of Kuchumatán, Maya Balam, and San Isidro the vendors obtain corn, pineapple, and sweet oranges, and supplement the merchandise with products acquired in the shops of the same markets; thus, the vendors are able to stock carrots, chayotes, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, and cilantro.

When they are setting up their stands to start the day's sales in the market, providers from other areas arrive, as they have for years; these include the vendors of Oxkutzcab, a settlement in the south of the state of Yucatán, who travel 330 kilometers to Chetumal in a trip that takes almost four hours; their three-ton

trucks carry limes, sweet oranges, bitter oranges, and other fruits such as papaya. Fresh merchandise is brought from Oxkutzcab on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; the owners of these trucks conduct their sales from their vehicles, a pattern reproduced in various parts of the country where pickup trucks with merchandise can be seen on the streets as a kind of *stand*. Part of the variegated mosaic of traders, the Mennonites are appreciated as key providers to *the Guatemalan women* of products such as beans and cilantro.

The scale of the negotiations between local producers and outside ones shows how a mercantile system operates, including various economic arrangements such as the settlement of accounts through the sales of the day. This hectic business life that takes off with the dawn in the streets of Chetumal shows a societal trait of this region populated by people of various origins. Cultural diversity is evident. The exchanges are innumerable, with an enormous quantity of people who enter and leave the trading circuit; contributing to this is a stop for buses that come from Belize carrying European, Asian, and North and South American tourists. Complementing this *melting pot* are people who get in and out of taxis, buyers at street stands, and passers-by. There are exchanges of voices, products, money, and a mixture of smells wafting from the popular street kitchens or from inside the market, on its second floor, where there is no shortage of the characteristic aromas of fried Yucatecan foods.

At 4 or 5 in the morning, the sale to the Chetumalan public begins, with fresh fruit and vegetables bagged for retail sale offered at a cost of 10 pesos; the task of filling bags, setting them out, and selling them is repeated throughout the morning. Don Toño and his wife, Ana, said others don't sell by the bag and weigh everything. Around noon they prepare for their departure; what they have left is sold off while the bus that brought them to the market from their localities pulls up in front of the stands on the extension of Antonio Cora street, and at this point the loading process begins again, but this time for the return. Their organization is seen once more; products that were left are hoisted up, crates and umbrellas are accommodated, the merchants coordinate with each other to make the safeguarding and collection of everything more efficient. The bus leaves at around 1 in the afternoon and heads for the communities following its routine of dropping off people by locale.

In the multiethnic settings in which the Mexican-Guatemalan vendors find themselves, identity dimensions emerge through the hetero-representations, a dimension that gives them the general designation of *las Guatemaltecas* (the Guatemalan women). It is a name that has overtaken the epithet of *refugee*, and has a

gender attribution because of the predominance of women among the vendors. In terms of self-identification, the markers that allow the traders to distinguish themselves are their language and the women's dress, now that there are consumers who seek out the *Guatemalan women vendors*; at this point on the identity scale, the men and women vendors make an instrumental use of ethnicity, an unneeded asset in other spaces.

While it is mostly women who sell, sometimes the husbands also attend to the business, running errands, carrying things, and supporting their wives in tasks such as bagging the fruits and vegetables. Some young people help with loading and unloading, as the bus drivers only drive the heavy vehicle. Those who hire the bus say the driver should not load or unload as it is important for safety reasons that the driver be rested. Organization is a nodal point in this business process, above all at the family level; this shows the assignment of roles at the community level in a trading network that has been consolidated over the years in the Lázaro Cárdenas market, in the state capital, and its extension to other points. The power of this collective staging is activated in cases of emergency, as illustrated when there is a breakdown of the bus that takes them to market and back. When there is a mechanical failure, the transportation network under contract responds through its ties with the Unión Nacional de Transportistas del Cambio [National Union of Transport Workers of Change]. A network of minibuses that works with ADO transports the population of Kuchumatán and Maya Balam, as well as other communities that go to Chetumal.

Two minibuses make two round-trip journeys between the communities and the capital. The first spends the night in Maya Balam and goes to Kuchumatán at 4 a.m. so it can then go to Chetumal. It leaves at 9 a.m. from Chetumal for the communities and returns to Chetumal at 1 p.m., to make a second trip to the communities at 2 p.m.; then the vehicle does not return to Chetumal until the next day. There is a second minibus that also makes two such trips, but about two hours later. It heads for the communities at 11 a.m., returning at 2 p.m. to then go back to the communities at 4 p.m. and to Chetumal the next day; this minibus also spends the night in Maya Balam and heads for Kuchumatán to begin its trip in the direction of Chetumal at 6 a.m. The authorities of the Lázaro Cárdenas del Río market don't consider *the Guatemalan women* to be part of the market now that they are located outside its building, and because of the form their selling spaces take. For these authorities, the Guatemalans are street vendors. This generates a discriminatory process that excludes the traders from the market organization; this

means the management also does not recognize the vendors' representatives. Because of this lack of acceptance, the sales locations of *the Guatemalan women* are administered by the city, which charges them a monthly fee, which is 35 pesos per stand (it is all they pay). Trash collection is the responsibility of the vendors, who at the end of the day put it in containers and in the afternoons the municipal garbage trucks pick it up. Finally, there is no nexus or responsibility with the authorities.

The stands have wood crates that the vendors call *huacales*, on which they place their products, covering them with some big umbrellas for protection from the sun and rain. The space is so small that it seems easy to confuse it with the adjacent one, but everyone knows and recognizes their own products; they help each other out when someone has to go to the bathroom or go somewhere else, and the neighboring vendor will promote or sell the absent vendor's products. There is a lot of traffic every day in this trading zone; people of various economic circumstances, origins, and ages come to buy the products on offer. Some buyers just head for where the Guatemalans sell. It is an area bustling with activity. On the other side of the street are wholesale vendors of watermelon, pineapple, corn, and habanero chilies that mainly come from Oxkutzcab, Maya Balam, Miguel Hidalgo, and Ávila Camacho, which are transported in private vehicles; these producers/vendors leave earlier, around 10 or 11 in the morning. The Lázaro Cárdenas del Río market in Chetumal comes to life in the morning and then slowly clears out until a calm arrives at 2 in the afternoon, a time at which the now-desolate Francisco Coria street awaits its return to life the next day.

### *SALES IN CANCUN*

The Chetumal market reached its limits as its administration provided only one space for the Mexican-Guatemalan vendors. The population in Maya Balam and Kuchumatán was growing,<sup>10</sup> and agricultural production kept increasing. In the worst of cases, "The harvests began to be wasted to the point of only serving as food for the backyard animals" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2016). This concern led the population to seek employment and better opportunities. David Mateo, a resident of Maya Balam, and Orlando Trinidad, of Kuchumatán, the two

<sup>10</sup> In 2000, Maya Balam had 1 724 inhabitants and Kuchumatán had 879. In 2010 the population of both communities went up: Maya Balam registered 2 018 inhabitants and Kuchumatán had 1 019.

pioneer merchants, explored other areas for the retail sale of fruits and vegetables. As a result of the trips that other compatriots made as construction laborers to Cancun, both knew of the presence of *tianguis* markets in neighborhoods, subdivisions, and avenues that were important or that had a great influx of people in the tourist city. Their *good eye* was able to see such places as opportunities. This was how these two started the process of opening more spaces for the sale of agricultural products from their communities. On January 20, 2014, a management process began that resulted in the diversification of the sales route. The Unión de Tianguis y Comerciantes Ambulantes del Estado de Quintana Roo, A. C. (Union of Tianguis and Street Vendors of the State of Quintana Roo), represented by Melitón Ortega García, granted permission for the sales. Thus, at nearly midnight on Saturday, June 28 of the same year, the first such trip began in a bus, rented from the private transportation company Leyva, headed for the *tianguis* of Región 100<sup>11</sup>; the merchants of Kuchumatán and Maya Balam left carrying local products: fragrant herbs and fresh, in-season fruits and vegetables.

This business journey lasts the entire day. When it ends, close to 10:30 at night, they return to their communities, arriving at dawn around 6 in the morning. With that first incursion, the city of Cancun, an important touristic pole in the Mexican southeast, began to position itself as a main route for the sale of fruits and vegetables at the retail level, which provides income to the Mexican-Guatemalan families that go to the *tianguis* to sell. According to David Mateo, the group that launched this trading feat was made up of eight people who accepted the challenge of rounding up the 8 500 pesos that the transportation company then charged “take us there and bring us back” (Anonymous, personal communication, 2016). This achievement was rewarded and was not too shabby for having been the first trip: Everyone’s 10 boxes of fruits and vegetables were completely sold. For the second trip, demand had grown, and the group of vendors grew from eight to 16 people.

In the face of such enthusiasm, it was necessary to establish a quota of vendors. David, as the person in charge, determined the fee each trader should pay for seven to 10 boxes, and/or three bags of produce. At the same time, another dilemma emerged, as the transportation company could not provide service with the regularity the community required; this put the vendors on a quest to find transportation that would

<sup>11</sup> Established behind Avenida José López Portillo, which crosses the city of Cancun, at the extension of Calle 16 (16th Street) near the Luis Donaldo Colosio Auditorium. It is the route of the federal highway to the entrance of the city.

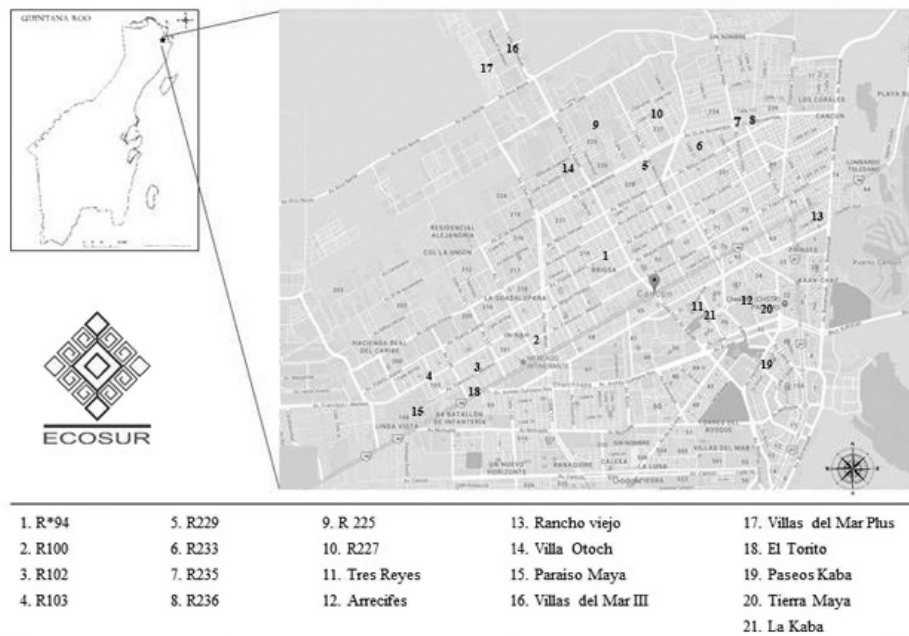
follow the Maya Balam-Kuchumatán-Cancun Kuchumatán-Maya Balam route every four days. They sought a solution with the municipal authorities of Bacalar, but got no satisfaction. Arturo, a member of the Partido del Trabajo (Workers Party), advised them to negotiate with the ADO bus line, which could transport them at the times they wanted.

A year after the start of the Cancun route, the community showed interest in forming more sales groups, which generated a certain discontent and unsettled some in the pioneer group, occasioning conflicts that led to the election of new representatives, overhauling the established rules and the group. The representatives and promoters of this business activity decided to become growers and left the group, and were replaced by the new representatives. This situation generated a new communal arrangement that came from a pressing need: the sale of products. Thus, the families reorganized and, realigning the practices the community was acquiring, responded to the new dynamics of work in the face of growing demand.

Success brought about a broad interest that created more sales groups; each one was formed in a different way depending on which *tianguis* the *merchant* groups sold in. Only one group of women withdrew, the original ones from San Isidro la Laguna, the third Mexican-Guatemalan community; they complained about the *arduous and costly work*. Finally, more heterogeneous sales groups were formed, in terms of the numbers of sellers and the variety of products they transported. All this occurred within two years, with seven groups traveling every three days to Cancun directly to 30 of the 66 *tianguis* established in the tourist resort, including: Tierra Maya, Región 102, Villas del Mar III, Tianguis Tres Reyes, Arrecifes, Región 229, Villas del Mar Plus, Región 223, Villas Otoch, Región 227, Región 100, La Guadalupana, Paraíso Maya-Azul, Villas Otoch Paraíso, and Región 94 (Map 2).

This business activity undertaken by the communities drove a trade network grounded in community organization that has involved resources of all kinds, such as the transportation that has benefited the powerful bus company ADO, which transports five groups. This activity has also fostered self-management, such as the case where vendors developed a cooperative that oversees the trips for two groups. The buses are based in Maya Balam, except for one that stays in Kuchumatán. Each bus has an assigned driver, who makes two trips each week, three days apart. What is different about the buses is that they have been adapted so that they only have nine rows with two seats on each side of the aisle; a tenth row has been removed for there to be room for boxes of merchandise, sacks, and buckets to be transported to Cancun.

MAP 2. Meeting points and sales of Mexican-Guatemalan merchants.  
Cancun, Quintana Roo, Mexico



Note: All meeting points are within the Cancun Region, an urban administrative-political designation.  
Source: Compiled by authors.

The profits make up for the cost of modifying the vehicles; the ADO company is assured of payment for its services, whether the groups go to sell or not; the members of each route must come up with the rental fee established to continue using the service. This brings about a certain dependence from both sides; on the one hand, there is the company that transports the community members on a lucrative route, and on the other hand, the vendors demand a bus that has been modified to cover their transportation needs. This utilitarian process established between the company and the *merchants* is essential for the trading network to function and has been modified in accordance with the requirements of the business activity in a complex network of relationships. This *business structure* has resulted in a stable system of work that sustains many families.

The sales routes are established by groups that travel twice per week with a duration of three days per trip; each group has four loaders. The young people doing



the loading play an important role; they were hired for the first trips because of their physical strength and with the goal of helping them economically. The loaders also travel and are responsible for loading and unloading under the command of the representative of the traders on each bus; the total pay is 500 pesos, with meals included. These payments come from the 800 pesos in fees the vendors pay per trip, which covers the following: transportation, taking a helper with them, a cargo of 23 to 25 boxes of fruits and vegetables, and two sacks of merchandise that they choose to take. If someone from outside wants to travel in the bus, the round-trip charge is 250 pesos, which becomes a contribution to the group. The driver and the merchants are not involved in this activity. As Don Andrés says, “The drivers must be rested so that they can drive well for the passengers, that is their work and the merchants must be comfortable because they sell” (Don Andrés, personal communication, 2016); there is a respect involved for the roles each person plays in this business operation. There are role exceptions. Some loaders also are vendors, taking advantage of what their *daily pay* represents and their space to travel in the bus. This description of continual back-and-forth trips provides an idea of the sales dynamics of rotating shifts.

The day of the sale the bus travels into the communities it is assigned to with the goal of loading the merchandise to be sold. The journey begins at 8:30 at night; the merchants place their crates and sacks at the entrance of their homes so the loaders can place the materials in the bus. The buckets full of fresh leaves and/or chilies go in the front in the luggage racks, or on the legs of the vendors or below the seats to take advantage of the bus’s air conditioning. At 10:30 p.m. the bus finally leaves the community; the trip takes about five hours, and during that time the merchants sleep for the workday ahead.

Generally, the men travel with the loaders in the front part of the bus, talking during the journey. In this space there is much discussion and camaraderie; they talk about the day’s experiences. They generally speak in the language they share, mam and q’anjob’al; one notes that some loaders, particularly the young people, understand what is said in their language, but speak in Spanish. Indeed, this is one of the few public spaces where the mother tongue is spoken, with the adults speaking it. The bus arrives at the assigned outdoor markets in the early morning of the second day of the trip. At 2:20 a.m., the drivers stop and turn on the lights, the loaders get down *los diablitos*<sup>12</sup> and begin to unload, the merchants continue sleeping in

<sup>12</sup> A colloquial name for a metal cart in the form of an L with wheels on its base that is used to transport heavy loads or ones of considerable size.

the bus, and none of the noise from the racket of moving the boxes and the commands wakes them. The loaders keep unloading and place the plastic crates at the assigned place of each merchant; the loaders have come to recognize the possessions and trading sites of each vendor. At 3 a.m., the vendors descend from the bus with their boxes full of vegetables. Once off the bus, the merchants put their stands together to accommodate those who want to buy the vendors' merchandise.

In some markets, such as the Tierra Maya *tianguis*, there is a place where the merchants leave their wood crates and plastic foam boxes so that they can be reused as a framework for their *stands*. Some vendors bring fruits and vegetables in bags, in packages filled by their sons and daughters; this represents a time savings. Among these bagged products are chopped vegetables, chilies such as the habanero and the max, beans, and *espelón* (black-eyed peas). Once placed on these improvised structures that they call *stands*, the merchants bag limes, bitter oranges, tomatoes, onions, mangos, nopal cactus, yuccas, plums, and cucumbers. Each bag has a value of 10 pesos. At the same time, they tie together leafy greens, herbs, and other vegetables (cilantro, *chipilín*, mint, radish, *hierba mora* [black nightshade], parsley, *epazote*, spring onion, and *quelite*).

These Mexican-Guatemalan entrepreneurs have been able to develop skills for the care of these herbs during the day, improvising coolers with ice in such a way that the produce does not dry up and stays fresh for the demanding consumer in Cancun. The sales in the outdoor markets begin about 5 a.m., with sporadic buyers who slowly increase in number. The time the greatest sales take place varies according to the location of the street market, although generally it oscillates between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m.; however, in some outdoor markets in central zones such as the Región 100, greater sales continue until 11 a.m. and then go down as the day moves along. Nevertheless, in some sectors in Tres Reyes, sales perk up at 1 p.m., when parents, grandparents, and relatives go to pick up children at school. In this place, sales are sporadic in the morning, and as a result the market stays open until 3 p.m. Those markets of greater importance, such as Tierra Maya, stay open all day, although they go on hiatus, in this case from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., to reactivate when the employees of nearby businesses leave work and *come by to stock up*. Región 102 is very different, and there is a lot of traffic from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. "The people come and they don't stop coming." [The groups that have] "the luck to be in a big *tianguis* do not have the same luck as those who go to the smaller ones, who must change" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2016) locations; they sell half the day in one place and then *switch* markets for the afternoon. The organization and

skills of the *merchants* are evident in how quickly they organize their stands while the bus is unloaded and the unloaders and/or helpers move the boxes to the spaces where the stands are set up. The haste is necessary because the transfer is 30 to 40 minutes.

The *merchants* do not rest during the day; sometimes the husband, the wife, or the helper will go get everyone's breakfast and/or lunch. They eat at their stands because "they cannot neglect their sales." [In any case:] "They go for a little bit and move quickly so as not to take too long" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2016). The stands are never left alone. After the market closes in the evening, vendor Doña Cruz, who generally travels solo, waits to get everything together at 10 p.m. and then goes to bathe and *travel fresh*. She contracts for meal service. Like her, many vendors leave the services of food and bathrooms during their business journeys in the charge of families who rent parts of their homes to generate income: restroom, 5 pesos, showers, 10 pesos. Those involved in these settings—buyers, vendors, and authorities—are often given nicknames in a process of recognition and identification. The *merchants* of Maya Balam and Kuchumatán are called the *Bacalares*,<sup>13</sup> a name that refers to the municipality they came from; it is common to hear "I am going to go see what the Bacalares brought" (Anonymous, personal communication, 2016) and the vendors are greeted by being called *Bacalares*. This recognition causes their sales spaces to be respected and identified by authorities and fellow traders. Another situation that makes this synergy clear is the buying and selling of products between the vendors in the trading space before the merchandise is offered to the public. They approach each other *to see what you've got* with the goal of *supplementing their offerings or stocking their stands*. There are external providers who come to these spaces to offer products such as tomatoes and onions, but there is very little demand; in particular, the *Bacalares* of Maya Balam and Kuchumatán *prefer to go to Chetumal to stock up*. Daily scenes include the appearance of the *bag vendor*, who goes to all the outdoor markets with a little booklet in hand collecting *what is owed*, outstanding debts.

This salesman is one more part of these heterogeneous business settings. On average, the merchant provides packages of bags that cost between 150 and 200 pesos; the transaction is done through a measure of trust, as the *Bacalares* now are people he has become familiar with and he knows *where they are located*. The sales day ends at about 9:30 p.m. Most of the vendors have bathed: first the women and

<sup>13</sup> This name, Bacalares, comes from the municipality of Bacalar, the jurisdiction Maya Balam and Kuchumatán are in.

later the small children who accompany them. The men do not bathe until after they have finished loading the bus. All collect the garbage, as cleaning the streets is also part of their obligations and rules of the *tianguis*. At 10:30 p.m., the bus is ready to load the leftover merchandise and the empty crates. At 11 p.m., the driver starts the bus and turns on the air conditioning, and the passengers spread out their blankets to cover themselves and sleep. The loaders and some vendors enter the bus with six-packs of beer in their hands, and with the lights out they talk during the return, but little by little silence reigns because of how tired the passengers are following their workday.

The bus arrives in the community about 7 a.m.; it makes a trip around the community to drop off the crates and leftover products. Some vendors head to their homes where their older children, mothers, or grandmothers have prepared breakfast; others head to the stands or homes where meals are sold, particularly those of corn or rice tamales; rice tamales are characteristic of Guatemala. It should be emphasized that in this organized structure, gender and age within the family come into play; the merchant roles belong to the husband and wife, and in certain cases the older daughters. When there are children, the trader families that go off to sell have two strategies for child care: leaving children with other siblings (age 12 is the age for taking on this responsibility), or leaving them with grandparents or aunts and uncles who live in the same house. The family dynamics are very important. Sometimes some members take on emerging roles; for example, when the household receives money from the social program Oportunidades the wife stays home to *collect the money* instead of going to market. The older daughter or son instead goes to the market, fulfilling the head of household role. Another image seen in the community during the arrival of the bus is the harvesting of the products to be taken to Chetumal or to the outdoor markets in Cancun. Activity in Maya Balam and Kuchumatán does not stop. Each family and each member know their role: *Go to school, go to sell, stay to take care of the children, go harvest, put fuel on the fire for the tamales, drive the taxi, load the bus*, various activities. It is a tremendous system of cooperation.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study addressed a case in which new social practices are strengthened through tradition (subsistence agriculture) and innovation (surplus agricultural production and business practices) as constituent parts of ethnic reconfiguration in a specific

experience of integration through an experience of forced migration with internal and international migratory journeys on various planes. The communities of Maya Balam and Kuchumatán, when they were settled with displaced refugees, were considered to lack social order (López, 1997), and, only having an incipient agricultural production for self-consumption, were also seen as incapable of generating economic resources or business activity. Currently, three decades after their arrival in Mexico, the agricultural production that long has been the collective support of these two communities has moved from self-consumption to a business production that supplies two important cities in Quintana Roo: the capital, Chetumal, and the country's foremost tourist destination, Cancun.

Thus, the Guatemalan-Mexicans' eventual integration, seen in this case as an adjustment process by an immigrant population, was performed by them as part of an asylum project put in place in Mexico by the government and international organizations that, with legal-administrative paperwork, eventually finalized the refugee process; this categorization now no longer applies to this population. No longer are they *ex-refugees*. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that these indigenous groups, like others in the Americas, have been subjected to integration projects; first colonial ones, by fire and sword, and later nationalist ones, through education and indigenist policy. Meanwhile, from the perspective of the migrant communities, what has been said about the Mexican-Guatemalans is far from having been driven by transnational practices such as social reproduction support.

Without a doubt, their agriculture and their innovative business practices are social reproduction strategies that have resulted from a process of integration driven by their own collective opportunities. This is the main payoff of the integration of the current Mexican-Guatemalan communities: the reconfiguration of their agricultural practices through the conquest of a business niche in important urban spaces in settings of cultural tension in the face of generational, sociodemographic, and migratory changes. Following this trend, these Mexican businesspeople of Guatemalan origin are creating a merchant tradition, adding to the experience of other indigenous groups such as the Nahuas or Mixtecs that established a resource of sociocultural reproduction through business, taking advantage of their traditions and innovating new social practices.

Meanwhile, the memory of the exodus is fading. What scarce or little knowledge the new generations have about the origin of their place in Mexico is hazy, such as occurs with other cultural markers such as the language used in domestic spaces and in limited spaces such as business ones. No bilingual reinforcement, bicultural

or intercultural, is present in the educational services in the communities. Speaking about this and other cultural and heritage challenges, Doña Isabel speaks with dismay about the abandonment of the language. “My children and nieces and nephews do not speak mam ... They do not want to speak it ... They do not want to learn it, and I don’t speak it with them” (Doña Isabel, personal communication, 2016). This woman, who left her country more than 30 years ago, synthesizes what she has brought and kept with her from her Guatemalan homeland. She was asked if she had *outfits*<sup>14</sup> from her pueblo. She blushed, shrugged her shoulders, looked around her house, and looked into the street, making sure no one in the pueblo would see what she was doing. She entered her home to look for something. Self-conscious, monitoring those who were curious, she brought out a blouse: “I was wearing this garment, I left with it, I came with it, now I store it, I don’t wear it.” [She was asked:] “You don’t wear it now?” [The Mayan grandmother replied:] “It is my wardrobe for a special occasion: They will put it on me when I die, when they bury me, that is where I want to wear it” (Doña Isabel, personal communication, 2016).

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<sup>14</sup> In fieldwork the generic term *vestido* (dress) is used, which could be instead *indumentaria* (clothing), a less common word. It is known that in Guatemala, the feminine Mayan *vestido* consists of a *corte*, referring to a skirt or rectangular piece where a standard measure is eight *varas* (80 centimeters); it is secured to the waist and can reach almost to the ankle. In a trip to Quetzaltenango in 2015, there was a variety of fabrics that marked differences in terms of regional origins. There are also other distinctions, such as fasteners. The young people usually imprint their own style by incorporating into the traditional fabric features such as bright threads (gold, silver, and so forth) or incrustations of beads or sequins; such an arrangement is called *pearly*. The piece worn on the upper part of the body (back, chest, shoulders, and arms) is called the *huipil* (woven) or blouse (made with commercial cloth); according to the style, this piece also often is quite varied, depending on ethnic origin. The final accessory is the common commercial sandals, also multicolored and bright. To this day these fashion patterns are notable in this city. This cultural aspect is even more complex, as there are specific colors for the traditional clothing (which can include *tocados* [headbands]) depending on the married or generational status of the women. (Field notes, Martha García).

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