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2 Survivors on the Move: Maya Migration in Time and Space

On 22 March 1991, at a ceremony held in a snowy Ontario town more than four thousand kilometers from the village in which he was born, a Q'anjob'al Maya named Genaro Tomás Castañeda became a proud new citizen of Canada. Genaro's experience during the decade prior to becoming a "Q'anjob'al Canadiense" mirrors the disruptive lot of countless thousands of Guatemalan Mayas who had to flee their communities because of the country's civil war (Morrison and May 1994; Nolin Hanlon and Lovell 1997). The personal circumstances surrounding Genaro's situation represent a happier outcome than most, for the majority of the 1 million or so Guatemalans now believed to live and work in the United States and Canada do not enjoy the security and stability afforded by legal citizenship (Jonas 1996). The Maya diaspora to which Genaro belongs today has a transmigrant dimension dizzying in its scale, complexity, and local and national impact. Migration as a cultural phenomenon, however, has deeper roots than most people realize, and in one form or another constitutes a recurrent theme in the shaping of Maya history. Archaeologically, Maya origins begin with migration, the most distant ancestors being among the nomadic bands that trekked across the Bering Land Bridge millennia ago to enter the New World from the Old. Ethno-historically, the *Popol Vuh* tells us of what might best be thought of as semi-mythic migrations on the part of more recent ancestors, who are said to have entered Guatemala from the Gulf Coast of Mexico. These primordial migrations, epic though they may have been, concern us less than do population movements that occurred during colonial times (1524 to 1821) and, secondarily, during the national period, from 1821 on. Our aim is twofold: first, to establish a framework within which the migration experiences of Maya peoples in Guatemala may be understood and explained; and second, to illuminate admittedly general categories and considerations with more grounded case specifics.

Migration, we believe, is a crucial element in the story of Maya survival. We view Maya migration as a rational, multidimensional reaction

to the daily challenge of survival, whether the challenge arose last year, a decade or a century ago, or in the wake of the Spanish conquest almost five hundred years ago. Continuity in certain key patterns of survival comes as a surprise only if we fail to identify, analyze, and at least try to unravel the complex web of past and present migration experiences. Migration, in fact, is such a ubiquitous feature of Maya life that it would be possible to envision a cultural history that harnesses the theme as its principal organizing concept, as David Robinson (1990) has observed for colonial Spanish America in general.[1] Here we must settle for something far less ambitious: first, the presentation of several basic notions that help us conceptualize the phenomenon of migration; and second, an examination of some of the historical factors most responsible for allowing us to link Maya survival so closely to Maya migration.

ROBINSON'S MIGRATION MATRIX

In his overview of migration in colonial Spanish America, Robinson (1990:5) provides us with a useful typology, one in which he considers three dimensions to be critical—those pertaining to space, time, and migrant ethnicity. Beyond our limited focus on Maya migration, Robinson incorporates into his scheme of things the distinct ethnic groups that constituted colonial society—Europeans, Blancos, Mestizos, Mulatos, Negros, and Indios. Within a three-dimensional matrix (see Figure 2.1) Robinson depicts graphically the interrelationship between the dimensions of space, time, and ethnicity in the process of migration. While we do not concern ourselves here with the multiethnic dimension of his matrix, Robinson's breakdown of space and time is pertinent to what we have to say. Robinson identifies four variations of population movement in space: rural to rural; rural to urban; urban to rural; and urban to urban. In terms of time, he divides migration into three categories: periodic, temporary, and permanent. Periodic migration, in turn, is subdivided into four types: circular, which Robinson (1990:8) defines as "migration that results in a return to an origin," daily, monthly, and seasonal. Robinson's essay warrants a close reading by anyone seriously interested in the topic, no matter their temporal focus. In fact, research on the national period as well as on colonial times, most notably the work of Castellanos Cambranes (1985), McCreery (1983, 1994), and Woodward (1983, 1993), reveals migration on the part of

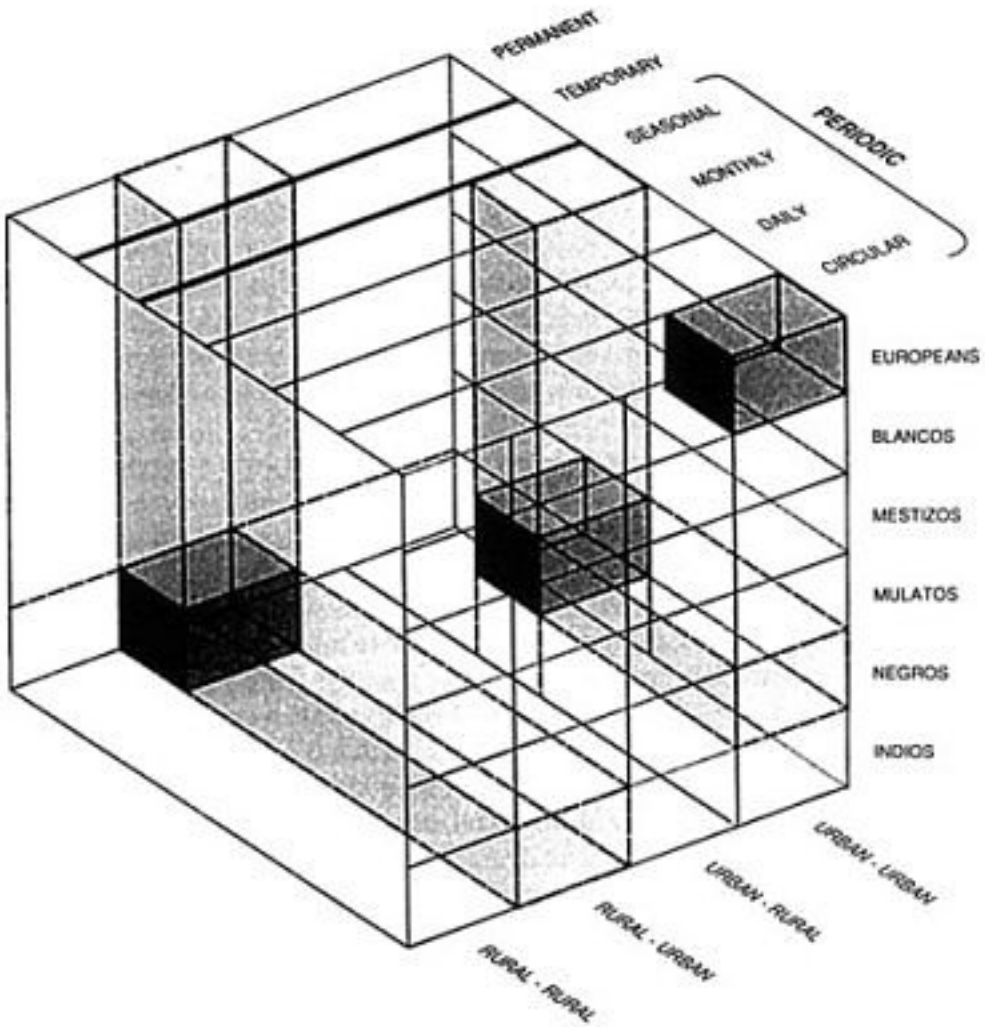

Fig. 2.1 A Matrix of Colonial Migration. (Robinson 1990. Reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press.)

Maya Indians in Guatemala to have been continuous and widespread. Even though we cannot do justice to all the different aspects of Robinson's ideas, we believe that his schema does allow us to conceptualize Maya migration with some insight and a degree of rigor.

Migration Categories

In conceptualizing Maya migration, especially for the colonial period, it is important to consider its forced and voluntary characteristics, as Robinson does. Under the first category we examine (1) the post-

conquest enslavement of Indians and their removal from their homes to locations where their new masters thought their labor would be most appropriate or lucrative; (2) *servicio personal*, the mobilization of Indians in the quarter-century after conquest to work in diverse locations for the benefit of privileged Spaniards (*encomenderos*) who held them in a tribute grant known as an *encomienda*; (3) *servicio ordinario*, a form of cheap labor, and the *repartimiento de indios*, a form of *corvée* labor; and (4) *congregación*, a policy of resettling dispersed peoples into nucleated places in order to exploit their labor more efficiently.

In addition to these overt forms of forced migration, we also consider the part that migration played in the obligation of every adult Indian (women were exempted only after 1754) to pay tribute either to encomenderos or directly to the Crown. For an untold number of Indians, especially male tributaries, tribute payment meant the obligation to travel, often long distances, to obtain goods specified for payment or to earn cash.

Robinson divides voluntary migration in colonial times into several categories. He notes that persons were attracted to other places, especially to urban ones, by the promise of a better-paying job, an easier life, or even the appeal of the unknown. Indians were also drawn to nonurban centers of Spanish economic activity, including cattle ranches (*haciendas* or *hatos*), wheat farms (*labores de pan llevar*), sugar estates (*ingenios*), indigo plantations (*ingenios de tinte añil*), and areas of cacao production. While, as Robinson indicates, there was a negative side to migrating to these operations, part of the attraction for Indians was security, protection by a seemingly powerful *patrón*, and, in many instances, the avoidance of onerous tribute, repartimiento, and communal labor demands back in their communities of origin. Not all migration to these estates, however, was entirely voluntary, for movement could be fueled by necessity, indebtedness, or the lure of a cash advance that was given under contract, thereby requiring the debtor to travel to the place where the creditor wanted him or her to work for a specified period.

Another form of voluntary migration involved Indians abandoning settlements for areas beyond the reach of Spanish jurisdiction and therefore Spanish control. There the immigrant might settle in an unsubjugated area free from obligations to encomenderos, landowners, parish priests, or their own leaders (Conchoá Chet, n.d.). Farriss (1978, 1983, 1984) offers many such examples in the context of colonial Yucatán, where she differentiates between processes of flight, fugitivism, dispersal, and drift.

Besides being pulled or attracted toward opportunities for work, voluntary migrants were also pushed from or came to reject their native communities for personal, familial, societal, and institutional reasons. We suspect, from looking at colonial tribute lists, that Maya men more often sought this escape route than did Maya women. Occasionally, however, couples would leave together, either to escape local conditions or simply to seek a new life elsewhere.

Forced Migration in Colonial Guatemala

Forced migration, as noted above, will be discussed in the institutional context of (1) slavery; (2) encomienda and servicio personal; (3) servicio ordinario and the repartimiento de indios; and (4) the policy of resettlement known as congregación (see Figure 2.2).

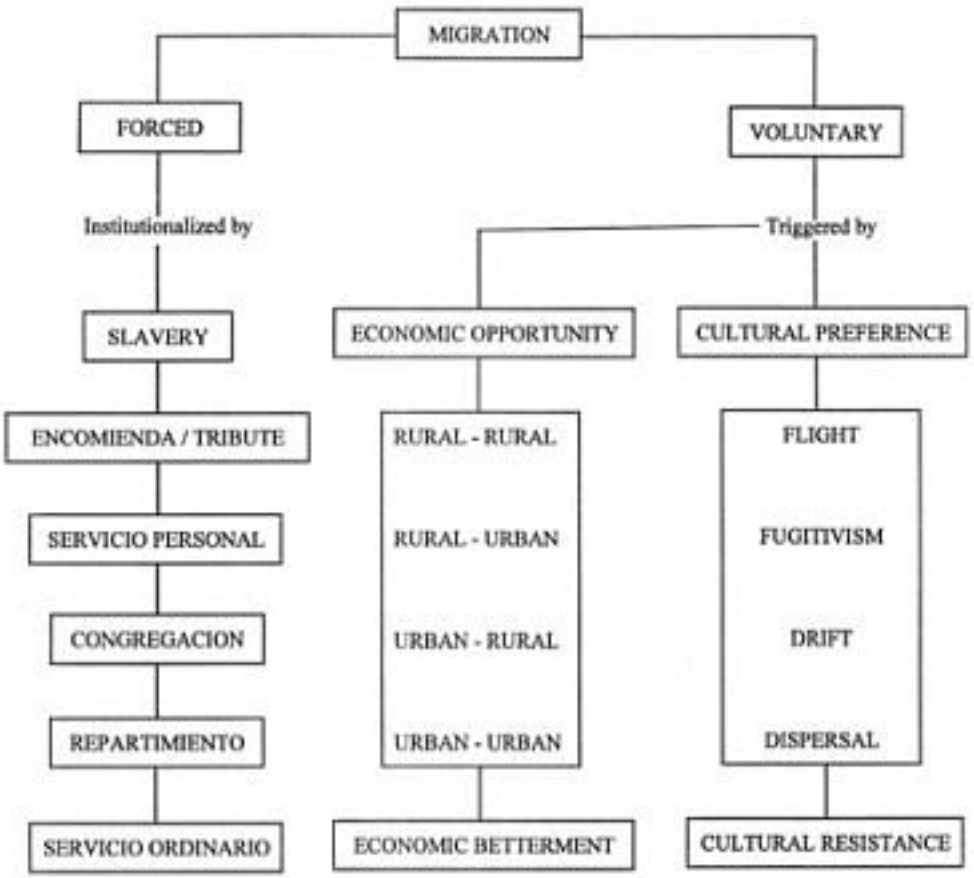

Fig. 2.2. Migration in Colonial Guatemala

Slavery

From the beginning of the conquest, Mayas and other native peoples were enslaved by Spaniards as a result of capture in battles or acts of rebellion. These slaves were called *esclavos de guerra*. Other slaves, already captive and owned by Indians or Spaniards, were often sold to persons willing to pay the price. Indian slaves were so plentiful and so relatively cheap that in the 1530s one could be purchased for two pesos, about the same price as a full-grown pig (Kramer 1990a). Whatever the manner in which slaves were obtained, they were certain to be uprooted and, frequently, forced to move repeatedly in the course of their lives.

Maya slaves performed a variety of functions for Spaniards, but the most common were those of agricultural laborer, household servant, and gold miner. On land around Santiago in Almolonga, the first permanent colonial capital, Spaniards had their slaves produce foodstuffs, especially wheat, for their households and for sale in the urban market. In the vicinity of Santiago in Almolonga and its successor as the colonial capital, Santiago de Guatemala, some three to five thousand slaves lived and worked on Spanish estates called *milpas* and in their masters' urban households. Sixteenth-century sources indicate that the slaves in question came from all over Guatemala, even from as far away as Oaxaca (Lutz 1982:95; Lutz 1994a). When President Alonso López de Cerrato liberated these slaves around 1550, the great majority, having grown accustomed to living in their adopted lands for almost a generation, never returned home. Once emancipated, however, the lives of these ex-slaves seldom improved, for they soon found themselves subjected to the demands of servicio ordinario (see below).

Some of Pedro de Alvarado's slaves were settled around Santiago after their master died in 1541; they were actually liberated by Bishop Marroquín before Cerrato's arrival, but until then they had a much more grueling life than did their milpa and household counterparts. Their fate, along with that of other captives, was to mine or to pan for gold for their Spanish masters in mountainous parts of Guatemala and, especially, in more mineral-rich Honduras. Relatively little is known about this episode, which spanned the years 1525 to 1549, but there are indications that those sent off to Honduras went for eight months at a time. This shift of work was known as a *demora*, and lasted from early October until early June, thus coinciding with the *verano* or dry season in Guatemala. The mortality among the luckless folk who spent a