New Help or New Hegemony? The Transnational Indigenous Peoples’ Movement and ‘Being Indian’ in El Salvador*

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Abstract. The transnational indigenous peoples’ movement (TIPM) can convey important political leverage to local indigenous movements. Yet this study exposes a more problematic impact: the political authority gained by funding organisations who interpolate TIPM norms into new discourses regarding indigeneity, and deploy that discourse in local ethnic contests. In El Salvador the TIPM has encouraged the state to recognise the indigenous communities and has opened a political wedge for indigenous activism. Yet TIPM-inspired programmes by the European Union and UNESCO to support indigenous activism paradoxically weakened the Salvadorean movement by aggravating outside impressions that Salvadorean indigenous communities are ‘not truly Indian’.

Since the last decades of the twentieth century resurgent ethnic and racial movements in Latin America have prompted area specialists into giving new attention to the long-overlooked politics of indigenous peoples. In recognising the political importance of these ethnopolitical schisms (and in illuminating ethnic grievances) this new literature has filled a serious gap, but it has not been free of controversy. Scholarly studies can grant disproportionate attention to – and so bolster the public profile of – loud but unrepresentative leaderships, or contribute new ethnic resources (such as, for example, pre-Columbian archaeological information, which can be reclaimed as present-day ethnic emblems). For this reason, academics have been carefully debating the political implications of the new literature: for

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1 The scale of this literature eludes citations space here. Monographs especially influential in this article include Kay Warren, Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala (Princeton, 1998); Charles R. Hale, Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State (Stanford, 1994); and Alison Brysk, From Tribal Village to Global Village: Indian Rights and International Relations in Latin America (Stanford, 2000).
example, that surrounding the pan-Maya movement in Guatemala, and the Rigoberta Menchú controversy. As the indigenous movement has grown and obtained unprecedented transnational scope, doubts have also been raised about the political influence of ‘external’ actors more broadly: that is, what might be broadly called the transnational indigenous peoples’ movement (TIPM).

The TIPM is interpreted here as that global network of native peoples’ movements and representatives – and of sympathetic institutions, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and scholars – which, through decades of international conferences, has formulated certain framing norms for indigenous politics now expressed in several international legal instruments. Since the 1970s the TIPM has gained growing influence among international human rights movements, which increasingly incorporate tenets of indigenous rights (or their interpretations of those tenets) into their platforms. A wide range of actors from local (non-indigenous) NGOs to World Bank have incorporated the TIPM’s central principles into their policy platforms (at least in tokenistic form, but with significant political implications, as noted below). The TIPM has thereby become an omnipresent influence in indigenous ethnopolitics around the world, partly by generating new transnational resources for indigenous movements, such as legal expertise, political leverage, funds for travel and consultation or communication technology, but more broadly by fostering an international human rights climate that has helped to cultivate political openings, to indigenous demands for group rights, within national arenas.

Yet close academic study of how the TIPM actually interacts in local indigenous ethnopolitics have been relatively scarce. International relations scholars (like Franke Wilmer and Alison Brysk) have richly described its role in helping native peoples to transcend their political isolation, yet have not brought this understanding to detailed case studies. On the other hand, scholars pursuing such case studies have tended to slight the TIPM, or to miss it altogether. Some literature has indeed

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2 On debates surrounding the Maya movement, see especially Warren, Indigenous Movements and Their Critics; on the controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú’s Testimonio, see, for example, Steven Dudley, ‘On Rigoberta, Guerrillas and Academics: An Interview with David Stoll,’ NACLA, vol. 32, no. 5 (1999); and Roger N. Lancaster, ‘Rigoberta’s Testimonio,’ NACLA, vol. 32, no. 6 (1999).

3 Especially important are the International Labour Organization’s Convention 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989); and the Draft Resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, debated (for two decades) by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations.


5 For studies whose juxtaposition in the same volume makes this neglect especially striking, see articles on Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia in Donna Lee Van Cott, Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America (New York, 1995).
identified the odd political twists arising from international involvement, but these studies remain exceptional. Instead, our most valued scholars continue to treat indigenous politics as playing out solely within the boundaries of their respective national arenas. My own informal discussions with these colleagues suggest various reasons for this omission. For some, the neglect reflects simple unfamiliarity with the TIPM. Closely-focused methodologies and theory-driven inquiry may also generate blind spots regarding ‘external’ factors. Some colleagues openly dismiss the TIPM: as an artificial product of alienated and ambitious indigenous intellectuals (and their naïve sympathisers), with little or no authentic connection to the local setting, and no legitimate role regarding on-the-ground struggles. Such views obviate their serious study of any local indigenous movements that seem too heavily to reflect the TIPM’s influence.

Several arguments can be raised against such biases. First, the TIPM’s global scope and diverse modes of influence suggest that today only the most isolated indigenous peoples can be fully insulated from it. If any transnational movement is so influential (for example, the environmental or women’s movements), then its ‘external’ character – even its blatant political instrumentality – should not impede our analytical attention to that influence. Second, any dismissal of the TIPM’s influence as artificial or inauthentic must rest on the untenable precept that ethnic identity is authentic only when entirely local in its derivations. Especially in Latin America, where indigeneity itself has always been defined by transnational ideas related to the colonial and nation-building experiences, such a claim makes an exception of the present era and is selectively critical. Third, the same accusation of inauthenticity is not raised against notions of nationhood, race and ethnicity promoted by Latin American nationalist intellectuals. In all cases, such ideas have been informed by centuries of dense transnational discussions, including European and North American ideas about statehood, nationalism, race, ethnicity, modernity and civilisation more broadly. Insistence on an entirely local quality to indigenous movements therefore suggests that indigenous peoples are being held to a different standard.

This article proposes that, given its global influence, any deep study of indigenous politics today must abandon such biases and consider the TIPM’s role. But such consideration must address the actual complexities of that role. The TIPM, both through pan-indigenous activism and as translated into programmes by non-indigenous allies and sympathisers,

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6 One vivid study of such interplay is Joe Kane, *Savages* (New York, 1995); see also Brysk, *From Tribal Village to Global Village*, pp. 272–82.

7 For example, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1990).
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can have contradictory political effects in local settings. Indeed, as Brysk has observed, the TIPM can actually generate new kinds of political stress for local indigenous movements: outside funding can have corrupting and fragmenting effects, and the TIPM’s transnational consultations and conferences tend to favour and promote more literate and therefore often less representative leaderships. Both these effects are illustrated in the study presented. A third hazard may be less obvious, however, because it derives from the very activity that has made the TIPM so constructive a political force for many indigenous movements: that is, the TIPM’s success in codifying and promoting formal precepts about indigenous peoples’ characteristic qualities and needs. In doing so, the TIPM has conveyed unprecedented political juridical and rhetorical leverage to local groups. Yet when adopted as a master frame by sympathetic outsiders (international funders, human rights groups, even other indigenous peoples) those same precepts tend to gel and reify as a new definition for indigeneity that can bring considerable pressure on those indigenous peoples whose ‘fit’ in that master frame is less than exact.

In this article, I will illustrate how the TIPM generates such contradictory effects through a focus on indigenous ethnopolitics in El Salvador. El Salvador has been a relative backwater within the TIPM, ostensibly because (as is widely believed) the country supposedly has no significant or ‘genuine’ indigenous population. More precisely, the self-identified indígenas in El Salvador have not matched the criteria for indigeneity held either by local ladino Salvadorean society or by most outside sympathiser groups. Consequently, a central political problem for indigenous communities in El Salvador has been simply to manifest themselves as ‘indigenous’ to both domestic and international actors. The TIPM has altered the terms of this dilemma dramatically. Its success in promoting new international standards for state behaviour toward indigenous peoples has encouraged the Salvadorean state to recognise the indigenous communities, and has opened a political wedge for indigenous ethnic activism. However, the TIPM’s codified norms have translated into a newly hegemonic discourse about indigenous identity that has paradoxically made the Salvadorean indigenous peoples’ political dilemma worse.

This article describes how the indigenous movement in El Salvador was affected by two specific programmes inspired by the TIPM: one initiated by the European Union (EU), the other by the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The resulting portrait of a complex interaction among transnational norms and local

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8 Brysk, *From Tribal Village to Global Village*, pp. 272–82.
ideas reveals the more complex and ambiguous impact of the TIPM on the perceptions and motivations of international and local actors. The case study also raises some serious questions about how the politics of authenticity are negotiated and deployed by funding organisations and by academics and ‘experts’, through their self-assumed role as ‘authorities’ over, and arbiters of, indigeneity.

A. The transnational indigenous peoples’ movement

In the post-Cold War era, transnational movements have come under increasing scrutiny from political scientists. Understood as networks of non-state actors (social movements, ethnic or gender interests, scientific communities, nongovernmental organisations) transnational movements form ‘dense webs’ of interactions and regularly share resources, such as information, funds and expertise, across state boundaries. A subset of these movements is what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink call ‘transnational advocacy networks’, which are motivated primarily by values, such as environmental protection, human rights, rather than by material gain. In general structure, transnational advocacy networks consist of two tiers of organisation: a domestic tier, which provides grassroots organising yet may have limited influence on their government; and an international tier, which may command more material resources and greater prestige with states and so wield greater political clout at the state level. The two tiers typically co-ordinate their lobbying efforts to bring pressure on states simultaneously from inside and from outside, in a kind of pincer (or ‘boomerang’) effect.

The TIPM reflects this model. It began to form even in the mid-1960s out of contacts among various local indigenous peoples around the world as they grew increasingly disillusioned with leftist alliances and gained access to better communication technologies that facilitated their global consultations. Histories of the TIPM trace its formal emergence on the international stage to key regional conferences (Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Scandinavia). In 1982 the TIPM gained a United Nations foothold with the formation of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. This Group still meets annually, drawing hundreds of indigenous activists to Geneva to consult on a Draft Declaration of Indigenous Rights (now finalised and pending a General Assembly vote).

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9 See especially Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, Activist Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics (New York, 1998).
10 Ibid., p. 12.
11 For a useful short history, see Brysk, ‘Acting globally: Indian rights and international politics in Latin America,’ in Van Cott, Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America, pp. 29–51.
A distinguishing quality of the TIPM has been the continued control exerted over its core platforms by indigenous peoples themselves, partly through extensive participation in conferences. For example, throughout Latin America the 1992 Quincentennial galvanised an effervescence of indigenous organising: among other initiatives, three pan-American indigenous congresses in La Paz (1989), Quito (1990) and Quetzaltenango (1991), each reflecting and inspiring hundreds of earlier meetings, demonstrations, and political campaigns. The connection of these major meetings to local politics was dramatic. The 1990 Quito conference helped to launch Ecuador’s unprecedented pan-indigenous uprising in June of that year, which, for the first time in history, unified Amazonian and highland peoples in a strike paralysing transport throughout the country, and which established the indigenous communities as a permanent power bloc in national politics. The 1991 Quetzaltenango conference marked a public crystallisation of the pan-Maya movement, now so influential in bringing indigenous interests to centre stage in Guatemalan national politics and formalised in the country’s 1994 Peace Accords.\(^\text{12}\) Thus the TIPM has become a key factor for indigenous peoples throughout the region (although continuing indigenous regional consultations are often not readily visible to outsiders).

This authenticity has greatly enhanced the TIPM’s international cachet with sympathisers. The TIPM’s rapid growth has indeed depended on extensive collaboration with non-indigenous sympathisers, often academics and ‘first world’ organisations, which have provided otherwise unobtainable expertise, endorsements, funds, training, communication technology, and political leverage. The TIPM’s earliest meetings were facilitated by the endorsement of major international NGOs, such as the World Council of Churches (which sponsored the Barbados Conference of 1971) and the Catholic Church (especially with its Pastoral Indígena programme, launched in 1986). By the late 1980s the ‘greening’ of the movement – the claim that indigenous peoples have intimate knowledge of, and a unique caretaker relationship with, their local ecosystems – reflected and fostered expanding alliances with major environmental organisations. The right of indigenous groups to consult on environmental issues is now codified, though with dubious import, in the internal rules of the World Bank, the International Development Bank and other international development organisations. In 1990, reacting to all this activity, the International Labour Organization revised its Convention 103 on the Rights of Indigenous Populations to reflect the norms

promoted by the TIPM; although controversial, the new Convention 169 has since become a key tool for much indigenous lobbying. One powerful indication of the TIPM’s success was the awarding of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize to Guatemalan Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú, and a proliferation of sympathetic NGO and UN initiatives, discussed below.

At the same time, the TIPM has, perhaps inevitably, generated an international and increasingly hegemonic model for indigeneity. TIPM activists were not unaware of this risk. The TIPM’s major international instruments, including ILO Convention 169 and the UN Draft Declaration, were drafted through extensive consultations among indigenous groups and carefully avoid defining ‘indigenous peoples’ beyond general references to ‘cultural’ distinctiveness. TIPM norms do emphasise common needs like territory, language, spiritual views, dress, and other ‘cultural’ rights, but also recognise that not all indigenous peoples share all of these concerns. Nonetheless, outsiders have tended to group these concerns as a package in forming their own model of indigeneity: their understanding of what indigenous peoples are, and of what they need. They then use this model in crafting their solidarity activities and in dispensing resources.

Thus, those latecomer indigenous peoples who seek to co-ordinate with the TIPM, like the indigenous activists in El Salvador, adopt the terms of TIPM discourse not only because it is attractive (dramatically dignifying long-despised ‘Indian’ identities) but also because it constitutes the terms of admission to an international network of support and resources. In other words, to gain the international benefits of ‘being indigenous’, a group must now fit a TIPM-inspired model of ‘being indigenous’ – or face an extra burden of persuasion.

To examine how this problem was confronted by the indigenous movement in El Salvador, a brief profile of the Salvadorean ethnic arena is necessary.

**The Salvadorean ethnic context**

Contrary to common impressions and decades of state rhetoric that the nation is racially homogeneous and has never had any significant ‘Indian problem’, El Salvador had a vigorous history of indigenous ethnopolitics through the early decades of the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century ethnopolitics was formal and public partly through the communal

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13 For an especially insightful study of *indianidad* (‘Indian-ness’) as discourse, see Fernando Mires, *El discurso de la indianidad* (Quito, 1991).

landholding by indigenous corporate communities (comunidades) recognised by the state. Up to the 1930s ethnic sentiment in core communities among the Nahuat in the southwest and the Lenca in the northeast was locally perceived as cohesive and strong, expressed in cofradías, culturally specific practices and ethnic patronage politics. But in recent decades the vast majority of Salvadorean ladinos (as well as most foreign observers of the country’s stormy politics) have assumed that ethno-racial politics were long defunct. The indigenous communities are popularly believed to have ‘abandoned’ their ethnicity after the notorious 1932 Matanza, when a largely indigenous revolt (allied with the communist movement) was brutally suppressed and ‘being Indian’ supposedly became prohibitively dangerous. Although this assumption has been greatly overdrawn, today distinct dress and language is indeed rare among the Nahuat, and have vanished among the Lenca, supporting Salvadorean ladino perceptions that these communities are no longer ‘truly Indian’. The ‘not-truly-Indian’ formula underlies sweeping ladino popular dismissal—and blanket state rejection—of any idea that the indigenous communities still exist in any meaningful sense, or that they might deserve any special assistance or ethnic privileges.

But, as close observers will confirm, in the scattered communities in the country’s rural southwest and northeast some 500,000 people are still ethnically indigenous in the sense that they consider themselves to be indígena, are seen by outsiders as being indígena, and (of special political importance) view themselves as especially poor and marginalised because they are indígena. Ethnic identity signals include family names, accent,

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16 The classic account of this event is Thomas Anderson’s Matanza (Willimantic, 1971). The few accounts that treat the ethnic dimensions of the revolt include Hector Pérez Brignoli, ‘Indians, Communists, and Peasants: The 1932 Rebellion in El Salvador,’ in William Roseberry et al. (eds.), Coffee, Society and Power in Latin America (Baltimore and London, 1995); and Ching and Tilley, ‘Indians, the Military, and the 1932 Rebellion in El Salvador,’ which also treats the communist connection.
18 See, for example, the Salvadorean government resolution endorsing the original ILO Convention 107 on the rights of indigenous populations (Decreto Legislativo No. 2709, Diario Oficial (2 October 1918), which begins with the qualifier, ‘Insofar as in our country indigenous populations do not exist, nor do other Tribal and Semitribal populations that are not integrated into the national collectivity ...’.
19 Indigenous perspectives, regarding ethnic politics and identity itself, underlie this study but will not be treated here. On indigenous political views, see especially Mac Chapin, La población indígena de El Salvador (San Salvador, 1990); also Alejandro D. Marroquín, ‘El problema indígena en El Salvador,’ América Indígena, vol. 15, no. 4 (1971), pp. 747–71. Ethnographies are rare; by far the most in-depth, although seriously dated, is Alejandro D. Marroquín, Panchimalco: Investigación Sociológica (San Salvador, 1959).
spiritual practice, and some traditional crafts. In some Nahuat communities, both language and distinct dress is sustained especially among older women. These core communities have provided the social base for the recent revival of ethnopolitical discourse in the country: in quite distinct spheres, both by grassroots indigenous activists and by certain state institutions.

Still, as this base remains largely invisible to most observers of the country’s politics, related ethnic discourse has seemed artificial and unconvincingly opportunist. This perception has translated directly into negative decisions regarding funding and other forms of international support. A quick survey of the very different models of indigenous ethnic ‘revival’ (rescate) promoted by the state and the indigenous movement will suggest the parameters of the problem.

1. STATE DISCOURSE
As noted above, popular belief and state discourse in El Salvador has long affirmed the country’s ethno-racial homogeneity, and has celebrated the absence of any (supposedly backward and divisive) ‘Indian’ element. But in the mid-1990s the culturas indígenas re-entered state discourse through two narrow vectors, both related to post-war reconstruction: (1) efforts to re-imagine and redignify Salvadorean national ‘identity’; and (2) fresh state-led efforts to attract international tourism. In both projects, state institutions translated transnational ideas and material incentives regarding indigeneity into domestic political formulas that, although tokenistic and highly circumscribed, have significantly altered the domestic ethnopolitical environment.

The project to reconstruct national identity reflected dramatic changes in both domestic and international conditions. Since the late 1800s Salvadorean nationalists have distinguished the country from other Central American states by affirming the complete miscegenation of the indigenous and Euro-immigrant populations. This claim had primarily domestic functions, in affirming the country’s happy immunity to any ‘backward’ Indian element, although it also carried transnational overtones in its echo of regional mestizaje. But in the 1990s a new agency of the Education Ministry, CONCULTURA, suddenly began to

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celebrate the country’s indigenous communities as valued ethnic components of the nation. This shift reflected a new state agenda, encouraged by outside agencies like UNESCO: the effort to restore a viable sense of the Salvadorean national identity in the wake of the civil war.

National cohesion was indeed in tatters. Although major violence ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, a million people (a fifth of the population) still lived abroad; a quarter of a million remained in the United States, classified as refugees, and most of these viewed forced repatriation as anathema. Within El Salvador, the war-weary population remained traumatised, embittered and riven by factionalism. Democratisation was burdened by rampant popular distrust and cynicism about the viability, integrity and capacities of the new government. Given the country’s deep history of violence, on what ennobled basis the Salvadorean ‘nation’ could be re-imagined was not clear.

Nationalist angst was further aggravated by the economic strains of repairing the war-ravaged economy. El Salvador’s urgent efforts to attract foreign investment required mitigating its abysmal image in world affairs as a hotbed of insurrection and instability. Yet related neoliberal policies brought massive imports of foreign (mostly US) goods that crushed domestic industries. Popular anxieties to preserve some insulation from the invasive values and US-popular-culture associated with these imports further spurred concerns to define a distinctly ‘Salvadorean’ national identity. As expressed in CONCULTURA’s mission statement,

Especially, the search for our identity as Salvadoreans is perhaps the most urgent need, since that search is made in the context of the globalisation phenomenon that presents us with alternative cultures, diverse in their quality, their benefits [bondades] and disadvantages. The primordial test, in our understanding, of any cultural system is its capacity to assimilate the best features of other cultures and peoples, without losing sight of its particular ideas and roots.  

Thus, when the Salvadorean government and UNESCO launched the ‘Culture of Peace Programme’ (discussed further below), its formula for political stabilisation included the injunction that a new national culture – understood as ‘shared values’ – was a prerequisite. To reassert El Salvador’s respectable international standing, those ‘shared values’ also needed to come into accord with international human rights standards. Given the budding influence of the TIPM, these standards now included at least token endorsement of indigenous rights. Hence, one section of the Culture of Peace project endorsed ‘promotion of indigenous and popular culture’ and ‘support to the Salvadorean [sic] Indigenous

In 1991 the government had already established CONCULTURA (Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y el Arte), to promote arts and ‘culture’ toward crafting a new (and more respectable) post-war Salvadorean national image. In 1994 CONCULTURA actually established an Indigenous Affairs Office and a Centre for Cultural Revival, to support indigenous ethnic revival and to promote indigenous artisan crafts respectively. The Indigenous Affairs Office undertook to host a series of meetings by indigenous political activists, and even organised a small international conference on indigenous issues in September 1996. The Centre for Cultural Revival complemented the country’s tourism initiative, discussed below.

But these initiatives remained confined to CONCULTURA’s culturalist rhetoric and token gestures. Ethnic issues remained entirely absent from state legislation, the 1992 Census, post-war land reform or retitling projects, agricultural support, health projects, or any other public policy. Even within CONCULTURA, the ideological re-insertion of the Indian into the refurbished nationalist image did not extend to addressing or even charting the indigenous communities’ urgent material needs, or even to any efforts toward a serious demographic survey, fundamental to its own ‘support’ work. Rather, the indigenous communities were celebrated rhetorically as cultural relics, as for example in a national poster campaign (featuring pre-Columbian masks and the like) under the slogan ‘The Past in the Present’. This comfortably anachronistic view was indeed the core of CONCULTURA’s indigeneity discourse: Indian ethnicity as folkloric heritage, valued solely for the cachet it might lend to what Charles R. Hale has called the *ningunídad* (nothingness) of the ladino nation.

To some, however, the government’s endorsement of indigenous ethnic revival was even more notable for its material incentives. UNESCO, which funds CONCULTURA, had committed funds specifically to support indigenous cultural revival; hence the Indigenous Affairs office became a direct funding magnet. Not surprisingly, many ladino observers and most indigenous activists in the mid-1990s tended cynically to suppose that these funds were the government’s true motive in creating it. Thus, even as TIPM norms helped to foster a public embrace of ethnic pluralism, the material rewards for that embrace off-set the political effect, casting the policy shift as opportunistic and self-interested. That

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22 Culture of Peace Programme in El Salvador, elaborated by the Ministry of Education and other Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations with the co-operation of UNESCO. (Original version in Spanish. Non-official English translation [by UNESCO].) (December 1993), pp. 53–4. All further citations are from this English edition.
impression would also shadow the indigenous movement itself (as discussed below).

Tourist revenues were a far larger incentive. With international tourism to Central America bringing some US$1.5 billion per year, states throughout the region have sought with increasing vigour to promote their pre-Columbian archaeological sites as well as the weavings and other crafts of present-day indigenous communities (most famously, of the Mayan and Kuna peoples). Among other measures reflecting this agenda (such as building a new international airport ensconced with pre-Columbian Nahuat glyphs), in 1986 El Salvador joined in a co-operative venture with Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and the southern states of Mexico to form the regional tourism initiative Mundo Maya (Mayan World). Through glossy brochures, a poster campaign, and a monthly bilingual magazine published in Mexico, Mundo Maya, also funded partly by UNESCO, promotes an image of Central America as the ancient site primarily of one cultural community: the Maya, whose civilisation peaked between 400 and 1000 CE. The para-statal Salvadorean Tourism Institute developed a corollary campaign to promote El Salvador as part of the ruta maya – the pre-Columbian Mayan cultural zone cum modern tourist ‘routes’. Thus El Salvador’s national identity was itself also recast as ‘Mayan’.

The Mundo Maya campaign deliberately associates earlier Mayan civilisation with the cultures of living indigenous peoples in order to enhance the latter’s touristic appeal. This tactic effectively revalues living indigenous cultures, although in an exoticised and commodified fashion that has had contradictory political effects. On the one hand, the campaign ascribes to modern indigeneity a purely folkloric quality deliberately devoid of any political collateral. On the other hand, it arguably contributes to fostering a social ideational climate more sympathetic to indigenous activism. Moreover, linking pre-Columbian and present-day indigenous cultures contradicts long-standing state-nationalist doctrine in Latin America that the Conquest represented such a profound collapse of the native civilisations that no meaningful historical connection with present-day indigenous peoples has been sustained. This claim has been of significant use to states in deflecting claims by indigenous peoples to territorial sovereignty or autonomy; for the same reason, the counter-claim – that living peoples do sustain such historical continuity – is a ubiquitous discursive element in modern indigenous political platforms. Thus, ironically, Mundo Maya imports a subversive subtext, by restoring

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25 See also Carol Hendrickson, ‘Selling Guatemala: Maya Export Products in U.S. Mailorder Catalogues,’ in David Howes (ed.), *Commodities and Cultural Borders* (New York, 1997).
indigenous peoples’ public profile as the region’s prior sovereigns, a concept that recasts the modern state as settler-colonial, and raises the spectre of indigenous secession, autonomy claims, or at least group rights.

But Mundo Maya had a second, distinct ethnic effect in the Salvadorean context: it ‘mayanised’ El Salvador’s indigenous peoples, for neither the Nahuat nor the Lenca are Mayan in any linguistic or pre-Columbian cultural sense. The Salvadorean Nahuat (often called Pipiles) are linguistic kin to the Nahuatl-speaking Mexicana (Aztec) of central Mexico, who entered El Salvador through eleventh-to-fourteenth century migrations and sustained strong trade relations with central Mexico until the Spanish conquest. The Lenca (in the northeast), with a longer history in the region, are also a distinct non-Mayan ethnic group. Yet, ignoring this diversity, Salvadorean tourist literature deliberately promotes present indigenous cultures as uniformly ‘Mayan’, referring grandly to the country’s ‘more than 3000 years of Mayan history’. The Salvadorean Tourism Institute issued a series of attractive travel posters labelled ‘El Salvador … Mundo Maya’, that soon adorned the walls of businesses around the country. El Salvador’s principal tourist attraction, the extraordinarily preserved seventh-century town of Joya de Cerén (a pre-Nahuat site for which the ethnic identity of the inhabitants remains unknown), was also presented in this literature as a ‘Mayan’ site. Other civilisations relevant to El Salvador’s ethnic and archaeological heritage, such as the Olmec, Toltec and especially the Nahuatl-speaking peoples, were incorporated tangentially by the literature as ‘predecessors to the Maya’. When facts simply did not fit – like the Nahuat ethnicity of Cuscatlán itself (the region’s principal city-state conquered by Pedro de Alvarado, much celebrated in Salvadorean nationalist myth) – they were simply left out.

Thus Mundo Maya altered the public value of indigenous ethnic identities: valuing ‘Maya’ and devaluing other (now officially meaningless) ethnohistories of living Nahuat and Lenca. The impact extended beyond tourist readers. By the mid-1990s, many government and private-sector officials at every level believed, and would repeat, that the Salvadorean indigenous peoples are, in fact, Maya. In this climate, the

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26 There is no evidence that the term ‘Pipil’ was ever used by the Nahuat themselves. The term is usually translated as ‘children’, supposedly deriving from Spanish perceptions that the indigenous people’s version of Nahuatl was relatively unsophisticated and childish, but it may have had the double meaning of ‘noble’: see Don Diego Garcia de Palacio, Letter to the King of Spain, Ephraim G. Squier (tr.) (Culver City, 1983), p. 11.

27 A principal trade commodity was cacao; on this era, see William Fowler, ‘La distribución prehistórica e histórica de los pipiles,’ Mesoamerica, vol. 4, no. 6 (1983).

28 For example, see tourist brochure issued by the STI, ‘Vive’, undated.
indigenous movement also began to identify itself as Mayan – although for more complicated reasons, addressed in the next section.

However, by the mid-1990s government discourses of ‘Indian-ness’ had opened a small wedge for indigenous politics by revaluing indigenous communities as living emblems of a glorified national past, and so providing small public sites for indigenous ethnopolitical discourse promoted by Salvadorean indigenous activists. Such openings might well have comprised a crucial opening which the indigenous movement could use to prise open a political space in the official rejectionist edifice. But that chink would remain virtually impassable, partly because of entrenched ladino popular rejection, but also because of the manner in which international influences interacted: intensifying the movement’s appearance of opportunism; rendering it vulnerable to harsh international scrutiny for doctrinal weaknesses; and aggravating its internal fragmentation and factionalism, so damaging to any movement’s public profile.

Indigenous Ethnopolitics

For its part, the most striking feature of the Salvadorean indigenous movement in the mid-1990s was its rapid proliferation (see chart). Oldest and by far the best known, both domestically and internationally, was the National Association of Indigenous Salvadoreans (Asociación Nacional de Indígenas Salvadoreños – ANIS), headed by (self-proclaimed) cacique espiritual Adrian Esquino Lizco. ANIS dates from the 1960s, but gained national prominence in 1982, when a major army massacre on ANIS cooperative farmland brought the organisation a flood of publicity. Its indigenous membership promptly swelled to include many indígenas throughout the country, both Nahuat and Lenca – possibly even to the 40,000 members that ANIS still claimed in the mid-1990s. In 1996 Esquino Lizco remained the only indigenous Salvadorean leader known to the major TIPM networks. Self-anointed as ‘primer cacique espiritual de las tres naciones Mayas, Lenca y Nahuat’, he had attended several international conferences including the UN Working Group. His regular contacts with North American Indian nations had also brought small but vital infusions of funds and support, while contributing Apache, Navajo and Lakota elements to ANIS’s annual ceremonies and festivals. Thus ANIS had been firmly connected to the TIPM since its earliest years. Yet, as with the state’s discourse, those very connections also eroded the organisation’s domestic and international image. In particular, its pan-Indian cultural syncretism was viewed as especially opportunistic and

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29 Esquino Lizco has claimed that ANIS dates to 1914, but former members report that it was founded in 1961. It obtained its personería jurídica in 1980.
emulative, delegitimising its ethnic claims in the local setting and to at least one key international observer (see below).

The infusion of international funds, ANIS’s associated prestige and Esquino Lizco’s growing personal wealth also aggravated internecine competition. By the mid-1980s Esquino Lizco was already being accused within the indigenous communities of embezzlement and autocratic behaviour, while some bitter schisms within the co-operative further eroded ANIS’s support. The first group to splinter from ANIS was MAIS, in 1986; with the 1992 Quincentennial, a fresh wave of ANIS
defections contributed to the phalanx of organisations shown in the attached chart. In 1994 twelve of these organisations came together to form the National Co-ordinating Council of Indigenous Salvadoreans (Consejo Coordinador Nacional de Indígenas Salvadoreños – CCNIS). CCNIS announced itself to the press as representing a spontaneous indigenous re-entry to the national political stage, inspired by the new ILO Convention 169. In entering the national arena, however, the CCNIS organisations quickly united in opposing ANIS and became a competitor for international funds. In this climate of open challenge ANIS’s popular base dissolved; by 1996, it was unable to muster the 3,000 names necessary to enter its much-publicised new political party, Tierra Madre, on the national election list.30

This burgeoning yet fragmented indigenous movement intersected with state interests only in isolated public sites. CONCULTURA’s Indigenous Affairs Office embraced the CCNIS organisations, providing meeting space and supporting their claims for international visitors. The Procuraduría de la Paz (the ombudsman and watchdog institution for the Salvadorean peace process) established an indigenous ‘desk’, to be run by an ANIS representative. But as noted above, the state’s tokenistic ethnic pluralism still fell far short of endorsing indigenous group rights and indeed excluded ethnic issues from any substantive policy area. Caught in this classic shutout, CCNIS’s discursive orientation became directed primarily toward gaining access to the TIPM. ANIS had long since adopted TIPM norms by proclaiming the Lenca and Nahuat (and Maya31) to be ‘nations’ and incorporating associated TIPM tenets, such as claims to territorial rights and to a privileged connection to nature and ‘Mother Earth’. Now CCNIS organisations adopted similar rhetoric – with mixed political results, discussed below.

One dimension of this new campaign was the indigenous movement’s own deliberate ‘mayanisation’, although this identification had deeper social roots than state rhetoric. For centuries, the Guatemalan Mayan peoples had been close neighbours of the Salvadorean peoples, with whom trade and intermarriage were frequent. For example, Nahuat women have used Maya-Kaqchikel cortede cloth (adding a distinct embroidery design) for at least a century, and since the mid-1970s, when local production ended, those who could afford it have bought cloth imported from Kaqchikel markets. Nahuat and Lenca people still make

30 ANIS assembled only 1,018 names: interview, Dr José Antonio Herrera, Supreme Electoral Tribunal, May 1997.
31 Early Salvadorean authorities had reported a Mayan population in the north of the country but today no Mayan-language-speaking communities (or self-identified Mayans) can be identified: see Rodolfo Barón Castro, La población de El Salvador (San Salvador, 1942).
regular religious pilgrimages to Mayan sites. This embedded sense of community with the Maya was further reinforced and granted official authority by the Mundo Maya campaign. Moreover, in the 1990s the Salvadorean activists were exposed to a veritable seismic shift in regional ethnopolitics: the emergence in Guatemala of the pan-Maya movement, an indigenous-led reconception of all the Mayan-language-speaking peoples into a larger, proto-nationalist ‘Mayan people’, led by many talented activists with strong connections to the TIPM. A distant (or dim) familiarity with this movement now helped to inspire both Nahuat and Lencan activists overtly toward ‘Mayan’ cosmology, imagery and identity. In this spirit, ANIS added a large mural in classical Mayan motif to an interior wall of its meeting house. Some Nahuat activists in rival organisations began to call themselves ‘Maya’ or ‘Maya-Nahuat’. Some Lencan activists also identified with the Maya. Even many Nahuat and Lenca outside the indigenous organisations would say, if asked, that they were Maya.

But mayanisation was detrimental to Nahuat and Lencan ethnic claims in several ways. First, it underlined the Salvadorean indigenous peoples’ appearance to tourists (and even to some social scientists) as ‘not truly Indian’ by endorsing the Guatemalan Mayan peoples as the benchmark for their own indigeneity. Distinguished by their languages, striking dress, and concentrated communities, the Guatemalan Mayan peoples have long exemplified what most Central Americans and tourists (and academics?) consider ‘Indians’ to be. In the shadow of this model and without such overt markers, the Nahuat and Lenca appear not as distinct peoples in a unique situation but rather to have ‘lost’ their (Mayan-model) ethnicity – and so their claim to any special indigenous rights or privileges. Thus mayanisation undermined the indigenous movement’s urgent efforts to overcome the ‘not-truly-Indian’ stigma which remains their primary political obstacle. Indeed, the ‘Maya-Nahuat’ rhetoric signalled to knowledgeable outsiders – such as UNESCO officials familiar with the region’s ethnohistory – that the Salvadoreans had forgotten their own links to the Nahuat of Central Mexico and so, implicitly, had lost touch with their real indigenous heritage.

Worse, the TIPM’s material and political rewards suggested a mercenary motive for the ‘Maya’ claim: that the Salvadoreans were

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32 An important link to Salvadorean activists was the missionizing Guatemalan ‘Mayan’ spiritualism of Apolinaris Pishtin, with whom many of the CCNIS activists had ‘trained’ as ‘shamans’; on this interesting character, see George Lovell, *A Beauty That Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala* (Toronto, 1995), pp. 137–40.

simply adopting a ‘successful’ neighbouring ethnic identity in hopes of sharing its – relative – political success. Of course, some element of this critique rang true. The Salvadorean groups were very aware that the Maya had drawn extensive international recognition and support, and did hope to partake of the material benefits and the ethnic prestige associated with that support. But the appearance of mercenary motives eclipsed the deeper social roots of the ‘Maya’ claim, even as it obscured the state’s complicity in authorising the ‘Maya’ profile through its saturation of the country with the Mundo Maya campaign.

In any case, the Salvadorean indigenous movement’s embrace of Maya identity would backfire when translated into funding proposals, because projects emulative of Guatemalan Mayan projects were strained or irrelevant in the Salvadorean context. The next sections of this article target two international initiatives that were especially influential in delegitimising the Salvadorean indigenous movement: (1) a pro-indigenous funding project by the European Union; and (2) a cultural funding project by UNESCO.

‘Being Indigenous’ for the European Union

In 1993 the European Union – sensitised to indigenous peoples’ politics by the TIPM – launched a programme to support indigenous peoples that had profoundly distorting effects on the Salvadorean indigenous ethnopolitics. The ‘Programme of Support for the Indigenous Peoples of Central America’ (Programa de Apoyo para los Pueblos Indígenas de Centroamerica – PAPICA) was intended to ‘contribute to bettering the situation of, and to defending the rights, values and collective identity of the Indigenous Peoples, garifunas and creoles of Central America’. The project reflected the organisers’ belief that indigenous activism suffered largely from a lack of funds and resources, both vital (in PAPICA’s view) to more effective and unified political action. PAPICA also sought to counter factionalism within the movement by creating stronger incentives for organisations to co-ordinate and share knowledge. In practice, however, PAPICA translated ideals and principles drawn from the TIPM into a top-down funding authority that, throughout Central America, actually aggravated factionalism, and distorted organisations’ agendas away from their original concerns and constituencies. Its impact in El Salvador illustrates only one aspect of this larger – and dismal – story.

The EU launched PAPICA at a conference in San José, Costa Rica; later, the EU organisers arranged for its co-ordination by Panama-based FUNDESCA (Foundation for Social and Economic Development in Central America). Following TIPM injunctions that any initiative regarding indigenous peoples include a central planning role for
indigenous peoples themselves, the EU organisers invited indigenous representatives from all five Central American countries and Panama to attend and to define its programme of action. (From El Salvador, ANIS president Esquino Lizco, another ANIS associate, and two MAIS representatives attended.) On paper, PAPICA was to be funded at an astonishing 7,500,000 euros – enough to draw immediate keen interest on the part of indigenous organisations throughout the region.

PAPICA’s proposed programme grouped indigenous needs within three general fields or ‘objectives’: (1) collective and individual identity; (2) access to national politics; and (3) control over the environment and natural resources in their respective territories. The language of these objectives directly invoked ILO Convention 169:

To support and contribute to the consolidation of collective and individual identity of the indigenous peoples, seeking to eliminate the discrimination of which they are objects and to eliminate those policies which actually seek their assimilation, and to strengthen their own values, above all those nonmaterial values (history, culture, language, traditions and forms of organisation) supporting their processes of change so that they may become subjects of their own development:

To promote their presence and participation in public spaces, at the local, national and regional level; to promote the recognition and respect of their collective rights by the rest of the society and by the States; to develop spaces for dialogue and their harmonious inclusion within the societies of which they are part;

To contribute to stimulating their economy and consolidating their control over their territories and/or their natural resources; to improve and enable their productive capacity and their transformation in the context of a healthy ecology. (Anexo A:1)

These laudable goals were translated into an ambitious Programme of Action. A multi-tiered bureaucracy to ‘co-ordinate’ projects ensured indigenous representation at every level – yet secured a ‘monitoring’ role for FUNDESCA. Any indigenous organisation in Central America was eligible to submit project proposals to PAPICA, on the sole condition that it join a mesa nacional (national co-ordinating body) in its respective state that would co-ordinate the proposals. (The logic, which had dire effects, was understandable: to prevent PAPICA funds from funnelling to one faction, to avoid duplication of projects, and to enhance co-operation, information-sharing, and mutual learning.) Each mesa would be advised by two EU-salaried ‘experts’, including one recruited locally from each country. (El Salvador was assigned only one expert, reflecting EU perceptions that the Salvadorean peoples were ‘less well organised’.) All five mesas would co-ordinate regionally through a Central American Co-

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34 Confidential interview, FUNDESCO representative to PAPICA, 14 January 1996.
ordinating body (Coordinadora Indígena Centroamericana – CICA) that would meet in rotating locations in the five countries.

Thus, the PAPICA process imposed an outside model for indigenous organising that promptly reconfigured indigenous activism in each country. In all of the Central American countries, indigenous organisations seeking PAPICA funds promptly formed *mesas nacionales*. In El Salvador, the *mesa nacional* was CCNIS – presented to the Salvadorean media in 1994 as a spontaneous indigenous initiative to promote ILO Convention 167, but in fact directly inspired (indeed, mandated) by the EU.

Furthermore, the internal configuration of CCNIS reflected a hasty scrambling to gain access to the *mesa*. Two organisations were simply husband-wife teams (RAIS, CONAIS), one of which was actually composed of ladinos (RAIS). The ‘women’s organisation’, COMUPRIN, was set up explicitly as a funding magnet by the president of CCNIS (and leader of ACOPINSA), who installed his wife as president. The only ‘Lenca’ organisation (CODECA) had for some years been a ladino sustainable-development organisation, which adopted an indigenous profile only when major international funding seemed imminent. ADMIS, based in Santa Ana, quickly went dormant because the president’s husband would not let her travel, yet remained on the books. ADTAIS (based in the heavily indigenous Nonualco region) was in disarray with the arrest and imprisonment of its president on charges of corruption. Four organisations claimed to be ‘membership’ organisations yet lacked any membership lists or any clear community grass-roots support to confirm that standing (ACOCPINSA, ANITISA, ASNAIS, ACCIES). The genuinely substantial and vigorous popular bases of ADTAIS, ADESCOIN and MAIS were clouded by this panoply. By contrast, some of the country’s best-known indigenous organisations – like the Lenca group led by Miguel Angel Amaya, based in the Lenca communities of Cacaopera – refused to participate. The indigenous cofradas – the most socially embedded ethnic organisations for both the Nahuat and Lenca communities – were entirely unrepresented. Hence the impression gained by some observers (both *indígena* and ladino) who had contact with CCNIS that ‘these people don’t represent anybody’.

Such a frenetic scenario is not uncommon in social movements confronting a balloon of new resources, and normally could be expected to resolve into more solid shape over time. But rather than enhance this process, the PAPICA process had several additional negative effects on the Salvadorean movement. First and most obviously, it distracted even

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the more substantial organisations away from their established activities and agendas, demanding months of grant-writing – a chore with which the groups were entirely unfamiliar, and for which, given their leaders’ inadequate literacy, they were dependent on advisers. Even subsequently, PAPICA entailed weekly meetings of the mesa nacional in the capital, a substantial bus journey for most of the organisations that consumed much time and scarce resources. The promise of vast returns sustained this onerous participation for two years, but resentment and frustration began to build as grassroots organising suffered in proportion.

Second, the PAPICA process inadvertently aggravated CCNIS’s intrinsic bias toward an anti-ANIS posture. At an earlier stage, the EU had conducted a diagnostic study of the Central American indigenous peoples in order to assess the best way to assist each country’s programmes. After touring the projects of various organisations, the (anonymous) EU consultant judged that not ANIS – the oldest and best-known organisation – but rather MAIS (the splinter organisation formed in 1986, with a solid base and demonstrably effective projects underway) was the best organised and positioned to take the role of ‘principal counterpart’ on the PAPICA project. In due course, a key MAIS activist (the only college-educated indigenous activist in the movement) was indeed selected as the local, salaried indígena ‘expert’ for El Salvador. (For the first year of its existence, CCNIS met in the office of a centrist national labour union with which MAIS had ties.) But the choice of MAIS as ‘counterpart’, whatever its seeming merits, was pivotal. In this key intermediary position, MAIS usurped ANIS’s traditional role as ethnic broker to international funders, hastening ANIS’s exit from the group and triggering a vicious schism.

That crucial political juncture deserves our closer scrutiny, for it highlights how TIPM norms can translate into the ‘knowledge’ of key players like the EU consultant. One of the reasons that ANIS manifested weakly to the EU consultant was its ‘pan-Indianist syncretism’ – especially, the incorporation into its public rituals of North American Indian ceremonial practices – which the consultant found contrived, if not fraudulent:

Under the aegis of its Cacique, this organisation tries to recoup the distinct culture and features of lo indio through a pan-Indianism assembled syncretically from the pictorial iconography of the North American Indians to the musical instruments of the tropical rainforest – that disappeared centuries ago in El Salvador. In its

36 Identificación de un programa dirigido a la problemática indígena en Centro-América, anonymous author, no date.
37 In the second year, CCNIS met in the new CONCULTURA building, under the auspices of the Indigenous Affairs Office. This connection aggravated its international appearance as a government tool.
search for allies among the powerful Support Groups, it uses all the mobilising themes imaginable: communion of the Indian with the Earth Mother, profound yet diffused religiosity, communitarianism, return to tradition and revalorization of pre-Columbian axiology. All this comprises a syncretic model close in its most elemental expressions to Indianist esotericism. (197)

On this question of syncretism, however, the TIPM actually aggravates a quandary inherent to indigenous politics. All ethnic politics always entail some codification or standardisation of the identity, to make sense of solidarity, to define boundaries and to justify political claims. For many indigenous peoples, the TIPM is indeed most valuable not for its juridical formulas (such as the right to self-determination) but for constituting an identity community through which they can imagine and share newly dignified understandings of indigeneity – flagged, for instance, by elevated spiritual concepts understood to distinguish their world view, like ‘Earth Mother’.38 Hence the incorporation of North American religious imagery into indigenous emblematic art and ceremonies, as by ANIS, reflects a strategic sharing that has emerged from this transnational-identity project. But the TIPM’s most basic argument, also reinforced in ILO Convention 169 and the UN Draft Declaration, is that indigenous peoples’ political rights derive from their cultural uniqueness: for example, a distinct language, that warrants bilingual education; or a distinct cosmology and spiritual practice, that requires autonomy over sacred lands. From this premise of uniqueness the TIPM also derives its compelling arguments for cultural diversity: that is, that these unique cultures should be protected, rather like unique species, because their disappearance would be a loss to humanity as a whole. Much indigenous public discourse is indeed replete with claims to special and ancient knowledge, and alternative modes of perception and insight. With uniqueness so valued, any cultural syncretism – say, with the practices of neighbouring non-indigenous peasant communities – tends to erode indigenous political claims by suggesting that they are not truly unique after all. Especially, indigenous practices syncretic with TIPM imagery and rhetoric immediately open indigenous peoples to observers’ doubts about how ‘truly indigenous’ they are.39

Thus the indigenous conundrum is to display a cultural autonomy, homogeneity and rigidity (visually inscribed in dress and other practices) which is always contradicted by the inherent syncretism, heterogeneity and fluidity of real-life ethnic experience, but which is much more graphically contradicted by the transnational-identity project itself. When

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brought before the docket of outside professional critics (like that of the key EU consultant cited above), such adaptations quickly tarnish any claim to the ethnically ‘true’ and ‘original’ – criteria for which are usually drawn from academic authorities, such as ethnographies.40

Hence ANIS’s syncretic rituals – indeed socially shallow, in that Salvadorean indigenous people outside its core membership do not practice them – did not simply suggest to the EU consultant a predictable diffusion of ethnopolitical ideas. Rather, that syncretism more ominously undermined ANIS’s claim to represent a distinctly Salvadorean, and therefore authentic, indigenous base. Thus, the EU consultant considered MAIS (with less obvious connections to the TIPM) a more appropriate ‘counterpart’ for PAPICA. The consultant’s report stipulated that ANIS should be included in the PAPICA project on condition that it abandon its ‘pan-Indianist syncretism’ and respect the ‘cultural specificities’ of the local communities.41

The formation of CCNIS under these conditions had several profound effects. First, it polarised the movement by demoting ANIS and grouping the newer organisations into a coalition that, under the influence of some archrivals of ANIS, quickly turned a complex factionalism into a vicious bipolar schism. Within a year ANIS was entirely absent from the weekly CCNIS group meetings – and so was omitted from the elaborate 628,130-euro project proposal that CCNIS eventually presented to the PAPICA directorate. Losing ground in this crucial split and after some violent incidents, in 1996 ANIS retaliated against CCNIS by denouncing it, to the TIPM and to the US Congress, as a front group for ARENA, the ultra-right-wing, formerly death-squad affiliated party, hostile to indigenous rights and to ANIS, the sole legitimate representative of El Salvador’s indigenous people. The charge was feeble. In 1996 the organisations in CCNIS were politically eclectic, with centrist and even leftist ties. But its endorsement by CONCULTURA made CCNIS vulnerable to this charge, at least to an international solidarity community that still associated all state organs with the virulent right-wing forces which controlled them in the 1980s.42 Responding to ANIS’s appeal, by 1997 two US Congressional offices were pressuring the US Consulate in El Salvador formally to protest attacks on ANIS by ‘ARENA death squads’ – who were, in fact, rival indigenous groups.

40 Ibid.
41 The EU report reproduced the common idea that Salvadorean territory still embrace Maya as well as Lenca populations (see note 32). The EU investigator was therefore concerned that ANIS was not respecting ‘non-Nahuat’ ethnic groups in the country.
42 The blanket charge that CONCULTURA is a right-wing organisation, let alone an ARENA front, is unfounded. By 1996 CONCULTURA had attracted dedicated professionals from all over the political spectrum.
Second, the PAPICA grant-writing process distorted the CCNIS organisations’ programmes to the point of eroding their international image. As noted, the mesas nacionales (and CICA) were intended by the EU to provide a rubric for consultation and mutual ‘learning’ among the Central American indigenous peoples. But as many an NGO will attest, ‘learning’ in such a setting quickly reduces to learning how to match the funder’s criteria for receiving grants. Hence the Salvadorean activists were leveraged into reconfiguring their projects into terms compatible with PAPICA’s reading of TIPM norms but not well suited to the Salvadorean context. Ultimately, this manoeuvre weakened their political standing even to PAPICA.

The irony could be seen clearly in two project areas: first, the question of land rights. TIPM platforms promote collective territorial rights, rather than private title, reflecting indigenous peoples’ history of land loss and needs for restored sovereign autonomy over contiguous tracts. The emphasis on collective title also distinguishes the indigenous peoples juridically from other ethnic or peasant groups: as ‘peoples’ and ‘nations’ with certain rights under international law. Urgently advocated by many indigenous representatives, this concern for ‘territory’ was accordingly a primary PAPICA ‘objective’, as cited above.

But the TIPM’s classic focus on territory does not resonate well in El Salvador. Collective land holdings by the comunidades were formally eliminated in the 1880s, and the subsequent state-sponsored titling of private plots was actually accepted and successfully pursued by most indigenous families. Loss of those plots in subsequent decades, to debt and fraud by ladino landholders, was indeed a major contribution to the 1932 indigenous uprising. Even with that loss, smallholding and semiproletariat production has continued to define rural Salvadorean indigenous family economies. The ANIS cooperative is an exception, and its sometimes violent internal disputes reflect its social-institutional fragility; the model is not being emulated. Although collective spaces and projects, such as meeting spaces or cultural revival centres, are key concerns, collective land holding is not currently on any organisation’s agenda.

As noted above, the TIPM’s formal instruments do not propose any single cultural criterion for membership, and would not find the Nahuat orientation toward private title ipso facto to disqualify the Nahuats from the category of ‘indigenous’. But for PAPICA, which had reconceived

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43 See Aldo Lauria, An Agrarian Republic.
44 See also Alvarenga, Reshaping the Ethics of Power.
45 An exception is a small parcel owned and managed by ADESCOIN, in Santa María de Guzmán.
TIPM norms as definitive criteria, the Nahuats’ interest in private title tended to cast them as ‘mere farmers’. As gaining respectable standing in the TIPM was, for the indigenous activists, a matter of immediate political urgency, PAPICA’s expectations bore in as a hegemonic constraint. Accordingly, CCNIS’s proposal to PAPICA dutifully specified the objective to ‘Support the conception, adoption and/or diffusion and application of laws that guarantee access to land and respect for indigenous territories’. Although consistent with PAPICA’s terms, this provision removed the land-tenure sections of the Salvadoreans’ proposal from local relevance.

A second project created to satisfy TIPM norms was CCNIS’s heavy emphasis on language revival (rescate), budgeted at 11,617 euros. Language rights are crucial to many indigenous peoples, and are particularly vital to the Maya – with whom, again, the Salvadorean movement had self-identified – and were heavily represented in the Guatemalan mesa’s proposals to PAPICA. But, in the Salvadorean context, no critical mass of Nahuat- or Lencan-language speakers persists to suggest serious hope of actual popular ‘revival’. In any case, none of the CCNIS organisations actually had the expertise (the intellectuals and trained cadres) requisite to launching such a project.

The effort backfired. This and similar cultural revival projects inspired by the pan-Maya movement rendered the Salvadorean organisations petitioners for projects they lacked training to pursue or even to supervise – for example, scholarly study of historical documents to illuminate their ethnohistory (budgeted at 31,033 euros). Vaguely formulated, beyond their capacities, and/or of marginal local irrelevance, CCNIS’s Maya-centric and TIPM-compliant project proposals were repeatedly rejected by PAPICA as badly designed and/or impractical. Worse, they cast the CCNIS activists as both poorly organised and weakly emulative. In March 1996, FUNDESCA monitoring officials from Panama made clear PAPICA’s dissatisfaction with the Salvadorean proposals – their lack of accountability, unqualified personnel, the exclusion of ANIS – leaving the Salvadorean delegates frustrated and bitter. Some Salvadorean activists found their position relative to PAPICA offensive in principle and humiliating in practice: as one put it, just ‘a new form of European imperialism’. Their humiliation was only aggravated by the Mayas’ and other indigenous groups’ inherently advantaged position

46 CCNIS, Documento de Planeación y Organización, ‘Line of action’ 3.12, emphasis added.
47 Interviews, Víctor Ramos, CCNIS President, and Leopoldo Tzian, COMG. On the significance of language standardisation to the pan-Maya movement, see Demetrio Cojti, Configuración del pensamiento político del pueblo maya (Quetzaltenango, 1991).
48 Confidential interview, CCNIS member organisation representative, 15 January 1996.
relative to the same criteria. By summer 1997 only the last shreds of hope for eventual funding were keeping the CCNIS group in the PAPICA process.

Similar dynamics would arise in a second, separate initiative: UNESCO’s Culture of Peace programme.

‘Being Indigenous’ for UNESCO

As discussed above, the Culture of Peace programme, formalised in 1993, was designed through consultations between the government, UNESCO and other Salvadorean groups and institutions to stabilise the peace process. The proposal was intended, in the words of its mission statement, ‘to contribute to social renovation in El Salvador, through the diffusion and the individual and collective interiorisation of the values, attitudes and behaviours which are fundamental to peace’.\footnote{Culture of Peace Programme in El Salvador, p. 17.} Part of this project was ‘Area 2: Recovery and Development of the National Identity in the Culture of Peace’:

Culture, in the sense of cultivating national and universal values, will be the united element that integrates individual and collective efforts to sustain a culture of peace. The identity of a nation consists, to a large extent, of a common, mythical or historically shared culture. (CUPP 1993: 53)

As noted above, re-imagining this ‘historically shared culture’ included revaluing its indigenous heritage: hence Project 2.9, ‘Support to the Salvadorian [sic] Indigenous Communities’ budgeted on paper for US$555,621.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 89–91.} The sum was significant even to CONCULTURA, which promptly established the Indigenous Affairs Office to secure government access. It was a huge sum by the standards of the Salvadorean indigenous organisations, most of which had no budget whatsoever, and drew them to a second two-year series of meetings and a second elaborate grant-writing process.

But UNESCO interpreted TIPM norms according to its own mandate, in assuming that the principal problems facing the Salvadorean peoples were ‘cultural’ – a concept understood by UNESCO as expressed in language, religion, arts and crafts. Accordingly, the intended ‘results’ of Project 2.9 were (1) a bilingual (Nahuat-Spanish and Ulua-Spanish) education programme, (2) an indigenous radio broadcast, (3) support for artisan crafts, (4) development of local libraries, (5) diffusion of ‘cultural matters’ (undefined) through various media, and (6) support for folklore festivals.\footnote{Ibid., p. 90.}

Notable among these ‘results’ was a disjunction with conditions in the rural indigenous communities, where people had almost no radios, were
largely illiterate, and had minimal access to public media of any kind. Glaring for its absence was any support for those activities truly central to Salvadorean indigenous ethnic practice, yet outside UNESCO’s mandate, such as corn cultivation. Corn is ethnically vital to the Salvadorean Nahuat and Lenca, as for many other indigenous peoples in the Americas, not only in its core subsistence function so crucial to community cohesion but also through its pervasive spiritual significance, and the reinforcement of kin and communal ties linked to its cultivation. Yet this vital reproductive function was not recognised as ‘cultural’ by UNESCO. Related indigenous concerns, such as micro-credit, fertiliser or market access, indeed cast their interests as those of ‘mere farmers’. It became crucial to the indigenous organisations that an appearance as ‘mere farmers’ tended to undermine, for UNESCO officials, the legitimacy of their ethnic claims as indigenous peoples – and their eligibility for funding.

Hence the indigenous communities’ urgent desire for farming credit and private title had to be sidelined. Instead, the relation to land was recast in terms of environmental wisdom and protection. But even the environmental agenda, as formulated in their proposals, was conspicuously vague. The very considerable expertise of the Salvadorean peoples regarding their environment lies in their subsistence farming ability. In the mid-1990s, no Salvadorean activist could actually articulate an environmental agenda in the first-world sense of managing forests or averting environmental degradation. Instead, environmental concerns were couched in vague rhetoric regarding the special connection of the Nahuat and Lenca peoples to ‘nature’ and ‘Mother Earth’, or even as a proposed return to the imagined idealistic existence of pre-Columbian indigenous society. This rhetoric did bring the CCNIS activists some plane tickets to a regional NGO conference on forestry. But its irrelevance to the immediate practical needs of the desperately poor indigenous communities drew pointed private protest from one CCNIS activist:

We can’t go back to the past. We can’t go back to the era when mangos grew liberally on the trees and game ran free in the woods. Then there were very few of us, we could live off the land that way. But now, these things don’t exist. We can’t pick the mango, because it doesn’t exist. We can’t hunt game in the woods, because it doesn’t exist. No, we have to think about how we live now. And there are those who say we should focus solely on rescuing our culture, and not on


production. But I say, let those who say that first give up their comfortable homes with their television sets and stereos. Let them first give up their comfortable jobs as teachers in the town and come live in the countryside, and live and work as we do. Because there is no work. Then they will know that we must focus on production, on the close bond between us and the corn. That is the basis of our lives, us and the corn. We need credit, we need support, because when we get our piece of land, we have to be able to plant it, to begin. This capacity is what we need to strengthen ourselves, in the context of all that we are doing to strengthen our identity; our capacity to produce, our relation with the corn.\footnote{Virginia Q. Tilley}

This argument would find ready endorsement by most indigenous networks in the TIPM. But it did not sell to UNESCO, deploying its own model distilled from the TIPM. Accordingly, of the projects ultimately submitted to UNESCO by Salvadorean indigenous activists, only two drew on actual community knowledge and experience: those concerned with medicinal plants. The rest concerned language revival and ‘indigenous crafts,’ most of which were not known, or no longer practised, by the most of the population:

1. training in the artisan production of traditional clothing;
2. establishment of ten centres serving 32 communities to train people in ceramic, wood and painting crafts;
3. a diagnostic study of ‘the needs and viability’ of Lenca and Nahuat language revival;
4. training courses in the oral transmission of cited languages;
5. a hundred ‘educating actions’ to promote native languages;
6. two regional artistic festivals;
7. a national artisan fair of indigenous crafts;
8. establishment of three nurseries for medicinal plants and
9. a conference on traditional medicines.\footnote{This argument would find ready endorsement by most indigenous networks in the TIPM. But it did not sell to UNESCO, deploying its own model distilled from the TIPM.}

Nevertheless, the Salvadoreans’ strained efforts to emulate the UNESCO’s model for ‘being indigenous’ again backfired. By 1997, Project 2.9 remained unfunded. Even those states sponsors normally most sympathetic to indigenous rights (especially Sweden and Denmark) could not be convinced that such projects made sense for the ‘not truly Indian’ indigenous peoples in El Salvador.\footnote{Nevertheless, the Salvadoreans’ strained efforts to emulate the UNESCO’s model for ‘being indigenous’ again backfired. By 1997, Project 2.9 remained unfunded.}

Conclusion

TIPM tenets represent decades of consultation among indigenous peoples in all parts of the world, who are highly diverse in their cultural practices

\footnote{Interview, Fidel Flores, president of ACCIES, 10 March 1996.}
\footnote{Programa Cultura de Paz en El Salvador: documento de proyecto, ‘apoyo a las comunidades indígenas de El Salvador (Perfil 2.9),’ pp. 13–18.}
\footnote{UNESCO programme officer, confidential interview, 19 June 1996.}
and in their assessments of their own political needs. That diversity is well recognised among indigenous activists. But confronting state power has required a collective project of identity reconstruction: re-imagining indigeneity as a re-valorised transnational identity, inclusive of indigenous peoples globally. Thus, in any local setting, the TIPM manifests not only as a transnational support network but also as the discourse of that identity, and as a related, evolving body of codified and juridical norms. Both the identity discourse and the codified norms take their political authority from the continuing claim that they represent collective indigenous authorship and consensus, and with this gloss have gained political clout. Indeed, in El Salvador, where the domestic political arena is antipathetic to the very presence of ‘Indians’, indigenous activists forged a political space not so much by gaining ambivalent international allies as by brandishing slogans and ethnic claims codified and reinforced for the state by the TIPM.

Nevertheless, when appropriated and deployed by outside actors, both the transnational identity and the codified norms may obtain authority to alter – even override – the terms of local ethnopolitics. The PAPICA and UNESCO programmes illustrate such appropriations: in each case, a non-indigenous funding agency derived from the TIPM its own discourse of indigeneity: the synthetic body of concepts, values, and related claims understood as definitive of what indigenous peoples are, and of their political needs and group rights. Each agency then assumed its own authority to deploy that discourse in negotiating its own involvement. Moral confidence derived from the commitment to reproduce a discourse authored by indigenous peoples themselves, but each institution assumed its own incontestable authority, as a morally driven actor, to arbitrate that discourse’s tenets. Thus their own distillation of indigeneity obtained a rigid framing function, autonomous from the beliefs, practices, and interests of the local indigenous peoples with whom the agencies engaged. Salvadoran indigenous organisations were leveraged into emulating standards and expectations for ‘being indigenous’ that diverged from their members’ own ethnic experience, in order to gain access to TIPM resources and allies. In this sense, TIPM concepts, as deployed locally, manifested as a newly hegemonic discourse of indigeneity, which the Salvadoran indigenous organisations were ill-positioned to contest.

Any portrait of the Salvadoran indigenous movement as rendered entirely craven by this manoeuvre would be a serious misimpression. In focusing on the role of foreign funders, this study has neglected others: particularly, the internal indigenous debates that recognised and denounced the hubris of the funding agencies; the indigenous organisations that did not participate or withdrew as the situation became clear;
and continuing transnational consultations among Salvadoran and other Central American indigenous activists outside the PAPICA and UNESCO processes. The fuller picture reveals much more diverse ‘webs’ of transnational exchange, and indicates that the hegemony asserted by the EU and UNESCO obtained only in the narrower sphere of their funding projects and state-institutional response. Nevertheless, the impact of those projects on the indigenous movement ran deep. The interplay traced here indeed shows how such larger complex ‘webs’ may be rendered covert, and be consigned to hidden transcripts, by well-meaning but powerful actors whose political and material leverage alters the public terms of domestic ethnopolitics. Thus the old contests over the definitions and meanings of indigeneity continue to dominate the conflict itself.

At a minimum, the Salvadoran experience demonstrates the permeability of local ethnopolitics to ‘external’ influences, suggesting the inadequacy of any analysis that takes the boundaries of the country as the boundaries of the study. But more importantly, the case shows how dense, complicated, and even contradictory that permeation may be. This study indeed contributes to broader critiques of international human rights movements whose first-world funding leverage and ‘universal’ norms sometimes ride roughshod over local perceptions and political agendas. Our careful attention to that fuller picture is vital if we are to understand and explain either local events or the fuller political nature of transnational influences, too often simply celebrated as liberating and uniformly beneficial, or, by contrast, too casually slighted for their apparent artifice, foreign authorship and putative distance from conditions on the ground.


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