AGENCY AT THE FRONTIER AND THE BUILDING OF TERRITORIALITY IN THE NARANJO-CEIBO CORRIDOR, PETEN, GUATEMALA

By

LUIS ALFREDO ARRIOLA

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2005
Copyright 2005

by

Luis Alfredo Arriola
To my beloved family, in appreciation of all they have endured.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The sheer magnitude of a dissertation necessarily engages multiple collaborations. In consequence I render proper credit to the people and institutions who partook of this endeavor. My everlasting gratitude goes, first and foremost, to the people of Naranjo and Ceibo who taught more than I could ever learn from them. Intellectual support was always there when needed from committee members, namely Professors Allan Burns, Marianne Schmink, Michael Heckenberger, and Murdo MacLeod. They challenged my intellect in many positive, creative ways. My dissertation mutual support group is recognized for invaluable contributions to my refining of the manuscript’s content and form at several stages of its development. The insightful feedback from Alex Rodlach, Maxine Downs, Deborah Rodman, Paige Lado, and Fatma Soud helped me through difficult times. My editors, Martha Jeanne Weismantel, Tara Boonstra and Mark Minho, have but my highest regards.

Other people who accompanied me in this intellectual journey and who deserve mentioning include Norman Schwartz, Victor Hugo Ramos, Edgar Calderón, Roberto Barrios, Kevin Gould, Georg Grumberg, Julio Cano and Werner Ramírez. Diverse kinds of support came from Tom Ankersen, Hugo Guillen, Bruce Ferguson, Richard Phillips, Paul Losch, Marie-Claire Paiz, Abimael Reinoso, Jorge Soza, Amilcar Corzo, Mario Mancilla and Luis A. Estrada.

I am indebted to a number of institutions for making possible the completion of this graduate degree. Generous endowments from the John D. and Catherine MacArthur
Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and the Organization of American States supported the first two years of doctoral studies. Sandra Cervera (New York) and María Teresa San Roman (Mexico City) from the International Institute of Education deserve special thanks for the moral support that they always offered when needed. Initial field research was made possible through aid from The Center for Latin American Studies, and the Program for Studies in Tropical Conservation, both at the University of Florida. The World Wildlife Fund/Central America office provided the funding for extended field work in 2002. While in the field I was privileged to procure the collaboration of the Assistant Mayors from Naranjo and Ceibo, Defensores de la Naturaleza, the town hall of La Libertad, CONAP’s Petén office, and FONTIERRAS. During the write-up stage critical support came forth from The Tropical Conservation and Development Program, the Department of Anthropology, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, all at the University of Florida.
PREFACE

I began collecting data for this dissertation in June 2000 two weeks after the inauguration of a 60-kilometer paved road from Tenosique, Tabasco, in Mexico, to the border with Petén, Guatemala. Both the international border and the settlement on the Guatemalan side are known as Ceibo. At the time there was no settlement of any size on the Mexican side. The building of the road would quickly trigger the latest advance of collective agency to occur in this frontier locality. A few months after the opening of the road an increasing number of ventursome merchants from distant Quiché province in the Guatemalan highlands had begun to set up make-shift booths with merchandise of all kinds. As I watched over the next two years, Ceibo changed from an isolated, scantily-populated hamlet into a growing settlement, one bursting with economic activity. Ceibo’s changing conditions were embedded in processes connected to the occupation of space that involved both the local population and the Guatemalan state.

Ceibo lays about 20 kms. west of the town of Naranjo, a place in this part of northwestern Petén I had visited before. A battered trail separated Naranjo from Ceibo, so the best way to travel between the two settlements was by river. One of the objectives of the 2000 trip was to determine my research headquarters for future research. Naranjo was chosen for a number of reasons to be explained later. As I collected information via interviews, life-histories, and archival work I realized that Ceibo was experiencing the same process that Naranjo had gone through two decades before.
This study of the stretch of land between both settlements, what I refer to as the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, sheds light on the way local populations find ways to deal with the state as their relationship with it changes through the process of building their own socio-cultural place. The central idea proposed here is that Naranjo and Ceibo inhabitants had engaged multiple strategies to adapt, to resist, and fight back external agents and driving forces acting upon them and on their agenda for attaining social control of space in reaction to the particular circumstances of each period. The external, or the outside, refers in this work to the non-local.

Ethnographic work allows one to examine the specificity of agency and its range of possibilities. It is this micro-perspective where anthropological insight contributes to the study of agency(ies) at locales such as frontiers and borders, by looking at 1) the level and success to affect bring about via agency, 2) the way agency develops from a connection to, as a result of, or in reaction to state intervention or encroachment, as when it promotes colonization—in a frontier, or controls its boundaries—at its borders, and 3) the way this interplay gets culturally mediated in the process.

Social control of space passed through a long period of frontier expansion before evolving into territoriality, or a permanent way of establishing social power (Sack 1986). Territoriality proper culminated with the titling of the land. External driving forces that had complicated the progression of the frontier and territoriality included the existence of illegal practices, political conflict, and the designation of the research site as a protected area for conservation purposes.

The significance of studying agency in this locale is twofold. First, there is a dearth of empirical data that explains the way members of local society in Guatemala’s border
and frontier areas deal with the state, and conversely, how the state engages, or fails to engage, its marginal fringes in Guatemala. The study of state issues in this country has been done in relation to the structure of government (e.g., Silvert 1954; Adams 1970), within an ethnic relations perspective (e.g., Smith 1990), in connection to social movements (see Galvez 1994), or from a perspective of “state terror” (see Delli 1996; Figueroa 1991). The reference to fringes follows the paradigm known as Dependency Theory (Frank 1967; Cardoso and Faletto 1979). This paradigm looks at relationships between the core of a political or economic system and its margins or periphery. The main idea is that power (social, economic, political) is concentrated in the center of the system, and places the fringes at a disadvantage. Periphery is understood here as situational. For instance, the shanty towns of many capital cities of the third world are the marginal loci inside the core. By contrast, the border area of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor is an example of a situational periphery, for reasons that will become clear later, in a rural context.

Secondly, the role of agency acquires an enhanced centrality when considering that borders, state symbols of control, are taking on new signified importance in the context of an expanding global political economy. Theoretically, political economy frames the study of social phenomena within a comprehensive historical scope and emphasizes the asymmetrical and disparate connections across different levels –e.g., the local and the global, and within diverse realms, including but not limited to culture, politics and economics. Among others, William Roseberry (1988, 1990) has laid out the approach in anthropological terms, and Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History* constitutes a prime example of this kind of work. In this line of thought, transnational
activities at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor make this location one among multiple world
nodes in globalization. Transnationalism, defined by Kearney (1995: 547) as the
movement of information, symbols, capitals, and people in spaces and places
transcending national boundaries, is rapidly changing the nature of borders as markers of
state power. Less and less, borders pose effective state barriers to the flow of ideas and
people from one nation-state to another. Behind the alleged erosion of borders (e.g.,
Ohmae 1994) is the professed demise of the nation-state as the “pre-eminent political
structure of modernity” (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 1). Although outside the scope of the
dissertation, this last point cannot be totally disregarded given that the diminished
significance of the state results from economic globalization and a de-territorialization of
political spaces (Steinmetz 1999: 10). International borders, withering away or not, are
arenas where cultural and symbolic dimensions of the state are still constantly re-
constituted and re-formulated. In such contested spheres border people are active players
of a dynamics that at one point in time may develop slowly, yet at another may change
abruptly. This study illustrates how people dealt with, tackled, and engaged change,
through personal and collective strategies, at the Mexico-Guatemala northern border over
the course of the twentieth century.

The dissertation contains six chapters. Chapter 1 sets forth the theory informing
research findings, with an emphasis on the connection between agency and the state. In
particular, a political economy approach grounds my theoretical insights, covering also a
conceptual understanding of the main aspects influencing on territoriality at the research
site.
The second chapter outlines the research formulation that guided this study. I explain first how this inquiry developed and changed over time and what kind of adjustments had to be made in the process. Secondly I address the physical and social features that characterize this location. Through a descriptive account of the research site the reader learns about the climate, fauna, flora, and the landscape of the Naranjo-Ceibo site. A general overview of the population’s offers insight into the social fabric and the conditions of the two communities of interest at the turn of the twentieth first century.

The following chapter is about the dissertation’s research methods. My analysis is based on ethnographic data, obtained through field research. Fieldwork took place in three time-periods between 2000 and 2002. Such stages are explained at length in the initial section of the chapter. I discuss what it was like being at the site, the tribulations and satisfactions of the data-gathering process, and my methods of interpretation. Other considerations, for example the validity and reliability of the data, are addressed.

Developing the argument from a world-system approach (Wallerstein 1978, 2004; Shannon 1996), Chapter 4 discusses the “intermittent” human territoriality of the study site. Historically there have been moments in which territorialities from different populations have prevailed, to then disappear. Hence, over the centuries the area has undergone periods of settling, followed by de-population, and then re-settling. In a way this phenomenon resembles what Little (2001) has coined for the Amazon as “perennial frontiers”. The chapter is subdivided into chronological periods. In each I discuss the conditions that occurred; the entering of modernization forces into Petén and the emergence of forest extractive economies, in the late 19th century; the transition period in the mid-twentieth century from a declining forest-based economy to one that came to rely
increasingly in agriculture; and the political, social and economic changes that took place after the province opened up, in the 1970s. Forces of modernization include but are not restricted to the presence of powerful foreign firms and individuals, emerging systems of international trade in raw commodities, and a slow but growing dependence on outside markets for finance and investment.

In the fifth chapter I concentrate in explaining, ethnographically, the manifestations of agency as carried out at the local level at the time the frontier faded, i.e. in the period 1982-2002. Field notes, vignettes and condensed life histories illustrate how people tackled diverse driving forces in the area, from political turmoil, to the oil industry, to illegal practices, to the increased presence of state representatives, all influencing the frontier-territoriality transition.

In the final chapter I pose a model to explain the manner in which the relationship between the civil population and the state mediated the evolution of land uses and tenure at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, a process that eventually culminated in territoriality. My concluding thoughts reflect on the locally embedded manifestations of a dynamic shifting state-civil population connection at the fringes of the nation-state, in a site that at the regional level was striving for augmented political empowerment, and one that in the larger global context was increasingly gaining higher standing.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ANTHROPOLOGY, AGENCY, AND THE STATE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The State in Conceptual Terms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontier</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border as a State Marker</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal Practices</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Globalization</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND THE STUDY SITE</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Formulation of a Research Question</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitation of the Study Site</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Description of Northwestern Petén</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetation</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fauna</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropogenic Landscapes</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society on the Naranjo-Ceibo Corridor</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society on the Naranjo-Ceibo Corridor</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>METHODS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Progressive Engagement with the Field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial Entry in 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Second Stay, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protracted Fieldwork, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phase II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phase III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Typical Day of Fieldwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Types of Respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generic respondents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landholders’ sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methods Used to Gather Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note-taking Procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Archival and Other Primary Written Material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methods of Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodological Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practical Problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethical Quandaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>HISTORICAL DISCONTINUITIES TO THE OCCUPATION OF SPACE AT THE NARANJO-CEIBO STRETCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northwestern Petén prior to 1860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-conquest Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Contact and the Colonial Experience, 1697-1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Populations of Northwestern Petén during the Colonial Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Cehach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Lacandón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interlude between National Independence and the Arrival of the World Market</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The First Years after Independence ................................................................. 117
Local and Regional Developments ............................................................... 118
Deepening Connections to the World System, 1860-1890 .......................... 120
The Macro-Economic Context ................................................................. 120
Economy and Politics at the National Level .............................................. 121
   Forest-based Extractive Economies: Rise and Fall of Logging and Rubber ................................................................. 122
   Shifting Local Conditions ................................................................... 125
The Main Era of Chicle, 1890-1940 ............................................................ 126
Chicle and the Northwest ........................................................................ 131
Transition to Full Opening of Petén, 1940s-1970 ....................................... 136
   Incorporation into the National Polity and the Impact of Demographic Change ................................................................. 137
   Conditions in the Northwest Before 1970 .......................................... 139
      Ceibo during the 1960s ................................................................. 141
      The central state makes temporary inroads at Ceibo .................... 143
      Developments at Naranjo, 1965-1970 .......................................... 144
Petén Opens Up, 1970-1982 .................................................................... 147
   Regional Developments: Roads and Expanding Populations .......... 147
   Post-Chicle Economic Activities of Petén ......................................... 148
The Creation of a Protected Area in Northern Petén .................................. 151
   Local conditions in the northwest, the 1970s .................................. 152
   Resurgence of logging circa 1973 ..................................................... 152
   Livestock and the emergence of Naranjo as a permanent settlement ... 153
   Main conditions for colonization: accessibility and land availability ... 155
   Presence of the central state in Naranjo .......................................... 158
Summary .................................................................................................... 162
Notes ......................................................................................................... 167

5 PASSING FRONTIER AND NASCENT TERRITORIALITY: 1982-2002 ........ 170

   Introduction ......................................................................................... 170
   Political and Social Driving Forces after 1982 .................................... 171
      Armed Conflict, 1979-1992 ............................................................ 171
      The End of Mexican Influence, ca. 1980-1982 ............................... 177
   Economic Driving Forces ................................................................. 182
      The Erratic Re-emergence of Logging in the Northwest ................ 182
      Xate Collecting, Late 1970s to Late 1980s ..................................... 185
      Resurgence of Oil Industry, 1978 .................................................. 187
   Slow Advancement of the Central State .............................................. 191
      The National Army ................................................................. 191
      Immigration Post ................................................................. 193
      CONAP and Conservation as State Policy .................................. 195
   Illegal Practices and Its Protracted Record in Petén ............................. 201
   The Frontier Process Fades at Naranjo ............................................. 211
   Naranjo’s Second Influx, ca. 1989-1995 .......................................... 221
   Ceibo and the Civil War of the 1980s .............................................. 228
6 A MODEL TO UNDERSTAND A SHIFTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOCAL SOCIETY AND THE STATE: TERRITORIALITY VIA LAND AT NARANJO

Introduction........................................................................................................256
The Consolidation of Social Control Over Land at Naranjo and Ceibo...........257
  The Distinction between Possession and Tenure ...........................................263
  The Historical Roots of Tenure in Petén ..........................................................264
  Free Possession in the Northwest ..................................................................265
  The Evolving Agarrada system ......................................................................266
  Agarradas, Land Use, and the Emerging Land Rights Regime .......................268
Actions in Search of Official Land Tenure .........................................................270
The Land Titling Program at Naranjo ...............................................................273
A Processual Model of Territoriality in Connection to Land Possession and Land
  Tenure at Naranjo ............................................................................................277
  Interpretation of Local Developments as Part of the Paradigm ......................278
  Construing the Influence of External Driving Forces ....................................281
Summary..............................................................................................................283

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS..............................................................................286

APPENDIX

A LAND HOLDERS OF THE NARANJO-CEIBO CORRIDOR ....................................294

B LAND USE TYPES AT THE NARANJO-CEIBO CORRIDOR...............................298
Notes ....................................................................................................................303

LIST OF REFERENCES......................................................................................304

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ...............................................................................324
**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>Matrix of intervening aspects and factors (excerpt)</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>Population changes at Naranjo and Ceibo, 1962-1982 (number of families)</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-2</td>
<td>Shifting relationship between the local population and the state</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Populating trend, landholders from Naranjo (n=38)</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-2</td>
<td>Populating trend, landholders from Ceibo (n=12)</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-3</td>
<td>Summary of life histories</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-1</td>
<td>Place of birth for the sample of land holders from Naranjo and Ceibo</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-2</td>
<td>Gender of land holders</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-3</td>
<td>Ethnicity of land holders</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-4</td>
<td>Date of entrance into Petén</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-5</td>
<td>Arrival date to the Naranjo-Ceibo site</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-6</td>
<td>Original cause for migration to Naranjo and Ceibo</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>Mode of acquiring land</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>A model of territoriality at Naranjo</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>External driving forces influencing territoriality at Naranjo</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-1</td>
<td>Landholders of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Guatemala. Country map</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>The study site</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Interspersed <em>Cibal</em> stumps on the marsh. On the right, an island of trees.</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photograph by author.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>False infrared color image of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, with main</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>Timeline (Excerpt)</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>Chicle production in Petén (Exports in 100,000 lbs.), period 1927-1982</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEMEC</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation Center at CONAP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONAP</td>
<td>Guatemala’s National Council of Protected Areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAR</td>
<td>Armed Rebel Forces (guerrilla group)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FONTIERRAS</td>
<td>National Land Fund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FYDEP</td>
<td>State agency in charge of the promoting and developing of Petén</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTA</td>
<td>National Institute for Agrarian Transformation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBR</td>
<td>Maya Biosphere Reserve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Self-defense Civil Patrol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNLT</td>
<td>Laguna del Tigre National Park</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNSL</td>
<td>Sierra del Lacandón National Park</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ha.  Hectare  
Mz.  Manzana. A measurement equals to 0.69 ha.
AGENCY AT THE FRONTIER AND THE BUILDING OF TERRITORIALITY IN THE NARANJO-CEIBO CORRIDOR, PETEN, GUATEMALA

By

Luis Alfredo Arriola

August 2005

Chair: Allan F. Burns
Major Department: Anthropology

Researchers of frontier areas rarely address, in detail, the way local society relates to the central state. This study focuses on interactions manifested in the frontier process that took place at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, in northern Petén, Guatemala, under the gaze of the state. The intersection of external and internal agents mediated the progression of the frontier, which later evolved into territoriality, or the permanent social control of space. With data generated from life histories, interviews and archival material, the author shows that the relationships between diverse driving forces and local populations, at the micro and macro levels, shifted as circumstances changed in the frontier, and so did the connection to the state.

Groups in this frontier have historically negotiated their relationship with the state via multiple strategies of agency, individually and collectively, in a spectrum that goes from avoiding any relationship with the state to seeking state recognition. The state’s dealing with the local people has varied from plain neglect, to use of outright force, to
tentative advances into the area. An examination of the way land possession and use forms developed at the research site revealed the manner in which agency was at the center of such relationship. Largely, the agenda of local society has prevailed over the state’s lack of attention to the territorially-making process. A major outcome, and benefit for the local people, was state recognition of land ownership through a titling program. The author proposes a historic model of the territorially-making process to explain social phenomena that is common to other frontier locales, drawing from empirical evidence of a setting that maintains a specificity of its own.
CHAPTER 1
ANTHROPOLOGY, AGENCY, AND THE STATE

Introduction

This study addresses the following question: How do people’s strategies for social control of space shift over time as their relationship with the state changes? I examine this issue by looking at the history of a locality in northern Petén, Guatemala. I am specifically concerned with the ways the population of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor has negotiated through time varying relationships with the Guatemalan central state. People have worked different levels of interaction at various times by accommodating to the dictates of the state, by colliding with state representatives and rules, or by contending with these agents as necessary. Strategies galvanize through human agency and are manifested in differentiated power relations. The analysis of agency elucidates a theoretical understanding of social control over space and the type of human interaction that accompanies this process. The processual approach calls analyzing change. I address transformation from a social history view. Social history is about the making of families, social groups and institutions, or how collectivities come about (Tilly 1980: 668). It is also about analyzing the relationships, individual and collective, that local people and local processes have had with outside forces in the past, and how the relationships are manifested on their grounds. In other words, social history offers an alternative interpretation of the interplay between the micro and the macro, different from state-based, official and hegemonic historical narratives. This study follows historically-informed anthropology works, such as Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*. 
The overarching objective of this study centers on understanding state-related processes in the constituting of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, a locality that sits in a frontier and a border area. I argue that a laxity in terms of control over the border, a state marker, during certain time-periods has been the main reason for the success of strategies to advance local schemes, while at others, when the state exerts a stronger sway over the population, its legal uses of force, in particular, restrict human agency. People manage to deal with the state, pragmatically and according to the circumstances, and as it best suits their interests through what I term “versatile agency”. The term refers to multiplicity of action, extensive spatial mobility, and a high level of adaptability (See Chapter 5). For instance, while at one point in time and place people may engage in activities within the realm of the legal, at some other time they might had moved on to the realm of the unlawful, hence subverting, the authority of the state. Social control of space, and specifically the creation of a particular socio-cultural domain, has come about through these strategies of survival in interplay with outside forces, most notably the state.

This chapter is organized as follows. The opening section deals with the unique way anthropologists conceptualize issues concerning agency, power, and the state. Then the discussion moves on to situate these central themes in connection to social control over space. The centrality of the state in dictating, regulating and organizing any space within its territorial boundaries makes treatment of statehood indispensable. To provide a general context, I briefly explore the evolution of the Guatemalan state and its locally constituted form in Petén. Just as important are the different aspects, namely the frontier, the border, illegal practices, and more recently globalization, that have impinged on the particular process of humans taking over the study site. My conceptual position on each
of these themes is advanced in order to position the general discussion within a comprehensive theoretical framework, again one linked to state matters. In one sense the frontier is conceived as a realm in flux, a domain of contacts and limits (Taylor and Flint 2000). In a different sense, the frontier is a sphere where humans create new strategies for survival in an unknown environment. Geopolitical borders constitute, just like frontiers, arenas for multiple encounters. The study of borders calls for a deep look into the every-day life interactions among state organs, its representatives, and the members of local society (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 4). Two topics are introduced here; they are developed further in Chapter 5. The first deals with policy, more specifically environmental regulations. State-directed conservation guidelines dictate uses and access to resources, something that bears directly on the consolidation, or vulnerability, of the kind of social control over space a population desires to achieve. The other topic is illegal practices. Because some of these practices are increasingly linked to larger driving forces and processes at work the chapter also addresses how the Naranjo-Ceibo case fits in globalization. The concluding part delves into the way these aspects have influenced the manner in which occupation of space has taken place, over time, at the Naranjo-Ceibo site.

The Anthropological Perspective

As a discipline anthropology offers guidelines for exploring and interpreting social phenomena. Thus, anthropologists can contribute to the understanding of culturally-set relationships among humans, and between society and space, through detailed and comprehensive ethnographic work. This approach offers a fine lens to understand the nature of human agency and power relations (Foucault 1983) in its locally embedded
manifestations (see Chapter 5 for examples). Because specific strategies of agency and power relations are informed by differences in origin, occupational background, or identity, and are mediated by class, race, ethnicity, and local, regional and national allegiances, among other aspects, anthropology constitutes an idoneous conduit to explore such associations.

Anthropology can elucidate how people respond to state representatives and agencies exerting their influence on collective behavior and social norms via numerous mechanisms of control and normalization (Bourdieu 1999: 54), in a unique way that differs from, say, a political science approach. To be more specific, local cultural mores that dictate land use and tenure can be substantially affected when the state steps in to regulate what is allowed and what is not. In this regard, anthropologists are interested in eliciting the way individuals and communities respond to and reshape state-directed regulations in the socio-cultural sphere. An anthropologist searches for the cultural response—whether it is through acceptance, challenge, dispute, confrontation, resistance (Scott 1985), to arrangements coming from the state representatives. Local people may then attempt to set up their own mechanisms of territorial authority, institution building, economic independence, and increased political autonomy vis-à-vis the state in an effort to attenuate or counteract its influence.

Harry Wolcott’s (1995) articulation of (at least) three uses of theory in anthropology enlightens this study. Wolcott’s first postulation refers to the connection between one’s work and prior studies. The second stipulates that theory offers a way to gain a broader perspective, or discover the broader implications of a single case. Theory also provides a means to criticize, improve or expand on specific aspects of a research
problem (185). In line with Wolcott’s second and third propositions, this dissertation contributes to the studies of frontier societies by presenting the examination of a locality enmeshed in complex shifting dynamics that call for new ways of anthropological inquiry. The approach proposed here looks at the progression of a frontier, the initial manifestation of control over space, as a way to culturally understand the interaction between agency and state directives, within larger temporal (historical) and spatial-structural (local-global) scales that constantly feed back on each other. Equally important is the fact that not only local changes are taking place at a much faster pace than in the past, but also the macro sphere is equally shifting at an increased speed, in a mutually influencing relationship. Hence, a study of a frontier society transformed by a quick-moving globalization process is another contribution to anthropology and cultural knowledge at large.

**On Agency and Power**

Human agency involves actions to effect change, to transform conditions (Lloyd 1993: 93, 94), or “. . . the volitional capacity of all persons . . . to chose, to intend, to act.” (International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences [IESBS], vol. 17: 7156). Agency has a larger incidence in society; in consequence it is inherently political. Agency influences the larger societal realm, which may be simultaneously formed by a number of processes, events, and driving forces of diverse caliber. Macro-social, economic and political conditions impinge accordingly upon strategies of agency.

Agency materializes and reveals itself through personal and collective action. I agree with Dallmayr’s (1982) suggestion that agency is embedded with purpose and intentionality (19). Agency can be sporadic or recurring, irregular or set, occasional or
permanent; enacted at a particular political conjuncture or, rather, a sustained effort in
time; triggered by specific circumstances, or set off by long-established factors, examples
of which are shown in Chapters 5 and 6. In a milieu in flux, such as a frontier, agency is
much more complex to analyze. Agency can be more fragmentary, short-lived, and
unpredictable as people come and go, and as circumstances constantly change. In this
sense, some strategies for control over space may be very specific, e.g., squatting to
obtain quick possession rights, while others may be long-term, e.g., a persistent claim to
land via the petitioning of titles, and permanent occupation.

Agency is realized within the context of a “structure”, whether it is a system
(political, economic, social), a culture, or an organization, with, to quote Anthony
Giddens (1982:35), “. . . recursively organized rules and resources”. Within the
structural realm of the Guatemalan nation-state the main focus of this study centers on the
progressive interplay between agency as exerted by the local population, and the state.
This interaction is enmeshed in a set of power relationships. In this light, as Eric Wolf
stated, power is to be conceived in relational, fluid terms, not as a concentrated “pack”
(Wolf 1999: 5, 67). Even though the matter is more complex than as presented here, I
follow the wider notion of power as set forth by Giddens: “. . . interpreted in a broad
sense [power is] the capability of achieving outcomes” (1982: 38). I am not dismissing
the extensive corpus of literature on power but instead offering a working definition for
the purposes of this investigation.

Because diverse relationships cast power in different ways (Wolf 1999: 66),
northwestern Petén has borne witness to a series of outcomes in terms of local
populations struggling to assert their agency vis-à-vis the higher center of authority at
different moments in the past. To this effect I make use of the term territoriality as a historically-specific form of social control over space. Hence, each group that has inhabited northwestern Petén has imprinted a particular territoriality on the landscape. To further define the term, human territoriality is a way, according to Paul Little (2001:4) to “. . . identify with, occupy, use and establish control over a biophysical environment. . .” that people consider home.

Historically, the center of economic and political power within the Guatemalan nation-state, the capital, has had the prerogative of establishing a territoriality scheme fitting its own interests. Yet, in the study area, and for reasons that are explained in subsequent chapters, a hegemonic project of territoriality in a top-down direction has rarely ever been completely asserted; at best it has been ephemeral and sporadic. One characteristic marking the dynamics of occupation in the Petén area is a long-standing frontier condition in relation to the rest of the country, and the center of authority. There has been a recurrent pattern of settling, depopulating, and resettling, with different local groups establishing unique territoriality schemes through different historical periods.

Throughout the colonial period (1697-1821), the area remained outside the effective control of the authorities; native groups fleeing Spanish rule manifested their agency through passive resistance in these hinterlands. After the transition from colonial appendage to independent republic, in 1821, the Lacandón people (see Chapter 4) roamed freely through much of the area, resisting a larger process of state formation that was taking place. A defiant autonomous position characterized the relationship of the Lacandón with the outside. Later, in the twentieth century, the population that began to repopulate the northwest engaged in a different relationship with the nation-state. People
sought to establish occupation of the territory via free possession without caring very much about any mechanism that would validate their rights before the central state. When internal and external conditions changed in the late 20th century, and more people arrived and settled, a new form of relationship ensued. Settlers began to assert their rights to permanent occupation of land through seniority, landmarks and claims to a title. Hence, agency took on a different form, one of pleading to, and sometimes contesting, the state.

In addition to a marginal situation in relation to the center of authority, in recent times there have been other aspects and driving forces that have shaped territoriality in the Naranjo-Ceibo site. The existence of a nearby international border is one of these aspects. Another element that has had an impact on control over space deals with an underground economy, with origins dating back to colonial times. In addition, political and economic driving forces have come to affect the dynamic of territoriality, namely conservation, and globalization.

Finally I end the chapter by setting the theoretical frame for understanding these major aspects bearing on territoriality. I present the more specific discussions of other aspects, such as war, conservation policy, and foreign investment in chapter 5. The groundwork for theorizing is an overview on the state, the relational arena where all these factors and driving forces converge.

**The State in Conceptual Terms**

The state is a polity linking people and territory, where statehood becomes a way of political organization in society (IESBS 2001, vol. 22: 14965). This intersection of human populations, territory, and power relations lies at the core of this study. To develop a conceptualization of the state I draw from five authors who offer critical
insights about the nature of the state, namely Max Weber, Eric Hobsbawm, Phillipe Bourdieu, Joel Migdal, and Timothy Mitchell.

Weber (1968) formulated what has been the most widely known and accepted notion of the state in the social sciences. The essential features of the Weberian paradigm include a well-defined territory, a claim to sovereign status over such territory and the population on it, a monopoly to enforce the law, and the authority of the state to coerce its population. Several social scientists (e.g., Dunkerley 2002; Migdal 1988, 2001) have considered Weber’s original proposition to be a restricted one. Still, Weber’s contributions are useful for the purposes of this study because the clearest expression of the central state at the research site has been that of the militia, an instrument of domination by force. This controlling factor by the militia is crucial in understanding how territoriality unfolded in northwestern Petén, particularly in the decade of the 1980s. In line with the Weberian line of thought renowned historian Eric Hobsbawm (1996) added three more characteristics that pertain specifically to national states or nation-states: a nation-state rules its subjects directly, homogenizes treatment of all inhabitants, and creates citizens with rights and obligations (267, 268, 269).

Bourdieu (1999) conceived the state as an entity that manifests itself in the concurrence of multiple entities, both material and symbolic. At the center of Bourdieu’s conceptualization is the idea that the state amasses different kinds of “capital,” namely economic, symbolic and information capitals: “It is this concentration as such which constitutes the state as the holder of a sort of meta-capital granting power over the species of capital and over their holders” (57). This perspective portrays the state in a much more complex manner. For instance, the informational capital refers to the systematic
operations by which the government, as part of the state, collects data from its subjects via official maps, archives, census and statistics. The multi-faceted nature of the state involves also a number of “fields of power” (Bourdieu 1999: 58), or domains of struggle, among diverse holders of capital at different levels of the state structure. The accumulation of capital within certain fields of power can be a matter of contention, or negotiation, or the ground on which a new set of relationships between the state and society develop. For example, the process of granting titles to the land at the study area involves a leasing of capital from the government to citizens. Ownership rights were allocated from the state to individuals. The transformation of national lands into private landholdings empowered citizens, while at the same time creating a set of obligations to the state that they had to fulfill in order to register and keep a specific piece of land. These procedures, e.g. paying taxes, filling out public record forms, answering census questions, fed money and data into the informational capital which the state controlled.

Joel Migdal (2001) envisages the state as a duality made up of two central elements: image and practices. The ideational part corresponds to the state as a “. . . clearly bounded, unified organization that can be spoken of in singular terms. . .” (22). Practices encompass a number of freely linked “parts or fragments” that may or may not have well-defined boundaries among them and vis-à-vis other groups “. . . inside and outside the official state border. . .” (Ibid). Furthermore, these groups foster competing rules between themselves and in relation to official legislation (22). Migdal emphasizes that this “mélange” of ideas and practices is constantly at loggerheads in a struggle for social control (57).
This paradigm presents the state as non-monolithic. The metaphor of the mélange materializes in many ways at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, specifically in the interactions between state representatives, e.g., immigration officers, law enforcement agencies such as the army and the police, and the driving forces of social and economic life. Hence, one can use Migdal’s model to show the connection between the immaterial and material dimensions of the state in this corner of the Guatemalan nation-state.

Mitchell (1999: 76) argues that the state can be conceived of as a two-sided entity, made up of state-as-idea and state-as-system, in other words, as an ideological construct and a material force. The first dimension consists of a set of emblematic forms, such as the flags, anthems and other such symbols. They embody a sense of belonging and allegiance to a nation, real or imagined (see B. Anderson 1991). The principle that the state prevails over other forms of political sovereignty in society, such as communal forms of government, is also part of its ideological dimension.

For Mitchell (1999: 76), the physical expression of the state is found in its structural form, most notably in a political system as well as in its human and material resources. Strangely, the average citizen finds it easier to recognize and identify with the abstract structural form of the state. One sees this, in particular, when observing what takes place at the margins of the state’s territorial boundaries. As Timothy Mitchell points out: “The network of institutional arrangements and political practices that forms the material substance of the state is diffused and ambiguously defined at its edges, whereas the public imagery of the state as an ideological construct is more coherent” (1999: 76). Localities such as Naranjo and Ceibo are illustrative of this condition where
the presence of state representatives is minimal yet the people maintain a strong sense of belonging to the ideational Guatemalan nation-state.

**The Guatemalan State and Petén**

Born formally in 1821 with independence from Spain, the Guatemalan state was to some extent an amorphous and disarticulated cluster of underdeveloped institutions for the next half century. Political strife among conservative and liberal factions, the absence of a consolidated political system, and lack of internal unity within the embryonic nation-state prevented the constituting of a strong state polity at the time. With the onset of an epoch of liberal-dominated regimes, marked by the rise to power of strongman Justo Rufino Barrios in 1871, the Guatemalan state began to take its current form. The framing of a novel political and economic model would bring about a different nation-state. The new order rested on ideas of modernization, progress and opening to the outside; its economy was based on promoting export-oriented crops such as coffee and bananas. Specific laws were created, and previous ones modified, to make land and labor available, in particular to coffee producers. Expropriation, coercive labor mandates, and sometimes outright plundering of “unused” lands constituted some of the radical steps taken to launch the incoming economic paradigm, mostly geared towards coffee production. A fundamental tenet of this emerging order was that the central state apparatus ought to operate as a means of control and coercion. The creation of entities in charge of such tasks became a main concern. It is in this context that a national army, at the core of state apparatus, was born in 1872.

From that time onwards, the military has overseen the continuity of the state polity in Guatemala via indirect and direct ruling. The preeminent role of the army in state
matters would resurface directly in the territorially-making process of the late twentieth
century at Naranjo and Ceibo. According to Migdal (1988: 33), a strong state is capable
of implementing social policy and controlling its social body. Notwithstanding the
relative strength of Guatemala’s central state in major urban centers, its ability to exercise
social control in the rest of the country has been rather uneven. Historically, the “gaze of
the state” (Allan Burns, personal communication, June 23 2005) has been stronger or
weaker at various times, and so has been its relationship with local populations. In the
case of Petén, two factors contributed to this problem: ethnic differentiation among the
Guatemalan populace,\(^\text{10}\) and a lack of resources to communicate the province with the
rest of the country, and most important, to end the isolation of these areas in relation to
the centers of power.\(^\text{11}\) For the purposes of this study, and in the Guatemalan context,
ethnicity is defined as one among several forms of identity, namely being considered
Amerindian or being considered *Ladino*. (For a comprehensive discussion on this issue
see footnotes 2 and 3 in Chapter 2).

Ethnicity was important in Petén, but more significant were the remoteness of the
area and its ecological limitations that made coffee cultivation non-viable. Because of
these reasons, much of the aforementioned late 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century political developments had
only limited repercussions in Petén. The arrival of foreign companies interested in
lumber exploitation at that time would make the central state look towards Petén. The
control of logging operations called for the presence of state representatives (Schwartz
1990: 88). After the arrival of timber companies, and for a long time, the individuals
fulfilling some kind of state-related function would be the real state in Petén.\(^\text{12}\) This
meant that a person, such as a tax collector, would concentrate the power that the state
bestowed on him or her, the circumstances granting this person huge latitude of discretionary control. Hence, at the time the “practices” face of the state, to follow Migdal, was more pre-eminent than its ideational counterpart at the local and regional levels; it was concentrated in one individual.

The demarcation of the borderline between Guatemala and Mexico in the confines of northwestern Petén in 1882, triggered by conflicting logging interests, was the first act of a protracted, and very irregular, advance of central state presence. This step would be rather symbolic because nothing reaffirmed the material existence of the state structure for a long time. Stable, yet minimal, state representation began in the 1910s when the government sent an army unit to set up an outpost in order to watch over irregularities taking place along the border. From then on, at a very slow pace, the state progressively intruded into northwestern Petén. Another four decades went by before the government promoted a closer link between the province and the rest of the nation. The final stage of a protracted frontier process in the 1970s would turn conditions around in Petén, the most significant being the furthering of closer linkages between the province and the central state. The discussion focuses next on the frontier.

**Frontier**

Frederick Turner’s (1953) original conceptualization of frontiers as areas of continuous human expansion across the western territories of the United States at the end of the 19th century has been the archetypical model in much of anthropological and sociological theory. Connotations of the frontier in the contemporary literature vary from the notion of it as a place of constant high turnover, with population that comes and goes through a specific location in a given time-frame (Hudson 1977: 15-19), to a physical marker of a settlement, to an arena of “competing claims” (Schmink and Woods 1992),
one which in fact, from a state-centered perspective, is a realm where the state is in the
process of building itself (Marianne Schimnk, personal communication April 12, 2005).

Frontier is conceived in this work in a dual manner: as an area of occupation, a
territory in flux, and as a process of spreading out over the land. To elaborate on the
second definition, frontier is a space where a “system of expansion” (De Vos 1993) may
enter a zone void of human presence. This definition is useful due to the specific
conditions that have characterized the study site, as shown in Chapter 4. Typically,
frontiers attract risk-takers willing to start anew in a charged milieu. The absence of
ruling institutions makes frontiers prone to the high incidence of conflict (Alston et al
1999: 2, 9). The series of events leading to the occupation of a former cattle ranch where
Naranjo sits today (ca. 1980-1982) and the informal market that sprung up in 2000 at
Ceibo (see Chapter 4 for an extended discussion) exemplify the daring character of the
populations that has gone there. Violence has been a pervasive problem, too.13 Not
surprisingly, the rest of society perceives frontiers as domains where unruliness and
barbarism prevail (Weber and Rausch 1994). *Peteneros* and non-*Peteneros* echoed this
view in 2002, and epitomized Naranjo and Ceibo as lawless localities. At the time, this
stigma was reproduced even in the printed media.14

Frontiers are also the product of forces interacting both locally and globally.
Anthropologist Paul Little identifies three central relationships around the frontier theme:
the advent of forces of modernity, a process of geographical occupation, and the
expansion of the nation-state (2001: 1). These relationships have developed at the
Naranjo-Ceibo locale over the last century through its engagement with the capitalist
world system. Initially this happened via an extractive economy. With the gradual
settling of the area, agriculture and commerce followed. In 2002 this location was part of international networks of exchange with people and goods on the move, an area where consolidation of international borders on the part of Guatemala and Mexico was occurring.

Frontiers undergo transformations because of the interplay of local factors, for instance, ethnicity, race, class, and extra-local forces such as trade differences or armed conflict (Hall 1998: 152). Petén’s northwestern frontier was, at least up to the 1970s, very much a result of Mexican influx into the area, a trend later reversed due to internal conditions, most notably massive migration from other parts of Guatemala, and the impact of internal war. Although the issue is developed below, and in Chapter 5, a few words on the bi-national exchange at the border are in order. Mexican presence resulted from economic dynamics that transcended the geopolitical border, and became a significant part of the human constituency of northwestern Petén. Starting in the 1920s and moving quite freely across the border zone, Mexicans initiated the long progression of the frontier and made up the social fabric of nascent communities. Guatemalans went to Mexican territory but in smaller numbers. Until recent times the border was more imagined than real, a construct of the modern nation-state.

Geographer David Cleary (1993) has offered a persuasive argument in favor of an alternative paradigm. Taking Amazonia as his empirical case study, Cleary says that the frontier has come and gone. No matter how one defines it, the frontier has disappeared now, or is in the process of doing so. Cleary explains that in the Amazon the central government has stopped building major roads, and can hardly repair or maintain the existing ones. Besides, the state is offering title to the land and at the same time not allowing (or encouraging) any further colonization (346). Under such conditions, the role
of the state is null or minimal at best (344). Also, the informal economy is more important than that of the formal sector in this scenario. In Amazonia, this kind of economy accounts for the growth of urban areas and “multiple layers of influence,” in turn, diminishing state sway in the region (338). To complicate matters, rural populations have been portrayed in social science literature as rather homogenous. Cleary disagrees, stating that colonists of the Amazon tend to be mobile, constantly engaging in different income-generating activities as they move along. The region is ethnically heterogeneous, making categories such as class and peasants inappropriate (335-336). As I demonstrate in later chapters, the Naranjo-Ceibo locale shares many commonalities with the situation Cleary describes. The question then becomes, how are we to characterize locations such as Amazonia and northwestern Petén, if the current understanding of the term frontier is inadequate, or fails?

Cleary suggests adopting the notion of the post-frontier for those localities where a sense of stability has been achieved, meaning that (1) the location is urbanized or in the process of being urbanized, (2) a diversity of economic activities makes up the economy, and (3) no large numbers of people continue arriving (347). The post-frontier label describes conditions at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor in many respects at the turn of the century, yet there are other specificities proper to the area, most notably the international border, which are closely related to the nature of the post-frontier condition as well.

**Border as a State Marker**

At the most basic semantic level, border and frontier are deemed synonymous terms (see, for example, M. Anderson 1996). Frontier comes from ‘in front’; it conveys the idea of zone of contact; it implies an outward direction. The root of the word boundary, say Taylor and Flynt (2000), is bounds, denoting a limit; thus it is an inward-
oriented term (162). These authors argue that all areas that could have been occupied are filled today; thus frontiers of the past have been replaced by boundaries today, that is, borders (162). International law, to take another approach, is very explicit in establishing a definition based on geopolitical attributes: one author defines the border as the imaginary line that establishes a boundary in a territory where two states meet (Pohlenz 1997: 76). Another perspective conceives of the border as, simultaneously, institution and process. Malcom Anderson (1996) claims that the institutional embodiment of a border conforms to territorial principles and is set up according to political considerations (1). Borders fulfill polyvalent functions in their processual form: they are active instruments of state policy and usually stand for markers of national identity. They also carry different meanings, which are susceptible to change over time (1996: 2). This last point is an important one, considering that the term border may differ from one discipline to another, and its connotation may derive from the context in which it is being talked about or applied, or the time period one is looking at. Vargas (1993) thinks that borders represent transitional locales between the territorialities of two nation-states, a rather provocative proposition.

Regardless of their cultural, material, or abstract intrinsic-ness, state borders are the creation, by and large, of a particular economic context and the dominant regional, national, and international political actors, rarely ever of the local populations living around them (De Vos 1993: 14). This is certainly the case of the Tabasco-Petén border, which was drawn in the capitals of Mexico and Guatemala, and formalized in a treaty elsewhere, custom-tailored to the group interests of the day, such as the logging firms that dominated the regional economy at the end of the 19th century.
Anthropologists have formulated their own state-border theory by borrowing from multiple strands of knowledge, including political science and international law. The most authoritative voices in the field conceive of border as a combination of three things: the actual borderline that separates adjoining states, the structures (made up of individuals and institutions) that define such borderline, and the territorial stretch extending through and across the borderline (Wilson and Donnan 1998: 9).

Borders constitute one of the essential, defining elements of the nation-state. A border encircles the population it contains, in turn making necessary some “modern social practices” and mechanisms of control such as identity papers, legal regulations, and physical barriers for entering and exiting a nation-state (Mitchell 1999: 90). In addition, state borders define issues of sovereignty, citizenship, identity, as well as generate other associated conditions and changes. Furthermore,

. . . borders are not just symbols and locations of these changes, which they most certainly are, but are often also their agents. It is not surprising that the concept of transnationalism, which has become central to many interpretations of post-modernity, has as one of its principal referents international borders, which mark off one state from another…However, these borders, structures of the state themselves, are constructed by much more than the institutions of the state which are present there, or of which the border’s framework is a representative part, as in customs, immigration and security forces (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 4).

These authors suggest that state representatives at the border exercise more agency than one normally thinks. Indeed people in different positions exert their influence on the making of what a border is about. In turn, living at the border involves being part of forming and re-constituting processes. Donnan and Wilson (1999) contend that national and ethnic identities, in particular, are prone to being re-shaped or re-configured at a border, and in very different ways from the manner in which they can be influenced at less marginal locations of the state (64). Ethnographic evidence from northwestern Petén
lends support to this contention. The oldest generation of Naranjo and Ceibo inhabitants is living proof of the way Mexicans exerted, until recently, a profound influence on local society and culture. People living in either side of the border paid little attention to the state marker and maintained close social and economic linkages. The situation of Mario F. comes to mind, an individual born to Tabascan parents on the Guatemalan side of the border. Mario resided for many years at Naranjo but had to leave due to political violence in the early 1980s. He lived on the Mexican side in 2002, but he was close and loyal to his birthplace. At the time we met, Mario traded dairy products that he took to Ceibo, transporting them in a vehicle he had purchased in Guatemala. Because he was married to the sister of a long-time resident of Ceibo, he frequently went to visit his brother-in-law. Mario’s ties to the “bordered” homeland ran strong (Fieldnotes). This case shows how a sense of belonging is grounded in a domain that is divided by a geopolitical marker, but where allegiance is given equally to both nation-states.

The fact that the Mexican state has now intervened more effectively in “developing” the border zone through colonizing efforts, constructing public works, and erecting settlements has brought about what Allan Lavell (1994) has called “structural inequality” (52), or an asymmetrical relationship, at the Mexico-Guatemala border. A borderline brings to the fore any discontinuities, whether economic (sharply present between Petén and Tabasco) or ideological (e.g., Europe before the fall of the Iron Curtain) (Foucher 1997: 19). Wilson and Donnan (1998: 26) have suggested that culture and power constantly collide at international borders, making them prime arenas for the ongoing contesting of these forces. The Mexico-Guatemala border at Ceibo was a locality contested at several levels in 2002. Two examples illustrate the point: migrants on their
way to the United States negotiated the border in their efforts to make it across and not get caught; merchants who were part of the informal market located in the hamlet refused to be removed in defiance of state directives. In all likelihood, this colliding is to increase after the central state finally achieves the setting up of a checkpoint in this zone, as part of its efforts towards further state control.

Illegal Practices

The term “illegal practices” (Heyman 1999) encompasses all activities variously labeled in the literature as illicit, non-juridical, unlawful, extra-legal, underground, informal, or extra-state. A substantive discussion of differences in shade of meaning in this terminology is introduced as deemed appropriate throughout the text. Let it be noted that in anthropological terms illegality is a culturally-specific concept. It is hence relative to the context in which it is being spoken or applied. What may be considered legal in one place may be illegal somewhere else. I follow Nordstrom (2001), who has set the distinction between legal and illegal as follows: “…formal as applied to the state, refers to formally recognized state-based institutions and the activities they support. Non-formal applies to institutions and activities that exist apart from state structures and processes” (219).

Activities transgressing this sphere of the “politically normative” (Navaro-Yashin 2003) have been a characteristic of the study area for a long time. Even though only part of the social body shared or approved of this set of practices in 2002, living in a milieu where they are part of a way of life, the interactions that the non-involved maintain with fellow citizens who do engage in them are almost inevitable. In this realm of constant change, people can and do move back and forth between legality and illegality. It is a domain that also shifts in the temporal dimension: while people may have participated at
one time in one activity, two or ten years later they could be engaged in something else, or may have stopped illegal undertakings altogether.

Anthropologists are increasingly taking notice of the growing significance of illegal activities, non-juridical practices, extra-state forces, and the “shadows.” A juridical institution, to take a concrete example, is one, according to Latham and colleagues (2001), which assumes “…some form of legal expression, such as a constitution and or a charter that is accorded recognition by other institutions and groups operating as legal entities.” Extra-legal activities, e.g., an untitled land system, or the so-called informal economy (De Soto 2000), fall outside the realm of what is considered legal. Historically, the central state has held the last word in deciding what gets legitimized and what does not.

The existence of illegal activities and behaviors is common to borders and frontiers, especially if the central state is weak, or limited in its reach. In a way, the very existence of illegal practices fostered the upsurge of human populations in places like Naranjo and Ceibo. The most recent and visible extra-legal activity at the research site rests on the informal market flourishing at the borderline. Heyman and Smart (1999) further assert that illicit markets are,

... nothing more than normal markets in which entrepreneurs have been enticed by demand to overstep the bounds of the law in search of higher profits. Conventional markets ultimately rely on state support for property ownership and contract... The mechanisms that support production and distribution of illegal goods and services are diverse, including trust within networks, threads of force, linking illicit deals with legal ones, the legitimacy of the transaction, the importance of reputation for illegal entrepreneurs and reliance on corrupt officials and institutions (4, 5).

All of the above traits are present at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, as this author witnessed. One issue inherent to legal and illegal practices is legitimacy. Just like the
legal/illegal dichotomy, what is and what is not legitimate can be qualified. When these practices are widespread and socially accepted, then “culturally-specific” legitimacy takes over juridical or state-imposed definitions. Referring to real life situations, Heyman and Smart (1999) contend that:

. . . legitimacy always rests with the law and never with crime or illegality. Yet black markets, bribery, illegal migration, protection by racketeers, etc. are accorded considerable real legitimacy, sometimes by segments of society and sometimes by society as a whole (19).

Legitimation is an outcome of struggles in both discursive and practical arenas, and criminalizing actions and relations is often a central move in such struggles… States and illegal practices offer an important terrain for studying the complexity of power and ‘common sense’ (Ibid: 7).

Legitimacy also brings up the issue of the levels of social control, and the strength or weakness the central state commands (see Migdal 2001). Because the state apparatus shows cracks and interstices, it never succeeds in consolidating itself as a solid unified totality capable of controlling “border arbitrage” or small-scale, low-profile irregularities that result from the concurrence of state forces and economic activity at the border. Individuals acting on behalf of the state (agents, officials…) who trespass or fail to uphold the law, by looking the other way, by accepting bribes, by partaking of an illicit practice, etcetera, are the fractures where the line between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ are confounded into several shades of gray (Heyman and Smart 1999: 10, 11). For example, an immigration agent in an isolated border outpost may also be an important linkage in a contraband venue. Thus, Latham et al (2001) conclude logically that “…state power’, to the degree it exists, might sometimes best be understood from a vantage point that encompasses the intersection of juridical and non-juridical realms” (17).

According to Alan Smart (1999), the persistence of illegal practices can be attributed to five reasons. The first rests on the continued demand in the market for
goods and services that are part of illegal transactions; this demand hinders any state efforts to control the market. This is the case of drug trafficking. Second, there may be activities which are extra-legal, yet tolerated; one example is the informal sector that flourishes in major metropolis. A third reason includes a situation where despite its illegal nature the state derives some kind of benefit from it and consequently there is but a token effort to suppress it, e.g., the relative laxness of U.S. policy towards undocumented migration at its southern border. Fourth, a bold persistence of illegal activity involves “internal political agents”, for instance entire unsubordinated communities or guerrilla groups that protect extra-legal practices despite opposition from the central government. The embodiment of this last scenario can be found at Naranjo and Ceibo where the local population holds a vested economic interest in the continuity of a migrant stream passing through the area. Another example is the Colombian case, where rebel forces live off the cocaine industry in open defiance of the state. Finally, Smart refers to a type of “subversive” persistence in which support for illicit practices originates in external or internal agents of the state who are attempting to undermine the state’s political authority. One example is the Iran-Contra scandal that took place during the mid 1980s within the United States government (103-105).

Illegal practices persist today at regional, national and international levels. Trafficking of migrants, and more recently of narcotics, both taking place at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, are part of a flow of exchange that extends from one country to another, sometimes spanning across continents. These “shadow networks” operate at a transnational scale (Nordstrom 2001). On the one hand, they challenge, and are beyond, the current grasp of the state in Guatemala; on the other hand, the vitality of these illicit
practices fuels the local economy. Hence, the underground economy of the area can be seen as a manifestation of state defiance. Through these initiatives people emphasize their independence from state controls, effectively subverting them (Flynn 1997). Perhaps when a road is finally built to Ceibo, the Guatemalan central state will be better able to control this edge of its territory; full ground access will intensify the volume of exchange of humans and merchandise going through the area. How these developments and relationships might play out in the long run are issues that deserve further research. The following section focuses on globalization in connection to all the aforementioned factors impinging upon territoriality-making at the Naranjo-Ceibo site.

**Globalization**

Michael Kearney has defined globalization as the “. . . [group of] social, economic, cultural, and demographic processes that take place within nations but also transcend them, such that attention limited to local processes, identities, and units of analysis yields incomplete understanding of the local” (1995: 548). The Naranjo-Ceibo corridor is a site where globalization-related dynamics are fast encroaching in many aspects of everyday life, specifically with regard to the international border, the most prominent symbol of the state. By their very nature international borders play a direct role in the making of transnational phenomena. However, the scope of transnationalism is more limited than globalization. Kearney explains: “Whereas global processes are largely decentered from specific national territories and take place in a global space, transnational processes are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-states. . .” (1995: 548). The flow of goods and people, mainly in a South-North direction, makes this border a node in a wider global exchange network where supra-state economic forces are at work. Historically, the area
has been a landscape of moving individuals (Appadurai 1998), in which a settling, depopulating, and resettling pattern has repeated itself over several centuries.

Some have argued that globalization is directly linked to the diminished significance of state power (e.g., Ohmae 1994, 1995). At the crux of the matter is how global activity, or “tran-statal” phenomena (Kearny 1995), undermines state jurisdiction. The increased and varied movement of humans, commodities, and information around the world, newer and faster ways of communication, and freer transnational exchange (e.g., multi-national trade agreements, liberalization of barriers in international commerce, and even the opening of some international borders) are all contributing to the “de-territorialization” of the state as we know it (Steinmetz 1999) and to its decentralization (Hobsbawm 1996). Globalization is also reshaping ideas about states’ world-wide responsibilities because these polities are more and more interdependent in setting universal protocols regarding “... rule making, rule enforcing, knowledge creation, and in fields such as commerce, banking technologies, medicine, genetic engineering, and in defining the standards of human rights” (IESBS 2001, vol. 22: 14972). Perhaps the best example of the way power is moving around the world is the case of multinational companies with numerous sites of management, production and distribution that effectively de-territorialize and de-center capital. The sheer magnitude of such operations, and what they involve in terms of juridical and economic intervention, weakens the normalizing and controlling attributes of the nation-state, in turn challenging the latter’s hegemony on people (citizens) and territory (sovereignty).

Accordingly, territorial borders, the foremost representatives of sovereign state control, are also compromised in their role as gatekeepers of state supremacy (Donnan
and Wilson 1999, Wilson and Donnan 1998). Adds James Anderson: “Globalization is challenging the traditional territorial basis of democracy and exposing its limitations. The state’s claim to a monopoly of legitimate force is incompatible with the cross-border sharing of authority and ‘multi-level’ democracy” (2002: 25). Even though globalization has purportedly made state borders more permeable (Anderson M. 1996: 32), this is not always the case. Certain production processes –maquilas in Mexico’s northern border are a prime example of “offshore or drawback” assembly industries, have undoubtedly turned global in scope. However, the restrictions placed on the movement of the labor force, specifically from developing nations to industrialized countries, has become tougher (Anderson J. 2001: 4). Certain international borders are more porous than others, that is, depending on their geopolitical import and the larger economic context. To illustrate: the tightening of the U.S. southern border to stop the stream of migrants entering its territory contradicts liberalization arrangements between the U.S and Mexico, i.e. NAFTA in 1994, and a similar proposal under discussion between the U.S and several Central America countries, an initiative known as CAFTA, at the time of this writing. Fiscal barriers fall under these Free Trade Agreements, yet obstacles to “the cross-border movement of labor have been rising in the form of more intensive policing” (Andreas 2001: 107). Within a larger perspective this undermines an avowed trans-statal democracy of a globalized world (Anderson J. 2002). Hence, from the geopolitical viewpoint of the U.S., the Guatemala-Mexico border at Ceibo ought to be a stop gate to deter the human flow going north. In 2002 the Guatemalan central state had done little to confront this “challenge”. Establishing a checkpoint at the borderline in order to control the movement of people and goods in and out of the country could be a first step. The
intent and action involved in this task is of a centripetal type, that is, one pulling towards
the inside and the center. The driving forces of globalization, by comparison, tend to go
the opposite way, in an outward direction that expands to, or can reach, any corner of the
planet. Hence it is not surprising to find people from India, for example, passing through
the Guatemala-Mexico border on their way to the United States. Likewise,
manufactured goods of Asian origin produced for transnational corporations (mainly of
U.S.-based capital) dominate the sort of wares that Mexicans buy at Ceibo from
Guatemalan, mostly Maya Amerindian merchants. Here we find, to paraphrase Donnan
and Wilson (1999), an intersection of political, economic and social networks linking
individuals in the border areas to other groups, both inside and outside their own
countries (12). Globalization is directly linked to local developments in the study site,
and vice versa. For instance, wealth generated from international drug trafficking activity
at Naranjo may accelerate the trend through which the accumulation of land will end in
fewer hands. This kind of process will continue feeding back into global circuits of
exchange, and undoubtedly, re-configuring space at Naranjo and Ceibo in ways that until
recently were rather inconspicuous, but that have turned increasingly more visible.

Summary

I have provided in this chapter the conceptual groundwork to analyze agency in
connection to the occupation of space in the Naranjo-Ceibo area. Agency, and by
extension power relations, takes place in a setting and involve a number of actors. The
context is the evolution of a frontier process and the two main actors of concern are the
local populations and the Guatemalan state. From an anthropological perspective, this
evolving relationship informs dynamics of change. This approach enlightens the
understanding of both social history and, to some extent, structural change, i.e. state
transformation. But it is the look from the periphery towards the center, via strategies of human agency and power struggles that is at the core of the social history presented here. Because a number of driving forces and aspects such as the frontier, the international border with Mexico, the occurrence of illegal practices, and globalization have played an important role in mediating state-society relations at the study site, they also affect the process behind territoriality-making at the Naranjo-Ceibo locale. The theoretical grounding of these issues brings into sharper focus the nature of the strategies used to achieve control over social space via human agency.

This study’s contribution to anthropology, and specifically to political anthropology, rests on the idea of versatile agency, or the way local agents situate themselves vis-à-vis the state when it serves their interests, whether by engaging it directly, hiding from it, even ignoring it. As mentioned, variable strategies get manifested in different realms and at different time-periods, including but not limited to the legal/illegal continuum; in the pro-conservation versus anti-conservation debate, or being part of the state –as when someone works for or is a representative of the government, and then turning a “civilian” later on. Thus, and to come back to the main research question, as conditions of control on space vary over time, so does the relationship with the state, based on such shifting agency (ies).

At a different level, this work adds to the growing number of anthropological studies that center on processual analysis rather than on the traditional ethnography of fixed “cultural territories” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b: 4). Instead of examining a particular ethnic group or nationality and the physical space the group inhabits, I strived to elicit a better understanding of the way a very complex social milieu was constituted.
Hence, studying the Naranjo-Ceibo site was a means, not an end in itself, to comprehend manifestations of state-related processes within a larger context but within its local specificity.

Finally, a word on the data that inform the research question is warranted in this introductory chapter. The analysis centers mainly on Naranjo for reasons that become apparent in Chapter 2. The core of the data to analyze territoriality comes from land possession and land tenure issues because the occupation of space is realized most notably through land. Land is a highly contested sphere, hence a field of power, where agency is most fundamental. The complex account behind the drawn-out progression of the frontier and territoriality is recounted in several chapters and then finally summarized in a distinct model that integrates the different levels at which agency operates—as represented in life histories, with the intertwining, different, driving forces at work in the research site.

Notes

1 The term central state is used here to mean an “integrated locus of authority” (Migdal 2001: 9) led by a class-group, a political system, or even a person. I make the distinction between the State as the broader, totalizing unit that encompasses a territory and a population and the structure that holds it together and makes viable its continuity. Usually, the central state is incarnated in a government. The government, in spite of its limited life-span, is the apparatus that gives continuity to the central state. However, the permanence of the state, and its corresponding central state, may be threatened or even disappear, due to instability, as when a revolution ensues, or when secession happens (Murdo MacLeod, personal communication, April 12, 2005), and give place to a new state or another polity.

2 Without any pretension to mastery of the topic and because it is beyond the scope of this work, for further discussion on current debates about structure, and its connection to agency, see, among others: Archer 1988; Chew and Knottnerus 2002; Giddens 1982; Lloyd 1993.

3 In anthropology this discussion goes a long way back as Kurtz (2001) has reviewed in a recent volume. For instance, Kurtz says (25) that Radcliffe-Brown (1940) proposed a paradigm of power based on notions of coercion and force, a Weberian-based conceptualization in his formulation of African political systems. Another influential proponent was Richard Adams (1975) who advanced the idea of power as a “relational quality” that can be granted, allocated or delegated (Kurtz 2001: 26-27). The volume also highlights Michael Foucault’s major contributions to the topic (29-30). Foucault’s ideas have been most influential recently in anthropology by proposing that power exists in multifaceted forms and shapes, producing multiple outcomes too (see, among others: 1978, 1983).
Until recently, state formation had been conceived in Central America as a process referring to the genesis of the state only (e.g. Lentner 1993). Alternative ways of framing this process have begun to emerge more recently. Consider the following excerpt from a major encyclopedia: “...state formation is a process of formation and reformation based on the changing nature of societies within the state and the international system of states.” (IESBS 2001, vol. 22: 14971) The following statements, found in a recent volume dealing with state formation in Latin America, reflect the same line of thought:

... [state formation is] a phenomenon of continuing complexity and constant change. This was true before the end of the Cold War, and even if some of the claims about globalization made today are exaggerated, it is a process that accelerated discernibly during the 1990s. Indeed, there is a strong sense in which all the nation-states of the region are still ‘in formation’ at the start of the twentieth-century, when such nation-forming no longer dominates the spirit of the age. (Dunkerley 2002: 1)

These insights are quite fitting for the present study for I believe that state formation is not the sole privilege of the political establishment and the centers of power. This argument is elaborated in the concluding part of the dissertation.

5 I conceive the nation-state as the resulting combination of two territorial “essences”, namely the possession of a sovereign territory (state), and the common roots found in the fatherland or motherland (nation) (Taylor and Flynt 2000: 233). This notion is relational in the sense that cannot be assumed separately from an international system of nation-states.

6 The political system involves, in a very general sense, those entities and actors that exercise state-sanctioned rule. The system can take on different forms, ranging from those in which the power of the state gets concentrated in one individual (e.g. a monarchy, a dictatorship) to more pluralistic expressions of rule, for instance a republic. (See IESBS 2001, vol. 17: 11447)

7 Authoritative and thorough sources that discuss these matters include: Cambranes (1985), McCreery (1983, 1994), Williams (1994).

8 Obligatory military service was decreed in 1872 and a military academy founded four years later, actions that marked the birth of the armed forces as a state institution. (Lentner 1993: 112)

9 A rapid review of the historical record exposes some revealing facts. Since independence from Spain, the country has had fifty state rulers, of whom twenty-nine have been either military men acting as elected heads of state or as part of military juntas. In the interval between 1898 and 1944, the latter date marking the onset of a period of revolution, two dictators alone had held power for thirty-five years. From 1954 to 1986, the military led three juntas. (Based on information contained in De Fahsen 2002, vol. 1: 176, 198)

10 Historically, the central state has failed to make peoples of Amerindian ancestry full and equal participants of the Guatemalan polity, that is, to share in equal terms the exercise of power. At the core of this problem are discriminatory practices and a strong socio-economic divide between Amerindians and non-Amerindians, which situate the former in a disadvantaged position in relation to the latter. Even though Amerindians, most of Maya descent, represent about half of the total population in the country, non-Amerindians dominate the central state apparatus and hence the source of disparity. Despite recent central state efforts to make inroads into Amerindian communities via different strategies that include the construction of public infrastructure, the implementation of social projects (e.g. education, health) and other programs, a wide gap remains in terms of making these populations full shareholders of political power. For an extended discussion of this argument see anthropologist Carol Smith’s edited volume addressing in detail the relationship between Guatemalan Amerindians and the Guatemalan state from the mid 16th century up to the 1980s (Smith, C. 1990), and in particular her two chapters: “Social Relations in Guatemala over Time and Space” and, “Conclusion: History and Revolution in Guatemala”
Murdo MacLeod has suggested that the lack of developmental capital hindered a stronger state presence in Petén. (Personal communication, April 12 2005)

Historian Todd Little-Siebold (1999) has proposed that this was, in fact, the case for all of Guatemala up until WWII. This proposition applies to northwest Petén even until recently.

With a combined population of less than 4,000 people, I recorded more than 15 incidents of crime at Naranjo and Ceibo during 2002 (Field notes).

During 2002, both Guatemalan (see Ferrigno 2002) and Tabascan journalists (see Avendaño-Murillo 2002) wrote in a derogatory tone about the allegedly ill reputation of Naranjo.

This claim resonates with other propositions to re-conceptualize the term peasantry and no longer think of these rural populations as self-contained, inward oriented only. The multiple realms from which they derive a living today are reshaping their self-perception and identity. See Kearney 1996 for a provocative discussion on this issue.

State presence is, undoubtedly, stronger in Mexico than in Guatemala. Two examples illustrate. In its efforts to establish greater sway over the border area, the central Mexican state launched an ambitious program in the Tabasco municipalities adjacent to the Guatemalan border during the 1960s and early 1970s. The entity in charge was the Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources, a federal unit resembling a Ministry of Public Water Works. The Balancan-Tenosique Plan, as this initiative was named, attempted to populate the region (Tudela 1989: 225), to “develop” the area through the boosting of cattle production in the region, and to enable the Mexican government to “…asumir el control de un área fronteriza de importancia estratégica [hold control of a border area of strategic importance] (229, my own translation).” (See pgs. 230-ff for a full discussion on the implementation of this project and its subsequent results.) During those same years, and in a comparison to developments between the two countries, on the Guatemalan side of the border only a handful of people were able to establish a foothold, by their own means. The paving of the road that goes from Tenosique to the borderline with Guatemala, at Ceibo, represents the most recent (2000) and visible manifestation of the way the Mexican state continues to reach into its farthest boundaries.

‘Extra-state forces’ are synonymous with illegal practices, with the particularity that “…while they may partake of state structures, they are not modeled on state systems.” (Nordstrom 2001: 219) The shadows refer to “…larger systems of affiliation and exchange that occur apart from form state structures.” (216)

The essence of border arbitrage dealings has been further elaborated in these terms: “Borders tend to generate short-term, opportunistic and more questionable arbitrage activities, ranging from trading on tax and price differences to smuggling and associated forms of crime, including the smuggling trade in ‘illegal immigrants’…. the concept of ‘border arbitrage’ seems to point to endemic weaknesses in the economies of border regions. It suggests that these are deep-seated weaknesses despite the fact that they stem from what are generally seen positively as ‘opportunities’ by participants (and understandably so, particularly if their area has few other economic advantages.)”

[It is important] …to distinguish more localized border-crossing processes and ‘border arbitrage’ which has different characteristics from state-wide arbitrage such as currency speculation. Whereas the latter[,] for instance[,] typically involves ‘big capital’ and large financial institutions, the former is usually dominated by ‘small capital’ and [where] large is more likely to include smuggling and related illegalities. The immediate border linkages and effects tend to be more pervasive and intense in border communities, and for this reason border regions may be particularly revealing of wider processes.” (Anderson J. 2001: 9, 10)

On the transnational nature of human migration see Glick, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992.
The initial motivation for doing a study of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor arose from my discovery that diverse driving forces coincided there, producing an intricate social milieu, one that was important for studies of borders but, at the same time, not well documented in the literature. I realized, at a later date, that the real focus of my research dealt with rapid transformations in a contested border locality. This contestation could be analyzed at different levels, i.e. the macro, the meso, the micro, but I decided to address the issue from the local perspective, in a way suitable to the spirit of anthropological research. I begin this chapter by tackling what evolved into a process of articulation and re-articulation of the question that guided my research plans. I purposely use the term articulation because the initial inquiry progressively turned more elaborate, from the time I outlined a research prospectus, through the period of gathering the data in the field, to the phase of the interpretation of results.

In this chapter I also contextualize the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor in its bio-physical and socio-spatial dimensions. The description of the physical milieu where people have settled elicits a better comprehension of the efforts that went, specifically, into territoriality-making. I discuss here anthropogenic landscapes, or the ways humans have intervened in the landforms they occupy. Landscapes are conceived as social constructions of nature and the environment (Greider and Garkovich 1994). The overall description of society in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, characterized by its heterogeneity,
and the economic and political status of the site in the regional context, conclude this discussion. By the end of this chapter the reader should have gained a good picture of what the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch was like in the early 21st century.

**The Formulation of a Research Question**

My original question centered on how the differing arrangements of land use and land tenure among diverse groups at the study-site constituted the process of economic development. The underlying assumption was that a close look at land use and land tenure issues in connection with larger political and economic phenomena would unravel the contested nature of development at this border locality. Examples of larger phenomena are political events at the national –e.g., a revolution in 1954, and international levels – e.g., the impact of WWII, and major turning economic developments, such as the rise of a forest-based economy in 19th century Petén.

I also speculated that individual and household-based initiatives and strategies concerning land use and land tenure issues revealed how economic development was played out at the local level. Two main variables mediated the process: ethnic affiliation and migratory history. Q’eqchi’ Amerindians and (non-Indian) Ladinos are the two main ethnic groups that make up this society. Historically, the Q’eqchi tended to form much more close-knit communities than the latter (Grünberg 2000). This tendency acquired greater relevance when dealing with issues concerning land, as current experiences around the titling process in Petén have shown (see Gould 2001). Migratory background alluded to the prior experiences of families moving around and expanding the colonization process. Like the *posseiros* of Amazonia (Schmink 1981), an important segment of Naranjo and Ceibo residents had been pushed off the land elsewhere in Petén, sometimes more than once. They had faced limited opportunities concerning access to,
and possession of land. People assume livelihood decisions and strategies pertaining to uses of the land and its possession according to the changing conditions of migration and border life, in ever-adapting circumstances. Thus economic development for the squatter and his family group usually has been limited to survival via subsistence agriculture in combination with cash crops, perhaps raising some cattle. By contrast, the average cattle rancher usually was a more recent settler. Furthermore, he arrives with a different mindset. He or she has gone to the area looking for land that can be turned into extensive pastures. This strategy produces the highest long-term economic gains. These differing uses of the land, agriculture and cattle ranching, are at odds with each other, placing the poor farmer in a precarious situation within this type of development.

After my initial research in 2000 and 2001, my effort took on a sharper focus, inducing some adjustments to the conceptual and methodological approaches. I saw that one of the main research instruments, the interview, should be administered among landholders within a well-defined geographical area, taking a sample within the entire population. I had to integrate, as well, another element influencing economic development, namely conservation policy. What kind of connections ought to be established between these different aspects to make a sensible interpretation of the data? In response to this question I brought in another approach, political ecology, and a new analytical tool, spatial analysis via remote sensing technologies. Political ecology makes use of the social sciences, particularly economy and history, to identify and understand how specific social groups interact with and appropriate the environment (Schmink and Woods 1987; Bryan and Bailey 1997). The most widely known technology for doing spatial analysis, mainly on land cover change, is a Geographical Information System, or
GIS. This tool involves analyzing satellite imagery obtained over time, i.e. through multiple observations, to establish rates of vegetation change and other disruptions effected on the landscape. Illustrative of GIS applications in Petén are the works of Steve Sader (Sader 1999) and Thomas Sever (Sever 1998). My ambitious goal contemplated explaining political, economic and environmental change as a result of human action at different levels. Later, as my focus of research narrowed, the ecological approach was re-formulated; the inclusion of spatial analysis in the dissertation design was too ambitious so I had to exclude it.

As the 2002 fieldwork season unfolded, the dynamic at work in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch exposed much more than I had anticipated. Intersecting processes obscured a clear-cut understanding of local and regional conditions, beyond economic development. The economy of the area revolved around agricultural activities, yet it also depended on illegal practices, most of them non-agricultural. The emergence of the informal market at the border increased rumors about the opening of a border checkpoint, which could had a potential impact at the provincial level. Local processes were causing profound transformations, too, specifically at Naranjo. First, Naranjo inhabitants were getting titles to their land, a demand that went a long way back. Second, Naranjo had experienced over the last five years a sudden occurrence of local organization. This latter development was the byproduct, at least in part, of yet another regional event: the asphalt paving of the road that led into the village, a process that had involved a protracted struggle on the part of the population. In fact, because Naranjo leaders had played a decisive role in this movement, they gained political stature in the northwest. This series of events allowed them to advance a political agenda that envisaged autonomous aspirations. Then the
issue became how to integrate this whole picture. Halfway through the extended 2002 field visit I realized that I had to ask more questions. The new questions dealt with illegal practices in the area, collective organization, and local politics, particularly in Naranjo.

In 2003 I began the write-up of the dissertation. My preliminary interpretation of the data and further readings in the post-fieldwork phase elicited more feedback into an ongoing re-formulation of the research question. One finding pointed to a much more diversified economic base among the general population, the land-holders being no exception, than my original assumption about people’s sole dependence on agriculture for a living. Land did not occupy the primary role after all, in terms of economic development. My review of secondary sources guided new ways of thinking through the data. Reading about the so-called perennial frontiers of Amazonia (Little 2001) I came upon the concept of territoriality, a central term in understanding the progression of human occupation in northwestern Petén. The concept of social control of space led me to seek, in turn, other ways of elucidating what appeared more clearly as power issues that included, but also transcended, issues of territoriality. Control over land was part of other dynamics in a larger scheme. The literature about land, conservation policy, illegal practices, and border issues led to a larger relational sphere where all these elements converged: the state. Consider these interrelated factors: the making and continuity of a border is a fundamental state matter in its assertion of sovereignty; the progression of the frontier, understood here as humans expanding on the land, happens sometimes as part of state directives, or the lack of them; the existence of an environmental policy results from state initiatives; and the activities that transgress the realm of the legal—which subvert the state, are defined according to a state-dictated juridical protocol. Still, a connection to
state matters did not explain much in and of itself. People reacted to the actions of the state in numerous ways, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as collectivities. These responses materialized on strategies articulated in the spur of the moment, or were well planned, for instrumental or pragmatic purposes. It was in the realm of human agency, and the ensuing interplay of power with the state, where answers to events at different levels of analysis could be best interrogated. Thus, the investigation centered on the changing relationship between the central state and the population, one that developed strategies to engage variable conditions in the process of controlling space.

**Delimitation of the Study Site**

The Naranjo-Ceibo corridor comprises a strip of land, about twenty-five kilometers in length and two kilometers in width (Figure 2-2). This location is bound on the west by the borderline with Mexico, with the hamlet of Ceibo sitting at this end. The San Pedro River serves as a northern limit, while on the south the Pita Mountain chain (Figure 2-3) stands as a natural barrier. Other communities border Naranjo on the east. One can get to the site by land, air, and water. The trip by land, from Flores, the capital of Petén, to Naranjo takes no more than three hours. The long journey from Guatemala City to Naranjo, 650 kilometers apart, is about twelve hours long. By local standards this is a far-away destination. Inadequate public transportation makes the area appear even more remote, and the trip quite tiresome. Naranjo can be reached from Guatemala City in ninety minutes via airplane. Except for big ranchers who fly in small planes, the dirt airstrip located on the village is hardly ever used. The San Pedro River is the connecting waterway between this village and Mexico, in the west, and locations in north central Petén, to the east. Since no overland pass exists between the two countries, Naranjo is the port of entry into and departure from Guatemala.
Getting to Ceibo is more complicated because the existing dirt trail that starts out at Naranjo is in bad condition. The fastest, and most used, way to get there is by the San Pedro River, a journey that may take from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the power of the boat’s outboard engine. During the dry season the trail can be managed with relative ease; during the rainy season only owners of four-wheel drive vehicles may venture to traverse the length of the battered road though, sometimes failing in the effort. Generally these vehicles do not take passengers. Their only objective was to transport loads of supplies to the informal market that had sprung up recently at Ceibo. With excessive rainfall, as happened in 2000 and 2002, the way becomes impassable. My first attempt to reach Ceibo, by land, was prevented due to an insurmountable flooded spot located some 8 kilometers from Naranjo, one where water does not recede quickly. I made the crossing on a vehicle a couple of times, at later dates, and experienced the difficulties of getting through. As the 2002 field season progressed, water transportation to Ceibo became more readily available. The thriving of the informal market triggered this development. Merchants increasingly favored moving their merchandise by the river and not over land. In turn, more undocumented migrants were using boats to get to points close to the borderline.
Figure 2-1 Guatemala. Country map
Figure 2-2 The study site
Physical Description of Northwestern Petén

Geography

At the regional scale, Petén is the farthest point south of the Yucatan peninsula. Northwestern Petén is situated within the Usumacinta River basin. As indicated, the study area lies next to the San Pedro River, a tributary of the Usumacinta. North of the San Pedro stretches a zone characterized by terrain prone to flooding, all the way to the border with Campeche, Mexico, some ninety kilometers north of Naranjo. This is an area known as Laguna del Tigre, from which the namesake park derives its name. South of the San Pedro River there are plains and wetlands, with interspersed mountains. Part of the study location also comprises an area of rugged, sloped topography at the small mountain range known as Sierra de la Pita, a branch of the Lacandón Mountains system. From Ceibo, which sits at the base of Sierra de la Pita, on an eastward direction, the mountains follow a parallel course with the San Pedro for about 7 kilometers of its length. Then they turn south until they merge with another section of the Lacandón Mountains. This is the northernmost flank of the area historically known as Sierra del Lacandón proper, and from which PSNL takes its designation.

The San Pedro River is a calm waterway that reaches as much as 150 meters in width at some points along its course. The San Pedro has played a significant economic role in the history of the area. For one thing, it is an important source of food. Many kinds of fish can be caught at the San Pedro, providing protein for the diet of local inhabitants. This, however, does not mean that this type of food is accessible to everybody. Fishing is not a way of making a living among the majority, nor do people fish actively to fulfill household consumption needs. Fish are, in fact, very expensive. There are other economic benefits associated with the river. For instance, a plot of land
with direct access to the river is of much higher value than one without it. Direct access to water may translate into further potential for irrigation, better access to riverine transportation, and offer fishing grounds, and a source of water for cattle. Throughout the distance that separates Naranjo from Ceibo only two parcels had a direct outlet to the San Pedro because a strip of wetland separates, in all other cases, firm land from water. The two fortunate landholders, from Ceibo, had benefited from the privileged location of their land plots by engaging in activities linked to the growing market at the borderline. One of them owned a number of boats that transport people to and from Ceibo; the other had turned his land into a port of sorts for the merchandise that is sold at the aforementioned venue. Both individuals are engaged in underground activities as well.

The river has also served as a main means of transportation for human populations who have resided at its banks, in pre and post-Columbian times, because it is navigable throughout its entire course. The river holds environmental value too. This watercourse is part of the largest wetland ecosystem in all of Central America, a RAMSAR Convention-designated site. The wetlands hold intrinsic value because they are critical to life forms that thrive on them. The dominant form of vegetation is the large sedge locally known as Cibal (Cladium jamaicense) (see Figure 2-3). These wetlands constituted a nesting ground for crocodiles, turtles and other fauna. The aesthetic worth of the river is something that remains to be fully explored. For instance, three kilometers upriver from Naranjo there is a fresh water mollusk reef of rare beauty and exceptional environmental value.

Climate

Naranjo is located at an altitude of 50 m. above sea level, while Ceibo sits at 230 m., with no significant gradient differences, climate-wise, between them. The zone is
very hot, temperatures reaching as much as 41° C and generally staying on an average of 38° between March and June. Conditions may vary considerably towards the end of the year. Temperatures may drop below 20 degrees from December through February when nights are cool (Calderon 2001). Like elsewhere in the tropics there is a distinct wet season and a dry season in northwestern Petén. The heaviest rains occur between May and November, with an average precipitation volume recorded at 18.2 cm/year, during a normal year (Calderon 2001). The dry period extends roughly from mid-November to early April.

**Vegetation**

The vegetation of the wetlands includes eighty-three species of trees, eighteen unique to the area, including *Canxan (Terminalia amazonia)* and *Mora (Maclura tinctoria)* (Proyecto FIPA/Guatemala 2002: 4). In the rest of the area two dominant classes of tropical forest are to be found. One is a semi-deciduous close-tree canopy formation and the other a seasonally flooded semi-deciduous close-tree canopy. Both associations are present where rain exceeds a 20 cm. per annum precipitation threshold and where temperatures average between 22° and 26° C. Although both happen together, it is the soil structure and its characteristics that differentiate them. Mollisol and vertisol soils predominate in both forests. Rendzina are dark soils that develop under grass on limestone rock. The high clay content characterizes the second ones. In the first forest, the tallest trees grow to be 30 meters in height, some reaching as much as 60-70 m. Among the dominant species in this forest are *Zopo or Palo de Zopo (Guatteria anomala)*, *Zapote de mico (Licania platypus)*, and mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*).

The other forest type occurs in relatively deep soil, which is prone to flooding during the rainy season. Yet, such soil can dry up during the summer months. This forest
is to be found in hollow and uneven terrain, locally known as bajos. Drainage of this soil is deficient and hence the reason for water accumulation. Trees are for the most part short (not beyond 5 m. in height) and their trunks may bend. In the savannas the most common trees include Nance (Byrsonima crassifolia), Morro (Crescentia alata), and Bolchice or Uvero (Coccoloba spp). Another association of trees that are found in this forest wetland but away from the savanna includes logwood (Haematoylum campechianum), Chechén Negro (Metopium brownei), Chechén blanco (Cameraria latifolia) and Sangre de Drago (Croton reflexifolius). In the hills where limestone rocks predominate, the typical association of trees consists of Ramón (Brosium alicastrum), Cola de lagarto or tachuelillo (Zanthoxylum sp.), and Chicozapote (Manilkara zapota).

Some of these tree species, notably logwood, mahogany and Chicozapote, have been fundamental in the process of frontier expansion that ensued as part of latest wave of human occupation in the area, a topic to be expanded in Chapter 4. Others have specific uses among local inhabitants. For example, Ramón and Nance offer edible fruits while Morro presumably has medicinal properties. During a walk through the area I also saw Morro being used as part of living fences that divided the paddocks of a cattle estate.

**Fauna**

A few specimens of the area’s original fauna can be found in a handful of minute spots where primary vegetation still thrives. On firm land, the howler and spider monkeys (Alouatta palliata, Ateles geoffrroyi, respectively) are noticeable. On the river, storks (Jabiru myeteria) are plentiful. The variety of fish, all eaten locally, to be found on the river include snook (Centropomus undecimalis), tarpon (Megalops atlanticus), cichlid (Chichlasoma intermedium) alligator gar (Lepisosteus tropicus) and Blanco (Petenia esplendida), the latter a native species to Petén.
With few exceptions, any terrestrial animal is deemed potential game. For example, coveted for its meat, deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) are actively hunted. Surprisingly, deer can still be found on occasion. I had a personal experience that illustrates the relative importance of this activity. Several times I observed a landholder respondent going to his plot of land with a firearm on his shoulder. He was an active hunter. One day in May, while surveying the boundaries of another associate’s parcel, he caught a glimpse, or so he assuredly claimed, of the deer’s hinds while the animal made a quick escape into a portion of fallow terrain. The other respondent and I dropped our activity at once and walked briskly to the spot. At the place where the deer had been sighted, we found footprints belonging, supposedly, to three individual deer. This very evidence was enough to engage in a two-hour roaming pursuit of the prospective prey, which after all, and to my respondent’s chagrin, turned out to be unsuccessful. The effort put into the chase points to the significance of wild meat for the local diet.

Inventories carried out at nearby Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre have established the presence of 40 species of mammals, 173 species of birds, 36 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 41 species of fish in this conservation unit (Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas [CONAP] 1999). However, this rich diversity was in peril of extinction. Human presence contributed to the decline of species richness, both in connection to consumption and commerce in wildlife. Among the most coveted species were the white lipped and collared peccaries (*Tayassu peccary* and *Tayassu tajacu*, respectively), brocket deer (*Mazama Americana*), *Tepescuintle* (*Agouti paca*), *Agutí* (*Dasyprocta punctata*), armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*), jaguar (*Panthera onca*), scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*) and a local species of crocodile (*Cocodrilus moreleti*).
Anthropogenic Landscapes

Landscape types correspond, roughly, to one or more vegetation associations, yet they are distinct in terms of their anthropogenic uses, i.e., the interventions they have experienced. Next to the southern banks of the San Pedro are wetlands, a strip that varies in extent all the way through the length of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. It is a vast expanse of marsh, used for occasional fishing during the dry season, at a time when water level drops. Occasionally, islands of tall trees or elevated ground patches are to be found in the midst of the wetland (Figure 2-3).

A small, transitional zone of savanna land follows. This plain, flat strip of terrain is greatly appreciated by cattle growers because the natural grass that grows on it may be fed to rotating herds, as when trying to re-establish overgrazed pastures elsewhere, particularly during the dry season. Even though savannas are found in other parts of Petén, they are connected here to wetland.

The third zone making up this landscape consists of a low-height, seasonally flooded forest where the dominant plant life includes lianas, thorny bushes and water-resistant trees such as logwood. This forest association, more like a swamp, overflows easily because the soils do not drain well. Much of the vegetation has now been cut down and turned into grazing land or agricultural fields, though some isolated portions of primary forest still remain. Spatial-based analysis of vegetation changes, using geographical information systems and similar technologies, has offered a new way of looking into this problem. (For a recent investigation on deforestation rates inside the MBR see: Wildlife Conservation Society et al 2003.)

The next anthropogenic landscape occupies a considerable area in the stretch between Naranjo and Ceibo. It is generally flat, with well drained soils and the
predominantly tall tree association already mentioned. The primary vegetation of this landscape type has been replaced today with secondary growth, crops, and pastures. The occurrence of frequent fires has extensively razed even those spots where occupants of the land have kept stands of primary vegetation. Much of the re-growth results from agriculture and fallows. Hence, the predominant scenery today encompasses vast areas with vegetation in different stages of succession, interspersed with cornfields and expanding pastureland.

The landscape found near Sierra de la Pita is especially notable at Ceibo where the hamlet is at the base of hilly terrain. From the riverbanks of the San Pedro, at around 50 m. above sea level, in less than two kilometers the elevation rises to 480 m. at its highest point. The vegetation of this section resembles the closed canopy forest structure. The topography, however, restricts agriculture to small niches between gullies (known locally as *joyas* or *encaños*).

Practically all Ceibo settlers possess land plots with a section of flat terrain and a section that is steep. Lands owned by people from Naranjo vary in slope gradient, some being flat, and some being rather irregular. Holdings next to the river typically feature a considerable area of marshland, a tiny strip of savanna, some low-forest and a fairly flat terrain where the original vegetation forms have been turned into fenced-in pasture or cropland. Part of the latter is done on the *bajos*. These characteristics are common to practically all the plots situated between the San Pedro and the dirt road. Parcels located south of the road, and which border the community of Lagunitas (See Figure 2-2), show a slightly rugged topography. Depressions on the ground and small mounds of rocky
formations are also present, as well as isolated bajos. The dominant vegetation is secondary growth forest with patches of mostly burned dry, tall trees.

Figure 2-3  Interspersed Cibal stumps on the marsh. On the right, an island of trees. Photograph by author.

The following satellite-based image (Figure 2-4) offers yet a different view on the landscape in 2000. Any intervened areas appear in white, whereas primary vegetation, by and large, is shown on red. Various tones of green denote vegetation on several stages of succession, and wetlands. The fragmented strip of land plots running alongside the marsh beneath the San Pedro River constituted the main loci of research.
Figure 2-4 False infrared color image of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, with main geographic landmarks. NLAPS Bands 4, 3, 2, 2000.
**Society on the Naranjo-Ceibo Corridor**

As one entered the village of Naranjo in the rainy season of 2002 there was the realization that this was the end of the road. Yet this ending denoted a beginning too. Naranjo was a gateway and a border on at least two levels. Naranjo sat at the fringes that delimit the core from the buffer zone inside the MBR (Figure 2-2), while Ceibo was part of the multiple-use zone, respectively, of the reserve.\(^9\) In theory the core zone is to remain inaccessible, but in reality this is not the case. Thus, Naranjo is the entrance to the northwest, until recently a sparsely populated region.

The Naranjo-Ceibo stretch was also the entering point into Mexico. Despite physical barriers separating major population centers on both sides of the Guatemala-Mexico borderline exchange has always taken place. Historically Mexicans have influenced culture and society in this border locality. Although intermittent, the connections do exist and go a long way back. These are explained in Chapter 4. In 2002 there were people of either nationality living on each side of the border. Mexicans who had worked in Petén before stayed and, conversely, Guatemalans went to live in nearby Tabasco towns. With no checkpoint at the borderline, Naranjo was the official place of entry and exit where legal papers had to be obtained; it was the border, with the 22 kilometers separating Naranjo from Ceibo constituting a large borderland.

What was life like in these communities? What kind of people made up the social fabric of these frontier and border localities? What was the economic and political standing of these two communities vis-à-vis each other and neighboring settlements? What was their status within the regional context? The concluding part of the chapter sheds light on these questions.
Sketches of Everyday Life

The following insights pertaining to life at Naranjo and Ceibo come from field observations in the two communities. Nothing out of the ordinary could strike the uninformed observer’s attention on his or her initial visit to Naranjo. On closer scrutiny, perhaps, the layout made it appear bigger, spatially-wise, than what it actually was. This was due to the fact that the San Pedro River, the northern limit of the community, was flanked by marshland both to the east and west. Hence, the village had an elongated shape, sprawling in a southbound direction. Naranjo was made up of several barrios or neighborhoods, but differences among them were subtle. Main commerce and other amenities were clustered at the oldest barrio, next to the river, making this the heart of economic and social life. Outlying neighborhoods had fewer businesses. For the most part, they housed the recently arrived Naranjeños.

The village of Naranjo exhibited ample signs of “modernity,” surpassing Ceibo in practically all respects. In 2002 there were three establishments offering elementary education to school-age children in the former, two public and one private. Ceibo had none. The only high school in a radius stretching for 160 square kilometers, private, was at Naranjo. State presence, though modest, was growing. Until recently, the few agents of the central state, other than the assistant mayor, included an army garrison, an immigration post and a public health clinic. After 2002, Naranjo had a police station, a local office of the national ombudsman’s bureau, and a branch of a government-owned bank. Infrastructure and services had improved considerably as well. Unlike conditions during a visit in 1997 (see Chapter 3), by 2002 satellite-based phone communication was available, there was ample transportation out of the village throughout the day, a paved road connected the place with the outside, a water system was being built, and plans to
introduce electricity were underway, all strong indications of strenuous efforts towards economic development. Ceibo lacked many of the above, but due to the influx of people social and economic conditions were rapidly changing.

Naranjeños tended to their different occupations day in and day out. Agriculturalists, the larger group, went to their fields in the morning and returned home in the afternoon. Those who went out early, and who did not have to travel a considerable distance, i.e. more than a few kilometers away from the village, returned for lunch at midday. Several of the respondents in my sample whose parcels were at least 5 kilometers outside Naranjo chose to take some ready-made meal and stayed at work through the day. They returned home by 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. Business owners opened their shops as early as 7:00 a.m., to close them at sundown; others stayed open longer, up to 12 hours. Business venues catering to the undocumented migrant stream specialized on different kinds of work. They included the petty smugglers, the money exchange agents, and the service sector people, namely owners of hotels, general stores, restaurants, telephones, and transportation. They all worked at different hours of the day, depending on the size and the situation each migrant group found itself in, that is, whether the group had recently arrived, whether it had resources to continue or not, if it was ready to move on, or if people were returnees trying a second or third time to make it through the Guatemala-Mexico border. Another sector of the population depended on a salary for a living, and it included those who worked for any of the above groups, for ranchers, or as employees of the two oil companies present in the area.

Evenings were the livelier part of the day at Naranjo. Many residents of different ages went out. Adult males would gather in a preferred meeting spot, i.e. a specific store,
to chat. Church services among Protestant denominations took place several days a week, for a couple of hours; they tended to draw families and other devotees. Video saloons were popular among children and teenagers. For a reasonable fee two or three videotaped movies were shown every night. Others simply visited neighbors, friends, and relatives. Then as the night progressed and most people went home, some males might drop by at any of the several bars in the village. Because they were located along the one paved street and main thoroughfare of the village bars were well known landmarks. When offering directions people pointed to the ‘corner where x bar was’ or ‘two blocks to the east of x business’.

On Saturdays the village was busier than usual. Inhabitants from up and downstream the San Pedro River, as well as from other communities, arrived in town to trade. They brought in items such as corn, beans, pumpkin seed, and fish. In turn, they purchased manufactured items and other essential goods, e.g., salt, sugar, soap. At the peak of harvest season a number of trucks could be seen alongside the river, the drivers and helpers loading their cargo of corn, beans or pumpkin seed throughout the day, an activity that extended to Sundays. This was particularly noticeable in late August when pumpkin seed, a product that may fetch a relatively high price in the market, first came out. It was the time of the year when the majority of inhabitants, agriculturalists, had more money to spend. The level of commercial activity that went on during the weekend at Naranjo underlined the significance of the village within the regional context, a point to which I shall return.

Life at Ceibo went on at a much slower pace than at Naranjo, except for weekends. Most of the less than twenty “native” inhabitants, that is, those who were there before the
market sprang up in 2000, all of them farmers, lived on their plots of land, in a spread-out pattern. Practically all had some cattle and crops, and hence their time was dedicated to rural matters. Nonetheless, these people had taken advantage of the border condition for their own benefit: at least three of them supplied, whenever possible, the services the undocumented migrant stream necessitated, similar to what could be found at Naranjo. They harbored, transported and fed sojourners on their stopover at the border. Though less preferred than other crossing points, Ceibo witnessed a trickle of undocumented aliens. Some of these visitors, in fact, proceeded from Naranjo. They walked or took a boat to the hamlet in a next to last stop before crossing into Mexico. But unlike Naranjo, the migrant stream was not the main backbone of the economy at Ceibo; agriculture and cattle were. Although Ceibo remained mostly a backwater location, conditions were rapidly changing with the entry of newcomers in search of fortune at the informal market. This process triggered the construction of houses and the emergence of other businesses, such as dining shops, and telephone services. If and when the border checkpoint finally opens, the odds of Ceibo becoming what Naranjo was in 2002 to the migrant population are great.

**Depiction of the Local Population**

If a researcher were to talk to a group of adult bystanders in Naranjo and Ceibo and inquire about their background, a list of common traits would easily and promptly become apparent. In all likelihood, more than half of those he talked to would indicate that they were born and raised in one of five provinces in Eastern Guatemala, namely Jutiapa, Zacapa, Jalapa, Chiquimula, or Izabal. If prodded to offer reasons why they had chosen northwestern Petén as a destination, culture-bound considerations would be elicited. First, the climate of northwestern Petén, hot, is somewhat similar to the one
found in the aforementioned provinces. The differences lie in humidity and precipitation, both being much higher in Petén. In fact the dry conditions of many zones in the East have pushed people out of unproductive, practically barren, lands. Second, historically cattle raising is a very strong component of Eastern Guatemala’s culture, unlike what one finds in other regions of the country. The ideal of these eastern migrants would be to reproduce a social world revolving around ranching in a place where favorable physical conditions abound, specifically land availability and water abundance. Those in the minority of the group might had been born outside the area but in all probability in southern Petén, to parents of diverse backgrounds, not unlikely prior generations of easterner Guatemalans who went earlier to Petén or from old-Petenero families, including people who engaged in forest-based activities in the past.

Had those people born outside the province been prompted to reveal the date on which they arrived in Petén, the visitor could obtain several answers. He or she would learn that about one third of his respondents immigrated before 1970\textsuperscript{11}. The main group would have arrived thereafter, with a slight concentration between 1973 and 1980. Upon further questioning regarding their arrival date to Naranjo and Ceibo, respectively, the group’s responses would vary. Contrary to the situation at Ceibo where people had been residing since the early 1960s, only a handful of individuals had arrived to settle at Naranjo before 1970. Of course, some settlers who eventually ended up at Naranjo would say that they had initially gone to Ceibo. During the 1970s, only a trickle of people went to Naranjo and even less so to Ceibo. Most of the interviewed arrived in the course of the following decade, when a road finally reached Naranjo. Between 1970 and 1990 very few of these people had gone to Ceibo.
If the imaginary researcher were male he would not approach directly a woman who had not been previously introduced to him, for this could be misinterpreted as culturally improper. But assuming that they were already acquainted with each other, a local woman would tell her interlocutor that there are some important gender differences in this society. One cultural norm, she would say, dictates that female behavior is subordinated to the mandate and wishes of her male relatives, beginning with her spouse. As in many other cultures, men expect women to remain within the private sphere (i.e. the house) while males engage in more public affairs. She would typically not be expected to own and work the land, to participate in social organizations –with the exception of religion, and fulfill or partake of other public activities in community life. Yet custom did not necessarily conform always to practice. If this stranger were to ask about Rutilia, he would learn of a female who would be, literally, the exception to the rule, and in many ways, a person with a unique remarkable life history. A woman of advanced age, more than 70 years old, she had grown and spent many of her early years in chicle camps, enduring the tough conditions of this extractive activity in the rain forest; as a grown up, married woman she and her partner settled in a place where they began their cattle ranch, at a distant location from Naranjo. Before the arrival of outboard engines, the ranch could only be reached by canoe, after one hour of travel on the San Pedro River. She would still row the distance to Naranjo from time to time. Reputed as strong and hot-tempered, it was widely commented that she did manly chores, including tending to her corn, even going crocodile hunting. Females are rarely given any land holdings, whether as inheritance, as a gift or as a loan. The only situations where women gain access to the land, and quite often only in a figurative sense, are those
in which they are widows, or when the husband or father uses the name of his spouse or a
daughter as a surrogate to legalize a holding. In other words, men use this procedure as
a subterfuge to gain legal title to the land.

The visitor would soon realize that the women of Naranjo, and Ceibo to some
extent, had a visible presence in commerce, specifically in businesses they own and
manage. Commercial venues include restaurants, pharmacies, clothing stores, and bars.
If this outside observer were curious to ask, she would find that the majority of
businesswomen had no spouse or companion, which may explain their source of
considerable independence. For instance, three out of the six enterprising
businesswomen who were among the founding members of the Merchant Association at
Naranjo had no known spouse or partner in 2002.

Upon closer scrutiny the outside observer would realize that very few respondents
in her group were of Amerindian descent. By and large, Ladinos have made up the
majority of immigrants in the latest re-settling wave to the northwest. In fact, the
communities that the K’eqchi’ had established remained predominantly K’eqchi’,
reflecting a trend amongst this group to migrate collectively. Barely twenty-two
kilometers east of Naranjo there was a community of K’eqchi’ who settled in the area in
the 1980s; they arrived there as a group. Yet, some archival evidence collected for this
study indicated that K’eqchi’ presence at the research site was actually the result of
individual initiatives rather than a collective enterprise. For instance, with economic
activity flourishing at Ceibo in the early 1960s, some Amerindians went to that locality.
This can be inferred from sources such as the Birth Registry at Libertad, the municipality
seat, where an entry can be found for a male born to a Maya man, and a Ladino woman,
back in 1963. The few K’eqchi’ at the research site came mostly from areas where the soil had been too degraded for agriculture, or where cattle ranching made its way and displaced subsistence farmers, most notably in southern Petén.

After perusing through the businesses located on Naranjo’s main street, the researcher would learn that many of them were owned by K’iché Amerindians. Most of the Kiché residents came from a town in Quiche province with a reputation for the traveling merchant tradition of its inhabitants. *Momostecos*, or people from Momostenango, are found all over Guatemala; they are salesmen that go door-to-door, sometimes setting up small business venues. At Naranjo, the bulk of K’iché people arrived mainly in the 1990s. And it was *Momostecos* already settled at Naranjo who spearheaded, in 2000, the sprouting of the informal market at Ceibo, in turn attracting a new wave of their countrymen to this location.

Were he to do further research, the visitor to the area would find out that only one recent source (Centro de Monitoreo y Evaluación . . . [CEMEC] 2001) contains an ethnic break-down of the population of these two communities. This census specified that out of a total of 2380 inhabitants at Naranjo, 28 self-identified themselves as belonging to one of ten Amerindian groups. In the census 18 individuals were of K’eqchi’ descent and only one was a K’iché, though this latter figure is definitely an underestimation. By my own count, in 2001 there must have been at least 20 K’iché families at Naranjo, if not more. The CEMEC census reported no Amerindians at Ceibo but, again, this is misleading because by end of the previous year a good number of *Momostecos*, at least 50, had already arrived at the borderline. (Field notes)
If the visitor were to inquire about economic differences, from his conversations with the locals she would establish that there are at least three distinct economic strata at Naranjo. The small better-off group is made up of individuals who are simultaneously businessmen and large landowners. A second stratum is made up of emerging entrepreneurs, farmers (which includes agriculturalists and ranchers), and people with a profession. A third segment of the population, the majority, is the one involved in farming and some salaried work. The visitor would also conclude that economic stratification is less marked at Ceibo because most people own sizeable land tracts with crops and cattle on them.

Many of those interviewed by the outsider would point out that regardless of economic and ethnic differences interaction among all groups is more or less widespread. The visitor would be told that in these communities social exchange, regardless of a person’s economic background, is highly valued. Any affluent family that shuns mingling with its less privileged neighbors runs the chance of being ostracized. This is eas true for a cattle grower as for a rich businessman. Place of residence is the sphere where differences appear more striking at Naranjo, specifically among people who live in the village versus those who reside in their land plots. For one thing, overall living conditions were harsher in “rural” Naranjo. Everyday life for residents living permanently in those outlying plots unfolded at a different pace than in the village, too. Economically, they depended exclusively on their crops. People who inhabited the land lacked access to some services and goods including grocery stores, health care, and churches. None of the children of the families living on the land, the visitor would notice, were able to attend school. The traveling distance to Naranjo, the cost involved
for enrollment, plus extra yet related expenses (e.g., uniforms, contributions…), and the (allegedly) dangerous reputation of the road leading into the village were all reasons that prevented the children from attending the educational establishments at Naranjo. Just like “rural” Naranjeños, the people of Ceibo living on their plots did not have access to these things either, that is, infrastructure, transportation, schools. In this sense, Ceibo residents have more in common with rural villagers from Naranjo than with the “urban” Naranjo inhabitants.

In the end, the sketch of the people who inhabit the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor gathered by this imaginary outside visitor would yield a rather heterogeneous picture of the population. Reflecting a general trend within the larger population, the majority of the sample was born outside the area. Most came from rural backgrounds and hence shared certain cultural traits common through the Guatemalan countryside. The majority belonged to the Ladino group with mainly two Maya groups represented, namely the K’eqchi’ and the K’iché. Practically everybody had migrated to the area in search of a better future, having settled at the research site in recent times. A large number came looking for land while others arrived seeking an opportunity to start a business. For most settlers who now have land, this long term dream was to become cattle rearers. Raising cattle brought in handsome profits and prestige. In truth people might engage in more than one occupation to make a living at this site; heterogeneity, social and economic, was thus the common characteristic among the populace. The abridged life history of one close associate exemplifies the point and shows recurrent themes, and strategies, in the trajectories of settlers in this area, issues to be expanded in Chapter 5.
Próspero Else (pseudonym)\textsuperscript{15} was a Ladino, from southern Guatemala, in his early 50s. He and his relatives went to Naranjo as part of the first Guatemalan families who occupied the area back in the early 1970s, when no road had yet reached the northwest. They came looking for land. Initially, they settled at some distance from the cattle estate that thrived at the present-day location of the village, by the San Pedro riverbanks. In fact, people who knew Else suggested he had occasionally worked there as a cattle hand. After the death of his father, who had led the family group into the area, Else inherited more than 200 hectares of land, along with a cattle herd. He had managed to get ahead in life by engaging at diverse jobs, both legitimate and illegal, for the duration of the years he lived in the area. One business venture involved active commercial linkages with Mexicans, too. In 2002 he, as well as some of his siblings, had moved to the village, where he ran a thriving business. He began as a modest agriculturalist to eventually become a successful entrepreneur. As a founding member of two local groups, the Merchant Association and the Transportation Cooperative, he gained status as a public figure in recent times (Field notes). This man exemplified one of several frontier settlers who became a successful border resident. Else was in many ways representative of the average settler; his experiences, however, were not necessarily typical because there was no characteristic Northwestern life-long experience. Rather, and this is the point to keep in mind, it was the assortment of the population’s personal trajectories that characterized local society.

\textbf{Naranjo and Ceibo in the Regional Context}

Naranjo was the settlement exerting the most influence over the northwest at the turn of the century. In part this was due to its strategic location; in part it was because of its critical role on regional affairs. First, prices of crops were negotiated and set at
Naranjo. All agricultural crops harvested locally were dispatched from the village. Also, most manufactured industrial goods needed for subsistence were found there. Second, the community sat where the paved road coming in from central Petén ended. This situation made Naranjo the hub connecting communities located further north, i.e. across and beyond the river, and the outside. People living upriver, as far as three hours away, and conversely, inhabitants all the way to Ceibo, went to Naranjo for commerce and leisure. In fact, no less than thirty five communities located within a radius extending out at least 60 kilometers from Naranjo, in all directions, did business, purchased medicine or found entertainment there, especially during weekends. These circumstances made Naranjo the main center of economic life in the northwest.

Naranjo was no longer a secluded community in the middle of the forest. Quite the opposite, events originating outside and inside the area gave the locale a major role in larger processes. Naranjeños were aware of their town’s significance. It was common to hear everyday conversations revolving around issues as diverse as the transnational movement of people, the price fluctuation of seasonal crop harvests destined to national markets, or the plans for the opening of new border checkpoint facilities, at Ceibo, with all its potential implications. It is worth noting that Naranjo is the first major populated center that Mexicans encounter as they enter Petén. Therefore Naranjeños had high pretensions of their own because of the privileged position the village occupied in the larger geo-political context. The idea of controlling all transportation services between their village and the borderline, once a road opened so that they could capture this profitable segment of the market, attested to Naranjeños’ ambitions. Naranjo people would strive to convince the government to keep the immigration post that operated in
the village in 2002, instead of moving it over to Ceibo. They knew that government representatives had to remain in the village so that the place could retain those loci of state power within their reach.

Ceibo was dwarfed in 2002 by the economic and political might of Naranjo. Yet, this little settlement was gaining increasing weight within the regional context. This rather recent development was the result of two separate events. One concerned ongoing planning for the construction of the aforementioned paved road to the borderline. The other had to do with the emergence of the informal market at the borderline, which played a decisive role on the growth of the community. It appears that Ceibo was experiencing what Naranjo went through two decades ago, though for different reasons. The driving force behind the rise of Naranjo was the oil industry; supporting Ceibo’s ascendancy was the imminent consolidation of the historically neglected geopolitical marker of state power, i.e. the international border.

**Summary**

In the introductory section of this chapter I introduced the reader to the main research question and the way it evolved as the study progressed. The shifting focus of the central query, as it were, reflected the difficulties of studying a complex site. The search took me from centering on land variables in connection to economic development at first, to a state-centered approach that agglutinated the prior two aspects in connection to other driving forces at work at a later stage, to eventually focus on the role of personal and collectives strategies of action shedding light on the changing state-society interactions that ensued in a process of territoriality.

This chapter also presented the geographical, social and political specificities of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor in which the dynamics of social control over space unfolded. The
discussion situated the connections between the Naranjo-Ceibo locale and the regional context, too. Ultimately, it showed that this was a diverse, multifaceted, changing locality in 2002, both physically and culturally, a characteristic I return to in later sections of the dissertation. The heterogeneous nature of this milieu required a multiplicity of strategies to succeed in it, so that people could fend for themselves and deal with outside actors, most notably the state, some of which are exemplified in Else’s lifetime experiences. Having established this background, I elaborate next on the methods employed in this study.

Notes

1 The general definition of landscape, of course, is much more encompassing. Consider the entries found in Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary: 1) the landforms of the region in the aggregate, 2) a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery, 3) the art of depicting such scenery, 4) a portion of the land that the eye can comprehend in a single view. All of these connotations are, in varying degrees, true to the conceptualizing of landscape.

2 For the purposes of this study, Amerindians include the 22 groups of Maya descent present in Guatemala, as well as Garifuna and Xinca groups.

3 A person who may be, biologically, of Amerindian descent, or a mixture of long foregone Spanish and Amerindian unions but who identifies, by self-adscription, as culturally and socially distinct from Amerindians and other groups, such as the Garifuna of the Atlantic Coast of Guatemala. (Adapted, in part, from Schwartz 1990: xii)

4 RAMSAR is an international protocol on wetlands.

5 Unless otherwise noted the information on forest classification comes from Pennington and Sarukhán, 1998, pgs. 18, 21, 32-33. Whenever possible the corresponding names in English of species are included, but sometimes this is not the case because only local terms are known.


7 *Bajos* are also known in Mexico, and in part of the literature, by their Maya name as *akalches*.

8 Unless otherwise noted the information comes from Billy 1999.

9 Many biosphere reserves are internally divided into three zones. The core area is generally off-limits to human presence, with the exception researchers. The multiple use areas may be sparsely inhabited, with populations that engage in non-damaging practices to the environment, such as low-impact tourism and forest extractive activities. As the name indicates, the buffer zone serves to fend off anthropogenic impact on the core, that is, as a transition strip between the reserve and the outside. See: Nations 1999:11
Like many frontier communities, Naranjo appeared to be predominantly Protestant with many churches in the community. There was a smaller sector or outwardly non-practicing Catholics too.

The date can be taken as a dividing point in Petén’s history. The first road connecting Petén with the rest of Guatemala was finally completed in 1970.

One of the requisites for gaining title to a plot of land in this part of Petén stipulates that the person hold no other possessions, in the past or at present, whether inside or outside Petén.


Fictitious names are used throughout the dissertation to protect the privacy of the people who collaborated in this study.

The assistant major of Naranjo expressed this thought once during a conversation (Field notes).
CHAPTER 3
METHODS

Introduction

This chapter explains the way I approached the field, the methods I used to gather data and to interpret the resulting data, and the methodology problems I encountered. First I describe the process of engagement with the Naranjo-Ceibo locale over a period of three years. After two short visits, in 2000 and 2001, I spent all of 2002 fully immersed in community life. I recount the range of experiences that this protracted stay encompassed, from developing close rapport with people, to my everyday occurrences as an ethnographer, to mishaps I had, to the insights I gained. I include a description of a characteristic day of fieldwork too. The section ends with a discussion of the selection of main group of respondents from Naranjo and Ceibo, namely the sample of landholders.

In the second part I discuss the techniques and instruments used in data collection, namely participant-observation, interviews, life histories, and archival work. The main source of data came from interviews, which in the aggregate constituted a survey I carried out among fifty landholders, 38 from Naranjo and 12 from Ceibo.

In the third section I focus on explaining the qualitative methods of interpretation on which I relied. The main unit of analysis I employed in order to understand the progression of individuals taking over space was the life-time trajectory. Descriptive statistics, content analysis and grounded theory guided my interpretations.

In the final part I reflect on challenges that emerge in the course of entering the field, getting the data, and analyzing them. The several tribulations a researcher is faced
with are both conceptual (e.g., representation, validity), and empirical (e.g., unexpected delays, non-cooperative bureaucracy). Ethical conundrums riddle the research endeavor too and the ones I faced are discussed here.

**Progressive Engagement with the Field**

I first visited Naranjo in early 1997 while doing a short-term study in the area. What I encountered there left me perplexed. The place offered the opportunity for observing unparalleled processes at work, in a microcosm of border and frontier life. After entering a doctoral program in anthropology, two and a half years later, I planned a new visit to northwestern Petén to find out more about the history and society of the area. Thus began my renewed approach to the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. In the following pages I present a chronological account of my immersion at the research locale, covering the thirteen months of fieldwork I spent in the site as part of dissertation work.

**Initial Entry in 2000**

In preparation for ethnographic fieldwork (see: Agar 1996; DeWalt 2002; Wolcott 1999, 1995) I conducted preliminary interviews in May and June of 2000. My stay marked the onset of an effort to build long-term relationships with local people. The initial strategy was to contact some of the individuals I had met three years before. Locating a remarkable schoolteacher who had left a lasting impression on me was a first step in this approach. He was a smart, insightful person, someone who would identify with my project. I also hoped that he could help me out in terms of guiding the research plans and making further contacts. When I found Fonseca we engaged in a lengthy conversation about my tentative research ideas. Fonseca offered to help, immediately providing the names of potential respondents and filling me in with the major developments that had taken place in the zone during the years that had gone by.
Fonseca was the first among what became a pool of “main” respondents (see below), also referred throughout the document as associates; he was a person with whom I discussed critical issues in detail and shared my analysis-in-progress, namely working hypotheses, trends and patterns found in the data, and any early conclusions.

The intent of this visit was three-fold: 1) to build a wide network of associates, that is, people who would willingly collaborate in this endeavor, 2) to gain a sense of the major issues of concern among the local population, and 3) to establish the groundwork for future research, both in terms of methods proper, i.e. finding the most appropriate instruments and techniques, and logistics, such as, prospective living arrangements, and knowledge of local transportation availability. Initially I did not consider Ceibo part of the study but as events and ongoing analysis developed, I came to realize that this locality’s past and future were intrinsically linked to Naranjo. Ceibo offered a good internal comparison. A study of the border required that the two be approached as a one site.

Data obtained during this stay included local history accounts from senior and older Naranjo residents and a trial socio-economic survey administered among parents of children attending a local school. Because I had established by then a close relationship with two of Fonseca’s colleagues, on the one hand, and because I was time-restricted, on the other, the completing of the survey at this establishment facilitated research. The experimental instrument made possible three things: first, to sketch a basic profile of conditions among the population; second, to identify other potential respondents; and third, to refine the instruments that would be used with the people who eventually became the core research sample.
The Second Stay, 2001

During my next visit to the research site I focused on narrowing the selection of a research topic, and in consequently on formulating a research question. I continued cultivating social relationships and gathering historical data. At the same time, I discovered other issues deserving close attention. One issue concerned the emergence of an “informal” market at Ceibo, next to the international borderline. This market had developed in the months since my previous visit. A second issue was the progression of a land titling initiative in a segment of the span between Naranjo and Ceibo. This process caught my interest because the territory where this was taking place, affecting directly landholders directly, corresponded to a conservation-designated area. I began to consider the idea of doing a study on land use and tenure. My objective would be centered on human interventions in the land in connection to economic development.

Having established the precise geographical boundaries of the research site, I took the next logical step, an exploratory trip through the length of the corridor. The first time I made the journey by horse, with a person hired for the occasion. Later, I rode along in a pick up truck whose owner was delivering merchandise to merchants at the informal market. The trip, rather brief, allowed me an opportunity to look at local conditions, first-hand. The makeshift stalls where people displayed their goods, which also served as their housing, contrasted with the few yet well-built houses situated right across the borderline. The booths in Ceibo were lined up alongside a dirt road, whereas in Mexico lay a new paved road. This state of affairs epitomized the sharp contrasts between conditions in the two countries.

During the last days of this brief yet productive visit, I began contacting the few institutions working in the research area. In principle the logical choice of alliance was
the administrative office that co-administered PNLT at that time because the park bordered Naranjo and Ceibo. Yet, the organization eventually left. No other similar organization replaced it. The NGO in charge of co-management at PNSL, Defensores de la Naturaleza (DN), concentrated most of its efforts at the core of the park, too far away from my research site. Yet, the growing significance of Ceibo, on the northern boundary of PNSL, called for closer scrutiny of events in the hamlet. As a result, DN had set up a checkup station in a nearby location. From this point onwards I stayed in touch with DN.

Finally, I contacted governmental institutions from which I would need approval and information. I shared with representatives from CONAP’s local office in Petén the tentative plans for upcoming research. At FONTIERRAS, which also had offices in central Petén, and was in charge of issuing land titles, my interest centered on gaining access to any documents from the time of FYDEP, and the documentation regarding the land titling process. But archival work at FONTIERRAS had to wait until my following visit.

**Protracted Fieldwork, 2002**

January 2002 marked the beginning of an eleven month-long presence in the field. This experience comprised three different stages. First came the phase of settling down. The second period involved building rapport with a wide base of respondents. I specifically looked for community members who owned land in the Naranjo-Ceibo strip from which to build a research sample. With the same purpose in mind I also began making trips to Ceibo. During the third stage my activities included collecting life-histories among long-time residents in the area, visiting plots in the company of land-owners, making longer trips to Ceibo and its surroundings, and carrying out other tasks such as extensive, in-depth interviewing and archival work (in Flores and Libertad). The
following description of each stage also recounts the many developments occurring in between.

**Phase I**

While looking for a place to live at Naranjo, I received an invitation to stay at the house of a friend, a trusted associate. This man’s house was conveniently located near the center of economic life in Naranjo, barely two blocks down from the San Pedro River. He was instrumental in helping me get to know people and places of border life that otherwise I could not have had learned about, or might have missed. He introduced me to long-time acquaintances of his who lived at La Palma, the first village one encounters in the state of Tabasco when traveling on the San Pedro River. These Mexicans provided invaluable information about the historical settling of the whole region. He paved the way for my direct participation in the Merchant Association, one of the few local organizations in existence at Naranjo. In short, this respondent facilitated much of my immersion into village life.

After getting settled, I initiated snowball sampling (Bernard 1998: 705) to assemble a group of respondents. In 2000 Fonseca had assisted me. He provided names of people, who in turn, referred me to other residents by word of mouth. Two years later the list had grown, to include in excess of 40 residents at Naranjo alone, with whom I established different levels of familiarity, i.e. close friendship, relative camaraderie, and distant acquaintance. I continued gathering the information available on the history of the area through oral testimonies and simultaneously began to crosscheck the material gathered in 2000 and 2001. Asking different informants about data already collected was a means of verifying their soundness. Sometimes it was possible to cross-examine information through references found in archival material.
During this phase I made a conscious effort to reach out and make the acquaintance
of local leaders, not only with the idea of expanding the pool of potential informants but
to grasp their perspective on some major issues. Three people turned out to be
particularly important in this regard. The first one was Naranjo’s assistant mayor, or
alcalde auxiliar. Because of his position, he helped open many doors among local
residents. The second was a man who had played a pivotal role in the emergence of a
regional committee, a group that struggled to get a road paved into Naranjo. This
movement brought together more than 40 communities in northwestern Petén. In 2002
this second respondent was a member of the Pro-Improvement Committee, another
communal organization which goal was the building of public works in Naranjo. I found
his insights quite valuable. The assistant mayor at Ceibo, my third contact, also
facilitated my work in his small hamlet. He introduced me to other old-time residents
like himself. In fact he was a good source of historical information because he had been
the only one who had lived continuously in the village since the early 1970s. Occupying
positions of respect, the three associates contributed greatly to expanding my web of
contacts, including identifying people heading different committees and groups, active
and inactive, in Naranjo and Ceibo. With this information at hand, I began a new stage.

Phase II

When I was given the name of a leader of the committee organized specifically to
apply for land titling, I immediately sought his help. I met Anastasio Quinto one hot
afternoon at his house, after he had returned from his land plot, around 4 pm. I explained
to Quinto the research topic and its objectives, as well as my reasons for seeking his
support. He offered to assist me, a promising beginning for my investigation. Quinto
delivered a list of the people he knew who had land at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. In this
manner the sampling strategy called “partial networking” (Bernard, 1998: 713) ensued.\(^3\) Compiling the list proved easy; meeting the people was not. Even though I already knew some villagers, I realized they might feel suspicious of an outsider who wanted to ask questions on sensitive matters, such as land. To have a reliable way of meeting what would eventually be the core of the respondents’ sample (see below “Landholders sample”) I approached a couple of trusted associates. Help came from the Naranjo assistant mayor, already mentioned, and from a key respondent whom I identify as Gallo. The latter was a young man with whom I related right from the beginning; he understood the intent of the dissertation and helped me out in many ways.\(^4\)

These two associates talked to fellow neighbors about the work I was doing and why they were being approached. Usually one associate and I went to the house of a person selected for an interview. During our initial encounter I posed very general questions to people, (e.g., about their families, their origins, personal and collective lifetime experiences in Petén, etc.) so they would feel at ease. After that initial introduction I followed up with two or three visits in which more questions were asked, this time addressing, in particular, land issues. Having established a comfortable level of individual rapport, and sensing whether it was appropriate or not, I mentioned the possibility of visiting their land possessions. The reaction towards this idea varied widely among respondents, from those who totally opposed it, without necessarily saying so, to those who felt honored by it. This meant that, while in some cases I kept asking repeatedly to do the trip, without success, in others, I was able to visit right away.

Prearranged visits to land tracts meant setting out early, between 6 and 7 a.m. I made the journey three or four times by foot, three times on a bike and the rest by horse.
The visit took from 2 to 6 hours, depending on the distance to the parcel, the season of the year, and the time we set out to the field. The farthest land plot was located 7 kilometers from Naranjo, that is, about one third of the way to Ceibo. At the site I requested to be taken around while asking the owner numerous questions about the crops he grew, when and how he had introduced pasture (if he had any), who had been the previous owners, from whom he had purchased it, for how long he had owned it, how much had he paid for it, what he had found on it when he acquired it (i.e. fallow, crops, pastures), and the size of the plot. Then the conversation moved on to talk about current uses of the land, whether he preferred one crop over another, when and if pasture would be introduced. Other complementary topics focused on water availability, the condition of any primary forest still left standing, the impact of current fires on the landscape, and the legalization standing of the particular tract. The answers were hand-written in a separate book.

I generally requested a walk through the landmarks and boundaries of the holding, as well. This request allowed me to assess the uses neighbors gave to their land. This was especially helpful if I had not been able to interview neighbors. Besides taking notes, I drew a sketch of specific features found on the parcel, such as the area that had been sown, the portion of it with re-grown vegetation, any stock of primary forest, the sites where fire had razed plant life, water availability, topography of the terrain (plain, hilly, flood-prone, etc.), and the identity of the neighbors. Whenever circumstances allowed, I took photographs documenting the locations I visited. In a matter of three hours the surveying of the plot was completed. In a few instances I was invited to spend the night at someone’s place. Twice I accepted and stayed at the homes of people who
dwelled on their plots. This invitation offered a more intimate occasion to discuss various subjects, namely to gather life histories, to expand on people’s views on land issues, and to clarify inquiries still pending.

By this time I had purchased a bicycle to be more at ease as I move around. The bicycle helped me inside the village limits, yet sometimes I took it elsewhere in the vicinity. A few times I walked the distance to places, especially to the households of those living on the land. During the worst part of the rainy season, from May to November, the only way to get to the land plots more than 3 kilometers away Naranjo was by horse.

Towards the end of phase II, which lasted about four months, I began traveling to Ceibo. At first I headed there for one day. These rapid assessment travels were intended to secure contacts in the area. At Ceibo I approached the assistant mayor to enlist his help. A man whose life is briefly recounted in Chapter 5, Leonidas Ec, expressed a real interest in the study. However, Ec’s constant traveling across the border offered limited opportunities for prolonged interaction. During those times Ec was around, he certainly fulfilled his pledge. The number of respondents was rather small here; moving through the community was not as easy as at Naranjo. Paths and trails were in bad condition and people lived in a spread-out pattern. All but three interviewees lived on their own parcels so they had to be approached at their places of residence. Landholdings were several kilometers apart. Not having access to any means of transportation, I would usually walk. My having to walk represented less a problem than the general isolation of the locality. This became of particular concern at later stages, when my stays stretched for three to four days. Having secured a place to sleep every time I was on the border zone, I
found myself sometimes heading back to my host’s possession, after dusk, a farm located about 5 kilometers from the borderline. With restricted time availability and transportation limitations my time had to be managed wisely at Ceibo. These reasons, along with the delicate issue of the informal market, complicated working in the Ceibo area.

Weekends were the best part of the week to visit Ceibo because availability of river transportation increased significantly. During regular weekdays two or three boats made the rounds to the border and at very odd timing whereas on Saturdays and Sundays more boats were in service. Merchants located at the border’s informal market replenished their stock on Fridays and Saturdays, in preparation for the arrival of Mexican customers. The presence of Mexican buyers also helped me pass unnoticed among a large crowd in a locality where otherwise I might have been the object of close monitoring. Researchers, and other outsiders for that matter, were not the most welcomed visitors, given the ongoing conflict between government authorities and the occupants of the market. The merchants were occupying a location where, according to environmental regulations, no human populations were allowed. The tension between merchants steadily refusing to move out and DN, which supported their ejecting, had made the former assume an aggressive stance. Thus, filtering out information that could have been adverse to the merchants’ claim, or worse, taking an outright position against them, would make any outsider who went around asking questions highly suspicious. This was the context in which I conducted research at Ceibo. Given the aforementioned limitations, I had to balance my time between examining what activities were like at the market and
interviewing Ceibo residents. Hence, obtaining thorough data in Ceibo posed more difficulties than at Naranjo.

At this point in time I had the opportunity to meet Mexican nationals who lived in Naranjo and others who, on occasion, traveled to the village. The first group included individuals who had migrated as chicle workers, as employees at the lumber mill that once existed at Naranjo, or who had established liaisons with local women. For example, the son of one of these migrants was part of the landholder sample. The other group was made up of commercial boat owners who carried passengers traveling from Mexico to Guatemala. Because sometimes it was too late for them to head back to La Palma, a three to four-hour long journey from Naranjo, these individuals would stay overnight in Guatemalan territory. When this happened I had a chance to enquire about their families, their childhood memories, the reminiscences that their elders may have shared with them about the region, and in general, what it was like to live on the border. These testimonies enhanced my understanding of local events within a larger perspective, but most important, elicited the emic viewpoint of Mexicans regarding the border zone. Narratives of their insights are presented in Chapter 5.

This first half of the extended fieldwork season at the study site marked the onset of my ongoing participation with the Merchant Association of Naranjo. As indicated elsewhere, it was through the auspices of Mr. Else that I came to collaborate with this group. The leaders of the association asked me to keep the minutes of practically all of their activities; I gladly volunteered. Being the acting secretary posed an excellent opportunity for getting an insider’s look into the group; perhaps in no other situation did I perform the role of participant observer as intensely. Most importantly, the linkages with
the association opened up the possibility of getting to know closely some of the K’iché Amerindians with businesses at Naranjo, something that yielded rich findings as well.

**Phase III**

The last 6 months of fieldwork I spent mainly interviewing those landholders of Naranjo and Ceibo I had been unable to reach, talking with members from local groups, and meeting those who currently, or in the past, had participated in local politics. I divided the rest of my time among visits to land plots, trips to Ceibo, and archival work. Whenever the opportunity rose, I also conversed with other special informants, namely people who could provide insights into particular issues concerning the origins of Naranjo, and to a lesser extent, Ceibo. This is how I came in contact with a man who had been a manager of the sawmill that operated during the 1960s at Ceibo, another one who had initiated land titles procedures since the early 1970s, the first elementary teacher ever to have gone to Naranjo, in 1976, and the person who took over the cattle estate, ca. 1980, that soon thereafter would become Naranjo.

During the final stages of fieldwork I established different levels of rapport with those in the sample group of landholders. There were at least two ways in which respondents explicitly demonstrated how much they had trusted me, or on the contrary, had withheld information: when people allowed me to go to their land possessions, and when the issue of illicit practices was brought up and discussed in the open. One third of the fifty people in the sample agreed to the plot visit. The rest gave excuses for not finding the right time to do it. Others, who initially accepted my proposed visit, kept delaying, and a few openly refused my coming. A smaller proportion, one tenth, discussed illegal practices, but with some reticence. Individuals who preferred to keep their distance answered my questioning more out of courtesy than sincere interest in the
study, and a few were difficult to locate or evaded my suggestions for subsequent meetings. Part of the missing data due to indifferent collaborations was filled in through other sources, in particular a census carried out by CEMEC in 2001 and the information available at FONTIERRAS.

Having gained more detailed knowledge of who was who both at Naranjo and Ceibo, I approached the heads of local groups in these communities. The small number of groups operating at Naranjo and Ceibo, e.g., a land committee, a cooperative, a merchant association, facilitated the task because I already knew the people heading them. I centered my attention on the land committee, and inquired about the group’s origins, its aims, its constituency and leadership, as well as its accomplishments and problems. The idea was to obtain a good idea about the group, from its very beginnings to its situation in 2002, and its relationship (or lack of it) with other social agents, most notably state officials.

I also collected information was also collected among state-affiliated groups and their local representatives, such as the assistant mayor and the members of the Pro-Improvement Committee. These data came mostly from direct observation and interviews. For instance, I looked up those who in the past had occupied the position of assistant mayor. This search involved going outside Naranjo to meet former assistant mayors who no longer resided in the village or its proximity. I traveled to Santa Elena, where the person who was regarded as the first assistant mayor of the village resided. On another occasion I traveled the San Pedro upstream to meet with a man who had arrived in the late 1970s and soon thereafter, ca. 1983, was chosen for the post. Yet, my search proved only partially successful. Out of the 22 people who had headed the post between
1966 and 2002 I was able to contact half of them. Five of them had died, three were unreachable, and three others refused to be interviewed.

My investigation with former *alcaldes auxiliares* concentrated on people’s recollection of significant historical events that took place locally, particularly in connection with the border, relations with Mexicans, and the progression of the agricultural frontier. I purposively shifted the focus of the interview among “contemporary” assistant mayors, that is, those elected in the last 2 decades. Taking as a turning point the emergence of Naranjo as an officially recognized community, something that happened between 1980 and 1982, I asked them about issues such as land access, the war going on at the time, and the consolidation of this village as a settlement.

I invested part of my time during the final months of this phase in archival work. This task involved going to the office of FONTIERRAS and to the municipal archives of Libertad. I also perused the documentation in the hands of Naranjo’s and Ceibo’s assistant mayors. At FONTIERRAS, with facilities located in Santa Elena, I was hoping to dig through what might be left of FYDEP’s internal documentation. To my dismay, though not total surprise, very little of it had survived. My main aim was to look for documents that would shed light on events and developments taking place in the northwest during the time this office operated. For instance, I was hoping to find some records with information about land title applications submitted to FYDEP, or perhaps the raw data of what the entity called censuses (more like questionnaires) administered in the 1970s to settlers. The only type of information available was recent requests on land submitted by Naranjo residents; unfortunately not all files of the people in the main
sample were accessible. Reasons for lack of access to this information included incomplete applications, misplaced documents, and filing problems.

Conditions at the archive in the town hall of Libertad were not much better. I was told that old documents had been either thrown away or destroyed over the years, mostly due to lack of space. Registries for births, marriages, and deaths were the exception. The books with these records date back to the late 1880s, coinciding with the period in which logging companies were setting up offices in Libertad (see Chapter 4). Many entries found in these books reflect a considerable influx of foreigners, mostly Mexicans, particularly in the late 19th century. Even though the timber industry, and later, chicle tapping, brought in people who came and went through northwestern Petén via the San Pedro River, there is nothing else besides oral accounts that may point to a slow but continuous occupation of the area. Considering the hassle involved in reaching central Petén, on foot, or with a beast of burden at best, from the Lacandón area, for instance, it is no wonder that very few people would attempt to report on the newborn and the deceased from remote locations in the northwest. The registry log in Libertad, indicates that larger numbers of people began to arrive in the northwest during the 1930s, possibly at an earlier date. The first two entries for people born at a location nearby Naranjo, and at Naranjo proper, are dated August 15, and August 30, 1930, respectively (Birth registry, Libertad Mayor’s office, Folios 187 and 188, Libro 8, 1930). This sort of information, extrapolated from the birth registry, proved crucial in establishing developments such as the one just mentioned, or else to cross-check data obtained from oral accounts.

As for the documents produced locally, the assistant mayor’s office offered worthy materials for my endeavor. Assistant mayors have kept books where an array of events is
registered. The entries in these logs vary a great deal in terms of their subject matter, length and detail. One finds in these books records from everyday life occurrences to matters strictly pertaining to the mayoral office. For instance, as part of “domestic” material there were a considerable number of entries concerning spouses leaving their partners (marriage separation). “Official” records, for lack of a better word, included petitions brought before the assistant mayor, such as mediation and conflict-resolution of disputes among residents (as when boundary disagreements emerged), special public events the assistant mayor sponsored or was invited to (such as town meetings), and the like.

Unfortunately these books lacked internal consistency. The absence of a protocol dictating what and what not should be included explains the miscellaneous information that the books contained. One would expect, for instance, that each and every succession ceremony from the incumbent assistant mayor to his heir, and the substitution of officers from one Pro-improvement Committee to the next, ought to be registered in this log, yet this was not the case. The historical depth one could reach upon examination of these sources was limited, too, because there were no books prior to 1990. The missing material, according to the assistant mayor at the time of research, was the result of vandalism and outright neglect among his predecessors. Despite these constraints I was able to obtain valuable data for the time-period between 1990 and 2002. The reader may wonder by now what it may have been like to be engaged in day-by-day research at Naranjo and Ceibo, over such a long period of time. The next and last paragraphs of this section address this question.
A Typical Day of Fieldwork

My average day in Naranjo began with a simple meal, i.e. a plate of black beans, eggs, and instant coffee. Immediately thereafter, I set out in search of key associates, owners of land at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor and the assistant mayor. Sometimes I made special arrangements, for instance, to see a K’iche businessman, or help out the Merchant Association, or go to the municipal archive of Libertad. Morning was not the best part of the day to meet inhabitants. Many people went to work early and returned past noon, sometimes in the late afternoon, depending on the season. Of course, there was always the possibility of an unexpected, yet positive event: the chance to accompany someone to another hamlet, an invitation to a local event, spontaneous encounters with individuals who might offer specific data, such as petroleum industry workers, NGO representatives passing through the village, and so on. Past lunchtime, the hottest hours arrived. The town plunged into a quasi-lethargic state, and activities slowed down considerably. After 4 pm Naranjo regained its vivacity as residents went out to visit neighbors, ran casual errands, or sought some relaxation outside the home. I had to make the most of these hours to talk to the people who would stay at home. Naturally, I was not always able to succeed in the effort: someone might decide to cancel a get-together at the last minute, or not show up, or a conflict of timing might arise between two appointments, or perhaps the person who would serve as a liaison to an appointment might not accompany me.

Going to land plots introduced some variation to my daily routine, and provided an excellent way of establishing further rapport with respondents. On the one hand, this time helped me understand better the worldview of this population; on the other, it allowed people the chance to ask more about the research in which they were participating. On the way to a land holding I could enquire about other important issues,
such as details of a personal life history, other economic activities the person might be involved in, his opinions about the proposed plans for the road going to the borderline and its impact on his property, people’s thoughts on illicit activities, and other details in need of clarification.

As the night set in, I headed back to my residence. Once in a while appointments would be made for an evening interview but I refrained from doing it whenever possible. Naranjo could be a dangerous place at night—especially at or around bars, where fights broke out now and then, with shootings occurring from time to time. Ironically, and despite the crime incidents I constantly heard about, I rarely ever felt unsafe at Naranjo. Delinquency and violence were part of a way of life here, perhaps not much different from what the rest of the country was experiencing at the time. People had learned to cope with trouble, not necessarily accept it, and carry on with their lives. Generally, and before going to sleep, I reviewed any notes taken during the day in order to expand and organize them.

For reasons already explained, the pace of a day’s work at Ceibo was much more intense. On my extended visits I would go out, during the morning, to look for the heads of households. When present I would ask if they had time to talk right there, or when would be a convenient time to do so. On less fortunate days and after several attempts at an unsuccessful “door-to-door” approach, I would head, instead, to the market at the borderline to observe the interactions and activities taking place there. While at the market I sought respondents who would not feel threatened by my asking questions. Or if someone I knew from Naranjo had set up a “shop” at Ceibo and happened to be around, then I would approach the person to get to know the latest news. The news at Ceibo
ranged from increased levels of violence in the community, due to circulation of drugs and heavy alcohol consumption; to the emerging local organization; to the disposition of the Mexican authorities regarding the existence of the market, sometimes lenient, at times strict, something that, in turn, impinged upon the number of buyers going to the borderline; to the evicting proceedings pending over the merchants. The journey to Ceibo would usually end up on a Sunday afternoon, with my boarding one of the last boats to leave the borderline hamlet and heading back to Naranjo.

Types of Respondents

Who provided the right material for “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and who would offer only superficial information? What made one respondent more important than another regardless of religion, ethnicity or class, that is, in terms of his or her quality as an informant, not as a “typified” human being? It is in response to these questions that the identification of different respondents is discussed briefly.

In this work I have categorized the respondents based on the level of rapport and closeness we both ascertained. Within the very heterogeneous social milieu of Naranjo, in particular, the poor and the rich, the Catholic and the Protestant, the rural and the urban migrant, to mention but a few identities and distinctions, were all clustered together into three generic types of associates, namely key respondents, acquaintance-respondents, and occasional associates. In the aggregate, the three groups correspond to what Russell Bernard has called convenience sampling (1998: 374), or the selection of respondents who would illustrate cultural competence rather than being representative, statistically-wise, of a population’s universe. For the purposes of looking at land issues, I furthered identified a sub-sample within the population of respondents: the landholders.
Generic respondents

In principle, and especially during the early stages of research, any person can be a potential respondent. Ultimately, the researcher becomes more discerning as to who can provide the best information on specific topics, or who may not be approached regarding “x” or “y” issues. In this spirit, key respondents were those I felt closest to because of common friendship ties and rapport. This first group included people I could visit at any time, practically every day, and consult at ease about all subjects. I relied on them to corroborate and double-check information, to discuss minor and major issues, to debate my interpretation of events. With key respondents I could also confide and share the fears, doubts and problems that I encountered during the fieldwork experience.

Individuals from all walks of life were part of this cluster of associates, representing a cross-section of local society.

A second group of general collaborations was established with those whom I call acquaintance-respondents. With these people I would seek advice on different topics, though not as thoroughly as with the first group because they either lacked the far-reaching insight of the others, or because the relationship with them was less “tight”. They would be asked specific questions to obtain a second or third opinion on the topic of interest; or perhaps I would request other type of collaborations, for instance help in locating other neighbors.

The third general subset was made up of the occasional respondent. This category included specific associates I purposely sought. Visitors to Naranjo or Ceibo, such as Mexicans who had resided before in the area; interviewees who lived in remote locations, for instance a couple I visited once in the mountainous area surrounding Ceibo; and
people I deliberately looked for, such as the first assistant mayor, and the first teacher
ever to have worked at Naranjo, were all part of this group.

**Landholders’ sample**

Landholders were respondents with land plots, from Naranjo and Ceibo, selected to participate in my investigation. Other than the fact that they had land at the site, this subgroup was not different from the rest of the local population. Recruited through snowball and convenience sampling, people of different ages, of different origins and backgrounds, and with access to diverse sources of income made up this core cluster. Overall, a very favorable disposition towards participation in the study prevailed among this group. When suspicion arose I tried not to appear too demanding in obtaining information from a person. Because most of them resided in the village, interactions took place there. The four informants who lived on their land plots assisted me at their living quarters. The information I requested in my interviews and conversations with these individuals included the following topics: origin, family size, level of formal education of family members, characteristics of the land possession, crops and any cattle they might possess. Other specific data related to people’s main economic activities, why and how they had acquired land, whether they were titling the land, and what they thought their possession might look like in a decade. The migratory history of the household, i.e. the recounting of the journey into Petén and the area, their participation in local groups or organizations, their ideas on current politics at the local and regional levels, their opinions on the road leading to Ceibo and how this development could benefit them were part of these interviews too. Having typified the study population, I move on to explain the means by which the data was collected.
Methods Used to Gather Data

Acquiring ethnographic information involves systematic gathering of all sorts of data. This on-going task yields anything that would contribute to understanding what local inhabitants are like, what their worldview is about, what holds the social fabric together or pulls it apart, in short, a comprehensive cultural interpretation of the community under investigation. Data for this study were gathered through different techniques and instruments, namely interviews, participant-observation, life histories and archival research. Interviews constituted the main research instrument. At the basis of any data gathering method is the process of recording and storing the research material. Hence, my note-taking protocol initiates this section.

Before discussing methods proper a note is in order about the commitment one assumes by conducting ethically sound research. Obtaining the informed consent of those I consulted in the field constituted a most critical aspect related to methods of research. At every step of the way I made sure to explain to respondents the implications of their participating in this investigation, and most important, the confidentiality of their contributions. People had the right to refuse to participate, and a few did. In short, transparency guided my data collection procedures.

Note-taking Procedures

Standard ways of keeping notes were followed as outlined by Bernard (1998, Chapter 9) and Wolcott (1999). Generally, I wrote in condensed form. If it seemed socially appropriate to do it right there and then my annotations were extensive; if not I tried to memorize as much as possible for a later rendering of the event. These remarks were kept in my field notebook and arranged in chronological order. At a later date, this material was transcribed and expanded as needed in a computer file. The organization of
this information followed a subject heading index based on two criteria: first, the prominent recurrence of the issue in the context of local and regional dynamics and second, the importance of the subject matter as pertinent to the research agenda. For instance, the entry labeled “Violence (acts of)” had not been originally considered very important. Over time, however, it became relevant to keep track of events of such nature because local people discussed them regularly and at some length. Issues related to land, to show an example of the second type, ranked high in my list. Any information available went into the “Land” item, which was divided into subheadings, namely, Colonization; Land Prices; The Titling Process; Land market. Entries could be very broad, or by the contrary, rather specific. To illustrate, “Ceibo” and the “Road to El Ceibo” each had an individual record. In the former I included the history and current developments at the location, whereas the second covered everything that had been said about the repair, maintenance, and plans for improving the way to the borderline—an issue that informed a good deal about politics at different levels. Although related, the two categories were handled as separate topics. Any thoughts, ideas, fears, and problems arising from fieldwork made it into a personal journal as part of a more intimate means of reflecting on the experience of being at this location and the overall research endeavor. Naturally, initial insights and/or interpretations about the research site’s culture, society, politics, economics, etc. were recorded in the journal too.

**Interviews**

The bulk of information was collected through formal and informal, structured and unstructured, open-ended and closed interviews (Bernard 2002; Fontana and Frey 2000; Spradley 1979). Any location turned to be as good as any other for this purpose. The occasion or mere chance of being at a certain place and time might bring out the context
for interviewing. In this regard, the anthropologist is to be alert as the opportunity for questioning arises, frequently in unexpected ways.

Formal interviewing meant here meeting with a respondent at a previously agreed upon time and place. Generally speaking, I arranged formal interviews with key informants and let them choose where and when to talk. Often, people suggested carrying out meetings at their own homes. The majority of interviews featured land owners in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch. Those residing in outlying areas, not many, were among the most kind and open. They shared their food, jokes, and sorrows with me. In part, it made them happy that someone would take the trouble of walking, or riding the distance, one to two hours, that separated them from commerce, amenities, church -and perhaps most important- other people. The initial interview with the landholder group was of the structured type. It contained a list of questions touching upon broad topics. Subsequent encounters followed up on the findings of the first meeting, inquiring about specific themes that needed further elaboration, others that had not been addressed, and new ones that were left out or were brought up by the associate. These interviews were transcribed into shortened versions and the material coming out of them sorted out. None of these interviews were put on tape as I realized tape-recording made people nervous and/or too self-conscious. The frequency of the theme of illegal practices also bore on the decision to eliminate the use of a recording device. Note taking was preferred instead. All the resulting material from these interactions was classified and integrated into appropriate subject headings, as explained before.

**Participant Observation**

Defined as the method by which one records behavioral data through simultaneous active participation and close observation (DeWalt et al. 1998: 259; DeWalt and DeWalt
2002), this technique generated a substantial volume of details on day-to-day developments within Naranjo and in the region at large. I engaged in participant observation in every possible social situation, from family events, to soccer games, to visits to one of the local schools, to collaborating with the Merchant Association, to name but a few examples. Much participant observation was simply “about courtesy and common sense”, as one experienced anthropologist has aptly put it (Wolcott 1995: 87). Hence, almost any sort of interaction offered potentially useful information. One specific aspect of participant observation involved accompanying people to their fields in order to have a sense of what it was like to be an agriculturalist in the area, as already described.

Active participation involves reciprocity. In the process of getting to know Naranjo and its people, but also as a means to give something back, I helped out in a number of small ways. For instance, people felt content when I handed over photographs of the family group, or to its individual members, as a token of appreciation for their time. When traveling to the city, to offer another example, I ran small errands for friends and acquaintances. During my first visit I walked through the village of Naranjo to document the sprawling process under way at the turn of the century. Out of this experience came an updated layout of the community.

My participant observer-as-collaborator role was best revealed in the relationship I sustained with the Merchant Association. A key associate, and member of the board, asked me to help out. I first learned about the association while members were attending a course on small-scale management and finances, a capacity-building initiative supported by an outside institution. A consultant paid by an NGO in Guatemala City went to Naranjo once a month to give a talk on accounting and related topics. During
these sessions my job required taking the minutes of the activity. When the association invited members of the Chamber of Commerce from Tenosique, Tabasco, to discuss the possibilities for mutual commercial schemes, again I fulfilled the same role. When migration officers were summoned by the association to be warned about their abusive practices towards undocumented migrants and Mexican visitors, I kept notes of the meetings. Serving in the capacity of secretary allowed me an insider’s view of different social situations. These experiences taught me a lot about leadership, ethnic and power relations within the group, as well as the nature of collective organization at Naranjo.

**Life History**

There are many ways to define life history. In general it refers to the historical data, usually oral, of a person’s life in narrative form, compiled by someone else, who then writes it out (after Langness 1965). More recently the conceptualizing of the term has been broadened. Hence, life history is a look into the past as part of a biographical account (Tierney 2000). Cole and Knowles (2001) introduce literary connotations when conceiving of it as “life narrative or story”, whether in part or in full, as recounted by a person (18). Within anthropology this method is used to discern how representative the particular corresponds within the collective or, to pose a question: “To what extent is the one in some important ways like the many?” (Wolcott 1995: 174) Collecting life histories had a three-fold aim in this study. First, through life histories I intended to exemplify the diversity of the human experience that made up the social fabric of the locality. A second objective was to build a local historical account through the lived experiences of the respondents. In this way life histories offered a living testimony of the main processes that had happened at Naranjo and Ceibo. Third, life histories were used to compare personal trajectories in life, in particular between old *Petenero* folks and
Peteneros of outside origin, Amerindians in contrast to Ladinos, people of peasant background versus settlers of urban extraction. The trajectory also pointed to patterns about the expanding frontier that preceded the territoriality process.

In the collecting of life histories I selected potential candidates among people who had a very good memory for past events, were very good with details, and had a disposition for conversation. Another criterion included how typical or atypical –within the heterogeneous range of human experiences- a person’s life trajectory might have been. Then the following step involved gaining the trust of potential respondents. Among those who shared their stories, there were: chicle workers who stayed at Naranjo; a chiclero camp cook, female, owner of a cattle ranch in 2002; a successful K’iché businessman; a farmer who worked with the petroleum company operating at Chocop; and a schoolteacher who arrived as a boy in the area and became one of the first “natives” to earn a professional degree. The sessions with this group generally took place at their residences. Whenever possible, and to secure detailed accounts on the specificity of an individual experience, I required authorization from the subjects to tape-record the rendezvous. At a later date, I did a literal transcript of these meetings.

Archival and Other Primary Written Material

In a wide sense, there is an array of “documentary sources as texts” (Brettel 1998: 516) that range from travelers’ accounts (e.g., Morelet 1871), to censuses’ raw data (e.g., CEMEC 2001), to the ones I have called administrative documents, those found in offices and archives. The former backed up the historical recounting of the late nineteenth-century history whereas the latter two contributed to outline the contemporary ethnography. Two sources of local documentary information became available to me. One was an assortment of documents found at Naranjo. Specifically, I refer to petitions,
memos and similar documents addressed to the central authorities in order to request land, services, and help. Others include claims brought before CONAP. They register the plea of people for improving their lot, contesting authority, or addressing what they consider unfair practices or injustices.

Archives, the second source, offered materials with mixed types of evidence, both in terms of quality and quantity. I centered my attention on documents touching upon main historical events, land issues, local organizing and political developments. The richest information came from the assistant mayors’ office at Naranjo. The birth registry of Libertad supplied invaluable details on the progression of human presence in northwestern Petén, in particular, for the first half of the twentieth century. The FONTIERRAS repository yielded socio-economic data about several of the land-holders of Naranjo, with quantitative detail unavailable elsewhere. This latter material was important to compare, and sometimes crosscheck, the information that I obtained in my interviews. For instance, I could look at what the FONTIERRAS record indicated as arrival date of respondents into Naranjo, and subsequently corroborate this fact with the one I had obtained from interviewees.

Methods of Interpretation

This section explains the systems of interpretation used in this qualitative inquiry. I stress the qualitative/quantitative divide because their differences are important in terms of this study. To follow Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a qualitative-inclined researcher seeks “…answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, qualitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not process” (8) (see also Wolcott 2001). This dissertation focuses, indeed, on providing explanations about processes.
I agree with Cole and Knowles (2001) in that the approach to interpreting life histories as processes, to refer to one of my methods of data-gathering, necessitates their being subject to different modes and levels of readings because “. . . there is no one or best way to make sense of and represent lives in context” (112). In this sense the researcher is to provide “signposts” to guide the analysis (Ibid). Following these precepts I made use of reflexivity, intuition and my “participant involvement” to theorize the life trajectories of respondents. The level of readings referred to went from simply sketching a person’s life, to identifying patterns and themes that helped understand the importance of one individual within the collectivity, to establishing a plot line, a common story in the aggregate of human experiences (after Cole and Knowles 2001: 113, 116).

I also adhered to the system of interpretation known as Grounded Theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). This approach is characterized by: 1) simultaneous collection and analysis of data, 2) a data coding process, 3) comparative methods, 4) “memo” writing aimed at the building of conceptual analysis, 5) a sampling of the conceptualizing that emerges to refine what eventually would evolve into a theoretical model (Charmaz 2000: 510-511).

In Grounded Theory the researcher assigns codes to field notes gathered in the field. The set of themes that emerge from the respondents’s actual words is called in-vivo coding (Bernard 2002: 464). Examples of these codes were provided above under the subheading, Note-taking Procedures. At the core of Grounded Theory is the idea that theory is developed as one collects data. The principle is that conceptualizing derives from the data and not the other way around. Say Strauss and Corbin (1998): “Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the ‘reality’ than is theory derived by putting
together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation...” (12)

Hence, theory is built rather than tested. Although Grounded Theory is used mainly in analyzing texts, I adapted two steps in this building process, namely conceptualization, or the abstract representation of phenomena, and the systematic comparison of such phenomena. The resulting products, extrapolated from notes, interviews and archival material, were then processed via Descriptive Analysis.

According to Bernard (2002), Descriptive Analysis involves making sense of data results through the use of summary statistics and graphic displays (516). The descriptive statistics included here helped characterize, specifically, basic social and economic aspects of the landholder sample. Through tables, graphs, charts and matrices I came up with further interpretation of the data results. A matrix, for example, can help identify “which combination of conditional or consequential factors in the data might be relevant [to the particular situation at hand]...” (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 191). Hence matrices are conceptual guides (Ibid: 193). These diagrams –more than a dozen- helped me organize, systematize, do a pre-analysis of the data, and eventually build a theoretical paradigm.

There were three distinct types, in terms of level of abstractedness, of graphic constructs. Among the first kind were, for instance, a characterization of landholders in terms of their connection to the frontier process, illegal practices, and the border, and a Critical Incident Chart (Miles and Huberman 1994: 115) that elicited in visual form the series of key phenomena that, in chronological order, yielded a historical analysis of continuities and discontinuities of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. The Timeline of World-System Events in connection to the Naranjo-Ceibo site presented below is a similar
product, one that situated major events, intertwined or disengaged, as they occurred over five centuries. This timeline was a synthesis, in turn, of a much earlier exercise, a chronological table that integrated primary data at a more disaggregated level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1524</td>
<td>Spaniards arrive in Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1697</td>
<td>Spanish forces defeat the Itza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Caste War expels Yucatecans to Petén (1848-1880s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Borders between Guatemala and Mexico are vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890s</td>
<td>Borderline officially established (1882)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forest-based economy in place (1890s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3-1 Timeline (Excerpt)

The sorting and classifying of all materials then led to identifying relationships, patterns, and differences. These could be considered intermediate products of interpretation. An example that comes to mind is a table that combined a decade-by-decade summary of events and processes in order to see internal connections across time during the last four decades of the twentieth century. Another example was the following matrix of intervening aspects and factors in terms of occupation of space. The higher tier identified the international agents and processes impinging, specifically upon territoriality, both in the past and in the present. The second and third tiers (the latter not shown) included the national and regional driving forces affecting the aforementioned sub-components of state building.
Table 3-1  Matrix of intervening aspects and factors (excerpt)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Aspects and Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>- Historically, the area was a focus for Mexican colonization until 1980.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The undocumented stream, which initiated in the 1980s has not translated into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>large numbers of foreigners staying in NW Petén</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Due to weak state control, illegal practices of international scale are thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>- Historically, the Guatemalan state has had very little interest in establishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a permanent presence in NW Petén</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Only after 1970 the Guatemalan state began promoting colonization, and on a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>limited basis for that matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- In recent times conservation policies have complicated the access to land titles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for local inhabitants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the two prior sub-products then I developed the most conceptually advanced graphic means of interpretation. I established generalizations from interpretations, which I then contrasted with a formal corpus of knowledge (Miles and Huberman 1994: 9). My contrasting theoretical construct was based on human agency and the state. The resulting conceptual contribution was a historical model of the process of advancing territoriality at the Naranjo-Ceibo site, presented in Chapter 6.

**Methodological Problems**

All researchers face limitations while engaged in data collection; I was no exception. Such problems may potentially complicate the end results of a study. I address here the issues of practical and ethical dilemmas, representation, validity and reliability, to clarify predicaments impinging upon the dissertation.
Practical Problems

Several unexpected inconveniences occurred in the process of doing fieldwork. One had to do with delays due to bureaucratic hindrances. For instance, I had to wait several months in order to have access to a cadastre plan of the study site and the data on land titling. Another small snag came up when the NGO in charge of co-managing PNLT, in the proximity of Naranjo, withdrew from the area due to internal problems. I had planned to establish this affiliation in order to have institutional back-up at the local level, and by the same token, to offer something back in reciprocity. In retrospective, this failed connection was perhaps for the better because working independently freed me from suspicion, in the eyes of the locals, from alleged connections to outside interests. Considering that many shadowy transactions occurred at this site and that the populace held strong opposition to environmental policy, being a non-affiliated researcher facilitated the research endeavor.

Ethical Quandaries

An ethical dilemma arose when I realized, not without apprehension, the inevitability of studying illegal practices to better understand border processes at the Naranjo-Ceibo site. The subject was always present. Constant references to the *mojados* -or wetbacks, a term used to designate the undocumented migrant, meant that they were part of everyday life. Everyone knew that the existence of the market at the borderline was forbidden; yet it was not something that one could easily ask questions about. Nonetheless, the market constituted a theme of lively discussion elsewhere. While still deciding what route to follow, I continued to record information on illicit undertakings. The data were classified and coded accordingly. The main problem remained: whether to use this information and how. Something similar came up with the unsolicited
information about third parties, for instance landholders, which came my way. The material was entered as part of my “raw” database, but then I wondered, again: how could it be used without compromising the confidentiality of the concerned party? Or, would people with whom I became close friends confide in me personal information that could be made public? As Friedman (1976) points out, once this line has been crossed, i.e. the anthropologist violates the right of personal privacy, the dilemma remains -always (128, 129). The solution, not the best one I admit, was the following: if the information was too detailed to seriously risk the safety and privacy of an associate, then I refrained from making it public. The information that did get exposed was minimized or masked to reveal as little as possible about the individual to whom I was referring. But just like Friedman (1976: 133), I found that such efforts might be only half-successful because by altering the data too much, I would present data not corresponding to the reality I observed. I concluded that there is no way to fully resolve problems dealing with confidentiality without some kind of compromise, including compromising one’s honesty (see Harrell-Bond [1976] for a direct, self-revealing exposé on this issue).

**Representation**

In addition to the fifty interviews with landholders, I collected fifty more with other respondents throughout the entire period of fieldwork. Considering that there were close to seventy landholders in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch, the group of fifty can be considered sufficiently representative of all landholders. This group included respondents from different backgrounds and ages in order to have a good mix of the general population. Some gaps in the data, i.e. missing values and dates, resulted from situations in which thorough interviewing was involuntarily interrupted, and when respondents declined to
give information. This void was partially filled with information from other sources, namely land records found at FONTIERRAS, and a census done in 2001 (CEMEC 2001).

The eight interviews with state representatives may raise doubts about how well represented the group was in this work. Several reasons account for this shortcoming. To begin with, all state institutions, except for the national army, were still in a nascent stage in this region. With scarce human resources and limited infrastructure, the material embodiment of the central state was rather weak. The health post facility at Naranjo was a good example. Nominally in the hands of the Ministry of Health, this service was to be equipped with first aid materials and have at least one nurse on duty; primary care medications were supposed to be supplied by the government as well. However, there were times when the facility remained closed because of a lack of human and material resources. During 2002 the post offered the most basic services, including the full-time assistance of a Cuban doctor. Volunteers aided the physician. There was, however, always a shortage of medicine.

Another reason for not approaching state agents directly was that members of the two state institutions with the longer history at Naranjo and Ceibo, namely army officers and the government’s immigration officials, were wary of people doing research on or about their activities. The recent experience of internal armed conflict (from the late 1970s to the early 1990s) was still fresh in the memory of everybody, civilians and the military alike. Even though the armed forces had tried to erradicate the common citizen’s impression that the army was an instrument of repression, their role as a tool for physical coercion at the hands of the state was very much alive. The role of the military in quelling social unrest, as recent as 1998, attest to this.
The immigration agents appointed at Naranjo were elusive when talking about their work, stating that little happened in this remote outpost that was worth recording. In a certain way they were right because few people entered or left the country though this border . . . legally. But the picture changed completely when it was a matter of the undocumented migrant stream. Immigration representatives were involved in this business, hence their apprehension when the issue came up. They dismissed the problem by saying that two people could do very little to handle the amount of sojourners passing through; they were outstripped and outmanned in every way. True, immigration officers lacked the material and human assets to handle the task more effectively, but this did not explain why they partook of this underground activity. Finally, other state groups were just beginning to work in this region; in consequence their history and real impact on the area were still negligible. This was the case of the police force and the ombudsman representative offices, both inaugurated in 2002 at Naranjo.

Validity

How valid were the data that informed the interpretation of this dissertation? To what extent could one make sure that respondents were telling the truth, that is, were their responses reliable? No matter how well one may think that one knows and trusts one’s associates, how exact the data appear, and how precise the instruments used, there is always the possibility of people lying, or cheating, or the researcher recording imprecise information, and perhaps not using the “right” tools. Validity, which is about accuracy (Bernard 2002: 49; Maxwell 2000: 45), was somewhat of a problem with people who participated in the study reluctantly, or merely out of courtesy. Because there was no feasible means to control this hitch, I had to try to compensate for it. One partial solution involved crosschecking the data that a respondent provided against answers offered by
other (trusted) associates. When major discrepancies surfaced, I asked for clarification with the original source. If this consultation proved unhelpful, then the data would be kept but used— if at all— with some reservation. Cross-examination was also a constant task in the process of reviewing my own notes to filter out, or discard, information that looked fuzzy.

Establishing the credibility of archival materials gets more complicated when there is no other literature to compare it with, as happened in this study. The researcher has to evaluate in a critical manner the information he comes across in order to figure out any potential problems, such as biases and mistakes. I did find problems in some of the main sources of information. For instance, in the CEMEC census there was some erroneous information regarding the dates different people arrived either at Naranjo, Ceibo, or Petén. This problem resulted either from: 1) the wording of the original question, or 2) due to the way the census taker posed the question, aloud. Fortunately, in this particular hindrance I was able to double-check dates against my own data collected in the field.

The land application papers from FONTIERRAS were no exception. In these dossiers some of the shortcomings concerned, among other things, the figures for annual yields of crops given to the survey taker. Sometimes the figures were too inflated and at times they seemed unreasonably low. I knew these people and had a good idea of how they were faring, so upon examining the numbers on the application it became clear that they were bogus. In contrast, the FONTIERRAS instrument contained quite reliable data on migration dates, for example.

Sources found at Naranjo, i.e. the books at the assistant major office, internal memos, petitions sent to authorities and such shared a common problem, perhaps one that
is inevitable: bias. Partial accounts, half-truths, the cover up of certain incidents, the omission of others, and political positioning surfaced constantly in the pages of these documents of village life. How could I tease out the problems riddling these written sources? This was done, whenever possible, by crosschecking the information via oral means. People who had borne personal witness to events would recount them to me.

Being objective is difficult, if not impossible, for everybody including myself. It is the job of the researcher to make his best value judgment and evaluate the quality of the information. Of course this call is to be based on her knowledge of the context in which the facts happen, his cross-examination techniques (oral versus written) and other considerations, such as the criteria to examine the worthiness of archival material. According to one scholar, these criteria consist of “. . . an assessment of the social position, intelligence, and linguistic abilities of the observer; of the attitudes that may have influenced the observations; of what is included and what is omitted; of intended audience and the motivation for creating the document; and of narrative style” (Brettell 1998: 517). These guidelines are rigorous yet sometimes impractical to meet, for the condition of archives in many locales, especially in remote parts of undeveloped countries, are quite inadequate, if not plain bleak. Thus, I did what I could under the circumstances.

**Summary**

In this work I relied on standard ethnographic methods, namely participant-observation, interviews, life histories, and archival work. Each of these techniques generated data that elucidated part of the answer to the overarching research enquiry. I administered and applied them at different times between 2000 and 2002, turning me in the process from a distant observer into an involved participant.
The participant-observer role exposed me to the day-to-day events of life at the
to the day-to-day events of life at the border, to follow on-site developments with local groups, notably the Merchant
Association and a land committee, to witness the actions the central state carried out, or
failed to. Through interviews I gathered the largest part of data concerning the advancing
frontier, and the occupation of space at large, two central topics of this study. Life
histories elicited data about changes over time, about larger processes and the driving
forces behind them. Data revealed the extent to which personal agency shifted in relation
to state initiatives whenever needed or appropriate. Archival documents constituted the
main repository of past testimony, in writing, by the locals, a source from which I
extrapolated useful, sometimes unique, information. The findings of archives contributed
to corroborate, sometimes expand on, the data obtained through the other methods.

This investigation drew on Grounded Theory and Descriptive Analysis to interpret
the data collected in the field. The resulting outcomes are presented in a later chapter. I
also exposed problems encountered in the process of gathering data, some of which I
favorably surmounted, some of which I was unable to resolve.

Researchers can only speculate about ongoing social phenomena, in a prospective
mode. Yet, everything that came before certainly helps explain the present. Following
this logic, the next chapter outlines the developments that in the long historical
perspective gave origin to permanent occupation of space, and the kind of power
relationships that engaged in the interaction between local forms of agency and the
actions of the central state.

Notes

1 I am aware that the notion of the field has turned increasingly fuzzy, even questioned within the
discipline. Gupta and Ferguson (1997a), for instance, present an alternative view on the issue.
The assistant mayor is the representative of the municipal mayor, the latter being, in turn, the highest representative of the government at the municipal level. There are twelve municipalities in Petén. The governor is the person who oversees provincial government, appointed by the president of the country.

Some clarification is in order though: the network was for all practical purposes rather loose, simply instrumental. People had joined the land committee with the sole intention of fulfilling a requisite to obtain the document that would formalize their tenure on the land; aside from that there were no shared characteristics or commonalities among all committee members. The situation of the committee is discussed in chapter 6.

At the time I never asked myself what was the reaction from community members regarding my connection to these two individuals. In retrospect I suspect some people may have thought that they were getting some retribution for helping me, which in turn could have biased the information I ended up with. Others, I am sure, genuinely collaborated out of good will, that is, regardless of my personal ties with these two friends.

I suspected this would happen. Twenty years before, Schwartz (1990) had already reported this problem.

Time constraints prevented me from looking at church records, another potential source of useful information.

After evaluating the task I was confronting, I came to conclude that a comprehensive study of the other two categories of books (deaths and marriages) demanded considerable extra effort due to the time needed to invest on it. The massive number of books, in excess of 150, my unfamiliarity with local surnames and families, and the inconvenience that demanded traveling to Libertad dissuaded me from perusing this rich material.

About half-way between Naranjo from Ceibo there are three landholders with latifundia who were not part of the sample. These people were absentee possessors who resided in Guatemala City. They did not live off the land; they were urban entrepreneurs instead. Their estates were rapidly turning into large-scale, cattle ranching operations. To have them as part of this study would have biased the results. Furthermore, it was very difficult to contact them for they arrived at random times and never stopped at Naranjo. Most importantly, they had little influence in the process of territoriality, thus far. To my knowledge none of them were purchasing more land from their small landholding neighbors in the recent past. In other words, they had not expanded their possessions as to have a direct influence in the land market, and the pushing away of farmers.

From 2000 onwards, the government of Cuba had sent medical brigades to Guatemala as part of a foreign aid program sponsored by the Caribbean nation.
CHAPTER 4
HISTORICAL DISCONTINUITIES TO THE OCCUPATION OF SPACE AT THE NARANJO-CEIBO STRETCH

Introduction

I argue in this chapter that historical “discontinuity” has characterized human presence in northwestern Petén. The region has experienced cycles of settling, emigration, and re-settling that span over the last seven centuries. Traces of people that have come and gone, from archeological and ethno-historical records, support this contention. The existence of an archeological site at present-day Naranjo evidences the presence of pre-contact populations in the area (Graham 1970). Similarly, accounts of the groups that populated the area and its vicinity before and after colonial times are well known (Jones 1998). Finally, the testimony of individuals who were engaged in forest extractive activities, in more recent times, bear witness to a particular way of life that prevailed until recently but has now vanished. Historical discontinuity has influenced the occupation of the zone in a way quite different from the situation of other borders in Guatemala: The central state apparatus has been uninterested, sometimes unable, to assert its full might in this one corner of its territory.

Three events mark the breaking points of the irregular pattern in this long overarching historical account. The first is the decline of pre-Columbian Maya civilization in the 13th century. The second is the conquest of the Maya Itza, in 1697, the last focus of Amerindian resistance the Spanish encountered in Petén. The third is the advent of forces of capitalism, towards the decade of 1860, which would break the
isolation of northwestern Petén, and the whole province, from the outside. This chapter concentrates mostly in the intervening years between the second half of the nineteenth century and the present, the period in which a new re-populating takes place. The comprehensive historical account is fitting to underscore the rather drastic transformations that have ensued in the last three decades, in contrast to three centuries of practically little change.

Discontinuous inhabitation is in part a result of Petén’s real and imagined peripheral condition. This condition has fed the popular imagination about Petén being a backward, uncivilized, exotic locale. Marginality has been defined and constructed from the perspective of the centers of economic and political power, whether it was the major city-states of Maya society in 600 AD; the seat of the Spanish Crown in the 17th century; or English and U.S. major trade firms, the source of the capital that began to flow into Petén in the late 1800s; or Guatemala city, the seat of the nation-state today. As will become clearer in the discussion to follow, in each period prior to the mid 20th century, any linkages between Petén and the outside never lasted too long, were sporadic, or were weak. The northwest stood at the margins within this peripheral province.\(^1\)

Contemporary occupation of the area may be breaking its recurrent opening and closing pattern, though. Furthermore, the Naranjo-Ceibo locale is turning into a transnational arena. In a paradoxical twist, the site has gone from relative obscurity to high visibility in the global concourse of increasingly de-territorialized state border locations.

The chapter is made up of five sections, each covering a time-period, in chronological order. In general, historical data for the area are very scarce, even for a
good part of the 20th century. This dearth of material imposes some limitations on in-depth analysis. There is also an effort at intertwining processes at different levels, namely the local, regional, national, and the international. The slow arrival of central state representatives in Naranjo and Ceibo is contextualized to illustrate the dynamics of shifting linkages between the local population and the Guatemalan state. The historical account stops around 1980-1982, the period in which Naranjo emerges as an officially recognized settlement, marking the onset of permanent re-occupation.

**Northwestern Petén prior to 1860**

**Pre-conquest Period**

The archeological record attests to the presence of humans for more than 1000 years at the site referred in the literature either as La Florida, Ocultún or El Naranjo, currently within the boundaries of what became the village of Naranjo. Limited archeological work has been conducted at the site, and only occasionally. According to archeologist Ian Graham, a colleague named Edwin Shook was the first to set foot at the site and study some of its remains, in 1943. Then Silvanus Morley paid a visit to the site the following year (Graham 1970: Appendixes A, B). The only other effort known to this author is a recent expedition led by Paulino Morales (1997), but his work has contributed little to what it is already known. The place was inhabited between the Pre-classic (around 800BC to 100AD) and the late Classic periods (roughly 600-900 AD) in the timeline of pre-Columbian Maya lowland society. Within the regional structure of Maya city-states Naranjo would likely have fallen under the sway of Piedras Negras, located to the west, on the margins of the Usumacinta River. For Graham (1970), La Florida functioned as a minor ceremonial center but this proposition is now questionable. Due to its geographic location one can feasible presume that La Florida played a role in the
trading routes connecting north-central Petén communities with the coastline centers of present-day Campeche and Tabasco, via the San Pedro River (Schele and Freidel 1990: 61). The significance of this corridor has regained a new vitality in the light of current events, as we shall see.

As happened in many other locations throughout the Yucatán peninsula, La Florida was depopulated as a result of a combination of ruinous events, including extended drought, overpopulation, and warfare, in what has been known as the pre-Columbian Maya collapse (Culbert 1977; Demarest, Rice and Rice 2004). There is no certainty as to how long this location may have remained deserted before re-occupation ensued. Anthropologists do know that after 1200 the populations that emerged in the southern part of the peninsula included the Manché Chol in Belize, the Acalán in Tabasco and Campeche, the Lacandón of western Petén and Chiapas, and the Kejach of northwestern Petén. The dominant group among them all, however, was the Itzá, who had occupied central Petén for the longest time (Jones 1998; Thompson 1977), and had hostile relationships with other native groups in Petén. The northwest was continuously, yet sparsely populated from about 1200 to 1800. I address the situation of the Maya group that occupied the area during this time after I discuss the arrival of the Spanish.

**Cultural Contact and the Colonial Experience, 1697-1800**

Cultural collision occurred when Europeans encountered native populations in the Americas. “First contact” meant cultural rupture for many Amerindian groups (Sokolow 2003; Todorow 1999). Europeans overcame native populations, particularly through infectious disease. However, the effects of such encountered were delayed among Amerindians in the northwest. When Hernán Cortez passed through this location on his way to Honduras in 1525 no clash took place between Europeans and native groups,
apparently the former having no interest in subjugating the latter population at that point. After Europeans secured their authority elsewhere in the peninsula, Petén became a sanctuary for Maya escapees from northern Yucatan, very early in the colonial period (Reed 2001; Jones 1989). More than a century and a half passed before Spanish expansionism finally broke the staunch resistance to colonial rule among the major Amerindian group in Petén, the Itzá. But even the encroachment of the colonial state did not in any significant way affect the situation of the populations living in northwestern Petén. After 1697 when Spanish forces entered Tayasal, the Itzá capital, the northwest became a main safe haven for local inhabitants escaping from the new powers. According to historian Terry Rugeley (1997:81), escaping into Petén occurred all throughout the XVI and XVII centuries.

Thus the whole of Petén remained a vast, undefined frontier within the confines of Spanish colonial southern Mexico and northern Guatemala. Because Merida exercised ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Petén, Yucatecans had the perception that this territory was part of their southernmost domain. Yet, politically, Petén remained in the hands of the Capitanía General of Guatemala. Remedios (formerly Tayasal), illustrated the telling situation of Petén’s remoteness: with a negligible population throughout the period of European domination, according to one source from 60 to 80 soldiers (Schwartz 1990: 42), this little settlement was too far away from any major center of colonial authority to get too much attention. Remedios functioned both as a prison and as a garrison, remaining in a pitiful condition, as did the province at large. Petén’s demographic downturn continued largely unchanged for the next two centuries. The introduction of
diseases unknown to local populations, notably smallpox (Jones 1998: xxvii), contributed to aggravate this problem.

Because of Petén’s marginality, little is known about the first century of Spanish domination. The absence of contacts with surrounding areas further exacerbated this state of affairs. Relations with Belize, to the east, were practically non-existent. To the north lay Yucatan, a distant world of its own, administered separately from the rest of the Mexican viceroyalty. Although not exactly a backwater location, Yucatan maintained weak ties with the central colonial establishment in Mexico City. Separated by an expanse of forest from Petén and having little to offer in terms of exchange goods, Yucatan held only intermittent connections with its outlying, southern neighbor. The occasional trade that took place was limited to the sale of livestock. In spite of the physical separation, there were, on occasion, events originating in the north with regional repercussions. One event, the Jacinto Canek revolt of 1761, sent a wave of refugees into Petén (Abreu 1977). Stagnant conditions continued to be the dominant trend through the 17th century, and beyond. Ethnohistorical sources show that after the aforementioned revolt the population seems to have stabilized: at the time there were 1500 Maya and close to one hundred Spanish in the province (Jones 1998: 417; Schwartz 1990: 53, Table 2:3).

For all intents and purposes the state existed more in a symbolic form than as a tangible entity during this period. Colonial government, though real, was limited to running the military district and penal colony in central Petén. Beyond Remedios, an island, Europeans encountered nothing but scattered populations and a few cattle ranches in the midst of tropical forest. One cattle establishment became the future town of
Libertad, seat of the present-day namesake municipality that encompasses a considerable portion of the northwest. From the 1760s onwards this town became one of the sites native Yucatecans would populate the most. For instance, towards 1795, a number of wealthy individuals from the upper part of the peninsula fostered cattle activities in Petén, bringing with them Maya Yucatec (Schwartz 1990: 308 n. 34). At the end of the 20th century Yucatec surnames, both Amerindian and non-Amerindians, survived among Libertecos. What happened to 18th century native populations? A partial answer to this question is outlined in the next section.

**Populations of Northwestern Petén during the Colonial Period**

**The Cehach**

Mayanist Eric Thompson mentioned the existence of two closely related ethnic groups occupying Petén’s northwest at the time, the Chinamit and the Cehach (sometimes spelled Kejach) (Thompson 1977). The former probably lived south of the San Pedro River but this remains still a point of contention. The latter resided north of the aforementioned river, all the way to present-day southern Campeche, another proposition that is far from clear. Several maps published in the 1700s, as well as others from the first half of the 18th century, situate the Cehach in differing points of a rather big country (See: Guatemala, Comisión de Límites 1929). In all likelihood, the considerable inaccuracy of these maps is a direct reflection of the vague knowledge that prevailed about the area. Although Jones (1998) has situated the southern border of the Kejach at a place called Yusancabil, no information is to be found other than it was five days away from Itzá country (32).

According to Thompson the Kejach group probably experienced a population boost during the 1600s, but thereafter underwent steady decline as a result of disease incidence,
including hookworm, malaria and smallpox (1977: 20). The initial population gains of the Cehach are plausibly explained by considering that their territory was a haven for individuals fleeing Spanish domination throughout the colonial period. It is equally reasonable to speculate, as a corollary, that they engaged in commerce with neighboring Yucatan, yet outside the orbit of the colonial economy, partaking of a larger “underground” economic system.

What kind of life these populations led, what contacts they maintained with the outside, and how often these encounters happened remain open research questions at present because after the 17th century there has been no trace of these groups (Scholes and Roys 1948: 12-13). If the Kejach maintained but minimal contact with other populations, as Jones (1998: 23) proposed, elucidating this people’s way of life is more complex.

The Lacandón

This group occupies a distinctive position in the regional context: they constitute the only indigene polity to have effectively resisted European domination. Part of Lacandón survival strategy may have involved, in all likelihood, the roaming of the northwest and its surroundings all along. A 1795 petition from an Itzá leader from San Andrés to the central government offers evidence on the matter. The Cacique’s request illustrates the willingness of other Maya people in putting down the Carib groups (the designation given to the Lacandón in Petén) who lived along the road leading to Tabasco (adapted from Schwartz 1990:66). The main country of this people was situated in the mountainous region of present-day Chiapas and the westernmost area of Guatemala, at the heart of the Usumacinta River basin, but their presence extended south of this core area as well. The origin of the group, whose stock was partially made up, over time, of
those people who continuously fled the Yucatan peninsula, is still a puzzle for anthropologists and ethno-historians (Nations 1979). Thompson (1938) suggested that Spanish writers of the colonial era linked the Lacandón to Chol-speaking people. Scholes and Roys (1948) thought it was more complex than that:

The problem [of Lacandón origins] is complicated by the circumstance that in modern times only a sparse population speaking Yucatecan Maya has been found throughout the entire area. They have been known as Caribs or Lacandón, and their presence in the region has given rise to speculations as to what became of the Chol Lacandón as well as how and when a Yucatecan people came into the country. (45)

According to McGee (2001) the Yucatecan-speaking strand that came to constitute the Lacandón probably appeared during the 16th and 17th century. Current thinking points to multiplicity of ethnic and cultural origins during the aforementioned two centuries (Palka 2005: 72)

Towards the end of the 17th century many Lacandón had been relocated by Catholic priests into a mission post (McGee 2002: 4, 6). During the 18th century, runaway outsiders kept coming, gradually outnumbering the few remaining local Chol-speaking groupst. By the 19th century the entire group spoke Yucatec Maya instead of Chol (Thompson, 1977: 46; McGee 2002: 11), further complicating the thread of events over the ethnic allegiances and constituency of the people. Others (Perera and Bruce 1982) have suggested that the term Chol did not constitute a specific language as used in colonial documents.

Regardless of their origin, continuity among the Lacandón after the 18th century embodied a dynamic territorial program that endured in the midst of ongoing harassment by the colonial state. Contributing to the Lacandón’s large degree of autonomy was the difficult access to their territory and their bellicose disposition towards outsiders. Although several expeditions attempted to subjugate the rebels (1586, 1695), none
succeeded (Scholes and Roys, 1948: 41-43). In the eyes of colonial authorities people like the Lacandón thrived outside the legal realm, challenging, if only symbolically, the hegemonic position of the Spanish Crown.

**Interlude between National Independence and the Arrival of the World Market System in Petén, 1821-1860**

The period 1821-1860 preceded the advent of the forest-based extractive economies that dominated Petén life for just about one century. In this sense, it was a period of transition. Major developments –social, political, and economic- ensued in Petén thereafter, specifically as a result of linkages established with foreign capital and institutions that, in turn, would press on the opening up of Petén to the outside.

**The First Years after Independence**

Although national independence was achieved in 1821, political autonomy did not translate into the fostering of mechanisms and means for economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and a strong state polity. This was a time in which conservative and liberal elites fought each other for control over the central state in Guatemala City, dragging the new republic into a situation of permanent political turmoil and financial chaos (see Asociación de Amigos del País y Fundación para la Cultura y el Desarrollo 1995, vol. 3). Against this background, the central state lacked the means to exert real influence over a loosely assembled territory, most notably on places such as Petén. During this formative period of statehood conditions changed very little in Petén. The province was left to fend for itself, the demographic stagnation being the best example of Petén’s dismal and lingering marginality: Jones (1998) has estimated that towards 1823 the population count was close to 2,500 people (417).
Local and Regional Developments

Descriptions of Petén during the 19th century offer a glimpse into general conditions. Though often biased, travelers’ accounts contain material that offers a glimpse into the past. One example is the published chronicle of French naturalist Arthur Morelet, who lived in Petén for a few months in the late 1840s. Departing from Tabasco, he arrived in central Petén ca. 1847. Morelet observed that logwood, also known as Brazil wood, and tinto or tinte in Spanish, was the main timber extracted at the time in this part of Mexico, its exploitation being a lucrative business. In Petén logwood extraction began soon thereafter. Morelet also thought that ranching was a declining activity in Petén, but he offered no explanation. The decline comes as no surprise, considering the isolation of the district: at the time it would take at least 16 days to get from Flores, the capital, to Campeche, and probably from 18 to 20 to reach Tenosique. He also mentioned the presence of Lacandón populations in western Petén, along the Usumacinta River, describing them as people who avoided contact with non-indigenous groups (Morelet 1871: 140-141, 143-44, 155, 189, 225). The relationship between central Petén and neighboring countries was minimal; the following quote illustrates his point: “At long intervals, a small caravan journeys from the interior towards the Usumacinta, with tobacco, cheese and a few articles from Belize, which are exchanged for salt and cacao; but they rarely proceed beyond Tenosique” (Morelet 1871: 168). Soon thereafter this picture began to change.

In a concomitant development, the establishment of peaceful relations with the Lacandón, in 1837, signified an important political event during this period (Schwartz 1990: 318). In addition to the obvious benefit of establishing “safer” conditions in the western part of the province, the truce with what appeared to be the only remaining Maya
group in the northwest brought about mutual economic advantages. Some kind of barter exchange initiated thereafter, particularly with Libertad, the closest town within Lacandón reach. According to Thompson (1977: 14), the commencement of timber exploitation in the northwest provoked the withdrawal of the Lacandón further inside the mountainous western flank of Petén.

The Caste War of Yucatan, which originated in 1847 and ended in 1901, became a development of regional magnitude that had a direct impact on Petén. The uprising of the Maya against landed elites provoked considerable displacement of people, some of whom looked for security in Petén (Reed 2001; Rugeley 1996, 1997; Schwartz 1990:315). Again, at this time Libertad experienced an increase in population numbers, along with a partial revitalizing of the local economy. Yucatecan impact on the economy materialized via the establishment of cattle ranches in the area. Other areas of Petén also absorbed many refugees from the conflict occurring up north in the peninsula. Many displaced Maya went to populate, for instance, the Petén-Belize border, to the east (see Jones 1977). According to Rugeley (1996), the arrival of refugees was a positive development for the district because it lacked a sorely needed labor force (75).

Conflict in Yucatan had regional economic repercussions too. As the conflict evolved, the small-scale level of transactions that until the mid-nineteen century had existed between Flores and Mérida dwindled, if not disappeared altogether. Schwartz (1990:111) has argued that the thriving of forest-based activities, which began to take place at about this time in Petén, made necessary the setting up of economic connections with Tabasco and Belize. These locations served as logical outlets for Petén’s forest products. Rugeley (1996) has suggested, in fact, that soon thereafter Peteneros took live
animals (e.g., cattle and pigs) to Belize to trade them for firearms and spiritous beverages (86). Ports in the Atlantic Ocean soon became a vital link in the export of world commodities from the province’s interior.

**Deepening Connections to the World System, 1860-1890**

The arrival of entrepreneurs interested in exploiting the forest resources of Petén signaled the engagement of the local economy with the forces of world capitalism. Concurrently, developments at the national level transformed the Guatemalan polity in significant ways. The ascendancy of liberal regimes created the right conditions for the rise of an economic system attuned to global capitalism, in turn setting the basis of the current nation-state.

Throughout these three decades Petén experienced the upsurge of two forest-based activities, namely timber-cutting and rubber tapping. The former activity has prevailed into the present; yet, it no longer carries the same economic weight as it did almost a century and half ago. Wild Rubber (*Castilla elastica* or *Castilla Ulei*) had, by contrast, a short-lived history in Petén’s economy. The advent of chicle (*Manilkara zapota*) extraction, after 1890, eventually overshadowed both activities.

**The Macro-Economic Context**

Petén partook of and was impacted by expanding capitalism during the 19th century as a result of industrial growth and increased commerce at the international level. Many raw commodities took on a world-wide import in the context of an expanding economic order that advanced the consumption of new goods in order to assure its continued reproduction and growth (Wolf 1982). The exploitation of these assets happened mainly, but not exclusively, at the remote fringes of the planet, most notably in imperial colonies and newly independent nations. Commodities to be found only in these locales, such as
precious woods, were imported into the centers of world trade, mostly European nations and the budding metropolis of the United States. In this manner, effective linkages, perhaps if only weak at first were established between foreign capital and places considered otherwise marginal. Hence, growth and development elsewhere did not always result in positive feedback, returns, or even trickle-down effects, in those outlying areas where the source of wealth originated (Schwartz 1990:138; Wolf 1982). For the period under inquiry, all profits obtained from forest-based activities in Petén ended up in Mexican and British firms, and a few individuals.

**Economy and Politics at the National Level**

The victory of liberal forces over their conservative foes in Guatemala marked the onset of a new political order. Among its main tenets, liberal doctrine eagerly promoted an economic establishment based on two main objectives: (1) furthering new export commodities, and (2) offering all sorts of incentives to attract the investment of foreign capital in the country. In the case of Guatemala, coffee was the export crop of preference that came to dominate the national economy. The emerging paradigm demanded the facilitation of labor and land for investors and businessmen. It also required the availability of better infrastructure, namely bank services, railroads, roads, and ports. Even though the state managed to set in place some of the needed improvements for expansion of, primarily, the coffee industry, non-vital coffee zones, such as Petén lingered as forgotten localities. Petén had forests to offer, which foreign companies wanted. A forest-based economy developed independently from the coffee-driven initiative, with minimal state support or intervention.

The contrasting progression of both industries is revealing. While ports were built to facilitate coffee exports in southern Guatemala, forest products in Petén had to be
Transported over large expanses to reach distant outlets in Belize and Mexico. This situation created a problematic situation, namely the prevalence of smuggling. Another dissimilarity was the source of working capital for each activity. Guatemalans and foreigners who lived in the country, mainly Germans, invested in coffee production. The exploitation of timber, rubber, and chicle was entirely financed by firms abroad. Labor constituted the one aspect where both activities shared some similarities. In the case of coffee crews had to be drawn outside the producing loci, from highland Amerindian communities. In the case of rubber, lumber, and later chicle, laborers included non-
Petenero Amerindians, Mexicans, Belizeans and other Central American nationals. Coffee pickers and forest workers were hired on a seasonal basis, for a number of months. Most importantly, during these years a system of debt peonage evolved and came to characterize labor relations between hired hands and employers. This macroeconomic context shaped the nature of the national polity during the next eighty years.

At a different level, the emerging forest-based economy crystallized another important development. In direct connection to economic control over resources in the area, specifically logging, Guatemala and Mexico negotiated the drawing of their common borderline. The demarcation of the border, in 1882, was a long-standing issue about the markers of territorial sovereignty between both countries, a step which configured present-day nation-states (Dardón 1875; De Vos 1988, 1993; Mensajero de Centro-América 1895). This is the context in which the extractive-based economy of Petén took off at the end of the 19th century.

**Forest-based Extractive Economies: Rise and fall of Logging and Rubber**

An extractive economy is based on the exploitation of raw materials and primary products from its source, whether it is the soil (as in root collection), a rock or mineral (as
in mining) or the vegetation (from trees, bushes, etc.). As Weinstein (1983) notes (cited by Schwartz 1990:183) in an extractive economy the surplus is obtained not through direct control of the production process or the ownership of tools and equipment, the means of production in Marxist terms, but instead by who controls the exchange system. In Petén it was foreign export houses with main offices in the United States, Europe, and Mexico that controlled the process.

Logging had been exploited commercially in the district in earlier times, but Petén’s timber industry took off on a big scale after the 1870s when the demand among European and North American consumers for prime tropical woods, particularly mahogany and cedar, escalated. For instance, in 1874 the government signed a contract with a Mexican company called Jamet y Sastré for logging on the border of both countries (Schwartz 1990:109; Petén Itzá 1940). Even though the British had exploited logwood and mahogany since the middle of the 17th century in neighboring Belize, the activity had lost its economic significance. The plummeting of Belize’s lumber industry favored Petén as an alternate provider location. A parallel development was the search for natural stocks of rubber in the rainforest of Middle America, also a result of European exigencies. In 1866 the central government granted an official concession to a British firm for the exploitation of rubber resin, making it the second most important economic activity in Petén’s economy (Schwartz 1990:110). In the long term the most significant forest activity soon developed, namely the collecting of sap for chewing gum. The gum had been initially manufactured in Maine, U.S., around 1848. But the depletion of the spruce tree, from which the sap originated, forced producers to look for alternative substitutes (Schwartz 1990:139-140). The chicle tree, or Chicozapote, filled the void.
The new paradigm brought about important transformations. For one, it forged strong linkages between local bosses or contractors and foreign interests. These individuals mediated the relationship between a “parent” company, its overseers, and the working crews. This structure worked with an *enganche* system by which gatherers were advanced a payment towards the earnings that were to be obtained during the season. For the first time, the central government began to intervene in Petén’s rising economy. To this effect it regulated and controlled the exploitation of forested Petén via the enactment of legislation that facilitated labor availability, the delimitation of the territory to be exploited, the duration of concessions for forest exploitation, and the collecting of tariffs on the volume of logs obtained. On the ground, however, central state existence was merely figurative with very few of its representatives present in Petén: even though the first concession for timber had been issued in the 1860s, it was only after 1874 that a customs office began collecting levies on mahogany and rubber (Schwartz, 1990: 109).

Logging gradually receded into a secondary plane within Petén’s economy. The downturn of the industry at the international level, the official cancellation of concessions by the government (in 1910) and later the prohibition of exports (1928) were contributing factors to logging diminishing significance. Yet, timber extraction did not end altogether. The high profits this activity has always generated made it endure into the present, as I show in a later chapter. Despite logging’s reduced importance, something that probably contributed to its persistence was the symbiotic relationship it developed with chicle: many logging sites were turned into chiclero camps during the rainy season. Woodcutters would also work, on occasion, as chicle tappers, and when a chicle company needed to clear a new camp it would use woodcutters for the job (Norman Schwartz, personal
Logging is carried out in contemporary times at a more modest scale, both because the stocks of woods are increasingly difficult to find and because of more stringent legislation on the commercialization of species deemed in danger of extinction.

Rubber exploitation followed a different trajectory. The modest scale of this trade makes it much more difficult to document what exactly happened and how its disappearance affected the economy and the people. After its peak production period, between 1899 and 1901 (Schwartz 1990:110), rubber waned because other countries, notably those in Southeast Asia, outproduced its American counterparts. This forest resin regained some of its original preeminence once more during WWII, but never to the level that had reached before. In a curious turn of history, the discovery of the archeological site at Naranjo happened as part of indirect linkages to rubber and war: in 1943, archaeologist Edwin Shook came across La Florida when leading an expedition that was scouting for rubber stands in the area (Graham 1970:429).

**Shifting Local Conditions**

The development of forest-related activities prompted, in turn, some changes in the social composition of Petén’s population. As indicated before, the new trades attracted laborers, a good percentage of them being foreigners. Some of these workers eventually settled in Petén. In places like Libertad, where at least one logging company established its headquarters, the overall populace became more diversified as a result of significant foreign influence (Schwartz 1990:109). A rapid examination of the birth registry books at the municipality, dating back to 1877, suggests that at the time many Mexicans had either established themselves in that locality, or at least had offspring in Guatemalan territory. By the turn of the century, according to one local source, the total population of the town
of Libertad, the second largest in the whole province, stood at a meager 2000 (Mejía 1904:26). In spite of this population increase, which was notable for places like Libertad, a generalized atmosphere of stagnation prevailed in Petén at the time. Again, the demographic trends of the nineteenth century constitute a most telling indicator. In 1839 the populace stood at around 6,327; by 1845 it had dropped to 5,203, to subsequently rise again, but not remarkably, to 6,705 in 1893.11

There is no certainty about how many indigene groups, labeled nomads in the documents of the time, inhabited the northwest. It is likely that the Lacandón comprised the greatest portion of residents there. This group progressively withdrew to the remotest confines of the rugged territory bordering Mexico, southwest of the study site. Fleeing the encroachment of a way of life that threatened their own, Lacandón society was among the few Amerindian constituencies to survive the advance of a new economic system. The advent of chicle, and the arrival of new people, accelerated changes of a magnitude that nothing else had in Petén’s past.

**The Main Era of Chicle, 1890-1940s**

A comprehensive discussion of chicle is important because this was the product that brought further economic and social transformations into the region. For almost a half century chicle prevailed as the dominant economic activity of Petén. The 1940s was the decade in which foreign companies withdrew from the region, bringing about the slow but general decline of this activity. This discussion is primarily informed by data pertaining to the whole of Petén, yet extrapolation for localized events in the northwest are made whenever fitting.

Because there is an abundance of material on the general and specific aspects of this industry (among other works see: Hendrickson 1976; Phelps 1957), the discussion
here focuses more directly on the ways chicle developed to become the prime means of livelihood in Petén. As the demand for the latex from the *Chicozapote* tree rose abroad, so did the interest of foreign companies in securing their supply sources. Thus, by the early 1920s two U.S. companies had managed to dominate chicle extraction in Petén. American Chicle, locally known as Chicle Development Company, held a concession for the northwest while its competitor, Wrigley Company, had one on the northeast (Schwartz, 1990: 156). The first company moved chicle via the San Pedro River to Tenosique, Tabasco. By land, the product went out through Belize, in the opposite direction. This goes to show the extent to which non-Guatemalans dominated most, if not all, aspects of the business.

The presence of the aforementioned companies allegedly improved conditions for chicle workers, whereas before they had been rather appalling. U.S. firms reduced the number of middlemen who hired people for the company, made payments on time and offered medical assistance to *chicleros*. The companies also invested in infrastructure related to the chicle economy. At the height of the chicle economy era as many as 19 airstrips served the whole of Petén (Milián, Grunberg and Cho 2002:29); the first airstrips in the north were built at strategic sites, during the 1930s (Schwartz 1990: 157). According to one of my respondents, the one airfield at Naranjo, for instance, was probably built around 1938. With the creation of intermediary institutions that worked between producers and hiring companies, and the imposition of levies on chicle, both previously inexistent, the foreign companies pulled out of Petén in the 1940s. These actions were thought unfavorable to their interests (Schwartz 1990: 157).
While the chicle industry provided good benefits for all concerned parties, still it experienced problems of its own. For example, contraband and cheating constituted two of the most persistent troubles in this activity. Most smuggled chicle went out of Petén through Belize and there is reason to believe that some went across to Mexico via Tabasco. The situation became so critical that during the 1930s the government attempted to solve the situation by enforcing export taxes on chicle and sealing the border with both countries (Schwartz 1990: 148). A widespread perception of chicle as a trade of much trickery became a trademark connected to this activity, as the following quotation points out:

. . . there is a pervasive belief in Petén that la chiclería is a game of engaño (cunning and deception), in which everyone –in what can become a chain of self-fulfilling prophecies– is on guard against being duped and may decide to cozen others before he can be deceived. Contractors have been known to short-weight chicle, overcharge chicleros for supplies, falsify receipts, fail to remit mensualidades [monthly payments that were sent to the family of each chiclero] on time, hold chicleros in debt peonage (in the past) and so on. Chicleros have been known to accept an enganche [advance payment] from one man and then collect chicle for another… sell or destroy a contractor’s equipment and then disappear into the forest, and so on. (Schwartz, 1990: 163)

The debt peonage system alluded to grew out of labor shortages in the chicle trade, and was rigorously upheld during the 1930s and early 1940s, when a dictator came into power. At this time General Jorge Ubico reinforced the application of an already existent vagrancy law known as the boleto de vialidad, a form of corvée labor. This legislation was meant to make a pool of workers available for large-scale plantations through the country. Essentially, the decree established that people in the countryside had to offer proof of permanent employment or of having tilled the land for a minimum of 6 months. (Schwartz 1990: 311) Those who did not comply with the law were imprisoned and sent to labor on public works (mainly roads), or plantations. In the case of chicle this
legislation came to strengthen a de facto debt peonage system already in place. Chicle tappers had to fulfill their contract for a previously agreed upon quota of chicle and within a certain time-period. Sometimes, as old chicleros recall, they were forced to remain in the woods until the time of the contract was up even if they had already fulfilled their production share. Unless a chiclero experienced an emergency, for instance a serious accident or an illness, he was forbidden to leave camp, and if he did it was at the risk of being seized by the authorities.

The *vialidad* decree probably contributed as well to the “recruitment” of indigenous labor for chicle collecting. Schwartz (1990: 187) has suggested that Q’eqchi’ Amerindians, from Alta Verapaz, the neighboring province to Petén in the south, alleviated the lack of chicleros during the World Depression era, in the early 1930s. Conceivably, the transportation of this people, in turn, contributed to further populate Petén. However, some Q’eqchi’ had already gone to Petén due to land scarcity in their homeland territory (Wilson 1995).

In retrospect, the chicle era exhibited a rather erratic performance during the time it was important to the economy of Petén. Although data on the production levels of the gum base were at times unreliable and scant, a rapid examination of the total volume, per year, from available sources, indicates an overall trend of ups and downs. Figure 4-1 shows the trajectory of chicle during a little more than half-century of its exploitation.
Figure 4-1  Chicle production in Petén (Exports in 100,000 lbs.), period 1927-1982.  
(Adapted from Schwartz 1990:149)
This chart shows that chicle’s performance was susceptible to, and in consequence influenced by, processes external to Petén. During the global recession of the late 1920s the production of chicle plummeted, whereas due to the hiatus of WWII (1939-1945) chicle regained temporary preeminence. Even ensuing turmoil from internal revolution (1945-1952) induced much fluctuation in the industry. After the 1950s the tendency was one of a slow but steady decline. The end of the major war in Europe marked the turning point for chicle. Until then, the latex from *Chicozapote* had been the main ingredient for chewing gum making, but thereafter a newly invented synthetic base substituted for the natural product. Other reasons accounting for the dwindling production of chicle included a reduction on the number of chicle trees, a trend that had begun as early as 1920, and taxes that the Guatemalan government imposed on chicle export after the war (Schwartz 1920:140). By the mid 1970s chicle was no longer the main economic activity of Petén.

**Chicle and the Northwest**

Within Petén, the northwest never seems to have been an important chicle-collecting zone. This was due to the predominance of the flooded semi-deciduous type forest characteristic of the area, with a low-density population of *Chicozapote* trees. Against this background, Naranjo was simply an in-transit camp for chicleros on their way to central Petén, or those heading west to Mexico. In spite of chicle’s drawn-out demise at the provincial level already underway, I suspect that the prime period of chicle collecting in the northwest did not occur until after the decade of the 1940s, when chicleros began looking for new tapping grounds. An abundance of second-class chicle trees, known locally as *Chiquibul* (*Achras chicle*) was present in the southern mountain ranges of The Sierra del Lacandón. According to oral accounts collected in the field, the
Lacandón Mountains became the main area of extraction during the final days of the chicle era.

Not surprisingly, chicle and related activities contributed directly to advance human encroachment in northwestern Petén. In this regard the role of rivers during the early stages of all extractive economies, and thus to the progressive occupation of northern Petén, is not to be overlooked. Riverine ways helped in the transportation of peoples and materials, especially during the rainy season when most roads became impassable. In the northwest the San Pedro River fulfilled this role, being a main outlet for timber and chicle. Barges, small boats and logs traversed the extent of the river that separated camps in northwestern Petén with the railroad depot at a place called San Pedro, in the municipality of Balancán, Tabasco. From this point trains transported the payloads to final destinations. As the amount of people and goods moving along the river increased, so did the number of prospective settlers. Proximity to the river constituted in all certainty a prime criterion to consider in the mind of a would-be settler; it provided access to the outside, and was a source of food and a permanent supply of water.

Then a few individuals began staying permanently at places like Ceibo and Progreso, which were well-known camps used in forest extractive activities. Maps published early in the 20th century include these localities at their current locations (See for example: Mejía 1904; Tabasco, Gobierno de 1982). Fragmentary evidence indicates that Progreso had been inhabited since then. In 1916 an expeditionary force that opposed the then strongman in power invaded Guatemala through this border area. They took over Progreso, attempted to move on to Flores, but did not succeed in their endeavor (Soza 1970:275-276). As a result of this skirmish a military post was created soon
thereafter at the site, but the place remained poorly manned thereafter. The existence of a lumberyard at Paso Caballos, 60 kilometers upriver from Naranjo, during the early part of the 20th century set an antecedent for the presence of people, especially Mexican nationals, in the area. In fact the origin of Naranjo is connected, somewhat, to this sawmill. A former employee of the timber mill, whom I have called Hurtado, set up his living quarters at Naranjo at a later date, when he became a chicle contractor. In this sense he could be considered the founder of a would-be permanent settlement. 12

Initially, Hurtado had established his living quarters at Progreso (about 11 kms. downriver from Naranjo) and had another dwelling at Naranjo. He may have lived part of the year at one or the other location, or traveled back and forth between both. This is what I understood from archeologist Edwin Shook’s notes. He visited in 1943, stating that Hurtado selected Naranjo because he found rich soil to cultivate on; Sylvanus Morley met the man himself the following year and reported that Hurtado had a corn planting at the spot (Graham 1970: 452, 454). According to oral accounts, this chiclero went to live permanently in his ranchería (dwelling) at Naranjo, possibly in the late 1950s. As a chicle contractor himself, he may have preferred to take care of his operation at Naranjo because of the existence of the airstrip at the location, though the matter remains unclear. The point here is that (1) Mexicans played a central role in the occupation of the area and, (2) with the progressive decline of the chicle industry people who had participated in it were compelled to lead a more sedentary lifestyle and turn to other ways of making a living.

During the 1940s the central state apparatus reacted rather strongly to the increasing presence of Mexicans in northwestern Petén. Specifically, Mexicans were
expelled from Guatemala, according to oral accounts. General Jorge Ubico took this measure due to the smuggling problems in the area. He also reinforced the number of guards at the post in Progreso. Yet actual conditions would prevent state representatives from affecting a strong enforcement role. Essentially left to fend by themselves, the military could do very little towards effective patrolling of a rather vast, isolated area. Difficult conditions would likely induce border state agents to participate, be accomplices to, or (at least) turn the other way when it came to the kind of illegal activities that took place.

In all probability, the expansion of chicle contributed to the expulsion of yet another population: the Lacandón. As chicleros encroached into Amerindian country this people retreated to the remotest portions of the Lacandón Mountains. McGee (2002: 13) has indicated that during the 1940s only a handful of these people inhabited a place known as Desempeño. Another source reported the presence of Lacandón families near the archeological site of Piedras Negras, by the Usumacinta River, as late as 1950 (Palka 2005:52 quoting Bruce 1968). An old ex-chiclero interviewed for this study corroborated this information. At some point treated as savages by many, including the government, the remaining groups eventually decided to leave and settle in Mexico. According to the eyewitness accounts of two respondents who came across Lacandón people, by the decade of the 1970s only a few inhabited their ancestral lands in Guatemalan territory.

The National and Regional Context

The high point of the chicle era coincided with the development, and eventual demise, of liberalism in Guatemala. From 1871 to 1944 a number of liberal leaders ran the country. Inspired by ideals of “progress”, the different heads of state of this period
undertook initiatives towards facilitating opening the country to foreign capital, the
promoting of export commodities, and in short, advancing capitalism. Coffee replaced
cochineal\textsuperscript{13} as the main export crop in the country, bringing political and economic
changes. Coffee production demanded labor availability, more and better infrastructure,
capital infusion, and banking services. Railroads were built, laws enacted to procure
labor (McCreery 1994) and financial institutions created to facilitate the growth of the
coffee industry. Absence of infrastructure and environmental constraints prevented coffee
production in Petén. With the exception of forced labor recruitment, the other
developments that accompanied coffee expansion elsewhere in the country did not occur
in Petén.

However, liberalism did not necessarily foster political democracy. Two liberal
dictators occupied the seat of government during much of the period between 1871 and
1944. Jorge Ubico, the second of these rulers, was the only one who showed a real
concern with the fate of Petén, although his was a heavy-handed regime. Ubico foresaw
the importance of integrating Petén socially and economically into the nation. After a
visit to the province, in 1932, and to counteract what he perceived as growing Mexican
influence, the General set out to open a road from the country’s capital into the area. Yet,
only half of the route was finished (Schwartz 1990:328, n. 37). It would take another fifty
years before this project finally came true.

A major activity that emerged in Petén during this period was the oil industry.
Looking for prospective petroleum areas, the earliest concessions in the province were
offered, in 1926, to an investor by the name of F.J. Davis; reportedly, Standard Oil of
New Jersey held one towards 1944, too.\textsuperscript{14} Based on oral testimonies, oil prospecting was
initiated during the 1940s, south of Ceibo. At the time, a company that went by the name of Ohio surveyed the area. It is likely that this firm built an airstrip at Ceibo. The runway, used for transporting chicle out of the area, had disappeared by 2002. According to a published source, another company, whose name was undisclosed, returned to drill at a place known as La Pita, also close to Ceibo, in the early 1960s (Centro para el Desarrollo… 1964: 170). After these short-lived attempts, the industry entered a dormant phase in subsequent years. The enactment of stricter legislation, considered unfavorable to foreign-based interests, halted the growth of petroleum exploitation.

Reportedly, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), one of the major regional events at the time, had little direct impact on Petén. In part this had to do with the fact that the Yucatan peninsula experienced much less violence than other scenarios of the conflict in Mexico. All states bordering with Petén (Chiapas, Campeche, and Tabasco) saw little of it too, again comparatively speaking. It is thus unlikely that a large number of displaced Mexicans went to Petén seeking refuge. Schwartz (1990) has suggested that unrest in Mexico provoked minimal relocation of people from the Yucatan peninsula in a southward direction (139), yet there might have been an overspill to other areas, such as Yucatan and Belize.

**Transition to Full Opening of Petén, 1940s-1970**

New conditions ensued during this time in Petén. First, in response to increased population growth elsewhere in Guatemala, Petén became an immigration pole. This phenomenon influenced, in particular western and southern Petén. Before 1970 the northwest attracted little population, but at least two developments set the stage for subsequent colonization. One was the ongoing arrival of Mexican settlers; the other concerned the founding of a timber operation at Ceibo. This last event was directly
connected to another agent that brought about important change: the birth of FYDEP. This autonomous administrative body within the structure of the state was created to administer generated stronger linkages with the central state and the national polity.

Second, a declining chicle economy compelled Peteneros to seek alternative income-generating activities. Timber exploitation regained some of its former importance during these years. New forest products, notably allspice seeds and a fern called tiger fur, acquired relative economic significance, too. These conditions preempted the onset of the agricultural frontier in the northwest as part of the latest re-opening of the area.

**Incorporation into the National Polity and the Impact of Demographic Change**

To understand local developments in Petén a discussion of the national political scene is warranted. The toppling of General Ubico in 1944 marked a radical departure from the prevailing political order in Guatemala at the time. This event plunged the country into an era of revolution and reformism (on this period see, among others, Gleisejes 1991; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1999). The program of the next two administrations pushed social and economic reform within a capitalist framework, yet with the clear intent of benefiting the most destitute sectors of the populations. To this effect a number of measures were advanced: the school system underwent critical improvements, with many schools opening throughout the country; a social security administration was launched; outdated legislation abolished -including the vagrancy law- and a progressive one enacted, i.e. a labor code that gave a number of rights to workers, in fact encouraging the organizing of labor. The most important and radical part of legislation was an agrarian reform program. In 1951 the land reform was underway but, unlike what happened in the rest of the country, it had no significant impact in under-
populated Petén. With no latifundia and a lack of major peasant organizations or labor
groups of any sort the land reform had a rather modest resonance in the province. Of all
changes, labor legislation did translate into something positive for the working
population, especially chicleros. From this point onwards the latter were able to establish
more favorable working relationships and set up an organization of their own.

One of the most relevant developments that began during the revolutionary regime
centered on the paving of a road that led from Guatemala City to the Atlantic Coast of the
country. The aim of the project was two-folded: to foster economic development in
eastern Guatemala and to eventually connect Petén with the southern part of the country.
Although the first phase was finished, the second never got off the ground.

Incorporation into the national polity was effected by other means. It materialized
in the founding of a state-level institution to run affairs in distant Petén. To this effect, in
July of 1959 the National Congress created an autonomous body called *Empresa de
Fomento y Desarrollo del Petén* (Management Office for Promoting and Developing
Petén, or FYDEP). Administered by the military, FYDEP was entrusted with fulfilling
three goals: (1) to set up the basic infrastructure to foster agricultural, industrial and
tourist growth, (2) to manage and develop Petén’s resources, and (3) to encourage
colonization, agriculture and cattle ranching to increase food production (Schwartz
1990:252). Although FYDEP depended partially on funding from the central
government, it also generated its own resources. Among other things, this entity
accelerated the construction of infrastructure and promoted the allocation of land to
interested colonists. It also fostered logging operations at border locations, Ceibo being
selected as one of these places. But before discussing the developments taking place in the northwest, a look into the changing demographics of Petén is in order.

Population growth, a phenomenon of national proportions, had a decisive and long-term impact in Petén. Starting in the 1950s, rising population and limited access to land in other parts of the country became contributing factors that pushed individuals to seek land in Petén. Even though FYDEP did not foster direct colonization, it gave indirect encouragement by selling land. Those who came at this time bought land from the agency, settling south of the province. Stimulated by immigration, the province experienced an overall population growth. Yet the total for Petén was still moderate, towards the end of the period under examination: close to 30,000, or less than one person per square kilometer. At the Naranjo-Ceibo locale numbers were also increasing: by 1970 no less than seven families, or close to forty people, had become permanent residents of Naranjo (Field Notes). Before then, and for a number of years, a much larger number had populated Ceibo due to the emergence of logging operations in this site, as recounted.

**Conditions in the Northwest Before 1970**

The arrival of full-time settlers established a permanent connection between northwestern Petén and the outside. Initially this process had ensued via the logging and chicle industries present in the area, and later in reaction to land tenure changes taking place in neighboring Tabasco. Land concentration transforming small-scale agriculture land into pasture latifundia expelled destitute populations from southeastern Tabasco into the study area (see Tudela 1989, Chapter 8). The discussion centers here on the first of these two developments.
Aside from Hurtado, the pioneer chiclero previously referred to, no one else seemed to have settled anywhere between Ceibo and Naranjo before 1960. By then he had also engaged in cattle raising. According to Otto Fesil, a main respondent, Hurtado was living at Progreso, where Ubico had set up a customs office (receptoría fiscal) and a guard post (resguardo), with at least 3 custom officers, and a force of 6 soldiers.

New developments unfolded. With less chicozapote trees available in northeastern Petén and the withdrawal of major chicle companies, operations seemed to have shifted west. Archival material points to the existence, for instance, of a well-known camp, about 8 kilometers south-southwest of Ceibo, named Lacandón. This camp served as an entrepôt for chicleros coming and going between the Usumacinta and San Pedro rivers. The existence of records attesting to the birth of one child at Lacandón camp, in 1948, and two others, in 1949 offers evidence about permanent, or semi-permanent, habitation of this place. I knew one of these individuals. The family to which this person belonged, and that I will identify from now on as the Mendez, moved to present-day Ceibo within the following ten years and established a residence there. The head of the Mendez family, a chiclero, had taken a Mexican spouse with whom he had had several children. In addition to cultivating corn, this man allegedly manufactured and sold alcohol as well. Two of the Mendez children still own land at Ceibo, perhaps the only original inhabitants who have continuously resided in the area.

Information for the 1950s is scant but bits of archival work and oral history point to the events taking place at the time. At this time Hurtado probably hired people to work for him at Naranjo. Again, the Birth Registry of the municipality of Libertad sheds some light on the matter. There are two entries for births in 1950 and 1951, respectively, one
belonging to the child of a couple who worked with Hurtado. I knew these people personally. The wife had been born at Paso Caballos to a Guatemalan father and a Mexican woman from Tabasco; the husband had arrived as a chiclero from the province of Baja Verapaz. Towards 1953, she recalled, there were 6 people at Naranjo, the main activity being chicle collection. Hurtado had hired her and her mother as cooks; her husband labored as chiclero. Eventually the couple settled at some distance from Naranjo, where they and their descendants still reside and where I talked to them in 2001. These and the few other residents made a living out of agriculture, chicle collecting and hunting. The selling of wildlife was, in fact, a main source of income at this time. Specifically, and for the following years, a growing commerce in crocodile hides developed at the study site, with the bulk of pelts heading west to Mexico. Even though some people paid duties on these items the largest number went abroad surreptitiously, according to oral accounts. Both Mexicans and Guatemalans were involved in these dealings. This type of activity continued for a long time, and was an ongoing matter of concern to the authorities. A report issued a few years later by a government unit acknowledged the prevalence of contraband in pelts (see: Centro para el Desarrollo de… 1964: 185). Why did the first settlers decide to inhabit Naranjo and Ceibo and not somewhere else? The existence of chicle operations and the importance of these two camps in the business, an easy way of making money with contraband, the prospect of working for Hurtado, even the prospect of having access to land, motivated people to consider staying put at Naranjo.

**Ceibo during the 1960s**

As noted, FYDEP began to promote timber enterprises in Petén, especially at border locations. In 1960 FYDEP entered into a contractual relationship with a Mexican
logger, named Salcedo, in order to set up a lumber mill at Ceibo. From the perspective of FYDEP, the objectives of the operation were three-fold, said an ex-employee interviewed for this research: first, to monitor more closely any movements at the border, especially those of an illegal nature; second, to keep in check Mexican incursion into the area, i.e. settlers, chicleros, smugglers; third, to take advantage of available timber resources while opening labor opportunities. Hence, as a former sawmill manager put it, FYDEP had a compound agenda in the setting up of this business.

The FYDEP-Salcedo mill began operations sometime in 1961-62. The state agency provided the administrative support and raw materials while its Mexican partner contributed resources and machinery. Mahogany and cedar, the woods of preference, were sent to two U.S. companies, IT Williams and U.S. Plywood. During the dry season logs and boards were hauled to access roads in Mexico and during the winter months they were transported in big barges on the San Pedro until they reached a port in Tabasco. From that point on lumber was taken to the Gulf where it was shipped to the United States. At its peak the sawmill employed around 150 workers, both Mexican and Guatemalan (Saul Torona, personal communication, December 15, 2002). Because of the absence of any nearby sizeable urban center, at first some of the provisions had to be flown in but this became too costly for FYDEP. Reportedly, this is why Mendez began selling corn and beans to feed timber employees. In addition, a boat from Mexico made periodic trips to supply Ceibo inhabitants with other foodstuff and essential goods.

According to oral accounts, this operation faced some problems right from the start. First and foremost, the sawmill was making no money. The already mentioned manager said that production levels were rather modest and consequently insufficient to even
generate profit. The volume of the average shipment load was close to 150,000 cubic feet and never exceeded the 300,000 mark. To make matters worse timber was being smuggled. Second, no formal accounting books were kept. Third, employees frequently went unpaid for months. Because of this situation people quit and as word spread about conditions at Ceibo it became more difficult to hire new workers to replace those that were gone. In time another problem developed: as stands of trees in the proximity disappeared, it became necessary to go farther away from the sawmill to get to the raw material. Such difficulty increased operations costs, with the subsequent impact on already crippled revenues. Eventually the FYDEP-Salcedo firm became indebted.

Such a state of affairs led, not surprisingly, to a violent incident, some time after the foreclosure of the sawmill. In 1969, or 1970, the machinery and facilities left at Ceibo were set on fire. The most sensible explanation, after hearing several testimonies, points to a group of discontented employees who grew tired of claiming withheld payments. After the closing of this enterprise Ceibo became depopulated.

The central state makes temporary inroads at Ceibo

The existence of a nucleated population at the borderline called for a mechanism of control regarding cross-boundary activities. Ongoing contraband in different goods and the increased presence of Mexican nationals in this area, looking for land, impelled FYDEP to do something. The first state representatives to be commissioned to Ceibo included an immigration agent, a militarized unit enforcing custom transactions (called Guardia de Hacienda), and FYDEP’s own security-enforcement corps (Guardia Rural Única de Petén, or GRUDEP by its acronym in Spanish). GRUDEP’s responsibilities included forest monitoring, policing and, on occasion, even customs and migration tasks (Centro para el Desarrollo de… 1964: 185). Soon thereafter a station in charge of the
International Commission on Boundaries and Water (*Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas*) was set up. The Commission brought its own personnel, including professionals, semi-skilled workers, even adventurers. A few of them ended up staying, either for lack of better opportunities elsewhere or because they chose to make a new start at this border and frontier. The fact that Ceibo even had its own assistant mayor, (*alcalde auxiliar*), the lowest rank in the political structure of government, illustrated the augmented, though temporary, importance of the location for a number of years. The responsibility fell on Mendez, perhaps because he was a permanent resident and everybody knew him.

However, real authority was weak. The number of state and government employees was kept to a minimum, Ceibo being a distant crossing point. For instance, over a number of years the same person held two positions, the immigration and the customs offices. Although people had gone there to settle, the progression of the agricultural frontier was interrupted with the end of lumber activities. Re-settlement would re-emerge three decades later.

**Developments at Naranjo, 1965-1970**

With an increasing number of ex-chicle tappers turning into farmers the population of Naranjo began to grow. Again, it was Mexicans who played a decisive role in this development. According to oral reports collected in the field, by 1964 Hurtado had left the area because of ill health; a nephew of his took over chicle operations and the growing ranch-in-the-making. This person, whom I call Ponce, had arrived in the northwest during the late 1950s and worked on chicle collecting inside the Lacandón Mountains areas, reportedly as Hurtado’s muleteer. When the opportunity came, he made the move towards a more sedentary way of life. By 1965 Ponce had cornfields of his
own at Naranjo, according to a published eyewitness account (Graham 1965). But due to a debt Ponce had incurred he possessed Naranjo only briefly. To solve his financial problems Ponce handed sold the land to a rich Tabascan cattle rancher, Figueredo. Having established a relationship with a local woman, Ponce stayed in the vicinity of Naranjo.

Figueredo was a central figure in the history of the Naranjo-Ceibo area because he initiated extensive, large-scale livestock raising in northwestern Petén. Local associates recounted that this individual introduced the first sizeable cattle herd into the natural savannas of the study area. He arrived some time between 1965 and 1967; no one seems to remember the exact date. For the following 5 to 7 years Figueredo occupied a territory extending some two thirds of the distance between Naranjo and Ceibo, his possession covering an area close to 900 hectares. To begin ranching this individual brought his own cattle and added to the herd some heads he bought locally. Reportedly, this venue had in excess of 500 heads, a respectable size considering the general conditions of the zone. Figueredo’s stay is not to be underestimated. First, he demonstrated that cattle ranching could be developed in the region. Second, he introduced the Zebu breed (*Bos indicus*) into Petén, hence improving the stock in the province. Third, he promoted a system of cattle exchange that contributed to the expansion of this activity in the area.\textsuperscript{21} According to several local respondents Figueredo fed his livestock in Guatemalan territory and then took the animals to Tabasco, the illicit activity that eventually would force his departure from Petén.

He offered two other reasons for leaving Petén. First, the absence of a sizeable population meant zero prospects of selling his livestock locally. Second, the
impossibility of legally acquiring a tract of land, because of his nationality, was something that he purportedly sought over several years. Two other explanations people mentioned as contributing to the withdrawal of the rancher related to his refusal to have the old airstrip at Naranjo rebuilt (see below), and the nonpayment of debts that locals incurred with him. It is likely that multiple causes were behind Figueredo’s decision to pull out. The Mexican rancher stayed until about 1972 when he sold his landholding rights.

The changes taking place were reflected in the demographics. While Ceibo had been at the center of human occupation in the early part of the 1960s, the tide subsequently changed in favor of Naranjo: eight entries can be found in the municipal birth registry for children born at Ceibo during the interval from 1962 to 1965; none is recorded for the corresponding period at Naranjo. Between 1966 and 1972 the tendency progressively went the other way: 21 children were reported as being born at Naranjo and only 8 at Ceibo.  

There was one other event occurring at this time-period that would prefigure future developments. Perhaps foreseeing that logging operations had to be moved over to Naranjo after Ceibo’s failed experience, between 1968 and 1969 FYDEP initiated the reconstruction of the airfield at Naranjo. After repairs, the facility was handed over to AVIATECA, the then government-owned airline in the country. Soon the company began regular flights into the area. This development was part of a larger process happening in Petén: full aperture. As the concluding part of this chapter shows, with more means of access becoming available the colonization process expanded throughout the province.
Petén Opens Up, 1970-1982

This final segment discusses a short but key stage for understanding the rather swift development of territoriality in the border region. Drastic processes led to the birth of Naranjo as a recognized settlement. This “emergence” of Naranjo contrasted with the continued stagnation that Ceibo experienced during these years. The bases for consolidating social control over space, via the advancing agricultural frontier, were set during this time-period.

Regional Developments: Roads and Expanding Populations

FYDEP had been working in the construction of a road to establish overland communication with southern Guatemala practically since its inception in 1959. By 1971 Petén had only 563 kilometers of roads, mostly second and third class dirt trails (FYDEP 1974: 9). The segment of the road inside Petén, about 120 kilometers long, was finally finished in 1970, a breakthrough given its long history of isolation. From then onwards remoteness was no longer an obstacle for bringing about potential economic development. The road, furthermore, catalyzed other processes already underway. People moving in represented the strongest among these dynamics at work.

Even though migrants had begun pouring into Petén in the 1960s the figures increased dramatically after 1970. From a total of 26,000 in 1964, the whole Petenero population stood at 63,856 people in 1973, amounting to about a threefold increase in a decade (Schwartz 1990: 106). The newly arrived “southerners”, as those born outside Petén were called by the native populace, settled initially in southern Petén. In the course of another fifteen to twenty years this agricultural frontier in southern Petén had closed when land became unsuitable for subsistence agriculture, barren, or scarce. Thus, part of this migration cohort decided, or was forced, to move again. The northwest became a
prime settlement magnet in a renewed wave of colonization expansion within the province. The origin of Naranjo as a permanent settlement, and to some extent Ceibo, was a direct result of this migratory movement at the district’s level.

**Post-Chicle Economic Activities of Petén**

An important trend related to Petén’s opening would be the rise of a more diversified economy: besides logging, new forests products could be exploited and sent out. A budding tourist industry would evolve too, one that thrived on the cultural and natural resources the district had to offer. Even the rather undeveloped cattle ranching sector began to prosper with the opening of national markets to Peten’s beef. The re-emergence of the oil industry was another important economic activity that had an impact, specifically, at the study area. Many of these developments responded to increased demand in global markets. For instance, the expansion of cattle in Guatemala, and Central America at large, was directly related to a rise in the demand of beef in the U.S. After WWII this country experienced a sustained rise in the consumption of this item. To illustrate, consumption by the average U.S. citizen went from 64 to 117 pounds per year, in the period 1961-1970 (Williams 1986: 84). As a glimpse into what was a much more complex situation than the scope and treatment given here, the following quote offers a summary about the implications of this process for the Central American region:

Strong market forces operating independently of governments contributed to Central America’s beef export boom. On the demand side was an insatiable appetite for cheap beef created by the fast-food industry in the United States. On the supply side, Central America had some real cost advantages in the production of grass-fed beef . . .

But the flourishing trade was not merely the work of technical breakthrough [such as improvements in refrigerated transportation systems in the 1960s] and the uncontrolled forces of supply and demand. From the start, the volume of demand
was regulated by quotas and health restrictions set in Washington, D.C., a factor that favored the yearly expansion of demand for Central American beef (Williams 1986: 98).

Guatemala contributed to this boom and Petén played an important part in it. Williams points out that between 1964 and 1973 Petén registered the second-fastest-expanding herds of cattle inside Guatemala (1986: 140). One decade later, according to another source, Petén conceivably had about one fifth of the entire Guatemalan herd (Leonard 1987: 104).

The exploitation of two forest products, *xate*, or tiger fur (*Chamaedora spp.*), and *pimienta gorda* or allspice (*Pimenta dioica*), rose during the 1970s, when they turned into important export commodities. *Xate* is an ornamental palm, one that stays green for at least two months, obtained in the forest floor. An ample market for *xate* was found in the U.S and Europe. According to one source, *xate* would bring in between four and seven million U.S. dollars, each year (Nations 1999:13). Allspice, a product that even FYDEP invested in (FYDEP 1974), comes from drying the berries collected from the tree; these are used for spicing desserts or for pickling. On this last point, the amount of earnings on this forest product is dependent upon the catch of herring in the northern hemisphere. In the 1990s allspice was generating as much as half a million dollars every year for the Guatemalan economy (Nations 1999:13).

The abundance of archaeological sites in Petén, as well as other natural attractions offered by a tropical forest setting, e.g. sightseeing, trekking, camping, fishing, among others- made the province an increasingly appealing destination for travel. To exploit this potential, the central government obtained a loan from a regional bank to build a modern airport and a paved road from Santa Elena to the archeological site of Tikal. Part of the money was destined to hotel infrastructure construction too (Empresa de Fomento
y. . . [FYDEP] 1974: 66). Hence, tourism evolved into a vital industry for Petén’s economy. The monuments at Tikal alone attract as many as 200,000 tourists every year, with yearly revenue shares worth more than 40 million dollars. (Nations 1999:12)

Ranching made important inroads into Petén during this decade. By the early 1970s FYDEP had planned the launching of 9 colonization schemes throughout Petén, all tagged for ranching development. 23 Yet the local population showed little interest or did not have the money to acquire land. FYDEP ended up distributing parcels, 450 and plus hectares in size, to businessmen and professionals from Guatemala City, politicians and members of the military with high connections to the ruling government, and to large ranchers from eastern Guatemala looking to expand their possessions (Milián, Grunberg and Cho 2002:33). 24 They grabbed land mostly in southern Petén, where the larger populated centers concentrated. Even though figures are unreliable for cattle ranching, livestock production increased noticeably over the years. While a national census placed the number of livestock heads in Petén at 6155 for 1964 (República de Guatemala 1969: 199), FYDEP estimated that there were close to 21,000 cattle in the province towards 1977 (After Schwartz 1990: 260), a three-fold increase over a little more than a decade.

The opening of Petén also coincided with an event that had profound repercussions on a global scale: the world oil crisis of 1973. In response to the growing cost of fuel and the country’s dependence on it, the Guatemalan government began encouraging prospective activities in potential areas of the country. Hence, the government enacted policies intended to attract foreign investment interested in petroleum exploration and exploitation. A number of concession areas (blocks of land, several thousand hectares in size and where oil was presumed to exist) were offered for bidding at several places in
Petén and neighboring Alta Verapaz province. After several years of prospecting, the discovery of oil in commercial quantities was announced in 1975 (Piedrasanta 1999: 21), and commercial exploitation of crude fuel began in 1979, in northern Alta Verapaz (Rosenfeld 1999: 69).

Oil was not new to Petén. The province had witnessed earlier work, around the 1930s and 1940s, as noted before. Prior efforts at Ceibo had been unsuccessful. This prior prospecting played a strong role in the eventual return of oil companies. By 1978 Texaco had discovered commercial fields at Xan, 60 km. north of Naranjo. The crude oil went abroad at first because the country lacked the infrastructure to process it into other forms of fuel. Part remained for local use and part was shipped abroad. During the early 1980s problems related to civil war (See Chapter 5), depressed prices on the world market, and enactment of laws perceived as unfavorable for the industry resulted in the withdrawal of foreign investors from Guatemala. By 1990 only Basic Resources remained active in northwestern Petén. (See the weekly This Week 1986, Aug. 4; Rosenfeld 1999: 70)

The Creation of a Protected Area in Northern Petén

One matter of regional relevance during this period was the creation of a forest reserve in northern Petén. Starting in the 1960’s, there had been talk about declaring the upper section of Petén a reserve. Specifically, the whole area north of parallel 17°-10’, or about 12,000 square kilometers, was earmarked for regulated forest extractive activities due to its relatively non-intervened situation. After the UN-affiliated Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) carried out a major evaluation of Petén’s forest resources in 1963, the determination of the authorities at this institution to establish the reserve grew stronger. The central government did not formalize the reserve’s status
until 1972 (Decree 48-72). The declaration of the decree, however, did not translate into improved conditions. In practice, the difficulties associated with access to the area kept it as a nominal reserve. In spite of FYDEP’s overall tight control of affairs in the province, people managed to settle north of the 17-10 boundary. Being unable to stop colonization altogether, FYDEP turned to monitoring and controlling the activities of settlers. Anyone planting crops, for instance, was required to request a permit for each clearing, or for the cutting down of trees, year in and year out. To discourage colonization the institution made practically no investments on public works within the reserve. From time to time, inspectors went to the field and checked on the validity of the permits people held. After 1975 or so, FYDEP sent trained personnel to carry out censuses in order to establish the number of inhabitants, their whereabouts and their activities. The reserve existed, thus, only as a piece of paper legislation, setting a negative precedent in terms of future conservation initiatives.

**Local conditions in the northwest, the 1970s**

During these years, new developments solidified the evolving frontier at Naranjo-Ceibo. A combination of different economic and political factors coalesced to make such changes possible. In spite of adverse conditions, including civil war, Naranjo succeeded in establishing itself as a permanent settlement. By contrast, the effects of armed conflict, at the end of this period, caused Ceibo’s already pitiful condition to deteriorate further resulting in a complete depopulation of the location. The fighting also furthered state presence in the area.

**Resurgence of logging circa 1973**

After the closing of the sawmill at Ceibo, operations moved over to the east, farther away from the borderline. FYDEP authorized the exploitation of the woods but this time
the government entity was not involved as a direct partner. Instead, the lumber mill was run entirely as a private business. Again, an assortment of people went there in search of work, and land. In this regard the mill became a pull factor. From 1973 to 1983 renewed logging operations took place at Naranjo. However, unlike its Ceibo counterpart, the mill at Naranjo seems to have down-scaled its operations. Because no written evidence regarding this enterprise has survived, establishing what exactly took place at the time is complicated. None of the respondents interviewed for this study remembered with certainty who the first owner of the mill was, nor how long he or she had it in his or her ownership. The sawmill changed proprietors over the years, including a few of Mexican origin. Recollections of former employees place the number of people working there, at its best, in the vicinity of 40 to 50 individuals. Timber continued to exit via Mexico, just like in the recent past. Like its predecessor at Ceibo, the Naranjo operation kept running at a loss, according to eyewitness accounts. The diminished availability of tree stands, misdeeds (i.e., stealing, contraband), and finally unsafe conditions due to brewing armed conflict contributed to the ending or cancellation of the sawmill concession. The existence of a lumberyard at the locality, however, was a factor in the permanent settling of Naranjo.

Livestock and the emergence of Naranjo as a permanent settlement

Another underlying factor in the settlement process at Naranjo was the continued flourishing of the cattle estate Figueredo had initiated earlier on. The fate of the estate was closely linked to the destiny of Naranjo. After Figueredo’s withdrawal, three partners acquired the estate from the Tabasco rancher. The partnership was unable to pay the price Figueredo set for it; another buyer came along. People’s most vivid recollections of the large estate, renamed Ocultún, came from the information obtained
through oral accounts. The new owner, a foreigner with Guatemalan citizenship, and whom I identify as Carl, concentrated on raising cattle and beehives on his land holding. Carl arrived around 1974-1975 and remained there for the next four to five years. During that period, he gathered a sizeable herd. Apparently, the exploitation of honeybees was of lesser importance; very few people mentioned it. Reportedly, this man brought in temporary labor, namely Q’eqchi’ Amerindians from outside Petén who were hired as a labor force. They tended to the cultivation of staples that supported the rest of the population at the ranch.

For some of those who met, or worked with the new boss, Carl was described as mean, allegedly someone who would call everybody “Indian,” a strong pejorative term in Guatemala. He was adamantly opposed to the idea of a permanent human settlement in his estate, so much so that he fought against the existence of a school for the children of his employees.27 One single event would bring the situation to a head at Ocultún. In the context of an unfolding internal war in the country, in 1978 the Guatemalan army had set up a garrison at Naranjo, close to the seat of the ranch, perhaps to the utmost displeasure of the aforementioned landholder. The negative attitude of Ocultú’s owner brought death upon him, in September 1979. Though the name of the murderer(s) remained undisclosed and people who lived through the event provided only indirect or half-answers when prompted to elicit information, the existing evidence points to army personnel as being responsible for the crime.

Hence, several conditions fortuitously coincided to finally make possible the founding of Naranjo as a permanent settlement. The death of the rancher at Ocultún resulted in the downfall of the estate, in part because Carl’s widow did not or could not,
look after it. Her decision may have taken into account the escalation of civil war in Petén (see Chapter 5), which posed unsafe conditions for traveling to, let alone living in such a remote outpost. In the context of conflict, the army had a vested interest on the growth of this settlement; it needed the existence of established communities adjacent to military garrisons such as the one at Naranjo to fend off guerrilla skirmishes. Last but not least, the decisive element in the constituting of the new hamlet was directly related to the construction of the all-weather road leading into Naranjo, an initiative funded by the oil company working at the time in the area, namely Texaco. Begun in 1978, four years later Naranjo was finally accessible by car.

Main conditions for colonization: accessibility and land availability

The opening of Petén coincided with the launching of aerial transportation from central Petén to the northwest. When asked, respondents indicated that by 1971, perhaps 1972, AVIATECA had initiated regular flights, one day a week, into Naranjo. Mainly used as transport for chicle and xate, the flights also brought in, on occasion, passengers and general goods. Even though this part of Petén was under reserve status, part of the people who embarked and went to Naranjo ended up staying indefinitely. Air transportation eventually stopped due to rising costs and low demand for air transportation in the late 1970s. However, by then the building of the aforementioned road had already started. Plans to open ground communication to the border with Mexico had been around for some time. In apparent contradiction to the existence of the reserve in the north, FYDEP envisaged ambitious plans for this region. A 1974 document authored by the entity itself outlined the main thrust of the road initiative in the following terms:
Otro proyecto importante es el que sale de Libertad con dirección al Ceibo y propiciará el desarrollo ganadero, favoreciendo en parte el turismo pues hay sitios arqueológicos y se ha autorizado un Coto de Caza por esa zona… en el futuro servirá de acceso para los pobladores que no tardarán en llegar . . . (sic) (Another important [road] project is the one that goes from Libertad to Ceibo ; it] will foster cattle development, [it] will benefit tourism because there are archeological sites in the zone and [because] hunting has been authorized… in the future [the road] will be a means of access to settlers who will be arriving soon …) (FYDEP 1974: 10).

These remarks are quite revealing because they clearly expose the intended plans for the northwest. Such developments were already under way, though. In less than a decade they began to materialize rather quickly, in fact, without state intervention.

Starting in the 1960s, and foreseeing a growing demand for land in Petén, FYDEP began pressuring the central government for a much-needed legal framework on which to base its decisions and, in consequence, to act upon what was perceived as a potentially explosive economic and political problem. FYDEP’s plea to enact legislation for the titling of lands in Petén materialized when the Guatemalan Congress issued regulations that dictated the ways land tenure was to be structured in this province. The first ruling came in 1971; it is known as Decree 38-71. An amendment released the following year, Decree 48-72, modified and clarified the antecedent law. Then in 1973 the bylaw of the former legislation was issued, dictating how this statute was to be implemented (Clark 1997:29). Because of difficult accessibility into the north these developments had a more direct effect on the land situation of southern Petén, where the settling process was well underway. Furthermore, FYDEP’s forest reserve, officially declared in the 48-72 dictate, prevented, at least on paper, the rapid occupation of the territories north of parallel 17°-10’.  

The process of widespread colonization, regardless of land legislation, had already made significant inroads in southern Petén. Except for one government-directed
land occupation in the province took place as an individual effort. People from eastern Guatemala and the Verapaz region made up the bulk of settlers during these early years (see Adams 1965). Even though most were landless peasants, pushed to out-migrate because of land concentration and population pressure in their places of origin, another small though important segment included large landowners looking for potential land for pasture.

Another 9 years passed before legal titles were issued to proprietors, despite the fact that FYDEP had already begun selling land around 1966. Schwartz has summarized conditions as follows:

Until 1966-1974, private land ownership in Petén was insignificant. Pre-1944 governments had given titles to fifty-four Petén notables, 90 percent of them from Flores, but they held only 1.5 to 2.0 percent of Petén’s land area; the rest was a “national estate.” The 1944 revolution and 1954 counterrevolution had no impact on land tenure in the department. Prior to 1966, access to land was based on usufruct and township permission to work the land (Schwartz 1990:256).

Indeed, among the scarce settler population of the northwest prevailing holding norms rested on free usufruct of the land (see Chapter 6). Requests to regularize titles to the land had been presented to FYDEP by a group of residents since at least 1973. The administrative body of the province sent personnel to the area so that “censuses” of local inhabitants were obtained and therefore the institution could verify actual conditions. The present author came across at least one such questionnaire, which corresponded to 1976. Two years later FYDEP had issued file cards to each applicant in order to organize the process and keep track of it. In the eyes of the beholder, such cards demonstrated the existence of an official application, part of a protracted legalization process. In principle this perception was true; in reality the chances that the procedure eventually would produce a title were faint. Paradoxically, in some cases such a document proved useful
twenty years later, when another legalization program came around and effectively delivered ownership land titles.

The following table illustrates the opposite demographic dynamics taking place at Naranjo and Ceibo over a period of two decades, a reflection of the processes at work.

Table 4-1  Population changes at Naranjo and Ceibo, 1962-1982 (number of families)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>1962</th>
<th>1972</th>
<th>1982</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naranjo</td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceibo</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field data

The figures reflect the effects of prevailing conditions at each settlement: favorable for Ceibo at first, due to the presence of the sawmill, two decades later severely depopulated because of internal war (see Chapter 5 for a thorough discussion on this). Naranjo was an insignificant spot in 1962, but twenty years later it had begun gaining more population as a result of ground access into the area.

**Presence of the central state in Naranjo**

Little by little, government representatives continued arriving. Around 1972 the Public Office for Monitoring Weather Conditions and Climate Forecasting (INSIVUMEH by its acronym in Spanish) established a station on the San Pedro, a few miles upriver from Naranjo. The station’s existence has been of little consequence to the local population, but, again, it brought in outsiders, this time representing a national state agency. For instance, one individual interviewed for this study who arrived in 1972 to work with this institution remained in the area for good.

As mentioned, AVIATECA had also begun flying from central Petén to Naranjo. The company hired as its representative a former chicle worker who also acted as one of the initial *alcaldes auxiliares* at Naranjo, a post he fulfilled for several years.
leaving AVIATECA, the same individual filled in as postman, a service run by the government back then. This person brought along a brother of his who made a living as a health provider of sorts, and who in fact, remained to die at Naranjo—unlike his kin, who left at an earlier date. FYDEP periodically sent in its personnel to look over matters concerning licenses for fishing, the setting up of an elementary school, the cultivation of crops, and the sawmill operation. Last but not least, the military decided that a permanent and large force in the region was a matter of national (and perhaps international) priority and set up a garrison in Naranjo, in 1978. The army, and in consequence the central state, looked with apprehension at what was considered an ongoing Mexican influence. It was concerned about guerrilla activity in the area, as well. Furthermore, the army had to protect the interests of newly arrived foreign oil companies. The central state apparatus regarded all of the above as good reasons for situating permanent troops in the village.

With a force consisting of from 40 to 60 stationed men, the army became the most prominent central state agent, holding a strong grip on local affairs. The de facto power of the military receded only in the 1990s with the subsiding of internal conflict in Guatemala. The effect provoked by the protracted presence of the armed forces in the area deserves a treatment of its own, beyond the scope of this work. The army was an unavoidable actor to reckon with. Let me point out, as an aside, that the armed forces also played a part, indirectly, in the colonization process of the area: a number of army servicemen who served at Naranjo went back to the village after their discharge in order to settle there. The following chapter recounts the lives and times of ex-military recruits, adventurers, former chicle workers and others who came to constitute the social fabric of
community in the northwest, illustrating the manner in which they contributed to territoriality-making of the research site in contemporary times.

To recapitulate: the discontinuity that characterizes northwestern Petén’s history gets reflected in the irregular contact and relations taking place in the area between local occupants and the central state, going a long way back. Generally those relationships were altered, or changed, because of the emergence of new conditions, or processes. It is during the last century that outside driving forces began not only to increase in number but also be most influential on, in particular, social control over space. The intricacies of this series of engagements and disengagements between local populations and the central state are graphically encapsulated in Table 4-2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make-up of the local population</th>
<th>Strategies of agency</th>
<th>State actions</th>
<th>Driving forces behind the shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Cehach, The Lacandón</td>
<td>- Very sporadic, or no contact at all, with the state; passive resistance via avoidance and rejection</td>
<td>- Distant, disengaged, colonial power, before 1821.</td>
<td>- Birth of extractive economy (1850s) - Strength of a centralized state (Liberal reforms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest dominated economy and the nascent frontier: 1870s-1940s</td>
<td>Forest dominated economy and the nascent frontier: 1870s-1940s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-up of the local population</td>
<td>Strategies of agency</td>
<td>State actions</td>
<td>Driving forces behind the shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasonal presence of workers, Guatemalans, Mexicans and others</td>
<td>Seasonal presence of workers, Guatemalans, Mexicans and others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition from forest-based economy to agriculture-based economy: 1940s-1970</td>
<td>Transition from forest-based economy to agriculture-based economy: 1940s-1970</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local population</td>
<td>Strategies of agency</td>
<td>State actions</td>
<td>Driving forces behind the shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexicans and Guatemalans</td>
<td>- People begin to establish claims on the research site - Migration (1960s)</td>
<td>- Creation of controlling agency: FYDEP - State allows “spontaneous” and planned migration; it build roads</td>
<td>- Advancing frontier via settlers - Population growth in other parts of Guatemala and Mexico expels people - Further opening of Petén by land and air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make-up of the local population</td>
<td>Strategies of agency</td>
<td>State actions</td>
<td>Driving forces behind the shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up to 1970 Mexicans, and thereafter Guatemalans</td>
<td>up to 1970 Mexicans, and thereafter Guatemalans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-2 Shifting relationship between the local population and the state
Summary

During the 18th century the research area constituted a hinterland within the hinterlands. For the local population and others escaping European rule it became a safe haven, a place where they could live in relative peace. Due to its “irregular” circumstance within the colonial structure, the northwest remained a zone in flux, a contested location. In the eyes of Spanish colonial society this zone constituted a Maya frontier (Jones 1989) where gaining control over territory and people was never fully accomplished. Although part of the native population succumbed to factors such as diseases, another segment resisted successfully, most notably the Lacandón people. Never a vital zone for either Yucatan or Petén, the northwest remained in oblivion through the colonial era and beyond. It was the expansion of capitalism at the world level that encouraged the reopening, and full occupation of the northwest, at a much later date. During all this time, and well into the 19th century, the state constituted a non-intrusive structure, distant and disengaged. In turn, the strategy employed by the local population vis-à-vis such structure was one of avoidance.

Internal and external political turmoil characterized the post-independence period, from 1821 to the emergence of extractive forest activities, in the 1860s. The main problem stemmed from the lack of consolidation of Guatemala as a nation-state. This conundrum resulted in the emergence of weak institutions. Under such conditions Petén continued to be disconnected, physically and politically, from the rest of the country. The Naranjo-Ceibo locale remained mostly depopulated, the Cehach having disappeared. Only the Lacandón were able to roam through the northwest; their coming to terms with emerging Guatemalan polity contributed to the eventual entrance of non-Amerindian groups into the area; peaceful relations, notwithstanding, did not mean fully open, cross-
cultural relations. On the one hand the Lacandón always kept their distance from the rest of society, and on the other, racist views continued to inform the way they were perceived and treated by outsiders. In a way, the Lacandón followed a path of passive resistance in relation to the larger polity, and notably in connection to the central state.

An external event, the Caste War of Yucatán, induced some demographic changes that would help the repopulating of Petén in the second half of the 19th century, in turn diversifying the ethnic pool of the province. Libertad, for one, became a main destination for displaced groups from Mexico. Some descendants of these war refugees would move one century later, again, to re-populate the northern part of the municipality but through other means and strategies.

More transformations took place in Petén during the last two decades of the 19th century than any changes experienced in the prior two hundred years. The penetration of capitalist forces, mainly by foreign agents, set in motion such changes. Capitalism forged linkages unknown before: it induced class stratification in the labor force engaged in extractive economies. Chicle, specifically, fostered and strengthened the *enganche* system, with all its skewed hierarchical relations. Social heterogeneity came about as result of the entry of outsiders from diverse nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. Internally, the social make-up was in flux as well. Although the new economic paradigm began to alter local social structures, it did not greatly modify the milieu. The seasonal nature of extractive activities required neither keeping a permanent labor force nor the existence of year-round, fixed infrastructure in the field. Techno-environmental constraints associated with this kind of work made full control of the workforce difficult. Chicleros, rubber tappers and woodcutters labored mostly on their own. Furthermore, the
rainy season made for very unpleasant conditions for working, let alone supervising. Enforcing any kind of overseeing mechanism could create tension among the working crew and also increase the operating costs (see Schwartz 1990, Chapter 4). Hence, Petén had experienced a timid taste of “modernity” by the turn of the 1900s, in anticipation of further changes to come. The thriving of a chicle-based economy, due to increasing demands abroad, would effect such transformations.

For the next half century chicle dominated the life of Petén. Chicle linked people to a forest-based extractive economy with relatively strong linkages to the outside and continued weak ones within. Also, chicle introduced capitalist relations (wages, contracts) into Petén’s society. Yet, most of the profits from chicle went abroad, to foreign companies that reinvested only a marginal amount of their benefits on the province. Such events did not have a direct and immediate impact on the study area, but in the long run they did. The constant presence of chicleros, the use of the San Pedro River as the main means of communication, and the opening of airstrips and camps were events connected to chicle activities that contributed to the eventual settling of the area. In turn, the incursion of chicle prompted other developments, such as the displacement of the Lacandón and a timid response of the state to safeguard the border. All chicleros avoided, or maintained minimal contact with the state yet its presence could be felt strongly at certain time-periods, such as during the 1930s, when debt peonage laws were strictly enforced. Mexicans were also direct targets of state directives in the latter’s effort to remove them from Guatemalan territory. The arm of the central state also reached into this corner of Petén sporadically when trying to curtail illegal practices. In this sense, contraband undermined the authority of the state. People fleeing from debt peonage and
smugglers evading the law used a strategy of rejection and hiding in dealing with state representatives.

The economic relevance of chicle at the national level is not to be underestimated during this period. Chicle became the third most important export in the country during the 1920s, surpassed only by coffee and bananas (Schwartz 1990:138). In spite of chicle’s relative national importance, however, the state took no active interest in Petén, at least not before Ubico’s time. Consequently, little investment, social, physical or otherwise was channeled at the local level. The events induced by a forest product-base economy, i.e. more contacts with the outside, minimal attention from the national government and the generation of some wealth, though limited and concentrated, were important for Petén and its people, though not far-reaching enough to fully incorporate the province into the nation, or into the world market system.

The closing of this period, in the 1940s, coincided with a time of transition for the entire country. Guatemala left behind an outdated political system, one that restrained further economic transformations. Petén was opening up and slowly establishing closer links with the rest of the country. The northwest was being initially settled, mainly by Mexicans, while it still remained quite secluded from Guatemalan nationals.

The local economy in the northwestern rested on the extraction of second-class chicle and wildlife poaching activities during the 1940s and 1950s. Oil exploration looked promising at first but never took off. Yet, the industry’s brief involvement set a precedent for future events. The creation of FYDEP, in 1959, was a key factor in the populating of the northwest. First and foremost, the founding of the lumberyard at Ceibo signified an effort to reactivate Petén’s economy at the local level. From a geo-political
viewpoint the sawmill was a façade for having a visible, and permanent, presence of state representatives at the border, in reaction to what was perceived as Mexican encroachment. Soon thereafter state entities of control and surveillance appeared at the border, namely customs, immigration and militia representatives.

For better or worse, Mexican nationals undoubtedly ended up contributing to community formation at the study site. The ones who decided to stay in Guatemalan territory were aware that chicle collecting was a vanishing industry. Thus they needed to embrace a different occupation, a more sedentary one, and fitting to the new circumstances. Yet, the Guatemalan state intervened to curtail their presence, and was partially successful. The state created a forest reserve to fence off human presence. However, the government allowed, in a contradictory policy, the arrival of Guatemalan settlers. This situation resulted in a failed conservation strategy in the long run (see Chapter 5).

The data indicate that historically the “establishment”, whether the Spanish Crown, or the Republic, consistently has been unable to assert full and constant hegemony over the populations inhabiting northwestern Petén and the territory they have occupied. Marginality and neglect are the main reasons for failure of the central state structure to exert control over the area. In the late nineteenth century, an emerging political economy driven by capitalism and the world system would bring about some state encroachment into Petén. However, it still would be sporadic and timid, particularly in the northwest. Only full opening of Petén due to national and international driving forces such as the oil industry, one hundred years later, would unleash the forces, from within, that would counteract state agency.
Considering the speed at which the changes took place and the scope of their effect in the post 1960 period, in hindsight they seem remarkable. The large amounts of newcomers that arrived and the emerging economic activities that progressively emerged turned around conditions for people and the environment. Barely one decade had passed after the opening of Petén when the northwest also experienced a full influx. The building of a road gave the final push to a process already under way: complete expansion of the frontier and, in turn, the birth of territoriality. In this regard, and as will be demonstrated, the foundation of Naranjo, towards 1980-1982, marked a turning point in the protracted process of occupation of space via individual and collective agency. Strategies of persistence and perseverance to stay put in the face of opposition coming both from the inside and the outside eventually paid off. The experiences of local residents during the last two decades of the twentieth century, recounted at length in the following chapter, reveal the nature of agency in this locale in contemporary times.

Notes

1 Taking as a case-study the settlement of Tipu, located on the fringes of colonial Yucatan, inside present-day Belize, Mayanist Grant Jones has argued that the alleged isolation and inactivity in such frontier locales exemplify biased preconceptions about them; linkages with the outside were more vital than scholars have given them credit (See Jones 1989).

2 Schele and Freidel (1990) offer conclusive evidence about river ways being a vital transportation means in Classic Maya time.

3 British Honduras, as Belize came to be known for a long time, was a territory Spain loaned to England for the exploitation of timber, notably logwood at first. Timber crews would have been started to populate this territory around the end of the 17th century. Although economic relations between Petén and Belize were scant for another century they were in good standing otherwise (Schwartz 1990).

4 Drawing data from archives Schwartz’s places the total at 1604 for the year 1778. According to this author the 18th century seems to have been a period of a population decline because the figure stood close to the 3,000 mark, he claims (1990:43).

5 Grant Jones, the specialist who has provided the most current explanation on this topic disagrees with Thompson in considering the Chinamit a closely related group from the Cehach. Jones believes that the Chinamit were a branch of the Maya Mopan, who occupied eastern Petén (1998:20). Cehach would mean something close to ‘land of deer’ or ‘abundance of deer’ because of the existence of large populations of these animals in the area (Thompson 1977).
6 The population of Libertad almost tripled in the course of twenty years (1859-1880) going from 520 to 1431 (Schwartz 1990:106, Table 3:10).

7 Bryan Latham (1957) provides a general historical overview of timber as part of world trade. A superb example of scholarly work that applies the world system approach to explaining the transformation of a staple into world commodity is Sidney Mintz’s study of sugar (1985).

8 Conservative politicians favored much of what had characterized the colonial regime, i.e. the sanctioning of the church’s strong influence on public matters, a mercantilist economy and corporatism. Liberals fostered layman education, a stronger role of the state on all realms of life and the opening of the economy to the outside.


10 In the early part of the 20th century a local magazine reported, for instance, that a company that went by the name of Guatemalan Mahogany Export Co. had an office at Libertad. See: La Estrella Polar Publicación mensual de propaganda, Organo del Club Liberal “Cirilo Flores” y de los intereses generales del país [sic] Epoca 1, n. 3, Petén, March 21, 1904

11 The first and last figures originate from reliable sources, according to Schwartz (1990:106, 107); the 1839 information would have come from a census that Arthur Morelet obtained during his visit to Flores in 1847 (Morelet 1871:231).

12 Information elicited by a man who was born at Paso Caballos, and who knew Hurtado, further supports this thesis. Then in his late 70s, he was the offspring of Mexican parents who had gone to Petén to work for the owner of the sawmill, a Mexican too. He recalled how Hurtado, ex-lumber worker-turned-chiclero, had chosen Naranjo as his collecting grounds. But initial permanent occupation may have had happened even at an earlier date. Archaeologist Ian Graham, who first visited Naranjo in 1965, recalls having seen infrastructure built by the chicle company that operated there in the 1920s, or so he assumed (Personal communication, September 16, 2003).

13 Cochineal, a natural product used for dying clothes, progressively lost significance in the international market share due to the invention of synthetic substitutes. This item had been the backbone of the Guatemala’s economy before 1850-1860 (Schwartz, 1990: 79. For a comprehensive work on cochineal see Rubio 1994).


15 Internal FYDEP Decree 354, issued on June 1965, layed out the plan for the growth of agriculture and industry in Petén. On the decree’s first article FYDEP sets as its goal to promote “…la intensificación de la colonización y aprovechamiento racional de las tierras del Departamento del Petén…” […]to intensify colonization and rational utilization of lands in the province of Petén.] (FYDEP 1969:29-33)

16 These were FYDEP’s calculations at the time (FYDEP, 1969: 13). The author of the document estimated that during the period 1959-1969 as many as 10,000 people had migrated into Petén, yet it remains only that, an estimate. (Ibid, p. 50)

17 La Libertad, municipal Birth Registry, Folio 34, Libro 57 (1948); Folio 66, Libro 57 (1949); Folio 121, Libro 57 (1949).

18 Folios 9, 40, 41, Libro 58 (1950 and 1951, respectively). There are no other entries for the 1950s. Obviously the scarcity of the data points to an undercount on these documents. This comes as no surprise
given the remoteness of the northwest at the time. Some people, specifically Mexicans, may not have wanted to report the birth of their offspring either.

19 There were other explanations, also heard by word of mouth, as to why the place was set on fire but none seemed completely plausibly. One placed responsibility in the hands of guerrilla groups but this unlikely because there were no insurgent groups active in the area at this time. Another key informant alluded to personal reasons, but again, this was an unlikely motive.

20 This institution is in charge of patrolling and maintaining cleared all vegetation covering the 30 feet-wide strip which constitutes the physical boundary. The entity also works at proposing recommendations to solve bilateral water and boundaries.

21 Figueredo entered into the following arrangement with people: he would give someone a cow to look after. The first three calves would be handed over to him, as a form of payment, while the person kept the mother.


23 Peteneros had traditionally used natural savannas for grazing, in collectively shared padlocks and without any legal title to individual parcels. FYDEP was attempting to introduce “modern” ways of ranching that necessitated investment in capital and regularization of tenure to offer security over it.


25 Today two mini-refineries produce asphalt and bunker oil in the country.

26 For instance, one of these censuses took place in 1976 at Naranjo according to Laureano Jerez, former FYDEP field worker. (Personal communication, February 15 2002)

27 Information elicited by the first teacher who went to Naranjo, in 1976; this respondent described the landowner as a “hard-headed” individual (Field notes).

28 The only planned colonization project implemented in Petén during this period occurs in the western border between Guatemala and Mexico. In a move to halt the Mexican government’s intention to build a dam in the upper Usumacinta River, which would have flooded vast areas of Petén territory, the Guatemalan government fostered the settling of 16 cooperatives along the margins of the Pasión and Usumacinta rivers. Initiated during the 1960s this program had ended towards 1973 (For detailed account of the cooperatives see: Millet 1974, and Sowers 1979).

29 At the time logging was a rudimentary industry. One century later, however, technological advances had made possible for timber extraction to be carried out as a year-round operation. This change will be a determining factor in the emergence of communities in northwestern Petén.
CHAPTER 5
PASSING FRONTIER AND NASCENT TERRITORIALITY: 1982-2002

Introduction

Two overarching themes make up this chapter. The first one is about the surrounding advent of territoriality. The second theme concerns the role that agency played in the making of territoriality. I argue here that the frontier process culminated in territoriality. In this sense and to clarify, frontier was about the action of humans moving in and occupying land, creating expansion, whereas territoriality was the progressive construction of a social-cultural space. But the transition from frontier fading towards territoriality-making was shaped by the intersecting of political and economic driving forces taking place at this time-period. One of these major forces, civil war in the nation, disrupted people’s lives in profound ways. Specifically, the conflict provoked population resettlement to places like northwestern Petén. The re-emergence of oil activities in Petén, after a three-decade long recess, was another driving force that directly contributed to the evolution of the frontier. Two events linked to the petroleum industry were critical in the colonization already in progress in the area: the building of a road from central Petén into the northwest and the employment opportunities that it created.

Abridged life histories, vignettes, and sketches of events in the lifetime of people who went to populate the Naranjo-Ceibo strip constitute the ethnographic data through which these processes are revealed. Personal testimonies exemplify shared experiences of the human collectivity while simultaneously showing the unique trajectories of frontier life and territoriality-making. The individual’s journey is enmeshed in dynamics where
personal choice, volition, fate, and luck intertwine with these external driving forces, most notably the social structure of the nation-state, namely its dictates, its bodies and its field agents. Reactions to all these actors and processes show the strategies that people at Naranjo and Ceibo employed in dealing with changing conditions and the forces molding their existence. The examination of diverse life histories reveals the strategies people employed in the progression of occupying space, and the actions the state employed in the area, to elicit a picture of changing state-society relations.

In spite of armed confrontation, but fueled by economic developments, the expansion of the frontier thrived at Naranjo but not at Ceibo. New and re-emerging economic activities induced further changes in the first of the two localities, infusing territoriality with its own vitality. While Naranjo prospered and grew, Ceibo languished, only to gain renewed importance in 2000. The first part of the chapter talks about the economic and political forces pushing the frontier, as well as other factors at work, namely the presence of the central state representatives, and the prevalence of illegal practices. Part two suggests that frontier expansion went through a two-phase cycle at Naranjo. Human expansion remained arrested at Ceibo until 2000, when conditions rapidly began to change at the hamlet.

**Political and Social Driving Forces after 1982**

**Armed Conflict, 1979-1992**

Leftist guerilla groups initiated armed struggle in Guatemala during the early 1960s in an effort to redress the country’s social and economic disparities. At the time, growing insurgency was met with heavy repression from the national army personnel, in control of the central state, and effectively halting the movement for some time. The main battleground at the time was eastern Guatemala, a region where small landholders were
facing incoming cattle ranchers in search of land for pastures. Between 1966 and 1968 the army carried out a sweeping campaign against a rebel force estimated at no more than 500 members, in the process killing from six to eight thousand innocent civilians (Jonas and Tobias 1974). Disbanded and reduced, the revolutionaries had to re-group to continue the fighting. Several years passed before conditions were ripe for renewed conflict. The political and economic crisis that the country experienced through the 1970s contributed directly to an increase of insurgent activity. Reports of guerrilla presence in Petén were documented as far back as 1972 (Inforpress Centroamericana 1973: Jan. 3). As the pace of war increased, violence between the armed forces and the rebels began to take a heavy toll among civilians not involved in the struggle in the form of massive displacement and mass killings (among others works see: Black 1983; Davis and Hodson 1982). This problematic situation helped the guerrillas win support among sectors of Guatemalan society disaffected with the establishment, and specifically with military rule. It is against this backdrop that, by 1979, the rebels’ influence had extended considerably throughout the country, particularly in rural areas. Guerrilla operations turned bolder and more widespread, as well.

Petén did not escape this turmoil; it soon became a main arena of the brewing war. In the early 1980s one of the three active guerrilla groups in existence had established a stronghold in the rugged terrain of the Lacandón Mountains, south of Ceibo. From that safe haven, the Armed Rebel Forces, known as FAR, organized and launched a number of different activities among the rural population ranging from propaganda meetings, to food collecting rallies, to sabotage of and disruption of oil operations, to attacks on the national army. The worst period of the conflict took place between 1980 and 1982 when
Guatemala’s army response to guerrilla activity turned brutal. The Guatemalan army killed hundreds of civilians as part of a “scorched earth” counter-insurgency campaign based on the general assumption that many sectors of society, such as students, intellectuals, Amerindians and others were active collaborators or sympathizers with the rebels (see: Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [CEH] 1999). In Petén the war was never as widespread as in other parts of the country but instead was rather localized. The main geographical areas of conflict were in the western and southern regions, with occasional incidents taking place in other locations.

To further secure its hold on rural inhabitants, the army initiated several tight-control initiatives. One was the creation of “self-defense” patrol units, known as PAC. The purpose of the PAC was to enroll all able-bodied male, civilians, 16 and older. In addition to reporting on and fighting (if necessary) against the guerrillas, the civil patrol was a mechanism of social control intended to keep people in check throughout the country. Squads made up of several men each had to patrol every night through their own community, as well as be on call duty for unexpected occurrences (CEH 1999). At Naranjo, the total male population in the hamlet was divided up in groups so that every man had to patrol at least once a week. The civil patrol system was finally disbanded after 1986, due to much discontent among the population, because hostilities between the contending parties had begun to wane, and because a recently inaugurated civilian president made overtures to guerrilla groups towards a peace accord.

Testimonies gathered in the field indicate that, by and large, no one from Naranjo and Ceibo showed support for FAR –at least not overtly. In fact, some of the inhabitants openly opposed the leftist program. Although the intensity of warfare at Naranjo and
Ceibo never reached the levels of violence experienced in other parts of the country, some dreadful incidents did occur during wartime. Innocent victims were tortured, some personal disputes were vented through the conflict, e.g., one neighbor falsely accusing another of supporting one side or the other, and limitations were imposed regarding free mobility, e.g., not permitting people to simply move around from town to town. Ceibo’s proximity to the Lacandón Mountains and its remote position made the hamlet a war scenario between the two contending forces. In fear of their lives most residents opted to flee and Ceibo remained inhabited for some time. Mexican nationals without proper documentation, e.g., residency papers, living in the border area were also directly affected by war, and those who did not leave on their own were expelled on purpose.\(^1\)

Reportedly, on several occasions guerrilla forces attacked the garrison at Naranjo. The last encounter between both warring parties probably took place in 1992, marking the closing of direct confrontation in this part of Petén. Civil war ended officially in Guatemala after a peace treaty was signed between the army and the insurgents in 1996.

Two field note entries and an abridged life history, provide close insights into what happened to different people who moved to the northwest due to the war:

Two field note entries

May 18, 2002. At Chal, municipality of Dolores, there came a time when residents were seized in the middle of the night without prior warning, and then taken away. They were innocent people, says Pablo Tirso, the associate reminiscing about this period of his life. One night the army went to the Tirso’s hamlet in a surveillance mission. A party of several military men broke into his house and took him out of bed. Then they began interrogating him about guerrilla presence in the area. After much commotion the soldiers left. Subsequently, even tending to the cornfields became dangerous. People stopped going to their parcels in fear of being unexpectedly kidnapped, or killed. Tirso realized it was time to move elsewhere for the sake of his family. Truckers who knew Tirso had told him about land availability in the northwest. After spending two years at another location, Tirso finally moved over to Naranjo, in 1990.
July 27, 2002. Friend and main respondent Gallo casually mentioned that he and his family had to leave Colpetén, municipality of Dolores, due to life threats against his father. A trace of fear in his voice revealed he was confiding a well-kept secret. At the time, early 1980s, Gallo’s father was a prosperous rancher. He had to leave everything behind because the guerrilla was after him. The family headed to Naranjo in search of refuge.

Marco Tení
A Q’eqchi’ man, Marco’s life trajectory is illustrative in many ways. He is one of many people who went to Petén at an early age in search of a better future. Without any formal schooling, his father never sent him to school. Marco said he left his hometown (Cobán, Alta Verapaz) at the age of 12. He and two cousins headed for Petén. The year was 1965. He walked three days to get to San Luis, he recalled, without knowing exactly where he might end up. Doing odd jobs here and there, Marco and his relatives made it to Poptún, where they stayed for six months working on cattle ranches. Then the group headed for San Benito. Marco learnt there to tend to cattle. After four years he decided to move on again. This time the destination was Paso Caballos, a main camp for forest activities. At this place, Marco worked on the collecting of chicle (during six months of the year), xate (July and August), and allspice (any time). He liked it at Paso Caballos because there was a way of making a living, he asserted. At this time-period Q’eqchi’ people constituted the majority of inhabitants at Paso Caballos. This could have been a pull factor in Marco’s decision to go over there, too. For over two years he was hired as a muleteer. During this period Marco traveled extensively through northern Petén.

Sometime in the late 1970s Marco would meet his future wife, a Mexican woman whose family had migrated, around 1968, to Paso Caballos. By 1982 they already had four children. But at this time Paso was a tragic scenario to civil strife in Petén. Suspected guerrilla activity in the vicinity attracted the attention of the army. According to this respondent, the insurgents threatened to kill everybody, so people had no choice but to flee. Soon thereafter the village was burned down, though the informant claims he does not know who did it. A friend of Marco offered him a house to rent at Naranjo, a proposition he took up. He knew about Naranjo because he had had gone there to sell corn. Marco worked initially as a fisherman, to slowly rebuild his life at Naranjo, where he has remained ever since. He procreated a total of nine offspring with his wife, who had died in recent years. In 2002 he was working as a wage laborer with the oil industry.

These narratives talk about the disarticulation of society in Petén that ensued because of war, mainly, but also because of the brutal campaign waged by the state army. People’s reaction, out of fear, or due to direct aggression, translated into fleeing. Warfare
hence became a main factor in fueling the frontier dynamic of the northwest through displacement, reconfiguring in this way the occupation of space.

Guatemala’s armed conflict had an impact on the emerging frontier on at least two levels. First, some people dislodged from southern Petén due to the war moved up north in search of safe haven. Now, conditions in and around Naranjo did not always facilitate this relocating because the army closely watched any outsiders coming into the village. People who moved with the intention of settling found ways of bypassing such restrictions. The new settler usually obtained from the military authority at his last place of residence, or his hometown, a safe-conduct that recommended him or her as “a person of good morals”, to paraphrase the words respondents used when they referred to this procedure. This pass served to demonstrate that the individual was not a subversive, in the eyes of the military. But at the same time, the opposite effect took place: the general climate of insecurity that prevailed in the region during those years discouraged other people from moving sooner than it might have happened under peacetime conditions. The war may have contributed to sending some people to Naranjo, yet, at the same time, deterred others, with the outcome of slowing down a process already under way.

Secondly, the army followed a specific strategy to curtail any potential support for guerrilla groups. Interestingly, this war-time interaction between the state and the population at the time, in a top-down power relationship, resulted in two possible outcomes in terms of the space occupation process. Some Naranjeños expressed the view that the military needed people to occupy empty areas in order to limit rebel movements through the region, as well as to gain intelligence information from non-combatant civilians. One key associate thought, in fact, that the army actively encouraged the
emergence of hamlets and communities along the road leading to Naranjo with the objective of neutralizing the guerrillas. The opposite view would argue that the Guatemalan armed forces enforced among residents a prohibition against inhabiting isolated areas, away from nucleated centers, precisely because they feared it would be easier to lure, convince, or coerce this scattered population into supporting the insurgents. Were this second theory proven correct, then it would explain why the occupation of the stretch of land between Naranjo and Ceibo did not take place at an earlier date. Under either scenario, it is to be noted, human agency was very much neutralized by, and subjugated to the dictates of the war logic, mainly in response to state-driven violence.

The End of Mexican Influence, ca. 1980-1982

Throughout much of the twentieth century and up until the late 1970s, Mexicans still constituted a large segment of the population in northwestern Petén. Attracted by labor opportunities or simply by the possibility of gaining access to land rather easily, Mexican presence gradually rose throughout the 20th century. This situation radically changed towards 1980. Mexicans were driven out swiftly. Whether using security reasons as a pretext in the context of the war affecting the country (see note 1, this chapter), or as a deliberate action on the part of the at-the-time militarized state to solve what was considered a threat to national sovereignty, the fact is that most Mexicans were banished from the area. Entire families, parents with children born in Guatemala, and spouses of Guatemalan citizens had to leave. Some people went into hiding to avoid persecution, but the majority fled or was forced out. In 2002 only a few Mexican nationals remained in Naranjo and Ceibo.

My research findings point to a significant presence of Mexicans at Naranjo and Ceibo, despite the lack of any quantitative evidence from other sources. Specifically, I
was aware of twelve Guatemalans who had established a conjugal liaison with a Mexican national. These Mexicans had arrived at Naranjo between 1960 and 1975. They were part of the twenty seven individuals whom I either knew, or heard about, and who had lived at one point or another in this location. There were also the offspring of Mexican parents, both from people who had left and people who stayed. A total of sixteen respondents, known to me, had been born at Naranjo and Ceibo to one or both Mexican parents. The following two narratives offer a glimpse into the lives and times of two Mexicans, one who left and one who stayed.

Maclovio Lara

Lara, 88 years old when I met him, was born in the municipality of Balancán, Tabasco, next to the border with Guatemala. He grew up at a time, the 1920s, in which land was plentiful in his homeland. Although several latifundia were already established back then, he recalled that the ordinary folk could still lay claim to non-occupied land parcels.

As a young man Lara decided to engage in chicle collection. In his early twenties, around 1935, he tried his luck and went over to Petén. Little did he know that most of the next three decades his life would drift between Ceibo, Naranjo, and points beyond. He initially arrived at Progreso, when Hurtado was in charge of a chicle camp. Then, and over the years, he worked and lived at different places, including Naranjo, Paso Caballos and San Benito. The first time he passed by Naranjo, Lara recalled, there was nothing there.

During the time that the Chicle Development Company operated in the northwest, two towboats hauled chicle to Mexico via the San Pedro River. Later the product would be transported out of the area via airplanes. Lara remembered that at some point during WWII chicle workers were coerced to extract rubber, too, under the threat that no chicle would be bought from them unless they also handed over rubber. He asserted that over-exploitation finished off natural rubber stands and after two or three seasons none was left. Many Mexicans, in excess of 400 according to this respondent, would enter Petén during this epoch to collect chicle every year. They came from different states, predominantly Campeche, Tabasco and Veracruz. In the intervening years of the major war Mexicans had been expelled from northern Petén; he was not directly affected by this action. Lara did remember that Ubico’s appointed governor mistreated his compatriots. In 1962 Lara suffered an accident, a spine injury, and had to be taken to Guatemala City, for treatment. The chicle union to which he and many other chicleros belonged paid for his medical care. All in all, Lara spent thirty seasons in the chicle business, twelve of which he worked as a group’s foreman. Around this time he joined a woman
and settled in San Benito. Just like many other chicleros Lara made no fortune in chicle, alleging that he always had one too many obligations. Later Lara did a series of odd jobs. For a while the International Commission on Water and Boundaries hired him. He also hunted jaguars and crocodiles. Later, towards the 1970s, he took up xate and allspice collecting.

Lara entered in a liaison with at least three women during his lifetime, hence the cause of his “obligations”. In spite of having procreated children with all of them, he was never able to obtain land in Petén. In 1980 he, along with other people, was taken to the borderline and expelled out of the country by an army officer, infamous for carrying out this kind of action. Dispossessed, Lara settled down in La Palma, Tabasco, to start anew.

Over the long term, Maclovio Lara intended to settle down permanently in Petén through the acquisition of land and through establishing relationships with local women. In due course he was caught in the spiral of violence that struck the Naranjo-Ceibo area.

He was living at Naranjo when the war arrived, but it was too late. With no legal papers he had to leave. He personifies the Mexican driven out as a direct victim of state-directed violence. He also embodies the drifter who never settled at one place early enough in his life. Even though Lara was part of the earliest cohort of people who shaped the frontier, he was not among the group of individuals who subsequently consolidated territoriality at Naranjo.

Nopal Tenorio

Another native of Tabasco, Tenorio entered Petén as a young man. He went there in the company of an elder brother who had been traveling for many years on a barge that sold wares to the few residents located on the riverbanks of the San Pedro. Around 1968 this sibling decided to settle near Naranjo. This situation probably constituted the pull factor that attracted the young Tenorio to the area. He arrived around 1972 or 1973. Tenorio indicated that he initially worked at the then recently established lumber sawmill as a machine operator. He was also an experienced boat driver, a skill from which he would benefit later in life. Tenorio worked for a short time at the sawmill and then entered the chicle trade. He claimed that he had worked as a foreman and muleteer. Towards the end of the 1970s he briefly entered the trade on xate. But both forest activities were fast disappearing and he began to think of ways to prosper from the ensuing growth at Naranjo. In his next endeavor Tenorio bought corn from Naranjo-Ceibo residents and sold it in Tabasco. He probably carried along other valuables, such as wildlife; a trusted respondent indicated that Tenorio hunted crocodiles for several years. In
return, he brought manufactured items from Mexico, in high demand in the settlement. Tenorio began to accumulate capital. With help from Guatemalan friends Tenorio went into hiding during the worst period of internal strife. Thus he was spared from the forced removal other compatriots of his endured at the time.

Towards 1984-1985 a new opportunity arose for Nopal Tenorio, and he grabbed it. At the time a major tourism entrepreneur from central Petén acquired land in the area. Foreseeing a potential for this activity he proposed a business deal to Tenorio. The businessman would send clients of his who were traveling to Mexico via this border. The idea was to embark tourists at Naranjo so they would navigate on the San Pedro River, and then disembark them at La Palma. From this point forward people would be taken to the famed archeological site of Palenque, Chiapas. Tenorio readily accepted the deal because by then he owned several boats. In fact, he was the only one in Naranjo with the capability to take on this enterprise. For the next eight to nine years Tenorio monopolized this activity, which brought him good profits. Problems with boatmen from La Palma would allegedly bring down to a trickle the otherwise flourishing traffic. Another respondent asserted that the low-quality service Tenorio provided to tourists was the real reason behind his downfall. But by then Tenorio had invested in other lucrative activities. He re-initiated the buying of crocodile hides to sell them across the border. Moreover, he transported undocumented migrants to locations close to the borderline, a phenomenon that had already begun to grow. Eventually he dropped, or was removed, from the tourist deal and was put in charge of the ranch his former employer owned in Naranjo. By this time Tenorio had made the moving of undocumented people his main occupation, setting him up in a comfortable position. In a matter of years he had bought a handsome piece of land and introduced cattle. He quit the job at the ranch and tended entirely to the booming migrant trade for a few more years. Eventually he left the operation in the hands of his children to dedicate more time to his cattle ranch.

Tenorio was among the lucky Mexicans spared from extradition. He was able to hide from the strong arm of the state. Furthermore, he integrated gradually into local society through financial shrewdness and by establishing relationships with several Guatemalan women. Tenorio’s success made him an exception within the Mexican cohort, however. Most of his compatriots were farmers, just like the rest of Naranjo inhabitants. From his perspective, he simply took advantage of opportunities that came his way, both legal and illegal. His nationality facilitated the coming and going from one country to another, placing him in an advantageous position in relation to other people. Tenorio’s involvement with the traffic of undocumented migrants, in particular,
contributed to make this a mainstream economic activity at Naranjo, a factor that, in turn, played a key role in terms of local economic growth. Economic prosperity attracted people to Naranjo. In this sense, Tenorio was a full participant in the progression of frontier expansion.

A closing commentary is warranted about Mexican presence at the study site. The long-drawn out impact of Mexican presence in the northwest, dating back to the early 20th century, did not surface locally via acquisition of language variation, the adopting of culinary habits or other material cultural traits. Instead the transfer was revealed in terms of people establishing marital relationships at the either side of the border. Although the exchange has happened both ways with Guatemalans going to reside in Tabasco and vice versa, many more Mexicans have stayed in Guatemalan territory to and raise families than the other way around. This can be explained in the context of expanding cattle ranching latifundia in adjacent Tabasco since the 1960s (Tudela 1989). As was happening elsewhere, including southern Petén, a direct result of cattle expansion in Tabasco brought about population expulsion. In spite of the demographic changes in Tabasco, low population density and natural geographical barriers have worked against a more thorough, and richer, socio-cultural exchange. Sparsely inhabited settlements on both sides of the borderline, plus the relative difficulty of moving to and from both nations, prevented the development of a distinctive border culture with some shared features.

This absence of a local population with no strong sense of attachment, i.e. no deep roots, to this particular territory has facilitated a relative permissiveness and tolerance towards Mexicans among their Guatemalan counterparts. A long, though discontinuous
connection with Mexicans via the chicle trade contributed to a relatively easy blend-in of these outsiders. Guatemalans of Mexican descent chose, by and large, to stay even when their parents decided to leave due to the war. Hence Mexicans contributed to territoriality with their numbers but not so much with the cultural exchange that usually takes place at international borders.

**Economic Driving Forces**

**The Erratic Re-emergence of Logging in the Northwest**

The exploitation of timber never ceased entirely in Petén, and certainly not in the northwest. It continued all along, but without official sanctioning. Timber extraction became one among several illegal practices that characterized the zone. The industry prevailed due to the high profits it brought in. A hypothetical case, elicited by a key respondent, illustrates the point: a truck carrying an average load of 5,000 square feet of lumber would have fetched an estimated total value of US$3,500 in 2002. Woodcutters would get the largest amount of it-about $2,300. Depending on the number of bribes to offer, the net share of earnings for the person who financed the whole operation could vary between $800 and $1,000 (Field notes). In Guatemala one thousand dollars amounted almost to the sum of eight monthly salaries, at the minimum wage rate, in 2002.

Logging picked up again after 1987, after FYDEP’s closure. Local residents remember that by the early 1990s the northwest was certainly experiencing a resurgence of logging in places where prime wood could still be found, according to local sources. It was in this context that Naranjo residents engaged in this trade, mainly as subcontracted woodcutters. Between 1990 and 1994, approximately, the area of operation was located east of Naranjo. At the time, the number of trucks loaded with the precious cargo became
a good indicator of the industry’s thriving: four vehicles left the area every day. As prime stands became depleted, lumber bosses moved their venues elsewhere, most recently north of Naranjo, inside PNLT. During the latter part of 2002 a renewed involvement of Naranjeños on this business was reported to this researcher, when neighbors noticed that trucks began passing through the village every week. It is important to point out that the contraband of timber to Mexico had continued unabated throughout. Reportedly, Mexicans took the lumber from Petén to sell it at a marked-up price. Because Tabasco’s supplies were practically exhausted, the non-regulated Guatemalan wood made it cheap merchandise.\textsuperscript{4}

Indisputably, logging was another activity that attracted settlers to the expanding frontier. Several respondents interviewed at length for this study came to the area because they found employment in this industry. The following account describes the life experiences of an individual who was a woodcutter early in the 1990s, one who eventually settled for good at Naranjo.

\textbf{Ricardo Valdez}

I first met Valdez in 2000, during his initial term as assistant mayor of Naranjo. A man in his mid 30s, Ricardo was someone who initially impressed me; he was a pro-active, well-intentioned, and progressive leader. He had good ideas for the welfare of his community. One was to attain the upgrading of Naranjo’s status in the Guatemalan political-administrative hierarchy of settled places, that is, to turn it from a hamlet into a village. Another idea was introducing a drinking water system into the locality, a long-pending project in the agenda of former political leaders. Perhaps what intrigued me the most about Valdez was his pro-environmental stand amongst a general populace that did not care for, and sometimes openly decried, protected areas and environmental policy. In line with his view of what ought to be right, and lawful, Valdez had openly opposed the emergence of the informal market at Ceibo. Naturally, this decision had earned him the enmity of the vendors, including some Naranjeños. The trajectory of events in Valdez’s life sheds light into what he had been before and what he became later.

Under the surface, the ascendancy of Valdez to the position he occupied in the period 2000-2002, for he was re-elected to the post, lay a history of sacrifice, affluence, hardship, and redemption. Born into a very poor family in southern
Petén, Valdez was one of many destitute youth who did not have the opportunity to finish elementary school because he had to work from an early age in order to supplement the family’s income. He said that as an adolescent the family group, headed by his single mother, moved in search of land to one of the colonization fronts (named La Bomba, municipality of Libertad) that had opened due to the construction of the way leading to Naranjo. Although conditions were harsh in that area -the feeder road that led there remained in disrepair most of the time, drinking water was far away and scarce- the Valdez family held on to what they had. Farming provided enough to get by.

This was the mid 1980’s when Valdez, a young man, got an offer to enter the woodcutting business. At the time logging operations were concentrated in the municipality of San Andrés, upriver on the San Pedro. Valdez engaged in this trade and remained in it for the next five to six years. The lifestyle of a woodman resembled in some respects that of a chicle collector. The person had to be away from home for extended periods of time and dwell in provisional camps in the forest. When their time was up most loggers would collect their payment and typically go on a drinking spree that left them penniless until they hired themselves anew for another protracted stay in the woods. Influenced by fellow workers Valdez would take on this lifestyle, to eventually fall prey to alcoholism. Valdez made a lot of money in those years but wasted most of it in drinking. At some point, as part of his job, Ricardo traveled around the region and went to Naranjo, a place he immediately felt attracted to. He and his mother then moved to this location. While at Naranjo and still working in logging Valdez initiated an intimate relationship with a woman he met there. After Valdez and his household lost every single thing they owned due to a fire accident, he reflected on his condition and decided to straighten up. He quit woodcutting and began a career as a salaried worker for others.

Towards 1994 he and other Naranjo leaders formed what eventually became the largest social organization in northwestern Petén, the Highway Committee, in a showdown between local communities and Basic Resources, the oil company working at Xan (see below). This experience would bring him into contact with the highest CONAP authorities in Petén, who approached Valdez’s group in search of support. CONAP asked the organization to mediate in its efforts to negotiate relocation agreements with three communities located inside PNSL. He gained first-hand exposure to what conserving the environment meant and hence he thought those ideas through. After a 1997 incident landed him, unjustly, in jail, Valdez emerged as a prominent public figure in the eyes of many citizens of the region. Thereafter he was called to collaborate with the then assistant mayor of Naranjo. In the meantime, Valdez took on a renewed interest in formal schooling. Through an adult education program Valdez was able to finish both elementary and high school levels in less than three years. At the end of 2002 he had earned the high school diploma and began making plans to attend college. Valdez declined running once again for re-election as assistant mayor because his goals were set higher: he aspired to get slotted as a vice-alcalde (substitute mayor) candidate for the 2003 general elections for mayoral position at the municipal level.
Valdez epitomized the settler who was lured by economic opportunity to Naranjo, a place he discovered while being part of the timber industry. Valdez’s experience took a unique, paradoxical turn. While initially involved in an illegal activity, logging, later in life he underwent a change of opinion that led him to adhere to the opposite side, i.e. the environmental cause. Flexibility and survival strategies of constant “shifting” were followed by many people because of economic instability, but also due to political fear. People used these strategies as well to spread out in spite of dangerous conditions at the time. During the period of civil strife the common citizen abided by what the army dictated, but if guerrillas confronted him or her, he or she had to comply as well. Valdez’s political ambitions are part of a project that goes beyond asserting territoriality, one in which the aim is amassing local political authority. I return to this topic in the concluding part of the dissertation.

**Xate Collecting, Late 1970s to Late 1980s**

Xate continued to be collected during the 1980s, to a certain extent filling the void left by chicle’s demise. It became a transition activity from the dominant forest-extractive system to an emerging agricultural-based economy. Xate was an occupation with which chicleros definitely identified. The collecting of this fern offered employment opportunities for people from many walks of life. This was the case of an ex-soldier whose life history is presented below. The lack of extensive stands in the northwest, a high rate of depletion of existing ones, the occurrence and severity of periodic fires will be contributing factors to the eventual vanishing of xate, in the relatively short time span of one decade. Although xate collection vanished from northwestern Petén, it also contributed to the rapid colonization process happening in the area.
Neto Guerra

A secretive man, Guerra never revealed where he had been born. His looks and his last name point to a possible origin in eastern Guatemala. He did mention that he had enrolled in the army, in the mid 1970s, and subsequently was sent to a garrison in a highlands location where havoc erupted a few years later due to armed conflict. Guerra headed to Petén soon after his dismissal and ended up at Naranjo, around 1982 or 1983, taking up the invitation of a friend. He engaged in xate, the first type of employment he found. He went to the Sierra del Lacandón area. The guerrilla, who meandered through the mountains, found him and expelled him, he said. At this point he took possession of land at the Naranjo-Ceibo strip, though he never cultivated it. After quitting xate he decided to work as a hired hand in the area surrounding Ceibo. A Mexican living next to the borderline employed Guerra to work in the maintenance of his paddocks. Then, in 1986, he accepted the job of administering the cattle ranch located at Progreso. He stayed for about five or six years in this job. In the meantime someone else took over his parcel of land. The new occupant set up his own boundary markers and began planting corn. Guerra had already introduced some pasture seed. To avoid any conflict he decided to give up on this parcel of land. After working for a number of landholders he was briefly hired as a woodcutter in the mid 1990s. He settled at Naranjo and began a family. In recent years he had been working with several oil companies, on a temporary basis. Just before our initial meeting he had quit his position with Basic Resources, where he spent five years. With the compensation payment from the company Guerra acquired a piece of land in the outskirts of Naranjo. He asserted that he would soon till it.

Guerra, a former state agent, exemplifies the settler who went empty-handed to northwestern Petén but had the opportunity to make a new start via xate. Not only did he find employment in the zone, but also he was able to get land. Guerra was one of the many people who participated in a practice prevalent during the early stages of the agricultural frontier, namely the high turnover in the possession of land in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. This phenomenon happened in one of two ways. People who initially laid claim to a piece of land but never cared much lost it when others came, took over, and began working actively on it. In the second scenario the first occupant decided to sell and move on. Today only a handful of the original holders still retain the piece of land they took over. In a way they were not only the real pioneers of the agricultural frontier, but also the people who kept moving on, at least some, to new frontiers.
Resurgence of Oil Industry, 1978

The discovery of oil in commercial quantities in Guatemala attracted the attention of major foreign companies in the business. One advantage for these businesses centered on the country’s proximity to the U.S. market. As exploration and exploitation opportunities were under way in the mid-1970s, the Guatemalan government put up for tendering a number of concession areas (called “blocks,” perhaps because of their rectangular shape) in northern Petén and other areas of the country. Numerous companies bid for exploration rights in several parts of Petén throughout the decade (see, for instance, Inforpress Centroamericana 1973: April 4, 1975: May 15). By October 1978 a consortium made up of the Texaco Interamerican Exploration Company and the Amoco Petroleum Company had signed a contract with the government for the exploration of area D (This Week 1978: April 3, October 23). Covering 196,000 ha., block D was situated right above the San Pedro river, covering part of Laguna del Tigre National Park. Texaco decided to concentrate its efforts at a place known as Santa Amelia, at a distance of 60 kilometers north of Naranjo. Because at the time the area could only be accessed by air, the consortium saw the need to build a road leading to Naranjo. Road construction began in 1978. The first segment of the road stretching from Santa Amelia to Naranjo was completed towards 1980. The second phase of this thruway involved connecting Naranjo with central Petén, something that was accomplished between 1980 and 1984. Perhaps Texaco decided to establish a base camp at Naranjo because the hamlet was the biggest settlement in the area. In 1979 facilities had been set up at the outskirts of the hamlet. Jobs, unskilled for the most part, opened up for Naranjeños. Then, in early 1981 Texaco announced the discovery of oil reserves at a field called Xan, in block D (This
Week 1981: April 27). Although actual production did not start until one year later, the news was considered a positive step in the progression of the industry.

After a new bidding round in 1982, block L was given in a concession to yet another consortium: Hispánica de Petroleos (Hispanoil), Petroleos Brasileiros (Petrobras) and Texaco (This Week 1982: August 23). This block, 198,414 ha. in size, was closer to Naranjo, southeast of the village (7 kms.), at a location commonly known as Chocop. In 1983 a base camp was promptly built within the main area of exploration. More employment opportunities rose. Soon thereafter petroleum was found within the block, and a 25-year term contract signed, with the option of renewal.

Initially owned by Texaco, the concession rights of block D and L were handed down (i.e. sold) subsequently to several companies. Exploration contracts lasted for 5 to 6 years only. In spite of having found oil, Texaco pulled out of the country by 1985, at the end of its commitment at areas D and L, mainly for security reasons (This Week, 1985: October 28). Basic, which operated at D for the longest time, recently re-sold the rights to the area. After 2001 a France-based company called Perenco became the holder of the concession (Perenco 2001).

In spite of what at first appeared as a promising future, the industry showed no more growth after the 1980s. Multiple reasons accounted for the departure of all but one of the oil companies from the country and the lack of interest on oil prospecting among new ones. First and foremost, production levels reached by the only two firms extracting crude in the early eighties (i.e., Basic and Hispanoil) were not enticing enough for other prospective investors. Second, a decline on world crude prices further depressed hopes of attracting major ventures into Guatemala’s nascent oil industry. To illustrate, while in
early 1983 the average price in the international market was close to US$34 per barrel, by mid-year it had plummeted to US$29; Guatemalan oil fetched close to US$26 per barrel (This Week, 1983: November 14). Third, a new oil code issued in mid 1983 contained policies considered by petroleum companies as too restrictive and over-regulated. Augmented state overseeing on the industry was considered, for instance, one of the off-putting aspects of the new regulations (This Week, 1983: Sep. 26).

Finally, the security factor influenced the scant participation of oil companies in the tendering of new exploration areas and the eventual withdrawal of others. The insurgents had damaged facilities in Alta Verapaz as early as 1981 (This Week, 1981: October 12) and other incidents took place thereafter, some in Petén. In mid 1984 guerrilla activity had been reported in and near block L, prompting the response of the army (This Week, 1984: June 18). Texaco was particularly hard-hit in 1985 in several incidents involving the burning of facilities, harassment, and attacks. For instance, FAR members raided a well at Chocop at least twice (L area); in the first occurrence, in August, they set off two grenades and blasted a water pump used in the drilling process; one month later they destroyed the camp’s kitchen, trailer-campers and a crane (This Week 1985: March 25, August 19, October 21). No fatalities were reported. Not surprisingly, Texaco’s reaction was to pull out.

In spite of the industry’s arrested growth, the influence of oil activity has been important at several levels, the economic one being paramount among them. People showed up at Naranjo once Texaco arrived there, some attracted by the possibility of employment with the industry, others directly hired by it. They added to the rising number of settlers. After the early 1990s the lack of growth in the oil industry stopped
being a pull factor that attracted people into the area, but the opening of a road earlier on had triggered the full expansion of the frontier. For instance, five of the thirty-eight land proprietors from Naranjo interviewed for this study had worked continuously with oil companies since these began operating. One such story is included here.

Boris Tejada

Boris departed for Petén from his native Esquipulas, a municipality in Eastern Guatemala, next to the border with Honduras, at the age of sixteen. Similar to other single young men in need of making a living, at the end of the 1960s Boris took up chicle. But Boris found he was not very apt at this trade and then tried allspice and xate collecting. Later he came into contact with people involved in the jaguar fur trade and joined them. For a decade Boris worked in these different activities. Intending to migrate to Mexico, he then went to the Naranjo-Ceibo area. He was hired as a ranch hand at Progreso but his stay turned out to be rather brief. It was 1978, the same year in which Texaco began operating in the zone. United, a company subcontracted by Texaco, offered him employment. He accepted. In 1982 he settled permanently. It took another four years before Boris decided to buy land. The land plot, 62 hectares, had never been exploited and Tejada kept it that way. He made a conscious decision to keep the parcel forested. But the pressure from encroaching neighbors was too strong. As a partial solution to potential invaders he decided to till at least part of it to show others that the parcel had a holder. In this area the way to assert clear-cut limits to the land is done by cutting down the vegetation at the perimeter of a possession. Because Tejada did not live off the land, he rented out part of such a strip of land to other people. Tejada had worked almost continuously at the oil company located at Xan for the last two decades, where as a semi-skilled laborer he was able to make ends meet. He was no man of riches but led a rather comfortable life by local standards.

This example points to the way the oil industry contributed directly to frontier expansion by attracting people. Tejada was fortunate to enter the oil industry ranks at its early stages, accumulate experience, and hence seniority. This meant, in turn, earning a much higher income than what his farming neighbors obtained. With better salaries oil workers had the means to acquire land, to build better houses, in fact be liberated from agricultural dependence, as the above story illustrate. Because oil employees had the means to pay for land titles, they were among the first to secure control over their territory before the law. In a different way, this account is another example of how
through illegal practices Tejada was able to make a living when the opportunity arose, just like many other people did at some stage in their life trajectories.

**Slow Advancement of the Central State**

The state did not show any signs of increasing its presence in Naranjo after the opening of ground communication with the rest of Petén, in 1982, and the subsequent tide of colonization that ensued. Several reasons explain the slow spread of central state representatives at the study site in spite of forming territoriality. A general lack of interest in this remote corner is one of them: the central state had nothing to gain from it. Also, and for a number of years, the existence of a latent conflict deterred other state initiatives from emerging. Later on, the central state even stopped intervening directly because it delegated the administration of this area to CONAP. However, in the period 2000-2002 the trend was moving in the opposite direction. State institutions were coming in again, a reflection of changing conditions under way around 2000. The upsurge of central state administrative bodies that was taking place at Naranjo coincided with improved access into the area, an increase in illegal practices, and the revitalization of the border area via the informal market at Ceibo, among other things. Such events are discussed later in the chapter.

**The National Army**

Among all institutions that are part of the central state apparatus the military has been the one that has maintained the longest, continuous presence in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. The existence of some form of state force in the area, such as a militia, or a group of soldiers, dates back to the early 20th century. However, the authority the military exerted on local affairs during the initial six decades was discreet. By contrast, the degree of influence the military held during the recent history of Naranjo and Ceibo outmatched
other forms of state intervention. The utmost expression of military sway materialized in
the creation of a civil patrol system (see above), in the context of civil war, between 1982
and 1986. By 1992 armed confrontation between guerrillas and soldiers had practically
vanished in the northwest. Progressively, the tight control of the armed forces on the
government and the civilian population at large, eased. Up to 2002, the commanding
presence of the military still lingered in both obvious and subtle ways. At Naranjo, for
instance, it was customary to invite the commander of the garrison in the village to every
community event of any significance. Until the opening of a police station at the village,
in early 2003, the army had been in charge of overseeing all matters of internal security,
including law enforcement duties.

As a state institution, the army’s mandate was to assert control over what went on
at the border that separates Guatemala and Mexico. With the avowed intent of exerting
tighter surveillance over illegal practices in the area, specifically along the borderline, in
1997 the armed forces set up another barracks in the proximity of Ceibo. The existence
of this post had been rather symbolic because the military intervened as little as possible
in matters of law enforcement. The surveillance work that the army did in different
places (the San Pedro River, the road leading to the border) was lax and sporadic.
Information that recently exposed the participation of army personnel in a number of
non-juridical practices elsewhere in the country, including drug trafficking and
involvement in the undocumented migrant stream (see Zamora 2002), might explain the
army’s negligence in the patrolling of the border.

Surprising as it may seem, the army helped consolidate the progression of human
expansion at Naranjo in the late 20th century. The army supported local residents’ claims
when they demanded official recognition as a hamlet. Under the threat of a possible war, the presence of a settlement called for the existence of a garrison in the area. These conditions turned this relationship, though temporary, into a mutually beneficial one.

**Immigration Post**

The presence of immigration authorities, who first came into existence in the 1970s, had been of little consequence at the research site. Not even the upsurge of a migratory stream to the United States, in the early 1980s, triggered an effort on the part of central authorities to improve immigration facilities and raise the number of officers working at the Naranjo post. Material and human resources had always been lacking at this locality. At least until the early 1990s only one person manned the office (Field notes). In 2002 two teams of two members each ran immigration affairs by working on alternate, bi-weekly shifts. Generally, there was not much “official” activity at the site. Occasionally a tourist entering Guatemala passed through, or a Mexican national who had some business at Naranjo came around. Similarly, local residents going to Tabasco, or a handful of in-transit tourists exiting Guatemala, went by. It was the undocumented migrant stream to the U.S. that kept officers busy. Of course, this group was a much-coveted target among these agents of the central state. Customarily, migrants ended up being extorted in order to obtain local permits that would get them into Mexico, faking to be Guatemalans. Sometimes migrants were swindled in other ways, such as when they were brazenly blackmailed under threats of being thrown in jail, or deported.

What came to be perceived as excessive greediness on the part of immigration personnel seriously upset the local business sector at Naranjo in 2002. The latter thought that the former had gone too far. This sector of discontented residents decided to do something about what they perceived as actions and behavior detrimental to the sustained
flow of migrants, the backbone of the formal sector of the economy. In March the local
Merchant Association summoned the four immigration agents. The Association
expressed its displeasure with the abusive behavior these officers had shown towards
Mexican nationals, and towards the migrant population. The main concern focused on
mistreatment and alleged rip-offs committed against Mexican visitors, something that
would end, the association argued, an already scant trickle of visitors going to Naranjo.
Most importantly, excessive abuse inflicted upon undocumented migrants, for instance
taking people out of their lodging to get money from them, was seen as a practice that
would eventually hurt the entire business sector dependent on this transient group. Again,
the reasoning was that the migrants would stop passing through. At the aforementioned
rendezvous the immigration agents received the following warning: if such behavior
continued then higher authorities would be immediately informed. After the reprimand
the two most crooked agents slowed down for a few months.

These immigration officers have been involved, indirectly, in the advancing
frontier. As more and more undocumented migrants learned that it was rather easy to
bribe these authorities, the number of sojourners passing through Naranjo swelled. This
increase in the flow of transient migrants attracted, in turn, a larger number of
businesspeople to the community, who by investing in Naranjo strengthened the local
economy. From the perspective of the state, the malfeasances of immigration officers
subverted the authority invested upon them. They took advantage of their influence to
gain personal benefit, de-legitimizing what they were supposed to stand for. They have
contributed to a much more porous border, weakening the grip of the state on its territory
and its boundaries.
CONAP and Conservation as State Policy

Before talking about the one entity of the state that carries out conservation policy at the local and national level, and about its performance during the last two decades of the twentieth century, a brief discussion regarding the context in which protected areas emerge in Guatemala is in order. The idea of setting aside territories to preserve unique natural resources was initially formulated in the 1970s. Illustrative of this policy was the declaration, in 1972, of northern Petén as a natural forest reserve (see Chapter 4). Such a move set a precedent for later developments. At the macro level, and in more recent times, the creation of conservation units could be considered part of a growing movement in the international community that seeks to guard off the last pristine, or little disturbed, extensive areas of unique biodiversity, left on the planet for aesthetic, moral and scientific motives (McNeely et al 1990). The disappearance of tropical forest ecosystems, in particular, has implications in terms of problems such as global warming. These biomasses of vegetation have a larger role to play at the planetary level. In tandem with these developments, the Guatemalan government took the initiative to issue specific legislation to set up protected areas. This effort materialized in the Law of Protected Areas, in 1989 (see: Instituto de Derecho...[IDEADS] 2000). The implementation of the set of regulations had to be directed by a specific agency. Hence, the assignment went to CONAP, created specifically for this purpose, also in 1989 (Ibid). It is against this background that the declaration of northern Petén as a biosphere reserve—one in the lists of UNESCO biospheres (Nations 1999:11), emerged. Biospheres are meant to serve conservation goals, scientific purposes and sustainable economic development.
Having established the institutional framework for conservation in Guatemala, the question to address when considering that most protected areas in Guatemala, as in many other countries, are state-owned territories, is the following: to what extent does environmental policy play a part in a state’s efforts to exert its power locally? The question is pertinent to the study site because both Naranjo and Ceibo sit inside one of them. Furthermore, conservation groups had proposed to designate the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch as a biological or connectivity corridor by (see: CONAP and the Nature Conservancy, n.d.; Miller, Chang and Johnson 2001). Conservation policies might purportedly reaffirm state preeminence and constitute, up to a point, ways in which the state furthers a particular kind of territoriality. The goal of conservation becomes, so the argument goes, a state-centered drive towards control of space that curbs human presence, in an effort to minimize anthropogenic intervention.

The Guatemalan central state is in charge of designing, implementing, and enforcing environmental policy. Thus far, bureaucrats, mostly professionals trained in biology, have solely devised all regulations. Locations targeted for conservation are primarily selected based on two criteria: the biological uniqueness of the ecosystem, and the potential perils that such bionetwork faces. Partly because CONAP has acted without consulting first with local populations, especially those living inside protected areas and partly because of the heavy natural sciences orientation embedded in conservation directives, these policies have had little success on the ground (Carr 2004). In many places, including the Naranjo-Ceibo site, people have lived there before their official declaration as protected areas, and the people claim a historical right to the location.
Although the presence of human populations inside protected areas predetermines neither the success nor failure of conservation initiatives, the actual record in the northwestern flank of the MBR is negative. It has been practically impossible to strike a balance between economic development and preservation efforts. The reasons are multiple and far too complex to analyze at length here. From the conservation side of the problem, the most relevant problem lies on the institutional limitations of CONAP to wield effective rule over the Reserve. A shortage of funding, lack of human resources and limited political clout has turned the western side of the MBR into a “paper” park. On the social side of the conundrum, the pressing conditions faced by local populations exacerbate the problem: few available social services, limited labor opportunities, restricted political representation, and overall poverty. Under such dire conditions it comes as no surprise that the local population holds strong anti-conservation views. Conservation policy in the northwestern corner of the MBR was not viable under because of such conditions in 2002. In other words, any central state-directed territoriality initiative by means of conservation policy was not working.

The continuous expansion of human presence beyond the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor inside MBR’s core area is replicating many of the conditions that took place earlier at Naranjo, with all its implications for the Reserve. CONAP will regain the upper hand inside the MBR only after a better attuned conservation policy can settle the economic development-environmental policy equation. Before launching a sounder formulation of its environmental program, the central state must tackle a more immediate concern: the prevalence of illegal practices in and around the border, another element that further complicates implementing any conservation agenda. These practices undermine not only
conservation initiatives but all other state schemes, an issue I come to after examining the specific situation of conservation policy in northwestern Petén.

**Creation of the MBR**

The area north of parallel 17° 10’, close to one third of Petén or about 12,000 square kilometers, was declared, a protected area in 1990 (see IDEADS 2000). In this manner, the Guatemalan government created the biggest conservation unit ever in the country, the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR), a surprising move given its overall poor environmental record until then.

The MBR faced enormous challenges in its northwest flank right from the start. First, to duly support, manage, and upkeep the protected area, a robust institutional framework was sorely needed. These conditions were lacking because CONAP had not fully consolidated itself as an institution. Secondly, the existence of human settlements inside the reserve boundaries prior to its creation posed intrinsic quandaries, difficulties that intensified over the years. The most salient concerned what residents of the area considered their rights to remain in the locality and their rights to own land. Third, local residents had no awareness regarding the rationale and purpose of protected areas. This initiative came to be perceived as a top-down scheme intended to restrain the right of the common citizen to occupy and work an otherwise “empty” territory. Poor public relations and deficient outreach methods on the part of CONAP worsened the situation. What had been up to this point an unregulated region became a controlled domain under the rule of CONAP. The new environmental protocol clearly established that private possession of land was limited, even banned in some parts. Similarly, unrestricted access to resources was curtailed, or set off-limits.
Hence, misconceptions about conservation, and a dearth of information, made the local population react disapprovingly towards the new policies, all well-meant but erroneously implemented. During CONAP’s early years, the institution eagerly tried to deter practices considered harmful to the environment. When CONAP tried to set limits to the amount of wood fuel each household was to use, and attempts were made to introduce stricter guidelines regarding timber cutting, for instance through authorization permits, discontent broke out because the proposed rules ran contrary to deep-rooted practices. The intended changes alienated local people. These policies came to be perceived as too radical. CONAP never succeeded in making any real breakthroughs in terms of reaching out to agriculturalists within the MBR. To counteract this problem somewhat, CONAP initiated the construction of infrastructure at different points inside the reserve. The idea was to maintain contact with the population and to watch over whatever went inside the MBR. But this initiative failed, too. An incident that took place at Naranjo barely a year after the birth of the reserve illustrates what the future tenor of relations between inhabitants of the area and CONAP would be like.

In February 1991 CONAP convened a meeting at Naranjo in order to discuss the newly implemented legislation concerning protected areas. At this rendezvous the regional head of the Council had planned to meet with all representatives from villages inside the MBR, most of them located on the road to Naranjo. Hearsay about the unruly character of the location led to distrust on the part of CONAP authorities, causing the chief officer to miss the meeting. After a prolonged wait the assembled crowd took this action as a sign of bad faith. Then at around 1pm in the afternoon an angry mob destroyed CONAP’s half-finished checkpoint facility. The incident proved that this kind
of central state action could be successfully challenged. The 1991 event set a precedent in this section of the MBR, for similar occurrences happened later on whenever CONAP tried to implement its mandate, or when exigencies from the population went unheeded. For instance, Las Guacamayas, the Biological Station inside PNLT, was burned down in March 1997 (Billy 1999: 37). In other incidents, people were held hostage too, as happened at Santa Amelia, in 1996 and 2001, according to local accounts. Other schemes, for instance the voluntary relocation of people outside national parks, have been consistently rejected, and in the few cases in which people accepted, they failed (see the stories of Ruperto Aldecova and Federico Alvarez later in the chapter).

CONAP’s work had little positive results. The capacity of the institution to increase its field personnel was minimal, thus limiting its ability to effect tangible changes. A checkpoint, some 5 miles north of Naranjo, was inaugurated in 2002 to guard the entrance to PNLT, the only presence of CONAP agents near the study area. Once again, the problems riddling this institution at the local level centered in its chronic shortage of operating funds, the high rates of personnel turnover at the top level, and alleged charges of corruption within institutional ranks.

From the perspective of the central state the need for stricter controls is more critical in a place like northern Petén, where there is a concurrence of political and protected areas boundaries. In this sense, environmental policy could be conceived as a state-driven program that might contribute to advance state authority. CONAP’s efforts to regulate human presence inside protected areas are part of the state’s normalizing its own agenda on territoriality. Effective, i.e. real and operational, environmental regulations contribute to consolidate state authority because they involve keeping a check on human
activities inside conservation units that belong to the state. Restrictions on uses of the land and its possession are seen, from the viewpoint of residents, as an obstacle to “development” and people’s own schemes for control over space. In this regard, environmental policy originating from the central state hinders the progression of territoriability as conceived by local populations.

**Illegal Practices and Its Protracted Record in Petén**

The terms illegal, illicit, non-juridical, shadow, and extra-legal practices are used interchangeably in this work to signify the same. They all make reference to activities that fall outside what anthropologist Yael Navarro-Yushin has coined as the “politically normative” order (2003). In line with this concept, all state institutions and its members are part of that legal order, and so are other ways in which society organizes itself, whether it is for social, economic or political purposes. However, there may be instances in which the legal-illegal domains intersect each other, and situations in which representatives of the legal order crossover into the realm of the illegal. When this happens clear-cut distinctions are no longer applicable and a more flexible approach is needed. As pointed out by Robert Latham and his colleagues the juridical/non-juridical divide is riddled with complexities because:

... state institutions and the actors populating them are embedded not only in the juridical realm, but also in a wide range of non-juridical informal or illegal political and economic arenas and practices... [For instance,] A customs official in a lonely border outpost may also be a central node in a smuggling network... ‘State power,’ to the degree it exists, might sometimes best be understood from a vantage point that encompasses the intersection of juridical and non-juridical realms (Latham et al, 2001: 16-17).

Hence, the sphere of the non-politically normative defies and undermines central state authority, yet it may empower its individual representatives at certain places, such as the fringes of the nation-state. The way illegal activities had curtailed or boosted
territoriosity-making at the research site, are the issues of concern in this section. I argue that Naranjo and Ceibo inhabitants had engaged, on and off, in the illegal sphere through most the life-time of these settlements. Understandably there usually is no written record of irregular activities in places like these. I have relied thus mainly on oral testimonies from trusted respondents, and personal observation from my stay in the field to render an account of the situation concerning illegal practices up to 2002. In the following pages I review the recent history of illegal practices in order to contextualize more recent conditions.

Schwartz (1990:54) has suggested that the existence of illicit dealings goes all the way back to the early years of Spanish rule in Petén. The peripheral condition of the province offered most advantageous circumstances for people’s engagement in these activities. The absence of any state representatives contributed to the flourishing of underground practices. Small-scale contraband on alcohol, for one, became at some point a popular item in the illicit exchange network that existed between Petén and outlying areas, in all likelihood because central authorities held little control over its distribution (Schwartz 1990: 78). For the period 1850-1890 the archival record shows conclusive evidence regarding the smuggling of liquor, tobacco and livestock out of the province (Ibid: 104). Cattle cargo, small at the time, was bound for Belize, itself a haven for contraband.

With extractive economies on the rise at the end of the 19th century, a growing flow of people and goods circulated through Petén. Food and basic supplies needed for subsistence in the forest came in. In turn, raw materials, considered marketable commodities, went out. With little monitoring from the state, the movement of newly
coveted items thrived through underground networks. It is safe to assume that a good deal of stealing and contraband on timber took place. Competition among logging firms operating in Petén triggered rivalries, double-crossings and irregular dealings. Other irregularities happened too: an agrarian inspector sent to Petén by the central government in the late 1870s wrote a report indicating that the lumber companies defrauded the Guatemalan Treasury through the underpayment of taxes (Valenzuela 1951: 405).

Unlawful trade on logging continued throughout the 20th century, experiencing ups and downs due to a number of reasons, including bans on exports to other countries, effective as of 1928 (Petén Itzá 1938b); state participation on this activity via FYDEP in the 1960s; and the eventual prohibition on any timber cutting, a directive adopted in the 1980s (Schwartz 1990). Chicle was also a coveted item in the contraband circuit. The latex made its way to Belize and Mexico, by way of pack mules. Reportedly, between 1890 and 1930 most of Peten’s chicle was smuggled to Canada, and from there re-exported to the United States (Schwartz 1990: 148). Only the closing of the border with Belize, in 1934, stopped the contraband on this item (Petén Itzá 1938a).

Another underground activity that emerged during the forest extractive era was the trading of archeological artifacts. As the locals soon came to realize, travelers and archeologists who went to Petén avidly sought the sculpted stones, ceramics and figurines that could be found in ancient “ruins.” Archeological looters nicknamed locally as wecheros, (from the Maya word wech for armadillo) went about defacing stelae and breaking into mounds in search of any item worth selling. Because chicleros knew their way around the forest it is credible to assume that some of them carried out such business. The northwest was never a vital zone for archeological looting due to the
absence of major sites. Cultural remains of any value at the Naranjo site were plundered well before the region was fully settled.

By now it should be clear that illicit activities have been part of everyday life in the Naranjo-Ceibo area over the last fifty years. In the next section I establish a distinction between some illegal activities that continued well into 2002, and those of more recent emergence. In a way, the ongoing occupation of protected areas constituted a third area of unlawful processes.

**Long-time Established Illegal Practices at the Research Site**

Petty smuggling, general poaching, logging, and cross-border cattle movement have had a long history in northwestern Petén. Small-scale smuggling has involved staple goods. The absence of stringent controls at this border has facilitated the free movement of unchecked merchandise in either direction. Products entering Petén in 2002 included eggs, soap, toothpaste, canned food, and cookies. In turn, acquired poultry, pigs and dried soups went to Mexico. At least a couple of individuals from Naranjo were actively engaged in petty contraband, purchasing merchandise on a regular basis from Mexico.

Poaching activities, i.e. commerce on crocodile and jaguar hides, turtle and deer meat, comprised a significant portion of the contraband underworld before the 1970s. Trade in hides rose alongside the long decline of chicle. Mexicans became particularly active in crocodile hunting all over northwestern Petén. Lagoons with marshy surroundings and plenty of reptiles offered excellent hunting grounds. Crocodile hunting still continued in 2002 but at a much lesser scale than before. Plummeting prices of hides account for the waning of this trade. The collection of jaguar hides carried some
economic importance in the past. However, the collecting of this item had dramatically subsided because of the sharp reduction in the number of animals to be found. This has been the result both of a sharp disappearance of the large cat’s habitat, and over-hunting. To my knowledge, no research has been done on animal pelt poaching in order to have a clearer idea of the volume of these operations.

Turtle meat deserves special mention. Deemed a delicacy in neighboring Tabasco, turtle has always been in high demand in the plundering business. Unlike Guatemala, turtles have been extensively depleted in Mexican territory, almost to the point of extinction. Like with tiger pelts, no quantitative data were available on this problem.

Another wild meat vastly popular in the region is venison. Deer meat is considered delectable among local Petenero and Mexican populations alike. Even though deer hunting is prohibited, an active demand is finishing off these animals. There is a ready market for exotic birds as well, most notably scarlet macaw, another specimen that is quickly disappearing. (See Elton 2003 on the demographic statistics of this species.)

As already mentioned, unlawful operations on timber have been in existence ever since logging became a major industry. In 2002 the main source of trees was located deep inside the MBR, north of the study site. At the end of that year trucks passed two or three times a week through Naranjo. Local respondents asserted that the continued thriving of logging was possible only due to widespread corruption among authorities, most notably CONAP employees and members of the national police, who partook handsomely of the rewards of this illicit business.

Unchecked trade in cattle, perhaps the oldest of non-regulated activities in Petén, continued back and forth across the border at the turn of the twenty-first century.
Historically, the demand for beef has been higher in the Mexican side, in part because prices are lower in Guatemala. Hence, more cattle have usually gone out than the other way around. Exchange rate fluctuations between the Guatemalan Quetzal and the Mexican Peso may also influence the direction of the stream in this trade. The stealing of cattle in Mexico, which then is sold in Guatemala, has happened on occasion, as well. While in the field, I heard cases of cows or horses suddenly disappearing, never to be found again. The evidence always pointed to a cross-border swap. Quite telling in this regard was the case of Lico Rosal, a resident of Ceibo, whose story is presented in the second part of this chapter.²

**Recent Illegal Practices at the Naranjo-Ceibo Site**

A stream of undocumented, transient migrants on their way to the United States, and the traffic on narcotics comprised the two most recent non-juridical activities taking place at the research location. The construction of the road into northwestern Petén attracted not only land-seekers but also another type of migrants. This second group was made up of individuals that found this location to be a most favorable point for entering furtively into Mexico. Part of a growing tide, more and more migrants soon made Naranjo a stopover in their long trip to the U.S.

Thousands of people, primarily of young age, have passed through the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor every year on a journey that may originate in continents as distant as Asia, and one that involves traversing numerous countries. For the last twenty years or so the area, and in particular Naranjo, has acquired an international dimension as a result of this migratory influx. Considering that not long ago this site was just a dot on a map, in a
seamless green forest cover, Naranjo’s notoriety as an entrepôt in the transnational movement of people is startling.

Central Americans made up by far the majority of the migrant cohort, followed in numbers by other Latin Americans. For instance, Ecuadorians arrived from time to time. Occasionally groups of Chinese and Indian nationals went through as well. When asked, a main respondent estimated that in 2,000 close to 5,000 people were passing through Naranjo every year (Field notes). Although the figure may be imprecise (there are no official and precise statistics and no feasible way to obtain accurate estimates), it provides a rough idea of the magnitude of this phenomenon. Like other unlawful activities, one of the reasons why the human cargo business continued to thrive was due to the rampant malfeasance that permeated authorities at all levels, both in Mexico and Guatemala. Of course corruption has been identified as a generalized problem in across-the-globe human smuggling operations (Kyle and Koslowski 2001). For Naranjo residents the presence of a transient population generated subsidiary developments. For one thing, it brought economic prosperity to Naranjo. The services migrants needed, namely room and board, medicine, and other travel supplies, were readily found in this town. Some local residents acted as go-betweens, linking, for instance, a smuggler with the immigration representative on duty. Others worked in the informal currency exchange market that catered to migrants, supplying Quetzales, Pesos or U.S. Dollars.

Drug trafficking was of more recent emergence, something unheard of before 1997. For some time Petén had been a transshipment region for cocaine, but the area was not a producing zone. The disruption of operations at another location in Petén, where a major cartel operated, resulted in a re-arrangement of transportation routes. Hence,
northwestern Petén became an alternate route. The drug made it to the area from the Caribbean and Colombia, mostly by air, and then it was shipped off to points along the border where the cargo was picked up and taken to Mexico, and from there on to the United States. The repercussions of this sort of business within the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor had already become manifest. For instance, vendettas for double-crossings or deals gone awry occurred from time to time. Also, local residents had been caught and imprisoned on drug-related charges (see Fila’s story in this chapter) and individuals who previously owned next to nothing would show off, overnight, and for no apparent reason, with a newly built house or a late model vehicle; a few have purchased land, a way of laundering their earnings.

Because the undocumented stream and the drug trade had crossed all sectors of society there were people in my sample of landholders who had some connection to these unchecked activities. Out of the four people involved in drug dealing two were actively investing in their parcels. At Ceibo one person’s success was directly connected to the sprouting of the informal market at the borderline, while two individuals harbored undocumented aliens who passed through the area and one more was a petty smuggler who had set up a store at Naranjo. The following vignette illustrates the way one of these individuals, a young man, had rapidly accumulated wealth due to his participation in illegal practices.

Field note entry on Magun

Magun, a second generation Naranjeño, was born in the village in the early 1980s. He attended elementary school but after fifth grade dropped out. Magun showed no interest in school and his father, who ran a ranch and who did not care much either, let the young one help him out. When Magun’s father was able to buy a boat he began making trips to the border with undocumented migrants. Again, young Magun participated in this venture. With a cattle ranch of his own to look after, around 2000 Magun’s father handed over the transportation operation to his
offspring. Magun prospered rather quickly. Two years later he had acquired three adjacent plots of land from owners in the Naranjo-Corridor strip and was pressing two other neighbors to sell their possessions so that he could augment his. In less than two years Magun had tilled extensive areas of pasture and bought a sizeable herd of cattle. Locals wondered where all the money came from, for he had invested a lot in a short time-period. Magun, the rumor went around, was involved in drug trafficking.

Even though for fewer people were involved in traffic on drugs that any other unlawful activity, in the long term its impact seemed more far-reaching. For instance, there was the issue of drug consumption among the younger generation, something that in 2002 had begun to turn up. In a related development the researcher also heard rumors about marijuana plantings in the region, but these were never confirmed. Reportedly, marijuana was cultivated inside PNLT where control was minimal. If trends perceived in 2002 were to continue, then the weight of this trade on the local economy would keep rising.

As discussed before, the presence of the transient migrants has been at the core of Naranjo’s economy. It has attracted entrepreneurial people who settled permanently and considered this place their home. It has made possible the existence of commerce and services that otherwise might not have been available. In other words, the passing of undocumented people has meant growth for the community.

**Ongoing Occupation of Protected Areas**

From a juridical point of view the settling of people in territories designated under different conservation categories is an illicit action. My own findings revealed that up until about 1995 this had been a critical problem at the research site. Thereafter immigration subsided but not vanished. According to two sources (CEMEC 2001; Corzo et al 2001), migration into the core zone of the MBR had slowed down. This researcher heard several testimonies about the way big landowners were acquiring land inside the
MBR from people who purposely took possession of land in order to re-sell it, or from farmers who were squatting in the area. Furthermore, people who lived in the buffer zone and owned land that was in the process of being titled were amongst the cohort advancing over the rest of the MBR. The latest development on this matter, at the end of 2002, was the initiative that a number of residents from Naranjo had taken to occupy land inside PNSL. After setting up a formal committee, these people surveyed a location known as San Francisco, some 20 kilometers west of Ceibo (See Figure 2-1). Proximity to the border with Mexico was not happenstance in their choice of place; the idea, according to oral sources, was that the adjacent community on the Mexican side would help newcomers to get settled and help them as much as possible. In exchange, Guatemalans would allow their counterparts to take advantage of forest resources in their new locality. By December 2002 at least two groups had traveled to San Francisco to take a look at their would-be possessions. Reportedly, one such group had demarcated the boundaries of parcels by clearing the perimeter of each tract of land. Even though CONAP and DN initiated some actions to halt this process (e.g., a guard was dispatched and assigned to remain in the area) they faced numerous difficulties.

At least two individuals within the landholders’ sample were among those going to San Francisco. Both already possessed, or had access to, two or more parcels. They were also trying to get title to at least one tract of land through the aforementioned legalization program. Despite the fact that the group deliberately portrayed itself as made up of destitute members, that was not entirely true.

This last detail indicated that under existing conditions many local residents, not necessarily landless individuals, were taking advantage of the central state weakness in
overseeing national protected areas. With insufficient financial resources to man, administer, monitor, patrol and carry out all the necessary tasks that conservation units required, the state’s position was too weak to advance a preservationist agenda. This quandary was compounded by the settlers’ disregard of any conservation-oriented agenda. Partly the result of a conflictive relationship with CONAP, partly because there were no other economic alternatives other than agriculture and ranching, oil industry jobs were limited, people continued pushing the agricultural frontier into the MBR. Because land continued to be relatively plentiful, and cheap, the average rural inhabitant of the northwest saw no value in conservation-based programs. He was moved, even forced in some cases, to act with short-term goals in mind. Even though there might be small ways of being pro-active in conserving resources, instead he sought immediate results. The drive towards attaining short-term gains was well illustrated in the most recent development of significance in northwestern Petén: the development of an informal market at Ceibo.

The Frontier Process Fades at Naranjo

Human expansion over northwestern Petén was slow during most of the 20th century. I argue that the waning of this frontier process evolved and gave origin to territoriality; at Naranjo, this process lasted less than two decades. Again, the frontier was about people occupying the area, whereas territoriality meant creating and controlling the area to make it a socio-cultural space. Naranjo and Ceibo followed divergent trajectories in the vanishing of their respective frontier processes for reasons associated with different social, economic and political driving forces affecting each community. For example, the oil industry played no role in the repopulating of Ceibo, whereas the opposite took place at Naranjo. Naranjo would see the frontier come to a
close in the course of fifteen years, with the community gaining economic and political stature in the process. After being unpopulated for a long time, due to extreme isolation in the past, and more recently to the civil war affecting the country, Ceibo began to repopulate, slowly, starting in 1990. The birth of a market induced another rush of newcomers to Ceibo one decade later, in turn sparking economic development. Just like in the first part of this chapter, data from personal testimonies illustrate here how the process of humans spreading out over the land came about the way it did, and the role of agency in dealing with state and other macro driving forces.

At Naranjo the passing of the frontier process encompassed, approximately, the period 1982-1995. Complete occupation of land by settlers at Naranjo happened in two stages. The first phase came about in six years. At the time anybody was able to take land freely. During the second phase, extending for about seven years, newcomers had to purchase the piece of land in which they were interested. Two other circumstances distinguish the two different phases. First, the majority of second wave migrants arrived at about the time that the Maya Biosphere Reserve was created, in 1990, affecting land use and land tenure. Second, the waning of civil war in the post-1990 period slowly contributed to the return of peaceful conditions in Petén, something that encouraged people to go to Naranjo. Population pressure in the highlands, in particular, attracted potential settlers and other migrants, the case of K’iché merchants who went to the research site being a good example of the latter. Of course, local conditions also acted as filters to the type of settlers who dared taking the chance to relocate to this place.

The main obstacle to the colonization of northwestern Petén was accessibility. As already indicated, this situation changed in the early 1980s with the construction of an
all-weather road into the area, as well the concurrence of other factors, namely the
resurgence of forest extractive activities, and the abandonment of the cattle estate that
was the core of the would-be settlement. All these conditions attracted settlers. In the
course of a decade, roughly from 1984 to 1995, the bulk of today’s population arrived at
Naranjo. From less than two-dozen families present at Naranjo in 1983, ten years later
the number had risen to more than one hundred (Field notes). Data collected among
landholders in the area corroborate this general trend.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Frontier</th>
<th>Nascent territoriality</th>
<th>Consolidation of territoriality</th>
<th>Post-frontier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: One respondent was born at Naranjo. No data=6
Source: Field data

My data confirm the findings of a 2001 census, which indicated that the major
jump in population occurred between 1980 and 1990 (CEMEC 2001). The flow began to
increase after 1980, reaching a peak in the early 1990s. Ultimately, the composition of
the settler population proved to be heterogeneous, as Table 5-3 exemplifies. During the
initial years the bulk of migrants consisted mainly of Ladinos from Eastern Guatemala.
Native Peteneros, both within the municipality of Libertad and other municipalities in
Petén also arrived. Overall, only a small percentage of Amerindian descent migrants
went to Naranjo at this time

**Naranjo’s First Wave, ca. 1982-1988**

The following abbreviated life histories exemplify the diversity of experiences that
made up the first cohort to populate Naranjo in the first, six-year long, period. The
testimonies show that in spite of the initial lack of services (health, education), economic
infrastructure (roads, markets, etc.), or basic institutions (religious, legal, other), the human that came to constitute this frontier society overcame adversity in creative ways, and prevailed. The first narrative corresponds to the chiclero who decided to stay at this place after that activity disappeared; he ended up poor. The second illustrates the individual who, after doing service in the army, turned to cattle rearing and was in local terms a successful settler. The last two highlight the trajectories of southern Peteneros, one an Amerindian and the other a Ladino, who migrated up north. Both had acquired land at Naranjo but diversified their livelihood strategies. Except for the ex-chiclero the rest of the people portrayed here owned land in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor in 2002.

Pedro Matos

Pedro represented one of the senior chicleros, and oldest residents, of Naranjo. He was one of the few respondents born in the town of Libertad, the seat of the namesake municipality. A man in his sixties, Matos began working on chicle at age 12 when his father introduced him to this occupation. He engaged in the chiclería business for the next 30 years, or so. His conversation was full of stories about the time when he was at different locations, north and west of Naranjo. Pedro’s recollections centered on the hard life of the chiclero, who had to stay continuously in the forest for several months –June through December or in some cases until March- at the peak of the rainy season. A chiclero would only be allowed to leave his camp back then if he became extremely sick.

When chicle began to wane Pedro entered the xate trade, sometime in the 1960s. He, like many others, went to the Lacandón Mountains for this forest product. But Matos did this type of job intermittently over the following years because he had in mind starting a business of his own. By the late 1970s more people had moved in to would-be Naranjo, at the time still a private ranch. Then Pedro was elected the assistant mayor at a time in which the nascent community began to demand official recognition from the government. Pedro filed a petition with FYDEP on behalf of fellow settlers, stating their case. Initially the request was denied but with the death of the owner of the ranch, in 1979, the initial ruling was reversed. Thereafter Pedro was able to assign land plots so people could build their homes on them. He was re-elected to the post several years in a row, at least until 1982, bearing witness to important changes, such as the arrival of the oil industry. By then, Pedro had been married for several years. Because his wife ran a small eatery, they were able to make a decent living.

Upon finishing his term in office, perhaps before, Pedro and his wife decided to open a different business in the locality. But an incident prevented them from
achieving this objective right away. Pedro, who was a heavy alcoholic at the time, said he once spent the equivalent of US$2000 in a single night in a drinking spree. After this mishap, they raised the capital needed for the business once more through the selling of contraband liquor (her) and corn (him). Then, the Matos couple opened a bar, the second ever to exist at Naranjo but the first one to offer sex workers for the clientele. The enterprise was a success, so much so that later two more similar venues were set up. The future looked promising for Pedro when misfortune stroke: Pedro’s wife fell seriously ill. The continued expenses associated with her treatment drained Pedro’s resources to the point of going into debt to pay for the medical bills. Eventually Pedro was forced to sell his businesses. To Pedro’s chagrin his sacrifice was worthless because his spouse died.

He never recovered again and thereafter he got on with his life by doing odd jobs. When I first met him in 2000, Pedro worked as a keeper in a gravel quarry that Basic Resources kept some 14 kilometers south of Naranjo. He had to stay there 14 days in a row, getting the following week off, and then doing another fortnight shift. One year later, when I returned again to the area, he had been fired, or had quit, for reasons he did not want to reveal. From then on Pedro helped out at one of the bars he formerly owned, but much of the time he simply hung out by the front door where he and the establishment’s prostitutes chatted during (many) idle hours.

Pedro is part of the cohort associated with forest extractive industries (chicle, xate, logging, wildlife) that preceded the founding of Naranjo. He embodies the ability of the ex-forest workers to adapt to changing circumstances, who after leading a nomadic existence decides to stay put, to live a sedentary life. He managed the transition rather well, but ended up with no assets, i.e. no business, no land. For him, as for many other individuals in the area, the heterogeneity of occupations he held, both legal and illegal became a defining characteristic.

Franco Murga
Murga was born in Izabal province, where his father worked with a banana company. Subsequently he was taken to another province, Chiquimula, where he stayed until the age of 15. Then he found a job as day laborer but soon thereafter was drafted into the army, against his will. He was sent to several garrisons including Poptún (southern Petén), and Naranjo. Murga said he arrived at the latter in 1979 or 1980. After military service, ca. 1982, Murga decided to remain in the area and found a job with a company that had a subcontract for the construction of the road. Next, Basic Resources hired him, though on a temporary basis. After four years of trying to obtain a permanent position, Murga quit the petroleum industry. Due to Murga’s military experience, when self-defense villages were organized at
Naranjo, he was chosen to head them. He had to inform on all newcomers with intentions of settling at the hamlet, Murga recounted.

Murga decided to work as a farmer and to this effect he rented a land parcel; he continued working on and off with oil companies, too. Towards 1990 he had saved enough money to purchase the parcel he currently owns. At the time of acquiring the land Murga found extensive secondary forest on it. Progressively he had introduced pasture everywhere. In 2002 he owned more than 30 heads of cattle, his main source of income. Ever concerned with securing legal ownership of his possession Murga became the highest officer of the land committee that formed in 1999 to seek title to the land in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch. Like some other fellow neighbors, Murga had already paid for his possession in 2002 and was awaiting the final title deed.

Murga exemplifies the settler who arrived because of an external force, the army, and who negotiated rather effectively the experience of living through a time when state intervention was the strongest at Naranjo. Over time he managed to go from a very dependant position (e.g., salaried recruit) to a fully independent one (a small-size cattle rancher). Because he was able to acquire cattle, Murga was an example of the successful settler, that is, as measured by local cultural standards. On a different level, Murga played a main role in the local committee that secured land titling. Hence, he was an advocate before the state, in a role where collective agency was critical. Most important, the land titling process to which Murga contributed was the key element in the culmination of territoriality because it secured legitimacy of the land with the central state.

Delfino Reina

Delfino and his family entered Petén when he was 7 years old, ca. 1967. They all came from a town in Baja Verapaz province. Delfino’s father requested land from FYDEP in the municipality of San Luis, eventually obtaining title to it. Delfino recalled that he and his progenitor tilled the land for several years until soil fertility declined; not being able to harvest any more crops, they introduced cattle. Around 1984 Delfino received an invitation from a friend to visit Naranjo. He liked the place and after consulting with his father Delfino decided to go there. Delfino senior chose to go along with his son and to this effect sold his property. With part of the money obtained from this transaction Delfino was able to buy a place to live at their new destination, although there was not enough money to purchase land for
cultivation, though. Delfino’s father never joined this new endeavor. He fell very ill and eventually died.

From then on Delfino had to look after his mother and a young brother. He opted for xate collecting and stayed at it for one year. In the meantime his sibling moved away from the area. Then Delfino obtained land, some 12 kms. north of Naranjo, close to the road leading to the Xan oil fields. For some time he turned to farming.

By 1989 or 1990 he was offered a job with Basic Resources, at the Xan fields. Initially he found employment on a temporary basis. Then another opportunity came up. Delfino’s new job was to assist a topographer. Doing different chores, always on a seasonal basis, he spent the next 8 years in the oil industry at various locations, including the Chocop site and southern Petén. In between temporary jobs with oil firms Delfino took on hunting wild game to complement his income. At some point, this respondent said, he was interested in migrating to the United States but the death of another brother of his deterred him from carrying out this plan.

In 1994 Delfino purchased from a brother-in-law, the person who initially grabbed the land, the parcel he was working on during 2002. Eventually Delfino became a full-time farmer because no more opportunities turned up in the petroleum business for him. His hunter days were over too, wildlife being increasingly difficult to chase as more areas were cleared for cultivation. Like Murga, he was one of the leaders who organized others to gain tenure over the land.

A man of no riches, Delfino embodies the Ladino settler who went to the area looking for land and through a combination of salaried work and agricultural activities was able to make ends meet. He also epitomizes the common small landowner at Naranjo who in 2002 survived on farming and occasional paid work, yet dreamt of becoming a cattle grower. The Delfinos of Naranjo made up the bulk of the average southern Peteneros pushing the frontier in the northwest during the decade of the 1980s.

His participation in the land committee also made him one of the agents from the local society that made it possible for small landholder to achieve their highest goal: obtain private title to their land. Hence, he was also a direct participant in territoriality-making.

Pretonio Mutzul

Mutzul was an Amerindian of Mopan descent, born at La Cumbre, municipality of San Luis. He stayed at that locality until he was 23, working on the family land. Then he went off to work to Quiché and Alta Verapaz provinces as a wage laborer. He arrived at Naranjo for the first time in 1984 though only for a short visit,
employed as part of a crew, on a temporary contract. He made that trip with his brother, who later would get land in the area. When Mutzul returned, in 1988, he also took land. He occupied 17 ha. of land with primary forest, some 10 kilometers west of Naranjo. From that time and until 2002 Mutzul had cleared patches of vegetation in the whole parcel. No more primary flora remained in this plot after many years of continuous cultivation. Mutzul allowed each planting area to rest for 5 years, at least. This rotation system enabled some soil regeneration to take place for future agricultural uses. When prompted, Mutzul made clear that he was not interested in introducing cattle; this might be due to practical constraints, i.e. the parcel was too small, and he lacked of investment capital for pasture and animals.

While farming provided for his basic food needs, Mutzul made a living as a mason, a trade he learned from his father. Even though masonry paid better than agriculture, he planted corn every year. Other neighbors had asked him to sell the small parcel of land but he adamantly refused. He was one of the three remaining original landholders on the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch. All others within that initial group had already traded or sold their rights, even left the area. Mutzul firmly believed that his holding was the best inheritance he could bequeath to his children.

Mutzul was part of those who obtained free land during the first stage of human expansion at Naranjo, a strategy facilitated by the opening of the area in the early 1980s. In a different way he was an example of those who still adhere to traditional practices of slash and burn agriculture throughout Petén. Amerindians have customarily placed a high value on being subsistence farmers and Mutzul followed this tradition. Mutzul’s refusal to opt for cattle set him apart from the general trend found in the area. His reluctance to give up the land or to transform it into pastures is a cultural trait connected to his Amerindian background, in which a strong emphasis is placed on the value of passing on land to one’s offspring. In a way, he was representative of the old ways of Petén in a place that was rapidly leaving them behind. Yet, he found an alternative way of making a living in masonry, a trade that proved instrumental in the changing setting of the frontier.

Mariano Coyá

Coyá, from the municipality of Momostenango, Totonicapán, was among the first K’iche’ Amerindians to open a business at Naranjo. Coyá recounted the way he began doing business in the itinerant door-to-door trade pattern for which
Momostecos are reputed. He first went to Izabal with a cousin to sell clothes, around 1972-73. They stayed there for two years. Then, they decided to try their luck in southern Petén, establishing their base in San Luis. They traveled, to and fro, from San Luis to northern Alta Verapaz. In 1978 he found out that there were no merchants at Naranjo so he and a son of his made a short trip over there. Soon thereafter Coyá decided to move to Santa Elena, in central Petén. This location facilitated peripatetic selling all over the province. Foreseeing a business opportunity in 1980, Coyá opened a permanent grocery store at Naranjo. Coyá even ventured out of his Naranjo base, to sell his merchandise at the xate camps and two or three emerging communities adjacent to the would-to-be road leading to Naranjo. Subsequently other Amerindian merchants from outside Petén would follow Coyá’s example and initiate their own businesses.

Like many of his ethnic fellowmen, Coyá maintained close ties with his hometown, which he considered his permanent residence. In fact, his wife and children never left Momostenango, he said. He went there every two weeks, taking turns with a son who looked after the store during such visits. Although it was relatively easy to acquire land when he first got to Naranjo, and later others offered parcels to him, Coyá never expressed an interest on owning any. He asserted that his presence in this locality was strictly for business. Similar to other Amerindians, he had already expanded his economic interests. In 2002 another son of his, still a minor, looked after a tent at the Ceibo informal market where Coyá sold clothing and shoes. Coyá had sized, timely and wisely, the opportunities the border offered to individuals like him.

Coyá was part of the K’iché cohort attracted to Naranjo for one reason: business opportunities. Coyá set the example for other ethnic fellows to follow suit. Amerindian merchants contributed to the burgeoning economy of the frontier by offering goods that others were not interested in, willing to sell, or able to trade. An interesting finding is the sense of transient people that someone like Coyá expressed about Naranjo. In contrast to the feelings held by other settlers of this place, Amerindians like Coyá maintained a strong sense of attachment to their place of origin. Such individuals did not enter into territoriality-making because they did not see themselves building and struggling for a socio-cultural space they could or needed to call their own. Any emotional connection to Naranjo was simply instrumental. Coyá’s strategy was to move back and forth, constantly, between his home in the highlands, and his business in the lowlands.
A brief discussion addressing the distinctiveness of Amerindian migration to Naranjo is introduced here in order to better understand the role of this population in the frontier process. Two general cohorts can be identified in the migratory trajectory of Amerindians moving into this location. The first group was made up of people coming from southern Petén during the 1980s, most of whom were Petén-born Q’eqchi’, and in lesser numbers, some Q’eqchi’ born somewhere else. The other Amerindians present in the area, a minute group from southern Petén, and who arrived at the early stages of frontier expansion, were of Yucatec and Mopan ancestry. For instance, Leonidas Ec, who had lived continuously for the longest time at Ceibo, (see below) was of Yucatec Maya heritage. The other associate who migrated from San Luis, in southern Petén, was Petronio Mutzul, whose life events have already been presented. With the exception of Ec, who came in the early 1970s, other Amerindians in this category arrived after 1980.12

Traditionally the Q’eqchi’ tended to migrate in groups, first sending males to explore and establish the boundaries of the land to be occupied.13 My data indicate that the influx of the Q’eqchi’ to the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch happened individually, as an effort to improve the fate of the person, or the family group. Another difference is that few Q’eqchi’ in the area were dedicated exclusively to farming, a remarkable finding considering their traditionally strong agricultural background. I could identify only two landholders of Q’eqchi’ descent at Naranjo-Ceibo stretch14 and even though both sowed crops actively, their main income came from other sources. The second cohort of Amerindians comprised those individuals who arrived from different locations in the highlands, approximately after 1990. Their stories were part of the second tide of settlers that went to Naranjo.
**Naranjo’s Second Influx, ca. 1989-1995**

The data gathered for this study indicate that a second, distinctive, flow of migrants went to Naranjo after 1989. The major differences with the prior phase were that at this time everybody had to purchase land from someone else, and that, proportionally, more people arrived in this phase than before. In other respects both cohorts showed little differences. People were usually born outside Petén. Motivations for moving to Naranjo were the same as in the past: some people wanted to make a fresh start in life, others were searching for new challenges at the frontier, and yet others went to engage in cattle ranching.

The largest percentage of Amerindians from the highlands that migrated to Naranjo, in particular, went at this time. As human occupation expanded and new settlements emerged along the road leading to Naranjo and beyond, so did the group of traveling merchants that made the rounds to sell wares of all sorts in the area. Concomitant with the progressive growth of Naranjo, this populace began to arrive during the early 1990s. Sensing good business opportunities at Naranjo, they opened grocery and hardware stores, and clothing and shoe businesses. Following on the steps of their compatriots other Amerindians expanded the type of merchandise available in their outlets. For instance, some began selling electrical appliances. Very few among these highland Amerindians came to own land and even if they did, they rarely exploited it. Their concern centered almost exclusively in commercial affairs. I estimate that no less than half of all businesses, other than corner stores, in Naranjo were K’iche’-owned in 2002 (Field notes).

The following present personal stories that illustrate the make-up of the second cluster that went to inhabit Naranjo. The first examples correspond to one Q’eqchi and
one K’iché Amerindian, respectively. Then there is the account of a settler expelled due to the advance of cattle ranching in southern Petén. The final two abridged life histories are about two Ladino easterners, a cattle rancher who moved from southern Petén, and a farmer who went directly from his hometown, outside the province, to Naranjo.

Calixto Quim

Quim, born in 1955 at Chacté, municipality of San Luis, to Q’eqchi’ parents, was the son of migrants from Alta Verapaz. Having established a conjugal liaison at age 20 he went to La Cumbre (San Luis). Because at this time he was unable to purchase land of his own, he either rented it for cultivation or sharecropping. Quim recalled that when he grew up people did not set border markers on their tracts of land. Most importantly, parcels were not to be trespassed, despite the lack of markers and or physical boundaries. Everybody complied with this unwritten, customary norm.

After having some disagreements with his father, around 1988, Quim decided to move away. One year later he headed for Naranjo because neighbors from La Cumbre had told him about the place. Upon his arrival he found out that the army had set up a guard post at the entrance to the hamlet. During those years everybody had to report and explain his or her presence. Quim’s entrance was facilitated because the driver of the vehicle with whom he was traveling had been an army conscript, something that helped to ease army suspicion. The military’s hold on local affairs permeated most aspects of life, as Quim soon came to realize. The army suspected recently arrived settlers, who also were distrusted by local residents. For newcomers like Quim these conditions made finding employment a difficult task.

To support himself, Quim occupied a piece of land at the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch owned by an acquaintance of his, someone who had been unable to look after it because he was an army recruit. After his takeover Quim learned of the way local possession arrangements worked: a person’s rights to the land were acknowledged as long as the possessor or occupant kept the boundary lines cleared of plant life, and more so after primary vegetation had been cut down in preparation for cultivation. Quim intended to purchase the land from his friend, a plan that eventually came true. Over the years Quim planted corn and beans, for subsistence, but he also engaged consistently in odd jobs to supplement his income. Never a full-time agriculturalist, he tried to cultivate his rather small parcel (16 ha.) every season -even if and when he was pressed to pay other laborers. In 2002 his employer was a K’iché Amerindian, owner of hardware and grocery stores in Naranjo, plus a booth at Ceibo. He spent the first part of that year at the informal market, and later was sent back to work at a new outlet at Naranjo. During the few days he had off, Quim looked after the crops he had sown.
Quim is part of the continuum of Q’eqchi immigration from Alta Verapaz into Petén, a phenomenon that goes as far back as the late 16th century, according to Schwartz (1990: 81). Just as his parents had done, Quim migrated in search of a better future. Similar to Mutzul, he maintained the cultural trait of the Amerindian who clung strongly to the land, although this resource might not even provide enough for his family’s sustenance. It is important to note that Mutzul arrived at Naranjo at the time in which the grip of the state on social control was the strongest; with the army watching people’s movement, civilian agency was curtailed to a great extent. In the long term, and as circumstances changed, this informant diversified his earnings by working in several occupations. In a different way, this was an economic strategy followed by many to adapt to border conditions.

Pablo Cantoc

This businessman arrived at Naranjo directly from Chiché municipality in Quiché province, where he was born and raised. He began working at the age of 12 as an apprentice in trading. Twenty years later, in 1989, he had gone to Naranjo as an experienced businessman, having already established a shop of his own with two branches, one at his place of origin and a second one elsewhere in Guatemala. Cantoc had sold agrochemicals at both locations. But when this type of trade began to wither he thought that it was time to try something else. From friends he had heard about business possibilities in Petén, and more specifically at Naranjo.

Cantoc asserted that he and another country fellowman were the first to inaugurate produce stores at Naranjo, in what would turn out to be very profitable initiatives. That the onset of Cantoc’s venue coincided with the resurgence of logging in the area contributed, undoubtedly, towards his initial success. He acknowledged making money because woodmen bought loads of foodstuffs and supplies, from him, for their protracted stay in the forest. During the first two years Cantoc had little competition from other merchants. Then K’iché merchants from Momostenango arrived.

In 2002 Cantoc owned a big store at a key location in Naranjo, next to the San Pedro River. Like Coyá he tried his luck at Ceibo by sending a son there but the undertaking failed. Unlike Coyá, Cantoc had made Naranjo his permanent home. Except for one daughter all of Cantoc’s family members lived with him year-round. A measure of his success was readily apparent given that he owned 7 plots in the village and a parcel 130 ha. in size. Part of this land was under degraded pasture,
an indication that Cantoc had entertained the idea of introducing cattle; it could as well denote his carelessness about such investment.

From a different perspective Cantoc could also claim to be successful: his eldest son had been able to set up a store by himself in the village. Such an accomplishment was a source of much pride in Amerindian cultural terms. The last time this researcher spoke with Pablo, at the end of 2002, he mentioned his latest project, one in line with the entrepreneurial spirit that characterized many K’iché Amerindians: to open a new store where his land parcel was, at a place closer to the border with Campeche, a locality that was just beginning to get settled. This was Cantoc’s new challenging frontier.

Where new opportunities for economic success arise, there is always someone like Cantoc who dares to take a chance. He did it at Naranjo and prevailed. He attempted to be triumphant at Ceibo but his plans did not work out. His next challenge was to conquer a new expanding colonization front, inside PNLT. In a real sense, he was thinking of making the same journey he had undertaken almost two decades ago, as if to reenact –and hence foster- a recurrent pattern of human expansion, this time into northern Petén.

Leopoldo Carro
During most of his 35 years Carro had lived in many different places in Petén. Born at Chacté (San Luis), to Ladino parents who had come originally from Izabal, Carro’s family moved the first time when he was 6 years old. They went to the municipality of San José. His father obtained a piece of land in this location but later they were forced out. He used subtle words to explain the family’s ejection: “We left because [someone else’s] cattle did a lot of damage [to our crops]”. Their next destination was a hamlet named Lo Veremos, near Salinas River, where they stayed for the next seven years. Around this time Carro left the family to live on his own. He enrolled as a wage laborer in different places, among them one known as Pico de Oro, at the border between Petén and Chiapas. He worked in cardamom and cacao plantations on Mexican territory. At the age of 22 he moved again, this time to Lagunitas, south of Naranjo. Due to the scarcity of water he decided to go over to Naranjo. This happened in 1996. By then Carro’s parents had joined him.

Carro was living in Lagunitas but he had acquired land on the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch as early as 1991. Carro cultivated a plot of land 13.8 ha. in size. When Carro purchased his possession all he found on it was secondary forest in mostly bajo (flood-prone) terrain. At the end of 2002 he was contemplating selling the land and maybe seizing some inside PSNL. To support a family of five the respondent engaged in wage labor.
Leopoldo Carro was one among many farmers who had been uprooted from their plots due to the expansion of cattle latifundia in southern Petén, a driving force that began pushing people towards the northern part of the province in the 1980s. With the growth of pasturelands, through purchase, and sometimes via the outright use of force, farmers with no official (i.e. title) holding rights to the land became the most vulnerable groups. This was a phenomenon that could eventually be replicated at the study area in the near future. The trajectory of individuals like Magdaleno (see Part I), and the actions of the informant suggested that such a trend had already begun at Naranjo as the frontier process faded away.

Sotelo Araujo
One of many recent migrants from Eastern Guatemala, Sotelo was born in Zacapa province. After having lived in Honduras, then in Los Amates (Izabal), and Morales (Izabal), at age 24 he went to San Francisco (Petén), where he acquired land. In 1998, and encouraged by relatives of his, Sotelo decided to move again, this time to Naranjo. At this place he bought several parcels of land with the money he obtained from his property at San Francisco. As soon as he went to the northwest Sotelo began introducing pasture. He already owned cattle at San Francisco and his grazing land had degraded there to the point where he had to look for new pastures. In 2000, when I interviewed him for the first time, Sotelo possessed 60 head of livestock; the following year he had 8 more. Not surprisingly, he owned one of the largest parcels within the group of small landholders at the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch, namely 56 ha. He had established at least two paddocks, one of them at the study area and the other inside PNLT, a few kilometers north of Naranjo. In addition he cultivated corn, beans, tomatoes, watermelons, and other crops at a third parcel, located south of the village.

Sotelo was on his way to becoming a well-established middle-size rancher, yet he took advantage of conditions at Ceibo too: because he owned two pick up trucks Sotelo rented one of his vehicles for occasional freight trips to the borderline, a profitable venture. He was also participating in a nascent colonization front. In December 2002 Sotelo had been one of several Naranjo residents who joined a group attempting to take hold of land inside PNSL.

Sotelo was not the settler who went to Naranjo out of need, but instead someone who arrived with a vision of expanding his assets. He is representative of the cattle rearer who arrived during the latter stages of human expansion in Naranjo. Furthermore, he was
directly contributing to advance yet another frontier west of the study area. Just like other people who already owned more than one parcel of land, he aspired to get hold of more of it to expand his patrimony. Most importantly, he was breaking one of the conditions stipulated in the requisites that made it possible for him to obtain title to one of his parcels on the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, namely, that he was forbidden to acquire more land. He was also violating the protected status of the land he and others were trying to take over, a widespread attitude among the local population. These strategies defied the rule of law, hence the state.

Adrián Castillo

One of the most recent arrivals into the area, Castillo left for Naranjo in 1999, directly from his native Zacapa. Apparently, the presence of two siblings who were already living in San Luis was a most influential pull factor in his decision to head towards Petén. Because he still owned land in his hometown, and was able to acquire an average size plot (31 ha.) in the study area, he could be considered a person of relative wealth.

Castillo had opted to live on the plot of land, some ten kilometers away, because village life did not suit him, he told me one day. At the time of our first encounter, this man inhabited a makeshift house with two sons who accompanied him. A couple of months later he had built a simple wooden house.

During 2000, the first year he planted crops, Castillo cultivated the land with corn to have a food base to survive on. Subsequently he introduced other crops to diversify his diet, and to secure some cash. He tried pumpkin squash seed, rice and watermelons. With three heads of cattle he bought, Castillo’s next step was the sowing of pasture.

From the advice he obtained from neighbors, he was able to initiate, rather quickly, the paperwork that would get him title to the land. This was no small feat considering that others had been waiting for decades to do so. The last time I spoke with Castillo he had come back from an “exploratory” trip to a place near Paso Caballos where he had gone to look at some land. He said he liked what he saw, so much so that he could have stayed there.

Castillo, like Sotelo, arrived with the intention of expanding his landholdings, within the latter group of settlers in Naranjo. If everything goes as he plans, Castillo’s parcel could be pasturelands a few years from 2002. His “excursion” to other areas
would suggest that he intended to continue acquiring land in Petén. If questioned he
would probably reply that more land was needed for his offspring, a widespread answer
among people. Again, this could translate into the replication of new frontier processes
beyond the Naranjo area.

**Ceibo and the Frontier at the Turn of the Century**

After the sawmill closed down at Ceibo, around 1968, the site entered a prolonged
period of stagnation. The hamlet became depopulated, the only remaining residents
being the Méndez family and the FYDEP personnel stationed there. Soon thereafter even
these state representatives would be relocated to Naranjo. Ceibo was simply a landmark
signaling the proximity of the border line, a passing point between the producing areas of
the moribund chicle activity, across the mountains, and Naranjo, the out-shipment
loading port for new and old products.

In spite of its backwater condition Ceibo did attract a trickle of settlers, though at a
much lesser scale and slower pace that at Naranjo. During the 1970s Ceibo attracted
about half a dozen families who made this location their home. They lived in a relatively
self-enclosed, yet peaceful locale. Then, the rising conflict in Petén disrupted their
pastoral existence. After 1987, little by little, the old-time occupants returned; then in
1990 a few newcomers showed up. With the advent of the informal market at the
borderline, in 2000, the place boomed again. Of all the different driving forces at work in
the northwest at the end of the 20th century, only the internal war and the extractive
economy of *xate* had a significant effect on Ceibo. The condensed life histories included
here address how people got to the location and how they coped with these conditions,
most notably the war. Such narratives show the striking differences between what
happened at Naranjo in contrast to Ceibo, and shed light on why the former thrived whereas the latter languished until its sudden resurgence.

**Ceibo and the Civil War of the 1980s**

My reconstruction of events at Ceibo is open to speculation because associates did not speak openly about this period. When they did speak it was only indirectly, even hesitantly. Not surprisingly, the relative proximity of guerrillas in the area brought the war home. The rebels used the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch as a passage between their sanctuary base inside the Lacandón Mountains and the one route leading to central Petén. Operating under the belief that nearly all civilians were potential leftist supporters, and with the intention of spreading terror, the military inflicted abuse and violence against innocent people. Reportedly, several individuals suffered mistreatment at the hands of soldiers. For instance, Tomás Méndez was beaten up on account of possessing firearms not registered with the army. From time to time cadavers drifted by on the San Pedro, too, casualties of irregular warfare and indiscriminate killings.

I have no first-hand testimonies of people who witnessed battles or clashes between the warring parties and the frequency at which they took place, but from indirect clues associates gave, fighting did occur with some periodicity during the worst phase of the conflict at Ceibo, from 1980 to 1985. FAR lacked the resources to wage a sustained and prolonged conflict with the Guatemalan army; yet the guerrilla harassed its adversary with conventional guerrilla warfare techniques. For instance, one Ceibo resident indicated that the insurgents set fire to the International Commission on Boundaries and Waters facility sometime in the early 1980s. The Guatemalan army responded to these provocations. In one of the few published accounts to be found, in 1984 the army sent 2,000 troops to the Lacandón Mountains and the Mexican border in order to counteract
guerrilla activity, particularly to stop the harassment of oil companies working in the area. The secondary source of information makes, in fact, the following remark on the general lack of information about the war developments in this region: “Though of some significance the military activity has not been announced by the government nor have reports of it appeared in the local press” (This Week 1984: June 18). Eventually, the high level of violence experienced in the area provoked the flight of most Ceibo residents. Some of them went to Mexico and some retreated to other parts of Petén. From about 1980 to 1986 Ceibo was basically a deserted community.

In the final analysis the war stopped for a period of time, an already slow settling process. Temporarily, the central state asserted its power on the zone, via the army, not with the intention of securing any long-term presence but for the immediate purpose of eradicating armed opposition. Having achieved this objective, it withdrew again. It would take something else to repopulate Ceibo, and to attract the attention of the central state again.

**Ceibo’s Depressed Economic Conditions, 1970-2000**

Isolation and lack of population continued to be the main problems holding back the economic revitalization of the hamlet. The few inhabitants present during the 1970s, to my knowledge, none of them Mexicans, lived off the land as subsistence farmers. Ceibo residents could send their products only on Mexican barges traveling along the San Pedro River. Logging never regained its former importance due to the depletion of stocks of valuable wood in the vicinity as a result of prior interventions. People did engage in chicle and *xate* gathering but such forest products were channeled out via Naranjo. When oil exploration began to take place in the region, the possibility of opening the road leading to Xan through this location was seriously considered. The crossing of the San
Pedro at a favorable spot had been chosen for this plan. Yet the idea did not materialize and Naranjo was chosen instead.

As war conditions worsened at the end of the 1970s in the rest of Petén, so did the situation at Ceibo. With the subsiding of hostilities, in the late 1980s, some sense of normalcy set in. Former inhabitants of the hamlet returned, slowly, to their parcels. By then the growing economic significance of Naranjo at the regional level had already overshadowed Ceibo, in fact making the latter dependent on the former. From this time onwards Ceibo residents traded at Naranjo. Among all the newest economic developments taking place elsewhere in the area, only the sojourner population on its way to the United States had some incidence at Ceibo, though never to the extent Naranjo experienced it. The lack of infrastructure and services demanded by the transient groups put Ceibo in a disadvantaged position versus Naranjo. Ceibo remained a small transit point for the undocumented migrants on their way to Mexico. No major driving force, political, economic or social, brought about substantial transformations to Ceibo during the decade of the 1990s. A twist of fate at the turn of the century changed drastically Ceibo’s conditions.

**The Resurgence of Ceibo in 2000**

Similar to Naranjo, twenty years earlier, a road became the factor that triggered a new upsurge of activity at Ceibo. Mexican authorities decided to pave the way going from Tenosique, Tabasco, the seat of the namesake municipality, to the borderline at Ceibo. After May 2000, the date the road was inaugurated, Guatemalan merchants from outside Petén, as well as a few Naranjeño businessmen, began arriving at the location to sell many types of goods. Cheaper commodities on the Guatemalan side attracted Mexican buyers to this location. The absence of a customs office at this place, an
unchecked crossing, enticed potential buyers to go to Ceibo. A thriving informal market was at the core of Ceibo’s recovered vitality in 2002.

One of the first people to go to Ceibo soon after Tabascans finished the road was the son of a Mexican chiclero who five decades before had roamed the area. Born in the nearby Lacandón Mountains area, he, along with other Naranjeños, spearheaded the subsequent flow of people who intuited the potential for business success. For reasons to be recounted later, in the end he was able to stay, whereas all Naranjeños had to leave.

After the initial group that went to Ceibo, a second cluster of people showed up. They were K’iché from Momostenango. The trickle began with five merchants, but by the end of 2000 their numbers had grown to 80. In spite of a government attempt to evict all these merchants from the area, launched at the end of that year, six months later the figure had swollen to reach between 125 and 150. The emergence of services, none of which were present before 2000, mushroomed at Ceibo. In 2001 I noticed the existence of two telephone lines, two eateries, and a number of boats servicing the Naranjo-Ceibo route. Also, every Friday, owners of four-wheel drive vehicles began traversing the truck pass that separated Naranjo from the border locality. This form of transportation constituted at first the main supply line to avid businessmen at Ceibo. In fact, my initial journey to Ceibo materialized when I arranged a ride on a transport of this kind. The following segment from my field notes captures my thoughts at the occasion.

Field note entry: [First] Trip to Ceibo
June 15, 2001

It is 9:15 A.M. and we [i.e. a merchant I will call Cuto, and me] sit on top of the bundles and boxes that fill up the bed of a pick-up truck carrying merchandise of all types to Ceibo. The vehicle leaves Naranjo and heads towards Lagunitas, where a connecting feeder road enters the 30 km. long truck pass to the borderline with Mexico. Cuto, owner of the cargo, is from Momostenango. On the way to our destination we chitchat, so I manage to enquire a little bit about Cuto’s background.
He arrived in 1998 at Naranjo in order to set up a business [later on another merchant informs me that Cuto had initially started as a door-to-door watch salesman], he says. But he did not do well. Then when the news arrived about the recently asphalted road to Ceibo, he foresaw a second opportunity for success. Reportedly, he was among the first Amerindian vendors to have headed for the borderline. He also mentions the pending eviction order [see discussion below] that hangs over all individuals with a tent at Ceibo, but seems not too worried because an appeal has been submitted to the court. Cuto believes that the merchant presence at Ceibo causes no harm to people, or the environment. Yet, he affirms that if vendors were compelled to vacate, they would comply.

The road is bumpy. Recent rain has turned dirt into mud and certain spots are rough. After about 1 hour we pass the farms on the outside of Ceibo proper. The vehicle stops at a checkpoint that the army has set up three kilometers before reaching the borderline. We proceed after the driver informs on the purpose of the trip—to drop the goods at the settlement. Upon entering the hamlet one finds an improvised eatery, owned by a man from Santa Elena. Across from the eatery there is a recently built corral, reputedly the property of a Mexican rancher from Tenosique. Further ahead, and lined-up along both sides of the road are the “shops” that make up the informal market. These rudimentary tents, built with plastic nylon and some improvised poles, exhibit towels, umbrellas, linens and garments of different sorts. Other booths display electric appliances, hardware tools and the like. Perhaps because of the hour and the day only a handful of potential buyers are seen shopping around. Across the borderline, in Mexican territory, there is a stand where tacos are sold. Two buses wait their departure time towards Tenosique. . .

My travel companion brought up one issue that, from the point of view of merchants, had been considered a nuisance in their efforts to occupy, and dominate the local economy, of this place. An eviction procedure was initiated in 2001 in an effort to halt the arrival of more people to the Ceibo market, which happened to be located in the multiple-use zone of the MBR. Conservation policy establishes that no one is supposed to inhabit the multiple-use zone, so the recently arrived people to Ceibo were, from this normative point of view, invaders. Yet, CONAP found itself in a predicament when it came to justifying the expulsion of residents who had been in the area before 1990, the date the MBR was created. 18 Nothing in the law explained what to do with these “senior” settlers. The newest batch of occupants, i.e. the merchants, rested their claim on
the national constitution, arguing that this ordinance proclaims the right of all
Guatemalans to work freely within the country.

Little progress had been made in this trial because of the continuous dilatory
measures the merchants’ lawyers placed before the courts. The eviction order was to take
place sometime in 2002; yet appeal after appeal prevented its enforcement. Unconfirmed
rumors posed that merchants had bribed the authorities to make sure they were never
kicked out of Ceibo. In a situation that remained at a standoff as of the end of 2002, this
problem certainly complicated the re-colonizing process at Ceibo.

Another obstacle to the resurgence of Ceibo came from certain sectors within
Naranjo that opposed the flourishing of any activity at the locality. In short, Naranjeños
presumed that Ceibo’s success would be tantamount to the financial downfall of Naranjo.
Not surprisingly, many Naranjo dwellers supported the move to expel the merchants
situated at Ceibo in order to curtail economic competition. The hamlet at the border
could well challenge, in the long term, the economic and political primacy that Naranjo
held in 2002. Hence, the hub of state growth-related activity could move soon to Ceibo,
de-centering Naranjo from the process.

**Demographic Changes at Ceibo, 1980-2000**

The population dynamics of Ceibo during the final decades of the twentieth century
comprises two periods. I have set 1989 as a dividing line between the two phases, or
about the time when the civil war abated. Like Naranjo, Ceibo’s populating process was
slow and long drawn-out before 1988. A larger number of settlers came afterward. I will
distinguish the two subgroups as pre-conflict and post-conflict cohorts, respectively.
Table 5-2  Populating trend, landholders from Ceibo (n=12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Pre-conflict</th>
<th>Post-conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: One respondent was born in the area.
Source: Field data

Pre-conflict residents were ex-chicleros, or people born to chicle workers, who decided to establish themselves at Ceibo and had remained there until 2002, even those who were previously displaced by war. All were born in Petén, three of whom had Mexican forefathers and a third from old Petenero ancestry. Two abbreviated life-histories represent this group. Post-conflict settlers resemble more the typical Naranjo inhabitant. They came looking for land, were mostly born in eastern Guatemala and had a prior history of migration within Petén. A few, in fact, lived first at Naranjo, and then settled permanently at Ceibo. Members of both groups were connected to some extent or another with the informal market at the borderline, some depending for a living on it, others deriving secondary benefits from it. Given the small number of examples offered here the life trajectories to follow are meant to be illustrative.¹⁹

**Pre-conflict residents of Ceibo**

Leonidas Ec

Ec was born in the municipality of San Francisco. His grandparents had migrated to Petén from Yucatan in the early 20th century. Following in his father and grandfather’s footsteps as chicleros, Ec began working as a collector of the latex base at the age of 12. After 14 seasons in chicle, mainly in the Lacandón Mountains and under the wing of Ponce, Ec was offered a temporary job with the International Commission on Waters and Boundaries. After being discharged from the Commission he bought the possession rights to a piece of land at Ceibo, around 1972, to settle permanently there. In the following years Ec established a family with a Mexican woman, procreating 8 children. During this period Ec was a full-time farmer. The proximity of the forested mountains allowed him an opportunity to complement his subsistence needs with hunting. In 1981 he requested title to the land with FYDEP though his application never got any further. As violence struck the northwest and security conditions turned more dreadful, he hesitantly left
Ceibo. [Another resident of this locale informed that his wife was expatriated.] They went to Mexico, remaining there for some time.

Ec slowly resumed his prior way of life, after returning from exile. Like other residents of the area, one of his main sources of income was the selling of corn to Mexican buyers. Historically, corn has always been sold at better prices in Mexico. Although agricultural activities constituted Ec’s core livelihood in earlier times, he may have engaged as well in the undocumented migrant business in order to supplement his earnings at some point in the decade of the 1980s. Then, when commerce in drugs began to show up, towards the mid 1990s, Ec took it up for a few years. His participating in the short-lived drug scheme allowed Ec to expedite setting up paddocks in his land. He bought a number of goats, too.

Ec became a figure of political stature at Ceibo, as well, by being elected assistant mayor in the early 1990s. But Ceibo was never sanctioned as a legally established settlement due to its location within MBR’s multiple use zone. Up until 2002, Ec continued to be recognized as the de facto mayor among the local residents only.

Ec’s latest financial opportunity came around when the informal market emerged in 2000. Reportedly he was the main vendor of parcels of land to the merchants who arrived looking for a place to set up their tents. With the exploits from these transactions, and sensing that he was in a vulnerable position because of the irregular nature of the sale, Ec decided to buy a couple of houses in Tenosique.

In 2002 Ec was leading a transnational life between the urban setting of Tenosique, where his wife and children resided, and the tending of livestock at his parcel across the border, on Guatemalan territory. At this latter locality he offered critical support to Ceibo’s newest population. In his position as a community leader and with the moral authority that he derived from being an old-time resident, Ec sided with the merchants when it was politically expedient to do so — as when defending the claims of the informal market occupants. He was one of those who made the best of both worlds, negotiating across and between shadowy practices and the legal economy.

Leonidas Ec is another former chiclero who decided to stay, and one of the few who withstood the harsh conditions that not long ago characterized this border. Until recently Ec’s attachment to the land ran very strong, so much so that even during the worst period of the war he kept going back to his possession at Ceibo. But it was land that allowed him to make the best of the circumstances when the opportunity arose, at the zenith of the protracted frontier process. Resilience and adaptation made Ec a survivor when faced with adversity and a winner when good fortune crossed his way. Ec has
negotiated life at the border and frontier, effectively, and at different levels, for example as a political leader with internal recognition from the populace, yet without the sanctioning of the state; he is also a good representative of the person who has engaged in the shifting strategy between legality and the illegality, in line with specific life experiences he had to go through.

Ruperto Aldecova

Aldecova was born and spent the early part of his life in the town that serves as seat to the municipality of Dolores. Son to a chiclero, he began working on this trade in the late 1950s; in a matter of years, approximately 1962, he visited Ceibo for the first time. He was among the people who worked for Ponce too. Aldecova was one of the few living chicleros who explored all of Petén’s north and northwest, including the Lacandón Mountains; attesting to his experience was the encounter he had with Lacandón people, sometime in the early 1970s. Reportedly, the Lacandón were living close to a place known as Macabilero creek. Sometime thereafter, his memory failed as to the precise date, he began cultivating a parcel in the proximity of Ceibo. By then he had joined a woman from Chiapas, Mexico, whom he had met in the chicle camps. Females worked on the chicle trade as cooks. Because they continued working in chicle collecting and chose not to sit year-round at any one place, other people took over the parcels that the couple originally occupied. This is the explanation I obtained when inquiring why they had not secured a sizeable, well-located piece of land in Ceibo, or some other place for that matter. Consistent with Aldecova’s preference for forest extractive activities, he engaged in xate collection when this ornamental gained significance.

During the civil war Aldecova and his family, by then consisting of several children, had to leave the area because of his wife’s nationality; the year was 1981. Even though they were not direct targets of violence, fear impelled them to get out. They went to Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco, where they stayed for the following seven years. In Villahermosa Aldecova worked as a wage laborer. Upon their return, the Aldecovas settled again close to the borderline at Ceibo, grabbing a piece of land, once more. None of their offspring followed them, though; the youth decided to remain in Mexico. Aldecova built a permanent dwelling in Ceibo and tilled the land in his possession for the next decade.

When the NGO co-administering PNSL made overtures to residents of the park to move out, in 2000, the couple was part of the few who agreed. After withstanding for about one year what they described as miserable conditions at their resettling destination, by December 2001 the Aldecovas had made their way back to Ceibo. It was a replay of circumstances they had gone through before, but in the different context; they were forced to make a new start. However, this time it was harder. Someone else had taken the land they tilled before leaving in 2000, so they had no place to live. At the time of our encounter, in 2002, the aging couple was putting
the finishing touches to their recently built palm-hatched house, located on a
foothill, next to a dump used by the vendors from the informal market. Aldecova
took land, anew, inside PNSL, yet at some distance from the community. Ruperto
Aldecova’s life, characterized by so much coming and going, continued to repeat
itself.

Aldecova is an example of a peripatetic individual who clung to the idea of
returning time and again to the same place. Aldecova also clung to a way of life,
farming, that was less and less viable at Ceibo, yet the only one he could fall back on.
Besides the fact that most of the land within reach had already been occupied, the
prohibition to live and till land inside PNSL potentially hampered Aldecova’s livelihood
because he could be evicted at anytime. He could be part of the underground market but
did not feel as inclined and, above all, competent in business. Most importantly, he
lacked the investment capital needed to get a business up and running. Aldecova,
remarkably, had been subjected to displacement twice: first because of war, and secondl
because of the dictates of state conservation policy. In both cases he reacted by moving
away, and then returned. Aldecova persisted at Ceibo out of love for the land.

Clodomira and Tomás Méndez
Two of the Méndez offspring stayed in the northwest throughout their lives. Born
in 1947 and 1949, respectively, Tomás and Clodomira had distinct life trajectories.
She was born at a chicle camp in the Lacandón area, whereas Tomás arrived to this
world in Tabasco. These facts denote the mobility of their Guatemalan father and
Mexican mother who were engaged in the chicle business. The family settled at
Ceibo even before the sawmill operation got under way. Reportedly, the father
departed at some point in the early 1960s due to problems with the law. Soon
thereafter, in 1966, Clodomira accompanied her mother to Tabasco where they
resided for the next five years. Tomas stayed behind. Looking after the family’s
possessions, despite his young age he began what would be a lifetime connection to
shadowy practices. During this period Tomás may have traded crocodile and tiger
pelts, turtle and deer meat, selling these items to Mexican buyers.

When Clodomira returned to Petén, Tomás was in control of all the land his father
had taken hold of. She was now married to a man from Veracruz, Mexico. The
couple settled to farm in a parcel at Ceibo. Tomás continued his trading, at this
time importing contraband liquor into Petén, selling dyewood to Mexicans. Life
went on without major problems until political violence began. At the height of the
war, in the early 1980s, Tomás took a beating from the army for the possession of non-registered guns. In spite of the dangerous ambience, he decided to stay during this trying period; by contrast, his sister took off, once more going to Tabasco. Tomás resumed his fraudulent activities. Reportedly, he stole cattle that belonged to the late owner of the estate that later would become Naranjo. By then he had begun rearing cattle, with extensive pastures and a number of cattle heads. Tomás Méndez became one of the first “guides” to move groups around and across the border when the influx of migrants on their way to the United States began, according to local sources. He failed at this though, for lack of savvy, soon dropping out of the human cargo scheme.

As for Clodomira, she and her spouse went back to Ceibo in the late 1980s and took on farming anew. Sometime in the 1990s they requested a loan for emergency cash, from Tomás. As a collateral bond Clodomira offered the piece of land she had inherited. In the interim Tomás decided to put the parcel to some use. When she was ready to pay back Tomás refused to turn over the land and thus a cleavage ensued between the siblings. Clodomira still held this grudge against her brother, as I gathered from the comments she made when referring to the incident.

Tomás’s life took a slight turn later on. His estate had prospered but then fell into poor condition. One source attributed the decline of the cattle farm to mismanagement and neglect. Whatever the reason(s), in 2002 Tomás lived in Naranjo, where he moved a few years ago. He opened a grocery store at the village in which he sold agrochemicals, general merchandise and an assortment of contraband items he slipped in from Mexico (among them eggs, soap, toothpaste, beer). In turn, he took fish to Mexicans and for sale to vendors at Ceibo’s informal market. He had also entered the trade on corn by establishing one of the four maize warehouses in existence at Naranjo.21

Clodomira was still at Ceibo, living off the land and trying to make the best of conditions there, i.e. get some extra income at the informal market. The last time this researcher saw her she was selling food among the merchant population. She built a house close to the tents of the vendors, part of a general trend signaling the re-surfacing of this settlement.

The Méndezes were among the few original occupants who still inhabited the area, in a sense the real Ceibo natives. They could not be labeled settlers, strictly speaking, even though their parents were. They were part of the earliest movement of human expansion on the land and witnesses to the latest one to come around. They took part of Ceibo’s brief prosperity during the early 1960s. Thereafter they survived living in this backwater site by using different strategies. For instance, when wartime ensued, Tomás
held out, while Clodomira sought refuge. In his early years, Tomás took up the common
occupations that the average rural inhabitant of Ceibo usually engaged in, namely
farming and ranching. Later, he was one among several individuals who made illicit
practices a full-time livelihood, as part of the border economy. In 2002 both siblings
were active participants, though in different ways, of Ceibo’s resurgence, too.

Post-conflict settlers

Lico Rosal

Lico experienced early in life the fate of many landless, rural inhabitants in the
country. His family was first expelled from the lands that were returned to a
multinational banana foreign company and years later from another location
where extensive cattle ranching displaced subsistence farmers. At age 22, in 1974,
and with a family of his own to support, he decided to make a fresh start in Petén.
The following year he went to El Chal, municipality of Dolores, acquired land and
submitted a title application before FYDEP. His request was granted ten years
later. By this time he had begun a small herd, expanding it slowly. Yet, external
events cast a shadow on Lico’s otherwise promising future. The war afflicting
Petén reached El Chal and hit it hard. Both sides pressed civilians. Guerrillas
demanded intelligence information and food from the population while the army
accused many innocent residents of supporting the insurgent forces; whoever did
not have papers to his or her land was suspected of sympathizing with the
revolutionary movement, said Lico. Never a direct victim of violence, he
witnessed many atrocities in his capacity as squad leader of the civil patrol
organized by the army.

Around 1989 Lico received an invitation to go to Ceibo. He accompanied an
acquaintance of his who was going on an evangelization mission. One thing that
captured Lico’s attention while at Ceibo was that the population of the area cultivated
small areas of corn, in a seemingly isolated rural locality with little else with which
to make a living. At the time, people obtained a good part of their main income
from the stream of undocumented aliens, as he later came to know. Lico liked the
location and bought 225 ha. of land from one of the Méndez offspring. He sold the
parcel at Chal and moved with the family. The first two years he grew corn on the
 flattest part of his parcel (around 90 ha.) and subsequently began introducing
pasture. In similar fashion to what he had done earlier at Chal, without delay Lico
initiated a request with the corresponding land office (FYDEP had disappeared by
now) to obtain legal title to his possession. Because Ceibo’s parcels are situated
within the multiple-use zone of the MBR, this procedure never got resolved. While
a matter of concern for him, the lack of a legal document on his land had not
prevented Lico from turning the possession into a mid-size (by local standards)
cattle ranch. He expressed satisfaction with the fifty plus head of cattle he owned
in 2002, and asserted he would not expand the herd – even though he could.
Lico had no reason to expand ranching. For some time he had shared the benefits associated with the harboring of undocumented migrants. It was commonplace to catch sight of small groups of Central Americans spending the night outside Lico’s house. On occasion, he got sojourners across the border too. With revived economic activity at the borderline, he invested in several boats. For the duration of 2001 and 2002 he was the main carrier of people and goods to and from Ceibo on the San Pedro River. As a dealer on cattle, yet a third trade, Lico had been taking horses to Tabasco to then return with steers into Petén. Recently Lico’s main activity centered neither on the migrant stream nor the black market; rumor had it that he was involved in something bigger and more profitable, the trans-shipment of narcotics. Lico’s coming and going across the border made him a suitable carrier for the hauling of this delicate cargo. But his participation in risky businesses seemed to have caused his downfall. According to a post-field report, Lico was shot outside his home in 2003; allegedly the incident was connected to his non-juridical activities, one theory stating that he had sold horses robbed from another resident of the area, another one maintaining that he was eliminated as part of the settling of accounts between drug cliques in Guatemala and Mexico.

One of Lico’s salient characteristics was his active seeking-after-the-state approach to get sanctioning to a title to the land, first at Chal, later at Ceibo. He was also a risk-taker in the renewed opening of the latter locality, one that took off after the 1990s. By going to Ceibo Lico became part of the wave of human expansion in the area at the time. Like Lico, most settlers arrived with the intention of establishing themselves as cattle rearers. In this sense, Lico did achieve such goal in a matter of years, most likely through his involvement on illicit practices as soon as he arrived to the hamlet. Capitalizing on the underground economy he was well established at the turn of the century. But his involvement in such a highly dangerous domain brought about his demise.

Federico Álvarez
Born in Chiquimula, eastern Guatemala, Federico first went to Izabal around 1984. Next he set out to southern Petén in search of land, but all of it had been taken over by then. When Federico arrived at Ceibo, in 1989, he asked Leonidas Ec where he could obtain land. Federico had to settle for a parcel on steep terrain because all flat areas were in someone else’s possession. Also, the land was inside what would soon become PNSL. He mentioned that at the time no passable road reached the border on either side. The way to Tenosique was as bad as the truck-pass leading to Naranjo. The rocky and uneven topography of the land limited agriculture so Federico subsisted on the cultivation of corn and beans.
A decade later he, along with Aldecova and other occupants, agreed to move out of the location. In November 1999 he was taken to a large estate, located in southern Petén, one purchased for the re-settled group. All those relocated were promised arable land, electricity, water and other amenities. After many problems and unfulfilled promises Federico decided to abandon the project. In June 2000 he went back to Ceibo. Having left his land in charge of a brother, Federico was able to resume his life as a farmer without much problem. In hindsight he resented the aforementioned experience and stated that he would not be “tricked” again if the authorities tried to convince him to move.

Federico is one of the people who went to Ceibo and its surroundings in search of land and had no choice but to settle in places where conditions were bad. This group of settlers shared some commonalities. They all dwelt on the parcel, at a distance from the closest inhabited center, Ceibo. The majority of these parcels were not the best suited to farming due to their irregular topography. All these settlers arrived during the last decade, in the most recent wave that went to the location. Federico was part of the human cohort that wielded ongoing pressure on the land, specifically on PNSL, as of 2002. Like Aldecova, he also opposed the rule of law and any initiatives towards conservation of protected areas such as PNSL, especially after experiencing in the flesh a failed experiment in resettling.

This last episode deserves an expanded commentary. Starting in 1997, and throughout 1998, CONAP contacted and gained the trust of leaders among different communities located inside or close to PNSL. The goal was to convince people to relocate outside the park. In the meantime, DN had entered into an accord with CONAP to co-manage PNSL. Right away the new partner took over the relocation project.

CONAP and DN offered to people willing to move the purchasing of land elsewhere in Petén, the building of some basic services and infrastructure in their new location, in addition to administrative and logistical support. Negotiations succeeded when some residents from Ceibo and two other smaller communities agreed to the relocation plan.
This took place in 2000, parallel to the sprouting of the new market. At this point, leaders who adamantly opposed any negotiations with CONAP threatened the six families that departed from Ceibo. They were very much concerned as to the outcome of this initiative. Other residents remained undecided; they wanted to see how their ex-neighbors fared. In point of fact they were very skeptical.

Ceibo residents who participated in the resettling process eventually deserted the project because of the many problems they faced. For instance, the three Ceibo interviewees who returned to the community one year later (the other three went to different places in Petén) stated that water quality was very bad; the access road promised to them was never built; and the amount of money given to them for the initial period of settling down was lower than the sum originally committed. In short, they felt deceived (Field Notes). NGO representatives concur in pointing out that problems arose at the initial stages of this initiative, some of them being the responsibility of the people, while others corresponded to institutional shortcomings. A main problem among the re-settled families, according to one source, was the irresponsible use of money initially handed over to them. Instead of buying essentials for a new start, and then making ends meet, they spent the cash in superfluous items. The main problem concerning institutional responsibility, added the same source, was the lack of adequate technical support for the relocated families.23

Nora and Fila
These two women share similarities, but also differences, as residents of Ceibo. One of the commonalities lies in the fact that neither had spouses at the time I encountered them. Nora’s companion had died a few years before whereas Fila’s was serving time in jail. Initially Nora, from Alta Verapaz province, had gone to Petén with her husband and children. They settled at the hamlet known as La Casaca. Around 1997 they heard that there was land to take at Ceibo and they moved there. They took hold of a piece of land inside PNSL and set up a house.
Three years later Nora’s husband got involved in some problem with a neighbor and was fatally shot. In 2002 Nora and her oldest son tended to the land, cultivating corn for self-consumption. She had also set up a stall at the informal market where she sold canned beverages. To further supplement her income she cooked for several of the single Amerindian men who made up the bulk of the merchants at the borderline.

Unlike Nora, who had migrated a few years before, Fila had arrived in Petén back in 1969 from Zacapa province. She and her husband went first to San Benito. Then they headed for Lagunitas, planning to rent out land there. This happened in the early 1980s. After almost ten years they moved to Ceibo. Just like other recent newcomers Fila and her husband went to occupy a parcel inside PNSL. In 1998 Fila’s partner was arrested and charged with traffic in drugs, a false accusation according to her. One of her children was in charge of tilling the land they have in the locality. Like the rest of small landholders Fila’s crop of preference was corn. She claimed to own cattle but had to sell them to pay for the expenditures that accompanied her husband’s trial. When the informal market flourished she moved out of the parcel and went to Ceibo in order to set up a small grocery shop. Part of her income came from this little establishment where the main clientele was made up of local residents.

Among the group of most recent migrants, these two females exemplify the fate of women who went to the border following their partners and who, for different reasons, ended up alone. After depending on their spouses for most of their lives they suddenly had to fend for themselves and their families. The emergence of the informal market offered them a viable way of making a living, a new start as it were. To do this they followed the strategy of putting agriculture aside and engaging in the emerging services sector that accompanied the upsurge of the informal market; commerce offered new avenues for economic subsistence. These women not only moved spatially from the parcel to the rising nucleated settlement, but also from a subordinate position to a more self-sufficient one, in an otherwise very male-dependent social setting, in the context of a shifting economy at the borderline.
## Interpreting Life Histories

### Introduction

What does the individual trajectory, as well as the collective experience, i.e. lives in the aggregate, tell us about the expanding frontier and social control of space? What were the distinctive strategies people followed to survive in the frontier, and within these particular strategies the ones to deal with, or avoid, the state? At a more general level, what do we learn about human agency from these life histories? The following table sums up the research findings as presented in the prior narratives; it sketches the type of strategies some of the people who went to constitute the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor followed and their connection to the state as part of the frontier-territoriality junction.

### Table 5-3 Summary of life histories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Land Access</th>
<th>Economic activities</th>
<th>Involvement in Illegal Practices?</th>
<th>Affiliated to (past/present), or affected by the State?</th>
<th>Requested land title?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lara, 1935</td>
<td>Mexican; went to Petén at age 20; lived there for 45 yr.</td>
<td>Chicle</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Chicle, xate, odd jobs</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Pelts (1960s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenorio, 1973</td>
<td>Mexican; went to Naranjo as a young adult</td>
<td>Brother, sawmill</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Sawmill, chicle, xate, pelts, tourism</td>
<td>Undocumented migrants, ranching</td>
<td>Several (1970s-02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teni, 1982</td>
<td>Q’eqchi; left home at age 12; lived in several places; Mexican wife</td>
<td>Displaced by war (early 80s)</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Ranch hand, chicle, xate, fishing</td>
<td>Oil company worker</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matos, 1970s</td>
<td>Ladino, Petenero; chiclero from age 12</td>
<td>Stayed after chicle’s demise</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Chicle, xate, bar owner</td>
<td>Wage laborer</td>
<td>Smuggled liquor (late 1970s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valdez, early 90s</td>
<td>Ladino; moved several times</td>
<td>Xate; Search for land</td>
<td>Seizing (early 80s); Purchase (90s)</td>
<td>Xate, ranch hand, Oil co., logging</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Possibly (cattle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guerra, 1982-83</td>
<td>Ladino; lived in several places before Naranjo</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Odd jobs, woodcutter</td>
<td>Assistant major</td>
<td>Logging (late 1980s)</td>
<td>Assistant major (2000-02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name, date of arrival</td>
<td>Origins and other personal information</td>
<td>Reasons for going to/staying in the area</td>
<td>Land Access</td>
<td>Economic activities Before 2002</td>
<td>Economic activities During 2002</td>
<td>Involvement in Illegal Practices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tejada, 1978</td>
<td>Ladino, Chiquimula; went to Petén at age 16</td>
<td>Oil Co. job</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Chicle, odd jobs</td>
<td>Oil Co. worker</td>
<td>Wildlife hunting (early 1980s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magun, born in Naranjo</td>
<td>Son of Mexican</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Worked for his father</td>
<td>Illegal practices</td>
<td>Undocumented migrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murga, 1982</td>
<td>Ladino, Izabal</td>
<td>Army (drafted)</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Oil company worker, farmer</td>
<td>Rancher, owned store</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reina, 1984</td>
<td>Achi; lived in Petén since age 7</td>
<td>Degraded land in southern Petén</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Xate, hunter, oil worker</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Wildlife hunting (early 1990s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quim, 1989</td>
<td>Q’eqchi, Petenero</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Farming; employee</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutzul, 1988</td>
<td>Mopan, Petenero</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Free grabbing</td>
<td>Wage laborer</td>
<td>Farmer and mason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantoc, 1989</td>
<td>K’iché, Chiché; merchant since age 12</td>
<td>Business opportunity</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Store owner</td>
<td>Grocery store owner</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carro, 1996</td>
<td>Ladino, Izabal; lived in South Petén</td>
<td>Expelled by cattle expansion</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Odd jobs, farmer</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Araujo, 1998</td>
<td>Ladino, Zacapa; lived in southern Petén</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Farmer, rancher</td>
<td>Farming, ranching</td>
<td>Indirectly; took land inside PNSL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castillo, 1999</td>
<td>Ladino from Zacapa</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CEIBO**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, date of arrival</th>
<th>Origins and other personal information</th>
<th>Reasons for going to/staying in the area</th>
<th>Land Access</th>
<th>Economic activities Before 2002</th>
<th>Economic activities During 2002</th>
<th>Involvement in Illegal Practices?</th>
<th>Affiliated to (past/present), or affected by the State?</th>
<th>Requested land title?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ec, 1972</td>
<td>Maya, Petenero; chiclero at young age</td>
<td>Stayed after chicle’s demise</td>
<td>Free grabbing</td>
<td>Chicle, farmer, illegal practices</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>Several (1980s-02)</td>
<td>Displaced by war (early 80s); Assistant major (90s)</td>
<td>Applied for title with FYDEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldecova 1962</td>
<td>Ladino, Petenero; Mexican wife</td>
<td>Stayed after chicle’s demise</td>
<td>Free grabbing</td>
<td>Chicle, farmer</td>
<td>Farming</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Displaced by war; relocated by CONAP (2000)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Méndez</td>
<td>Mexican; has lived all his life in the area</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Inherited land</td>
<td>Farmer, rancher, smuggler</td>
<td>Store owner, smuggler</td>
<td>Several (1970s-02)</td>
<td>Physical mistreatment during war</td>
<td>Applied for title with FYDEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Méndez</td>
<td>Lived most of her life in the area; Mexican husband</td>
<td>Native</td>
<td>Inherited land</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Street vendor</td>
<td>Indirectly (Ceibo’s informal market)</td>
<td>Displaced by war</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5-3, continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Name, date of arrival</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Origins and other personal information</th>
<th>Reasons for going to/staying in the area</th>
<th>Land Access</th>
<th>Economic activities Before 2002</th>
<th>Economic activities During 2002</th>
<th>Involved in Illegal Practices?</th>
<th>Affiliated to (past/present), or affected by the State?</th>
<th>Requested land title?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosal, 1989</td>
<td>Ladino, Izabal; lived before in southern Petén</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Farmer, rancher, smuggler</td>
<td>Farming, ranching, smuggler</td>
<td>Several (1990s-02)</td>
<td>PAC leader (80s)</td>
<td>Applied for title w/FYDEP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fila, ca. 1990</td>
<td>Ladino, Zacapa; lived before in southern Petén</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Free grabbing (inside PNSL)</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Farming, grocery store owner</td>
<td>Indirectly (Ceibo’s market)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora, 1997</td>
<td>Ladino, Alta Verapaz; lived before in central Petén</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>Free grabbing (inside PNSL)</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Farming, street vendor</td>
<td>Indirectly (Ceibo’s market)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The life histories of settlers, many of whom went to northwestern Petén explicitly looking for land (11 out of 25), demonstrate their high level of courage to start anew, to adapt to difficult conditions, to take risks, and seize opportunities in unknown places. Perhaps resilience and flexibility describe best the character of the early Naranjo and Ceibo residents. In this sense they were no different from other frontier populations. They had to face a number of driving forces from both the outside and the inside, acting upon them at a fast pace. One external factor was Mexican demographics, with people going to Guatemala as a result of latifundia expansion in Tabasco. By their sheer numbers Mexicans became important social agents, part of the local society, which even the central state’s army could not fully uproot through forceful removal. There were Mexicans who hid and stayed, offspring who grew up there, and even others who had to flee but returned (e.g., Aldecova’s wife, and Clodomira’s husband). An inside driving force was political violence in Guatemala, the manifestation of global Cold War politics, an event that was particularly devastating among Ceibo residents. Wartime altered the
progression of territoriality like no other event. The oil industry, another driving force with transnational links, fostered a renewed occupation of space. Even though in the whole group of life histories only two respondents had full-time jobs in the industry, many others I interviewed had held some form of temporary employment, at some point in their lives, with petroleum firms that had worked in the area.

Throughout these life trajectories one encounters heterogeneity; the diversity of the social make-up at the research site is shown in terms of place of birth, ethnicity, and occupation. As for the ethnic demographics that shaped the frontier, the narratives indicate that the impact of the Amerindian populations was felt modestly at first, but after the 1990s their presence became important, particularly as they came to dominate the commercial sector of the local economy.

Life histories also incarnate what I term multiplicity of action. Multiplicity of action refers to the wealth of strategies people, especially early settlers, engaged in throughout a lifetime in the process of dealing with and living in the frontier. At one level, this involves the high spatial mobility. All but one respondent (Magun) had to leave his or her place of origin at least once in his or her life, the majority moving voluntarily, the minority forced to leave due to violence. At a different level multiplicity of agency is about the assorted sources of income people had at one point or another or the capacity they had to hold several jobs simultaneously. This strategy was particularly evident among Naranjeños, the best example being Tenorio, who took up at least six different means of livelihood during the course of his life. Access to different ways of making a living bore a direct connection to multiple possibilities both in the legal and illegal realms, either temporarily or steadily. Not surprisingly 15 of all respondents had
been involved, directly or indirectly, with illegal practices at some point in their lives. Once again, the possibility of finding several ways of making a living was part of versatile agency that distinguished this population. In this regard Ec was the notable example of the individual who went from legal to illegal engagements, back and forth.

Finally, life histories indicate that in seeking recognition and attention from the state local inhabitants established direct and indirect links with it in order to get ahead in life, either as members of the army, or as civil patrol enrollees, or as representatives of a government branch, or even as members of the committee that made obtaining a land title possible. Different manners of dealing with the state translated into ways of gaining various degrees of social, economic or political empowerment, a point to which I come back.

Summary

The first section of the chapter presented the complex array of processes contributing to human occupation of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor at the end of the 20th century. The shifting frontier brought together a number of social driving forces, e.g., Mexican influence in the area; political processes, e.g., a disruptive internal war; and determining economic phenomena, most notably the arrival of the oil industry. Historically, illegal practices were the mainstream of the economy in a location in which when few other possibilities were available. Aside from setting up a small military force and a modest immigration office at Naranjo, central state involvement moved at a slow pace during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Only recently had the state begun making further inroads into the area, at a very moderate scale, and mostly in response to the increase in unregulated practices. Post-field reports indicated that in early 2003 a police station opened in Naranjo, staffed with two officers.
In spite of relatively weak influence from the central state, the local population had been asking the state for recognition, legitimation, and sanctioning in different ways: for instance, people persistently requested land titles, something they finally achieved after 1997. They sought to enhance the settlement’s political stature, by gaining the designation of village, instead of hamlet. A few individuals (e.g., Valdez) even aspired to climb within the structure of political administration in a bid for increased political clout, as expressed to this researcher in 2002. At the same time it is undeniable that the persistence of illegal practices subverted the politically normative, without much state intervention. Local people thus recurred to switching strategies, first positioning themselves within the realm of the legal, and later shifting to the opposite camp. For instance, Valdez and Tejada were involved at some point in underground practices to make a living, but then moved on to work in the legal realm. This kind of survival stratagem made the thriving of the frontier possible.

The advancement of territoriality brought the local people and the central state into a closer relationship, after a prolonged period of disconnection, and in spite of the existence of underground practices. The testimonies presented in the second part of this chapter elicited the nature of such a convoluted relationship between state initiatives and personal agency. They also pinpointed the workings behind the transition from frontier to territoriality.

With no more territory to occupy, the frontier vanished at Naranjo first, and later at Ceibo, all in the 1980-2000 period. However, more expanding frontiers went unabated elsewhere in the MBR. Both Naranjo and Ceibo were serving as entrance points to new colonization fronts in 2002. In fact, and as implied in the personal accounts, at least part
of this undercurrent was made up of Naranjeños, an indication that some population in flux still persisted in that village. Why did people keep on moving, expanding human presence beyond Naranjo? The answer lay in the lack of “legal” economic opportunities, land degradation, and overall land shortages in Petén and Guatemala at large. These causes might induce second and third-generation Naranjeños to migrate again, repeating the opening and closing pattern of frontiers in Petén. Future land-related developments, the prevalence of illegal practices, further incursion from the central state into the area, and potential developments at Ceibo might all impinge upon the progression of human expansion.

For a number of reasons the passing of the frontier happened differently at Naranjo than Ceibo. The first phase in the occupation of space in Naranjo shows that land possession was fragile. At this time, the particularly strong hold of the state via military control neutralized local agency, and, hence, disrupted the progression of territoriality. During the second phase at Naranjo, with the re-establishment of peace conditions, the trend that had been interrupted before the 1980s accelerated. Ceibo underwent a different path. For one thing, no road made the place accessible, so the locality’s isolation discouraged potential settlers. Political conflict complicated local conditions even more. Yet, permeability of the border allowed the escape of Ceibo residents from war. In the context of war, moving away was a survival strategy many followed. In the post-conflict period Ceibo began to re-populate; however, the locality still remained politically and economically depressed, overshadowed by the ascendancy of neighboring Naranjo. In a twist of fate, common to frontiers, and similar to what had happened two decades earlier at Naranjo, the triggering factor in the resurgence of Ceibo resulted from the construction
of a paved road reaching into this location. Starting in 2000 Ceibo acquired new significance when a growing informal market revamped economic conditions. This is one example where the occupation of space was fundamental to the flourishing of illegal activity and, in fact, to its own continued reproduction, with little reaction from the central state.

Since about 1990 the enactment of environmental policy regulated the uses of the land for conservation purposes. Yet, lack of enforcement, overall institutional weakness and strong resistance found among the local populations had prevented full implementation of these directives. In short, legislation did not stop the progression of territoriality. Anti-conservation actions were the most effective strategies among the Naranjo and Ceibo residents used to resist state dictates.

The state constituted among local communities an inevitable point of reference in their lives despite the tense relationship that sometimes ensued between both actors. Frontier settlers had variously sought or ignored the state, contingent upon their particular needs at one point in time, or whenever it served their own interests at another. The life histories presented here exemplify the multiplicity of approaches, ways, and subterfuges settlers had undertaken to deal with the state, and ultimately to get ahead in life, by engaging the state –as when asking for titles from it, by being part of it –as when working for it, by avoiding it –as when carrying on illegal practices, or by rejecting it –as when burning CONAP’s facilities. Life trajectories had also been influenced by different driving forces acting upon them, some of which individuals could react to, some of which they could not (e.g., war).
With or without state sanctioning, the social construction of space by Naranjo and Ceibo settlers continued. For instance, and as mentioned in one vignette, the setting of boundaries in a pacer through the cutting of vegetation in its limits was a means to legitimize occupation of space, “informally” yet in a culturally-approved way and in lieu of any form of state sanctioning. The legitimacy of the possession was based on honoring an unspoken practice and rule, as in a “collective moral pact.” Issues like these are addressed in the next chapter, which presents the system that evolved with its own set of rules, specifically those concerning land possession and its uses, all part of territoriality-making.

Notes

1 Practically anything related to the civil war is a matter of secrecy because people are still fearful, or simply reluctant to speak up. The thesis behind Mexicans’ expulsion in connection to armed conflict goes more or less as follows: one notoriously infamous officer who got to Naranjo ca. 1980-1981 on special commission drove people out arguing that if any foreigner was killed or injured due to hostilities, he would get in trouble with his superior officer. Another reading of the situation would be that the war provided an excuse to kick out Mexicans from Guatemalan territory without creating a diplomatic incident.

2 In addition to the problems between Mexican and Guatemalan boat operators (See: Libros de Actas y Conocimientos, Assistant Major Office, Naranjo Acta 12-92 and Acta 07-93 for a glimpse on these problems) there were other factors accounting for the decline of this type of tourism. The most important ones were the emergence of another border crossing point in southwestern Petén and the subsequent opening of another archeological attraction (Yaxchilan) near this location. At the peak of this activity several Naranjo boat owners, under the command of Tenorio, founded an Association. This group worked for a number of years, but eventually disappeared.

The passing of these tourist groups, usually affluent Europeans traveling on pre-arranged tours, continued but at a much lower scale than in the past. In spite of service improvements, tourism had not expanded as of 2002. The area has never been a major scenic route, partly due to the lack of complementary services for the tourist industry. Groups came occasionally, sometimes months passing by without any movement at all. The high season went from August to December. The operation involved less than 6 local people, including 2 to 3 outboard-engine boat operators, and 2 to 3 suitcase carriers in 2002. This state of affairs revealed the inconsequential nature of tourism for the area.

3 The first commercial ban on timber cutting for Petén was enacted as early as 1938 (Schwartz 1990: 341, n. 4).

4 Because of the delicate nature of this activity there are no precise records on the actual volume of timber smuggled across the border. The magnitude of the problem can only be assessed through general inferences from the information that trusted associates supplied.

5 In terms of economics, a contemporaneous weekly publication explained the matter as follows:
“...Guatemalan oil exploration and production are still in the diaper stage, and there has been relatively little progress in the past two years. In fact, if anything, the oil flow has diminished, while costs continue to rise. Elf-Basic’s Rubelsanto fields have dropped from over 4,000 bpd to barely 1,200, while Hispanoil’s Yalpemehel is producing about 850 bpd. The overall production and export averages about 5,500 bpd –an amount that doesn’t even begin to defray office overhead costs.

“The operating companies are spending over $1 million per month on exploration in what is considered a marginal petroleum region. Barring the discovery of new sizable reservoirs of crude, some experts are wondering how long the companies will be willing to continue the effort before moving on to greener pastures.” [sic] (This Week, 1982: May 24)

“A truly commercial oil strike should be in the range of 20,000 bpd when developed, some experts say, but no one in the industry has made such an optimist forecast [for Guatemala].” (This Week, 1983: Nov. 14)

The overall performance of the industry in recent years shows the following scenario. Production figures offer some indication of the revenues oil brings into the national coffers. Guatemala’s oil production reached in 1995 the 3.4 million barrels per year mark. Three years later the figure had gone up, to 9.3 million barrels of oil. Out of this total, 97% came out of the Xan fields. Even more recently, the daily production approximated the 26,000 barrels per day, representing more than half of Guatemala’s daily use. (Rosenfeld, 1999: 70) By 2001, when Perenco took over Basic, the total production for the country approximated the 20,000 barrels (Perenco 2001).

Despite its significance for the local economy the petroleum industry has never become the major employer in the region (except during its initial years), nor has fostered a more dynamic economy in the northwest. None of the companies working in the region have willingly built infrastructure for the local population beyond what is required of them. Other than basic staples, practically everything else consumed or used at the camp facilities is flown in from the outside. As time has gone by the companies have progressively downsized the number of employees on their payroll, with the consequent loss of jobs for many area residents. In short, the presence of the oil industry in Petén has not been benefited the province or helped it alleviate some of its more pressing social problems, nor has it aided in reducing the country’s dependence on other sources of petroleum. The benefits have largely gone abroad. Revenue in the form of taxes paid to the central government has translated, at a minimum, into social or public spending, that is, into the construction of public works and infrastructure in Petén. The struggle to get the oil industry and the government to put earnings back from the sale of the mineral into public projects has been at the center of recent social movements in northwestern Petén, a topic beyond the scope of this study.

Any Guatemalan citizen who resides on a border province may obtain a 72 hour-long pass to travel to the adjacent Mexican state.

Naranjo inhabitants, including the then assistant major, denied any direct participation on this unfortunate incident, but such allegations seem highly unlikely. From the perspective of the aforementioned assistant mayor, the triggering factor for the vandalism that took place was a reaction to, “CONAP’s repression” against the population. This incident was kept in writing, a rare oddity for this kind of event to appear in a public record. See: Conocimiento 1-91, Feb. 2 1991, Book of Minutes, Naranjo’s Assistant Major Archive.

In the context of larger-scale processes, yet processes with a local incidence, the timing of my research coincided with a turning point in the cattle business atmosphere, both in Guatemala and Mexico. Mexican markets opened to U.S. cattle in 2002 as part of a previously agreed upon provisions within the North American Free Trade Agreement. The entry of U.S. cattle has disrupted the Mexican livestock industry, hard-hitting in particular, large cattle-producing areas –like Tabasco. A traditional provider to Mexican states in the north (Coahuila, Sonora, Nayarit...), Tabasco could no longer compete in price with beef
imported from the United States. In an effort to salvage the industry from complete bankruptcy Tabasco ranchers were selling their cattle to Guatemalan buyers, at rates that beat local prices. In the latest reversal of the tide, the extra-legal dealings on cattle were favoring Guatemalans willing to risk the carrying of livestock. This exchange exemplifies the porosity and fluidity existent at international boundaries – particularly those unchecked and poorly controlled ones. It also shows the ways in which local populations constitute the main agents behind such interactions, challenging immigration, police and other state representatives and institutions located at the border.

10 Currently it is easier to reach San Francisco by land, via Mexico, because a road goes to the border community in Tabasco, whereas there is only a path to this place from anywhere in Guatemala. Normally, it takes from 10 to 12 hours, by walking, to get there from Ceibo.

11 These included mobilizing to the area and assigning permanent staff to remain at San Francisco. There was also the issue of a strategic alliance between Ceibo merchants and the land grabbers. They saw themselves as partners against a common enemy: the NGO administering PNSL. This entity actively sought to have both populations removed. One incident at Ceibo illustrates the strong rejection that existed towards the NGO. In late September 2002, and on his way back from San Francisco, where he had gone to assess the situation regarding encroachment of people, the head of PNSL had to face a mob of angry merchants that threatened with burning down the vehicle he was traveling on. He was forewarned that the organization he belonged to should stop pushing any actions for the eviction of vendors. (Field notes)

12 The CEMEC census of 2001 registered no Yucatec or Mopan Maya inhabitants are reported either at Ceibo or Naranjo, in all certainty a miscount. According to this source, at Naranjo there are no Itza Amerindians, from central Petén, either.

13 These forerunners then began delineating their space by planting corn and building their dwellings. Once the territory was demarcated and the initial harvest secured other family members joined in. Within two or three years a community had emerged, with both individual plots as well as a sort of commons. (Milian, Grungber and Cho 2002) The Q’eqchi’ carried out collectively organized agarradas (land seizings, see Chapter 6 for fuller description). However, no examples of this type of collective strategy are present in the study area; the closest (and predominantly) Q’eqchi’ community in the zone lies some 15 miles east of Naranjo.

14 The CEMEC census indicated 28, self-identified, Q’eqchi’ inhabitants present in all of Naranjo, and none at Ceibo (CEMEC 2001). Considering that the total population approximated 3000 people at the time, the figure is telling.

15 Specifically those natives from Chiché and Momostenango townships (located in Quiché and Totonicapán provinces, respectively) have made up most of the ranks of this group, yet other ethnic groups are represented too. The aforementioned census (CEMEC 2001) registered the existence of 10 Achi´ people (from Baja Verapaz province), and 6 Kaqchikel individuals (from several provinces in the center of the country) at Naranjo. Although this data may be an undercount and other groups could have been left out, it provides a rough idea of the situation in recent years.

16 They refer to small venues where one could find everyday use goods and which level of commerce transactions is rather modest.

17 Although it is very likely that some in fact were, no respondent ever mentioned anything. In any event, it is plausible that such Mexicans would have left as a consequence of the war that ensued a few years later.

18 Even the local government has attempted to diminish the legitimacy of these older inhabitants’ claims to remain in the area. For instance, residents recounted that the municipal authorities refused to register their recently born children. They were told they had no right to because they were considered intruders. What
the municipality officers did not know, or chose to ignore, was that these people arrived before the reserve status came into effect.

19 As mentioned, the count of the populace for 2001 was put at 80, with more than half of them being children younger than 15 years-old (CEMEC 2001).

20 Emilio Moran, anthropologist and Amazon expert, has noted that an important factor at the frontier lies on luck. (Personal communication, June 5 2003)

21 Warehouse owners usually monopolize the buying and selling of this grain. In their position as intermediaries between the direct producer and the intermediary who gets corn to its final destination, individuals like Tancho are able to influence on the price at which the farmer is to be paid. Generally speaking, intermediaries buy cheap and sell dearly, getting the biggest percentage of the profit.

22 These lands had been expropriated and distributed among needy people during the post-Ubico regime that enacted an agrarian reform in the early 1950s. With the downfall of this progressive government, the legislation was changed and lands reverted to their prior owners.

23 Most of this institutional viewpoint was provided by Mario Laguardia (pseudonym), an officer working with DN, the NGO that co-administered PNSL at the time. (Personal communication, December 10, 2002.)
CHAPTER 6
A MODEL TO UNDERSTAND A SHIFTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOCAL SOCIETY AND THE STATE: TERRITORIALITY VIA LAND AT NARANJO

Introduction

The dwindling of the frontier process in Naranjo signaled the onset of territoriality. While the frontier evolved, nothing was stable. By contrast, territoriality brought a sense of permanency to settlers of Naranjo. During the frontier period, humans expanded over land. Territoriality implied permanent spatial control of the area. Territoriality was completed at the moment the central state sanctioned ownership rights via land titling. This act consolidated a deeply felt demand among the settler populace for legitimacy of the social space they were occupying.

This chapter lays out the developments that preceded and laid the foundation for territoriality. To explain how people went from having customary land rights, or what I call “possession-ship”, to attaining legal tenure over the land, I offer a three-stage model, corresponding to three distinctive historical periods. While initially the holding of rights was fairly open-ended, later rights turned individual and private. Transformations in land use accompanied changes in rights. At first, resources were freely exploited from the forest, and following a seasonal regime. As the frontier process advanced, anthropogenic intervention concentrated on the land, and became permanent. At the stage in which territoriality was legitimized through land titles, that is legal tenure, the dominant type of land use became grass paddocks for cattle rearing. All through this process people turned to different strategies of agency suitable to prevailing conditions in each corresponding
period. The central state had an impact on territoriality, as well, passive at first, then more active in the end. As explained in earlier chapters, for a long time the state allowed colonization by neglecting the research site. Later, it was under the initiative of the central state that people had access to land titles. Of course, there were other driving forces at work influencing the nature of the frontier, and consequently territoriality. These are analyzed in order to comprehend the interaction at different levels, i.e. between the local and the external, along with different strategies of agency.

Because access to land was the main factor in establishing territoriality at Naranjo, the model I propose explains the evolution of land holding rights and the progression of man-made interventions upon the landscape. The intent is to elucidate the way human occupation shaped land possession types as gradually constituted on the ground. Before laying out this conceptual construct, however, I characterize the populations that took part in the process.

**The Consolidation of Social Control Over Land at Naranjo and Ceibo**

Certain aspects that pertain to land occupation among landholders were drawn from data elicited through interviews with 50 respondents in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. Tables 1 through 7 include descriptive statistics that reflect these general aspects. Annex 1 contains the raw data for the entire sample. The variables discussed here are place of birth, gender, ethnicity, date of entrance into Petén, date of arrival in Naranjo or Ceibo, the primary reason for migrating to the area and the way the people had access to land.
Table 6-1  Place of birth for the sample of land holders from Naranjo and Ceibo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Naranjo (n=38)</th>
<th>Ceibo (n=12)</th>
<th>Total Population (n=50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>63.15% (24)</td>
<td>66.66% (8)</td>
<td>64% (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PETÉN</td>
<td>15.79% (6)</td>
<td>16.67% (2)</td>
<td>16% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>21.05% (8)*</td>
<td>8.34% (1)**</td>
<td>18% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>0 (1)</td>
<td>8.34% (1)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (1)</td>
<td>100 (1)</td>
<td>100 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Alta and Baja Verapaz, Santa Rosa, Escuintla and Quiché provinces
** Mexico

This table shows that more than half of Naranjo and Ceibo inhabitants surveyed were born in eastern Guatemala. The proximity of that region, climatic similarities, and the possibility of reproducing in Petén a society based on cattle ranching explain, in part, the flow of easterners up north. A much smaller percentage of Petén-born residents in the northwest was an indication that population pressure had been less severe inside Petén than in the rest of the country, as has shown in Chapters 2, 4 and 5. The data points to some heterogeneity of origins but with a clear predominance of eastern-born respondents.

Table 6-2  Gender of land holders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Naranjo</th>
<th>Ceibo</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>86.84% (33)</td>
<td>91.66% (11)</td>
<td>88% (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.15% (5)</td>
<td>8.33% (1)</td>
<td>12% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (1)</td>
<td>100 (1)</td>
<td>100 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results corroborate the general trend found in the northwest, where cultural norms dictate that females are, generally speaking, not granted land holder rights (see Depiction of the Local Population, Chapter 2). Women were rarely given titles to land,
as it was expected that their male relatives would be in charge instead. A woman gets land holdings under special circumstances only, namely when her partner has passed away, or when her conjugal mate is legally unable to be a land owner. This is indicative of a strong female to male subordination, yet one that wanes when women have to fend for themselves, such as the case of Nora and Fila, to name two examples.

Table 6-3 Ethnicity of land holders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Naranjo</th>
<th>Ceibo</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amerindian</td>
<td>10.52%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>89.48%</td>
<td>83.34%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(34)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that more Ladino people than Amerindians populated Naranjo and Ceibo. The figures were somewhat different from the ethnic make-up distribution found in the township of Libertad, which was 30% Amerindian and 70% Ladino (CARE-Guatemala and Cooperación Austriaca . . 1999: 20), yet within the same general pattern. Specific reasons that explained the presence of only a small cohort of Amerindians at Naranjo and Ceibo included the following: instead of many agriculturalists it is mostly business-oriented individuals who were attracted to the frontier, and the Petén-born Amerindians populations, i.e. the Q’eqchi, Itzá, Mopán, have been less pressed to look for land elsewhere in the province. Despite their long-standing history of mobility, and for reasons deserving further research, the Q’eqchi’ never moved in large numbers to Naranjo and Ceibo as part of the second wave of space occupation into the northwest.
Table 6-4  Date of entrance into Petén

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time-period</th>
<th>Naranjo</th>
<th>Ceibo</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 1970</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1980</td>
<td>21.05%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1990</td>
<td>13.15%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-2002</td>
<td>10.52%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.a. (born in Petén)</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>23.69%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First dates of arrival into Petén contrast sharply between the two settlements of concern. Before 1970 people went first to Ceibo and then to Naranjo. An upsurge in the number of immigrants during the following decade is a direct reflection of the effect of Petén’s terrestrial opening. In the next period migration continued but at a lower pace. Widespread war conditions in the late 1970s through Petén, and the country, probably accounted for this deceleration. Certainly migration into the province decreased even further after 1990. Instead, internal migration began to increase, as shown in Chapter 4.

Table 6-5  Arrival date to the Naranjo-Ceibo site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time-period</th>
<th>Naranjo</th>
<th>Ceibo</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 1970</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1979</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-1990</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(18)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-2002</td>
<td>39.47%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.a. (born in village)</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>7.89%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The trend before 1970 points towards a much earlier arrival of Ceibo landholders than their Naranjeño counterparts, a reflection of the temporary boom that the former hamlet experienced in the 1960s. Subsequently conditions deteriorated at Ceibo. Little by little people began to arrive at Naranjo. At the end of the 1970s, there were countervailing forces at work. On the one hand, roads were being opened into the northwest and other areas; on the other hand, war conditions made moving around dangerous. This explains the paucity of migration at that juncture. Unfortunately the substantial lack of data for Naranjo hinders a better understanding of what else might have happened.

Table 6-6  Original cause for migration to Naranjo and Ceibo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Naranjo</th>
<th>Ceibo</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search for land</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
<td>41.66%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest-extractive</td>
<td>73.67%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job with oil company</td>
<td>7.89%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.a.*</td>
<td>2.63%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One respondent was born at Naranjo. One respondent from Ceibo went as a child to that location.

Even though most people from both settlements arrived looking for land, a considerable percentage of Ceibo residents, in particular, went to the area in search of jobs. Again, these results were indicative of the distinct historical moments in which the respective localities gained preeminence. While Ceibo attracted individuals at the latest stages of a dying forest-extractive economy in the 1960s, Naranjo clearly had turned into the main colonization front in the northwest by the 1980s. Within the general settler
populace there were, of course, many other reasons that impelled people to head to the northwest, from displacement to business opportunities, something exemplified in the life histories of this study.

Table 6-7 Mode of acquiring land

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Naranjo</th>
<th>Ceibo</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free Occupation</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>81.58%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(31)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>7.89%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The manner in which access to land took place presents contrasts. More people in Ceibo had held on to the parcels they freely took than people from Naranjo. This indicates that Ceibo never had a very active land market as compared to Naranjo. Given the isolated condition of Ceibo until recently, these findings are not surprising.

Summing up, the sample replicates something that has already been established about the larger population: the majority of the landholders were born outside the area, more specifically in other rural regions of Guatemala. A good percentage (40%) entered Petén before 1980, yet almost half of all interviewees arrived at the research site in a single decade, from 1980 to 1990, evidence of national and regional demographic processes of population expansion. Although many migrants were searching for land, the range of motivations for settling into the area was more complex. Many others arrived in search of a job. For most settlers the long-term goal was to become cattle rearers, an objective that several did accomplish.

Underneath the process of achieving social control over space, data shows a history of evolving uses on and rights over the land. Ultimately, land was the sphere where
settler’s shifting strategies realized and engaged a changing relationship with the state in the frontier. My analysis of such developments is captured in the model of the frontier that evolves into territoriality. Before discussing the model proper, I offer a conceptual clarification of two central terms: possession and tenure.

**The Distinction between Possession and Tenure**

Land possession and land tenure as used here have very specific meanings. Possession is not synonymous with tenure, the distinction being very important. Under “possession-ship” the holder of a parcel usually has “ownership” rights to the land. In other words, he or she might occupy and work the land under *de facto* rights. Incursion into state lands, or taking over someone else’s land are ways of acquiring a possession. Another example: the acquisition of a plot of land without official papers to back up such transaction grants possession rights to the purchaser. The buyer attains possession-ship but not official owner-ship. I am aware that tenure is a more encompassing term today, and the extensive, constantly growing, body of literature attests to this. (For extended discussions on the situation in Latin America see, for instance, Thiesenhusen 1991, 1996; Vargas 1999; Baranyi et al 2004.) For the purposes of my argument, however, I use a very narrow definition of tenure, an operational one. Tenure, involves the sanctioning of ownership rights through a government-issued document, generally a title. Unlike possession, tenure carries secure ownership and state-dictated rights and obligations. A settler inside a protected area may stay on the land and hold possession to it, yet he or she can be dispossessed from it. With tenure the owner has the choice to stay, or be rightfully absent from the land, but no one can evict him or her. The following quote helps clarify the distinctions I am making, and it is applicable to the situation at the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch: “In the case of land, possession may lie with a squatter who has
barred entry to the land while ownership may lie with the person who purchased it and whose interest may be registered by the state.” (Dale 1997: 1625). At the center of the argument for the model presented here is the way land “possession-ship” evolved into tenure. But before addressing how this progression happened, specifically at Naranjo, and over the course of the twentieth first century, I introduce the antecedents of tenure in Petén and how a direct link between possession and land use was a result of encroaching market forces into the area, and eventually, the central state.

**The Historical Roots of Tenure in Petén**

When national independence took place in 1821, the government declared the whole of Petén a national estate. From that point onwards the central state was the only entity empowered to allocate and title land. At least until the 1960s there was a lack of interest, and thus no actual need, to adhere to these formalities. This is hardly surprising, given the conditions of the province at the time. With a rather sparse population there was plenty of land for everybody. According to Schwartz (1990: 244) the absence of infrastructure and poor soil conditions also hindered the growth of commercial crops, in turn discouraging the rising of private tenure. In consequence, the market on lands inside Petén was weak.

Before FYDEP began selling land to individuals in the 1960s, private ownership of a possession was very limited. Nonetheless, there had been a precedent of land titling: at least two presidents had granted individual titles to a small number of *Peteneros*, mostly people from Flores, the capital, during the first half of the 20th century. At the time, fifty-four individuals owned between 1% and 2% of all of Petén’s territory, or between 360 and 680² kms (Schwartz, 1990: 92-93). Hence, the emergence of private rights on holdings was a rather recent development in the district, associated with demographic
growth and the exploitation of cash crops and cattle on a large scale in the area. Tenure was basically circumscribed to the center of the province. In the fringes the situation was different.

**Free Possession in the Northwest**

During the era of forest extractive activities no restrictions ruled access to resources anywhere at Naranjo or Ceibo, nor did people involved in these trades seem interested in claiming permanent ownership of the space they occupied. The harsh living conditions a person had to endure in the middle of the forest plus, the seasonal nature of the work, discouraged permanent control and settling. No monetary value was attached to the land. Chicle foremen established territorial boundaries on the basis of mutually recognized collecting grounds; that was sufficient. The situation of Petén resembled what in the natural resource management literature has been identified as the commons (Baden and Douglas 1998).

Under this arrangement a *chiclero* knew the extent of the grounds his other coworkers or colleagues would cover during the tapping season so as not to interfere with each other’s, perhaps contiguous, tapping sites (Schwartz, 1990). Loggers and *xate* collectors had equally flexible rules. Once a section of the forest was depleted of all valuable trees, or palms in the case of *xate*, operations had to move somewhere else and new delimiters were established accordingly. Like chicle camps, logging *tumbos*, or collecting spots, constituted permanent markers of human activity, places to which people returned year out and year in but over which no enduring, definite claims were asserted. Later some of these chicle and *xate* camps turned into permanent settlements, with their own, well-defined spatial boundaries. Among farmers all over Petén the way of establishing de facto possession over a tract of land was by clearing the forest cover –
even if it simply meant marking the holding by cutting down the vegetation along the parcel boundaries. This “customary” system (Scott 1998) came to be known as *agarrada* throughout Petén. But the *agarrada* system developed over time into something else, as circumstances changed.

**The Evolving Agarrada system**

When population numbers were low and available land plenty in Petén, a farmer did not need not to worry about establishing a permanent claim on a parcel, nor would he think of setting any markers to declare the possession as his. Furthermore, people did itinerant farming, cultivating the land one year at ‘x’ location, then clearing at ‘y’ site the next. This flexible practice and strategy was called *agarrada*. Wherever land access remained unrestricted and plentiful, the practice of *agarrada* continued. When people turned to establishing permanent settlements with year-round land uses, the word *agarrada* took on yet a new meaning.

The shift at Naranjo from a temporary chicle camp into a permanent settlement happened in the late 1960s. At the time, people like Hurtado and Ponce, chicle contractors, were able to settle freely on the land. Under these new conditions the *agarrada* scheme dictated the following: whoever took unoccupied land first had the right of claiming it as his or her permanent possession. The simplest and commonest way of establishing one’s possession rights was through clearing the outer limits of the parcel. In this way the rest of the community acknowledged the person as the rightful occupant of that tract of land. Hence *agarradas* were spatially fixed, could be traded, and given as inheritance. Because the buying and selling had no state-sanctioned foundation, a parallel land market on lands, as it were, emerged. The value of these holdings was set according to any “improvements” the occupant might have made on the land. In this
context improvements meant having cleared the plot in preparation for planting crops, introducing pasture, or establishing fenced-in paddocks. In other words, what a possessor really offered when selling an *agarrada* was equivalent to the value of the investments rather than the actual worth of the land. Thus, in the northwest, *agarrada* progressively became synonymous with both *a method of access to land and a category of possession*. The people who took over land during the 1980s in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch did it within this *agarrada* scheme.

As a possession type *agarrada* held several simultaneous meanings in 2002, depending on the uses of the land, the zoning location, i.e. inside or outside a protected area, and the size of the holding in question. For instance, farmers in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch sometimes referred in colloquial speech to any small possession as either *agarrada* or *parcela* (i.e. any parcel), using the two terms indiscriminately. When a former *agarrada* (as meant before the 1980s) was transferred from one holder to another, by bartering or selling, and was under cultivation, then it turned into a *parcela*, this time (2002) in the sense of a farming unit. One respondent explained that the key to the subtle distinctions between the two glosses was as follows: an *agarrada* was considered such when there were no papers to back up the right to its possession-ship because it had never been exchanged or sold, whereas a *parcela* was a former *agarrada* for which there was evidence, i.e. a written record of some sort, as part of a transaction, and hence proof of prior occupancy and possession-ship.

Another meaning of the term was in relation to what was in the parcel, particularly in terms of vegetation cover. According to the prevailing local norms in 2002 any tract of land with primary forest, regardless of its size, could still be labeled an *agarrada*,
provided it had remained forested and had never been sold, bartered or exchanged; with few crops on it, this possession would be considered a rather large *parcela*; if extensive farming or cattle was present then it had turned into a *finca* (an estate). The presence of a sizeable herd on this land, i.e. more than 60 head, would undoubtedly put it in the category of a cattle estate. The meaning of the term *agarrada* in connection to possession thus varied as economic conditions changed, most importantly as a property acquired monetary value, i.e. became a commodity, and as it gained further value through new uses of the land.

*Agarradas, Land Use, and the Emerging Land Rights Regime*

Before occupancy *agarrada* was the dominant, customary type of possession and land use as part of the frontier progression in northern Petén, that is, before full and permanent occupation. The average farmer cultivated land in different parcels from one year to the next, i.e. rotating from one place to another. He could also plant as much area as he wished. The situation of the cattle ranches was not much different prior to 1970. Herds roamed and grazed on open pastures, on what at the time were national lands. Because the volume of livestock was fairly small in Petén, the interest in making claims to privately own land possessions were not there. The formal adjudication of lands by the state began after 1971 when the national Congress enacted a law regulating land tenure, Decree 38-71 (Milián, Grunberg and Cho 2002:35). Coinciding with a period in which a large number of people moved to Petén, and to entice these settlers to stay in the province, the granting of lands launched the process by which an official system of ownership rights began. In spite of the area’s remoteness at the time, people from Naranjo began demanding land titles soon after the legislation was enacted. Petitions were sent to FYDEP as early as 1972 or 1973. This strategy of seeking the state had
continued up until 2002, specifically among sectors of the population that had not qualified for titles in the 1997 program.

Unlike the pre-1970 *agarrada* system, which allowed the flexibility of using any extension a person would need, with the new land normative size became a primary criterion for land holdings, in what would become a nascent formal tenure structure. The average size of a land parcel adjudicated to most applicants would be set at 90 hectares. This threshold, the assumption was, would hinder the establishment of latifundia while allowing, in the mid-term, enough of the resource for inheritance redistribution. Moreover, given soil characteristics in most of Petén (karst soil), land parcels of smaller dimensions would probably make farming unviable. Finally, foreseeing continued immigration into Petén in the near future, the distribution of land plots larger than 90 ha. was considered to be unwise for a long-term sustained agriculture strategy (FYDEP 1969).

In contrast to the norms that characterized land possession associated with forest extractive activities and itinerant farming of the past, the land tenure arrangements that eventually emerged all over Petén were of an individual, private, and permanent, type. No free, open access to any land was possible at the study area in 2002. The rotation of crops was restricted to the individual plot. Despite the absence of a formal framework that could “regularize” land (i.e. get legal titles), private ownership began at Naranjo and Ceibo from the time all the land was occupied. Between the early 1980s and the late 1990s a non-juridical, de facto structure of individual rights to the land reigned.

Hence the transition from possession to tenure went on through the adherence to a framework meant to regulate land transactions, whether they involved an exchange, a
purchase, or an inheritance. The system worked under the logic of property as a legal relationship (De Soto 2000: 257), based on a corpus of law, a “...codified, systematic and regulated one” (Scott 1998: 35). The move went from informal possession rights to legal tenure sanctioned by the state apparatus, the source and guarantor of the political normative. By 1997 the central state consolidated private rights at Naranjo with the implementation of a titling program. Before launching the discussion on the way the actual program was implemented at the turn of the century, I address the issue of the means through which people engaged the state in their search for titles during the previous three decades.

**Actions in Search of Official Land Tenure**

Attempts at formalizing land rights went a long way back at Naranjo. As mentioned before, 1973 marked the beginning of a protracted effort to get the state to grant titles to the lands at the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch. For the most part, the initiative happened due to the single-handed efforts of one person. This man, called herein Pinto, took on the task of gathering the names of all people living along the San Pedro riverbanks at the time, as well as collecting the necessary papers from them to initiate the application process required by FYDEP. In fact, Pinto traveled countless times to FYDEP’s central headquarters to file, and to follow up on the status of the petitions all his neighbors had filed.

Part of the prerequisites in the long process of applying for a land title involved gathering socio-economic data among potential beneficiaries. To this effect, FYDEP required specific information from each applicant about such matters as family size, the time the petitioner had occupied the land, crops and animals he/she might possess, and income. The list of all claimants was thought of as a “census”. These listings were
collected every time that Pinto prepared a new application or a petition for land titles. A change of government personnel (every four years), misplaced and lost applications, political unwillingness to address the land issue on the part of authorities, and bureaucratic neglect created a backlog in an overloaded system, due to the number of applications and the amount of paperwork involved. Response was very slow to applicants’ demands. The only solution left for the common man was to press on by re-applying time and time again, something that Pinto did for others and himself.

Collected at intervals several years apart, the listings reflected the growing number of applicants that settled at Naranjo (and Ceibo to a lesser extent) over time. Thanks to Pinto’s meticulous document filing, some insight into the land solicitation process can be gained today. I had access to listings compiled in 1979, 1981 and 1994, respectively. Pinto mentioned the existence of a fourth list, dating back to 1974. Unfortunately he was unable to furnish the latter because it was in someone else’s possession, he said. The main finding these documents yielded concerned the influx of the population at the time: many people came and went without seeming to care about securing land rights, or perhaps they sold their privileges to newcomers and moved on to try their luck elsewhere, or simply dropped their land claims. While the 1979 list identified 86 applicants as “old proprietors”, two years later the figure had gone down to 73. In 1994 the number of names had risen again, this time to 102.³

With no tangible results to show, eventually Pinto lost credibility among his own people; this undermined his purportedly good intentions. For one thing, he never organized a formal group. My supposition is that he did not want to. He always acted in representation of a loose assembly of residents. As the applications stagnated, people
began to sense that something was not working; settlers felt cheated. Pinto’s continuous monetary allotments to cover for his lodging and transportation expenses in his frequent trips to Flores came to be regarded among many as an excuse so that he could live off their contributions. In spite of these allegations Pinto continued to have a small following, as I had an opportunity to witness. For example, in November 2002 we came across each other at Ceibo, when he was holding a meeting with a group of land holders. He asked me to participate in the activity. He had called the rendezvous to brief the attendees about the current status of the latest petition he had submitted to the government. Those (few) present listened attentively, though Pinto had nothing really new to share with them. Towards the end Pinto requested contributions for the expenses he would incur, he said, in yet another trip to Flores. Everybody gave him some money. According to Pinto’s critics he was, essentially, living off people’s ignorance.

Later, some Naranjo residents organized in small groups with the goal of obtaining title to the land. For instance, in late 1994 a land committee was initiated at Naranjo. However the group rapidly dissolved, having achieved nothing.\(^4\) The latest effort, assembled in 1999, materialized in the form of a committee made up of village residents. Thirty five enrolled yet only a handful of people were very active. By the end of 2002 many committee members were close to attaining the much desired land titles. In retrospect, however, this latter committee was only a means for reaching a short-term goal. It had not endured as an expression of permanent collective organizing; for all practical purposes it ceased to exist. Part of the problem rested on the fact that the group coalesced because of outside imposed regulations, not as part of a drive from within the community. Of course, this problem is not unique to Petén’s northwest. Little (2001:
instance, has described a similar situation in Aguarico region of the Ecuadorian Amazon, where cooperatives were set up a means to consolidate individual claims and not for the collective welfare of the group. In the final analysis, the Naranjo group had contributed very little to facilitate a relationship with the central state, much less advance an agenda for social or economic empowerment, the main objective intended by the outside institution that set it up as a precondition to aid in the titling program. The desire to organize had been stronger and firmer in other realms of community life at Naranjo, a topic beyond the scope of the dissertation, but one I come back to in my conclusions, when referring to other means of achieving social control over space. At this point I continue discussing the progression of territoriality as seen through the evolution of land tenure.

The Land Titling Program at Naranjo

This program, launched in the mid 1990s, was created with the aim of stopping the occupation process occurring in the core zone of the MBR, a particularly critical problem in northwestern Petén. The titling program intended to stabilize communities situated within the buffer zone of the biosphere reserve under three premises: first, obtaining title to the land would mean increased tenure security; second, land titling would foster investment; third, secure land ownership would facilitate access to credit (Gould 2001). Once a title was granted, people would see no need to occupy more land elsewhere on the reserve. For residents of Naranjo, a title to the land meant accomplishing legitimacy over the piece they occupied, an unrelenting demand made to the central state institutions over the years. In this regard, titling the land was a key achievement in consolidating territoriality from the local level. Itinerant occupancy and squatting had been part of a
longer strategy, part of the expanding agricultural frontier. Colonizers set a foothold for future permanent claims, even if they might not see those claims come true.

Another implicit rationale for giving permanent titles to the land was that large cattle ranchers in Petén use poor families, directly and indirectly, to expand their holdings. Farmers with no means of access to land are allowed to remain on an estate for some time and sow their own crops in exchange for the labor needed for cutting down primary forest or secondary growth, introducing pasture seed, or putting up fences. After two years, or more, these people were not needed, and were told to move on. Small landholders where arable soil had turned into barren land are forced off the land as happened to Carro and his family, to cite one example. Large cattle ranchers may pressure these individuals to sell off the land, sometimes even resorting to violence or coercion (see Williams 1986 for an extended discussion).

To expedite and make more efficient a lengthy and convoluted process, in 1995 the international non-governmental organization CARE was put in charge of the program; later, in 1998, a government agency, FONTIERRAS, created specifically for this purpose, took over. Because the Q’eqchi’ people were the most disadvantaged among Petén’s population, the program initially targeted this group (CARE-Guatemala and Cooperación Austriaca . . 1999). The titling program reached the Naranjo area in 1997. People began to enquire in earnest about it. CARE told inhabitants that one prerequisite for acceptance into the project involved their having to organize themselves. A committee was established. Out of more than fifty land possessors on the Naranjo section of the Naranjo-Ceibo strip, by 1998 thirty eight residents had joined in. The three largest landowners and all Ceibo residents were excluded from participating because
most of their possessions were part of the multiple-use zone of the MBR, a place where the law prohibited issuing land titles. By 2002 the majority of applicants in the land committee had completed the paperwork required of them. At the time I left the field people with complete applications were only waiting to make an initial down payment, which accrued towards a provisional title, a sale tax on the transaction, and a property tax based on the number of hectares owned. Once the lands were paid in full, the government agency was to issue a permanent title. The documentation of those who were unable to comply with all the requirements remained in limbo.

Glimpses of some of the initial effects of the land-titling program were already appearing in 2002. Even though a title did grant ownership security, such privilege became of lesser importance to a farmer once the soil was washed out, eroded, and denuded. An agriculturalist with barren land was more likely to sell his property and move on again to find fertile lands. From the of the small farmer’s point of view, a title offered added value to his asset because the land could fetch a better price when sold. Contrary to another of its intended goals, the program was not fostering access to credit among small landholders. According to a key respondent, a main reason for this was rural landowners’ lack of knowledge on how to apply for a loan, and to follow up on the process. Another problem was that people owned no major assets other than the land itself to put forth as collateral. From the perspective of private lending institutions, the high transaction costs they incurred when doing small-scale operations made micro-credit unprofitable. Only a handful of landholders within my sample had requested and obtained loans from the only financial institution, a bank, which had an office branch at Naranjo. These individuals, by and large, possessed two or more parcels, had medium to
large size cattle herds, and owned other material assets to back up the loans. Typically, they invested the money borrowed from the bank in the improvement of pastureland, or to augment their herds.

It is difficult to measure the extent to which the titling program curtailed the influx of settlers into the MBR. Even though there were indications that the trickle of outside settlers had continued, though at a slower pace (see: CEMEC 2001 and Corzo et al 2001), the findings of my research painted a bleak picture. For instance, Corzo and colleagues obtained field data indicating that the rate of migration into PNLT had decreased by 15% in the period from 1997 to 2000 (2001: 44). But my own evidence led me to conclude that those who were already established inside the MBR had continued moving in it.

This was the case of Naranjo land possessors, who, in addition to taking advantage of the titling initiative, had no second thoughts about grabbing more land within the core zone (e.g., A. Castillo and S. Araujo). This happened in spite of a clear prohibition stating that a beneficiary of the land title program could not own more than one piece of land. In a parallel development, the agreements that people signed as part of the process for obtaining a land title prohibited the sale of a possession without explicit authorization from the government. Ten years had to go by since the signing up of the agreement before people could sell. This proviso was being actively violated in 2002.

Thus, the titling program had not stabilized ownership of the land nor had it been an effective deterrent for the continued occupation of protected areas. Although this program was meant to alleviate negative impacts on protected areas, such an objective remained unfulfilled. If anything, the existence of the titling program at the buffer zone
raised expectations for the future implementation of similar initiatives elsewhere on the Reserve, especially among those inhabiting the core area.

In spite of this failure to fulfill the state’s original intent, the land tenure via land titles, paradoxically, furthered state involvement. Territoriality has been possible only due to state intervention. Legal tenure over the land involves rights and obligations. Because land rights cannot be taken away, they empower the individual, and in the aggregate, the whole community. Rightful tenure to land may contribute to cementing a collective identity connected to a place. Obligations link the proprietor of land to the government, and in consequence to the central state. Duties come in the form of tax paying and the use of instruments of normalization, for instance, a cadastre. How people might deal with these new instruments of state power is beyond the scope of this study and open to further inquiry. Having set out the empirical evidence, I move on to introduce a model on territoriality as seen through the progression of land possession and tenure.

A Processual Model of Territoriality in Connection to Land Possession and Land Tenure at Naranjo

The model proposed here involves the integration of possession types and land use patterns at the study site. “Use” is conceptualized here in the sense of anthropogenic intervention upon the land for different purposes, including, but not limited to, productive (agriculture, mineral extraction), leisure (e.g. tourism), environmental (conservation), cultural (e.g., salvage archaeology), and religious (sacred sites) ones.\(^5\) Annex B offers a full description of land use practices in existence during 2002 at the Naranjo-Ceibo site. Use and possession types may or may not correspond with each other time-wise. A possession class may or may not determine the type of use that prevails on the land.
Historically, the frontier process, or humans spreading out, extended from the 1920s to the early 1980s. Then the agricultural front ensued in a period of another fifteen years, setting the foundations for territoriality-making. With the titling of lands, territoriality was consolidated at the turn of the 21st century.

Table 6-8  A model of territoriality at Naranjo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSSESSION-SHIP/TENURE</th>
<th>USE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage</strong></td>
<td><strong>Characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free possession</td>
<td>Temporary; Unrestricted access; No delimiting of land; No papers needed to back up “ownership”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-facto, non-juridical possession-</td>
<td>Permanent yet non-juridical possession; Boundaries marked; Agarrada system as main method of access to land; “Informal” documents recognized by community to endorse possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, individual tenure</td>
<td>Legal, i.e. State-sanctioned, tenure emerges; Official documents legitimize ownership; Small and large holdings exist side by side. A tendency appears of the latter to prevail in the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interpretation of Local Developments as Part of the Paradigm**

Initially free, temporary possession took place at Naranjo. Resources (i.e. land, water, flora, and fauna) were open and available to everyone. Because human activity was seasonally-based, there were no set limits in terms of demarcating the land. During this stage extractive activities impinged directly upon the vegetation but not on the soil.
Chicle collectors in the forest, and the general farmer elsewhere in Petén, were able to engage in this system. Regeneration of plant life was viable to some extent, but overexploitation eventually would finish off the source base of some forest products, as happened progressively with the timber stock of fine woods. Control over the land did not matter, either to private citizens or to the bureaus of the central state.

A growing population and the subsequent emergence of permanent settlements launched a second stage. Enduring human presence led, in turn, to 1) setting up of boundaries on the landscape, followed by de facto possession (through *agarradas*), and 2) steady forms of sustenance on the land, such as farming and livestock raising. Individual control of the land, whether by a person or a family, set in. From then onwards, delimitation of the space under occupation had to be clearly defined. In lieu of juridical endorsement, the rest of community members sanctioned possession rights over land. In Naranjo, specifically, the more people that arrived at the vanishing frontier, the more personal holding rights came to be entrenched. The soil became directly and substantially intervened. The replacing of the original vegetation with crops planted periodically brought in some radical transformations on plant life structure. Hundreds of native species of flora had been replaced by three or four plant crops, or one or two grass varieties. The result was less biological diversity, and an eventual relapse of resources, an irreversible development. Agriculture became the dominant anthropogenic land use category.

By the time title to the land was granted to landholders, a third stage was already under way. Ranching was becoming the dominant land use type with farming taking on a marginal role. Titling brought about the shift from possession to tenure, the latter taking
on the juridical figure of individual private property. Both the state (through FONTIERRAS) and the local population (via the land committee in Naranjo) acknowledged this pact, one that opened up legal trading, bartering, inheriting, and passing on of land. However, the growth of a market in lands could eventually skew the land tenure regime by means of land concentration. In 2002 the trend pointed towards the constituting of large estates in Naranjo and its surroundings; were this trend to continue, it would be a matter of years before the wealthiest people in the area might acquire from their neighbors parcels of land that would no longer be useful for anything else but pasture. This situation could replicate what has already occurred elsewhere in southern Petén, and across the border, in Tabasco, namely the synthesis of processes that lead to the emergence of large cattle ranches in very few hands.

In between the second and third phases the creation of protected areas came about, an event that had a decisive influence on the progression of the frontier, and territoriality. Environmental legislation attempted to regulate land use and land possession in a manner that was at odds with people’s customary ways of doing things. Until recently, conservation legislation was at loggerheads with the prevailing form of land possession among the population, namely private holdings. Yet, the land title program initiated in 1997 made private tenure a legal option, at least inside the buffer zone, where Naranjo sits. Overall environmental policy remained, however, a countervailing force to the local population-driven territoriality. Like environmental policy, there were other non local aspects present in northwestern Petén that influenced the evolution of territoriality; table 6-9 summarizes the role these agents had played in the process at Naranjo.
Table 6-9  External driving forces influencing territoriality at Naranjo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driving force</th>
<th>Level of influence on territoriality</th>
<th>Strategies and Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexicans [1860s-1980]</td>
<td>Driving force, fostering frontier</td>
<td>Populated the area, particularly between 1940-1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil Industry [1978-2002]</td>
<td>Fostered the frontier</td>
<td>Co. opened a road; attracted people through employment positions, particularly between 1982-1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War [ca. 1978-1989]</td>
<td>Disrupted the frontier</td>
<td>Chaos; displacement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logging [Erratic, 1860s-2002]</td>
<td>After 1980s it was a driving force of the frontier.</td>
<td>Illegal logging began attracting people that later settled permanently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife [1940s-1980]</td>
<td>Fleeting activity</td>
<td>It did not influence territoriality because it did not affect land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human cargo [1980s-2002]</td>
<td>Indirectly, it fostered growth</td>
<td>This activity contributed to economic prosperity of Naranjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs [ca. 1995-2002]</td>
<td>Indirectly, it helped consolidate full occupation</td>
<td>It could alter land market and hence land structure (concentration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal market (Ceibo) [2000-2002]</td>
<td>Main driving force behind the re-settling</td>
<td>Market was the main reason for the repopulating of Ceibo. In 2002 the market continued attracting more settlers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The State [1821-2002]</td>
<td>It has, at various times, deterred or fostered territoriality</td>
<td>By neglect, it allowed colonization of the area (before 1990). By law, it issued policies that restricted land occupation (MBR). Yet, later it encouraged consolidation of the process (land titles)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Construing the Influence of External Driving Forces

On close examination, the way different actors and aspects influenced the development of territoriality at Naranjo yields a dynamic picture of intertwining processes. The spectrum of forces and their impact was as diverse as the several levels at

...
which they had an impact. At least three of them had been fundamental to the fruition of social control over the land: the Mexican human cohort and oil exploration at Naranjo, and, more recently, the existence of an underground market at Ceibo. In some cases they had indirectly contributed to territoriality, as was the case with logging and the traffic on undocumented migrants. And there were those aspects that had had a null role, or at least a very minute one, as with trade in pelts and wildlife meat. It is interesting to note that the state was the one agent that had been in a position to either promote or stifle territoriality, at different periods, and contingent upon its political or economic interests, and strength, at the time. In this sense, the central state also has had the capacity to maneuver and take on a “shifting” position of its own, meaning that at one time the state might act passively, while at some other period be very active in carrying out particular schemes, not necessarily successful ones (i.e. conservation policy), pro or against territoriality.

The link between illegal practices and territoriality-making merits a special discussion. Traditional illegal practices corresponded, time-wise, with the period of frontier expansion. None of them, coincidence or not, necessitated permanent use and occupation of land. They resembled, and some were linked to, forest extractive activities. As times changed, and more people took over territories to establish themselves in permanent fashion, the emerging stable settlements became loci where novel illegal practices sprouted. When the latter were in place they boosted, in turn, further immigration and hence further colonization. What I call modern-day or contemporary illegal practices developed alongside budding territoriality. As mentioned, there had been, as well, other shadow practices that occurred alongside the frontier process, but
with very little influence over it. These included the smuggling of archeological artifacts, pelts, wildlife, and chicle. Finally, it is evident that some illegal practices do not require human social control over space to continue thriving. The example that comes to mind is the illegal trade on wildlife. By the same token there were those illegal practices for which the existence of settlements was vital for their continued existence, e.g. the undocumented migrant stream. All along, during the existence of traditional and contemporary illegal practices the arm of the state was at a distance, weak or ineffective in its policing functions. Unlike earlier illegal practices, those of the late twentieth century bore a direct connection to globalization processes. How these connections of international and transnational caliber could play out in terms of territoriality, especially in this border, is a major question that has not been addressed.

**Summary**

A protracted period of frontier expansion preceded full fruition of territoriality at Naranjo. In part this was due to the nature of the forest-based economic activities that prevailed during the initial period of human occupation. With the downfall of extractive activities and other developments that contributed to opening up the area, people began to settle permanently, effecting qualitative changes. The most important among these transformations was the emergence of agriculture, i.e. farming and ranching. Changing conditions fostered new relationships and rules among people over the system of having access to and “owning” space. As De Soto (2000) has fittingly pointed out, a legal framework began to fix and realize capital (157), in this case land, when state legislation set in place private property rights, in the early 1970s. For the next three decades the settlers of Naranjo held possession rights to the land but no legal tenure over it. Then a program initiated by an NGO, and subsequently taken over by a state entity, brought the
opportunity to legitimize landholdings at Naranjo. Once residents of Naranjo secured tenure and no more large numbers of settlers were going in, the frontier process concluded and gave place to territoriality. There were other factors pushing the passing of the frontier as well, including the pressing population growth in other parts of Guatemala, the expansion of cattle inside Petén, and the construction of roads in the region. As seen in Table 6-9 external aspects and agents also played a role at different levels, some being more important than others. Even though this was not always the case, the state, among all of these actors, has been pivotal in territoriality-making. In the end, the land program contributed, paradoxically, more to an agenda of territoriality emerging from local people than to a closer means of effecting state policy on local society.

With varying conditions taking place during the frontier/territoriality transition one would presuppose that a more active encroachment of the central state might have ensued at the study site. Such a move occurred only intermittently, and at a slow pace. The state’s involvement in the forest economy was rather marginal at either Ceibo or Naranjo. The subsequent upsurge in populating did not initiate closer monitoring, or any significant intervening in the settling process on the part of the central state. Even the government’s environmental policy, aimed at regulating population and land inside superimposed protected areas, had been a rather weak initiative. The failure of environmental policy reflected the relative feebleness of the state at its margins, a situation which allowed the local population to strengthen their own agenda of territoriality vis-à-vis the central state, specifically in relationship to the government. People developed a set of strategies to achieve social control of the place they occupied
and made their own, namely hiding and subverting the state, as when engaging on illegal practices; directly occupying state territory, as when taking up state protected areas; and asking for sanctioning and legitimacy; as when applying for land titles.

**Notes**

1 Though outside the scope of this work, Scott’s insight about customs and land possession systems based on them are worth reflecting upon:

   Customs are better understood as living, negotiated tissue of practices which are continually being adapted to new ecological and social circumstances—_including, of course, power relations_. Customary systems of tenure should not be romanticized; they are usually riven with inequalities based on gender, status and lineage. But because they are strongly local, particular, and adaptable, their plasticity can be the source of microadjustments that lead to shifts in prevailing practice. (Scott 1998: 35)

2 A parallel market is one that works outside the law. For instance, and according to current legislation, no one is allowed to buy or sell land in the study area because this is a national reserve inside state-owned lands. In practice, this law had been disregarded.

3 Sources: _Poderes otorgados a “Pinto” para representar a los ocupantes de las márgenes del Río San Pedro, en 1979 and 1981_ [Mandates granted to Pinto on behalf of all residents to handle land titling procedures, dated 1979 and 1981, respectively]; _Memorial entregado a INTA para regularización de la tierra_, [Petition submitted to INTA for land titling, dated November 24 1994].

4 See Acta 21-95 [sic], Book of Minutes, Naranjo’s Assistant Mayor Archive.

5 Two distinctive moments can be identified in the resource use history of the Naranjo-Ceibo locale. The first is the time of forest extractive activities. Anthropogenic interventions during this phase were of a limited impact; in fact they made possible the regeneration of resources. The disappearance of extractive economies led to permanent intervention on such resources, the most important being the launching of agricultural practices. In contrast to the first phase, the current system of agriculture is completely transforming the landscape at the Naranjo-Ceibo site. Cash and subsistence crops farming practices of 2002 shortened soil replenishment because they were nonviable on tropical locales. Their thin productive layer, and a low water-holding capability of the karst bedrock, as well as other physical limitations characterized soils in this area. For a complete overview regarding the problems that accompany tropical forest deforestation see: Lal et al 1986. Grazing land as a type of land use leads to the same outcome because it becomes equally degraded. Secondary growth may allow for partial regeneration of some species, but never replenish the rich diversity of a primary forest. In short, agriculture finishes off land productivity, and in the process dooms itself. The value of land increases as more interventions are affected on it, from clearing to farming to the introduction of pasture.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS

In my efforts to unravel the social history of a border and frontier area, I explored the interplay of a changing relationship between human populations and the state. In the long-term perspective, this relationship has been part of recurrent discontinuities in the occupation of the research area. This intermittent forming of a social space in northwestern Petén by different populations that came and went entered a new phase after the late 19th century, extended thereafter for about one hundred years, to accelerate rapidly in the final two decades of the twentieth century. Human presence was at first temporary, and then later became permanent. Starting in the 1860s, the world system made its way into the research site through the forces of capitalism, i.e. new links to the outside through the market, new forms of exploitation, etc., through emerging forces of modernization and, more recently, via globalization. In this sense, this progression resembled the model outlined by Joe Foweraker (1981) for certain areas of the Amazon in which a non-capitalist stage preceded the pre-capitalist, to finally yield to full capitalist integration. The speed and complexity of the process in recent times complicates the capacity to fine-tune social analysis, though: the more factors/driving forces that have come into being and the more changes they effected, the more difficult it becomes for a researcher to identify and interpret distinct phases or phenomena as part of local developments.

My preoccupation with change led me to take a different route to the study of the repositioning interactions between the Naranjo-Ceibo population and the Guatemalan
central state. Instead of looking at the social life of people in the manner of traditional ethnographic work, I shifted the focus and concentrated on the political economy, a large-scale system, to explain what went on into the making of such a complex socio-cultural realm (after Gupta and Ferguson 1997b: 4). Rather than capturing a snapshot in time and place, as it were, I wanted to apprehend different processes through time and space and their connecting linkages.

I have proposed here that the concept of agency is vital in talking about strategies humans use to take social control of a particular space, and, while doing so, how they deal with other agents and social forces. The evidence presented in this study points to an array of ways agency was realized in a milieu such as the Naranjo-Ceibo site. Avoidance, as the Lacandón chose to do when withdrawing into the forest; active demands on the state, as when people requested services from it; and the undermining of the political normative, as when individuals took up illegal practices, all constituted means by which people have related to the state. In turn, the central state also redirected its agency thus affecting people differently. The state did this in either subtle or blatant terms through devices of control and exacting, via an ideology, or by the use of force. Censuses, a program towards conservation of natural resources, even forced enrollment to patrol the village during war—all were different ways by which the Guatemalan state carried out particular agendas in northwestern Petén.

The interface between differing, sometimes contending, agencies results in specific power relations, some in which the state gains the upper hand, some in which it does not. Another restating of this proposition is that of Michael-Rolph Trouillot, who reminds us that: “The power of the national state sometimes seems more visible and encroaching and
sometimes less effective and less relevant” (2001: 126). In Guatemala, and Petén is no exception, the state seems to find itself trapped in a tension between sometimes being in a stronger position, yet, at other times in a relatively weaker position. In theory the Guatemalan central state has the capability to intervene and completely halt local agency but has rarely ever done so. The expulsion of Mexicans in the early 1980s attests to this potential might of the Guatemalan state. Parallel to the expelling of foreigners, in the middle of political conflict, some daring settlers circumvented the grip that the national army imposed over Petén’s territory and successfully settled in the northwest.

To maximize the chances of a positive outcome in their use of strategies through a lifetime, local populations had recurred to a strategy of versatile agency. This strategy allowed people the flexibility and resilience needed to survive or adapt under adverse conditions, or changing contexts. Not only had people moved, spatially, and a few had done so since a very early age, but they also drifted in a lifetime, sometimes back and forth, through the continuum of different realms, e.g. the legal/illegal, the pro-conservation/anti-conservation, even the state representative/civilian member duality. As the life histories presented in this work, people have taken advantage of a wide range of possibilities.

Because social control over space is best realized, empirically, via land possession, I offer some closing thoughts on the way strategies of human agency have revealed the relationship between the local population and the state through land issues. The numerous ways in which settlers at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor materialized their making of a place they could call their own involved taking over agricultural land through *agarradas* (as early as the 1940s and all the way up to the late 1980s),
establishing a market on lands outside the juridical frame of the state, the petitioning of land titles before the authorities (from the 1970s and onwards) in defiance of existing legislation that marked the area a forest reserve at first, and later a biosphere reserve. These strategies challenged state dictates both within and outside the juridical normative.

Paradoxically, the state has helped to advance directly and indirectly human expansion over northwestern Petén: the promoting of certain policies geared to spur economic development, e.g., setting up and running a timber mill at Ceibo in the 1960s; granting of permits for oil exploitation in the late 1970s, the slow but constant formation of its own institutions, for instance, schools, administrative bodies of control such as police and immigration offices. Even its neglect of state-conservation enforcement protocol contributed in one way or another to the populating of the area. The most paradoxical of all actions was the land title program that the authorities allowed at the MBR’s buffer zone. When this opportunity to regularize the land arose, settlers readily took advantage of it. From the perspective of the local inhabitant, land titling was “positive” agency on the part of the state.

The state is a point of reference, when it comes to organize resources, among them land, within a nation-state. The state arbitrates and legitimizes most matters of public interest. Yet when the state is weak, or not very effective, the individual and collective clouts of agency among the civilian population to bend, ignore, or circumvent the rules of arbitration or legitimizing increase. A good example was the emergence of de-facto, *sui generis*, possession rights that evolved before the enactment of national legislation regulated land matters in Petén. People came up with their own system of boundaries as a strategy to set internal legitimacy to the process of occupation. In this
sense legitimacy was established *in situ*, as part of a relatively open access system.

Internal rules of social control over space prevailed before the state realized capital via a corpus of legislation (De Soto 2000:157), one that set the rules for a market in lands, for the existence of a private-ownership system, even for dictating preferred uses of the land, most notably ranching.

Changing conditions have thus demanded shifting strategies among the local population of Ceibo-Naranjo. When occupation of space was temporary due to the seasonal nature of economic life, the rules were more flexible regarding rights to be in possession of a territory, and so was the relationship with the state. The more permanent human stay became, as with agriculture, the closer this condition brought people to a connection with the state, eventually culminating in the granting of a state-issued title.

But changes affecting the process of territoriality also originated due to driving forces acting upon the Naranjo-Ceibo site at different levels, i.e. the regional, the national and the international. Some of these driving forces were outside any effective control of the state or the local population. When and if there had been room to act upon or take advantage of these outside driving forces, then a window for local-level agency opened up. Consider the case of illegal practices of transnational caliber at the research area. Illegal practices had been indirectly linked to control over space in the research area because the economic benefits they generated furthered the process. Shadowy practices incarnated an interesting tension, although one of apparent contradiction. On the one hand they promoted some form of economic development, empowering the population; on the other hand they undermined the authority of the state. The proliferation of unregulated practices pointed to the relative weakness of the state’s enforcement capacity.
in 2002 and to the interstices through which local agency thrived, confronting and subverting the state.

As a non-local driving force, the civil war that afflicted Guatemala also had an enormous but sometimes not so readily perceptible impact on the process of the moving frontier. The displacement of people due to hostilities disrupted a demographic process already underway and by which the northwest could probably have been occupied at a much earlier date. In the process it fueled a more antagonistic relationship between the local population and the Guatemalan state. Likewise, the creation of a biosphere reserve complicated the colonization process taking place in this part of Petén. Ultimately, conservation policy also estranged the relationship between Naranjo and Ceibo settlers and the central state through the bureaucratic delays it posed –more than any real, effective prohibitions or limitations that never came into effect. These two aspects made the progression of this frontier a distinctive one. War and conservation were connected to phenomena of larger transcendence, namely the Cold War that confronted the opposing political camps of capitalism and socialism, and an international movement seeking to preserve the last major ecosystems of the planet for the sake of the environment. In this sense, the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor exemplifies the way in which global politics are played out even in the remotest confines –in this case a frontier, of the world system.

In line with this global perspective, the latest driving force that affected territoriality, the state, and agency was globalization and its related sub-processes, some of which had materialized locally. Undoubtedly the situation at the borderline, i.e. Ceibo, constituted the best example. In the course of three years, from 2000 to 2003, swift
changes occurred there. The opening of a road led to the emergence of an informal market, which in turn was the main force behind the re-populating of the area. Due to its illegal nature, the market had complicated the relationship between population and the state, at least at the formal level. In actuality economics was likely to prevail over political considerations after 2002. This scenario could force the state to establish a more permanent presence at the borderline. There are many reasons for the central state to pay attention, even move in, into a previously ignored area, with or without a local population present on it. The presence of important resources (e.g. minerals, ore), or real threats (e.g. external invasion), or even the existence of other agendas of state caliber (such as competition from another nation-state at an international border) are all good reasons to establish a foothold. Of course, the more people that go into a non-populated area, the more likely the state will be drawn to it. Put differently, the more settlers that move in, the more engrained notions of the state they carry with them because, sooner or later, they would look for it. (Murdo Macleod, personal communication, April 12 2005)

Finally, a discussion is warranted on what I see as other means of effecting social control over space found at the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. These include initiatives among the population to increase their social, economic and political empowerment vis-à-vis neighboring communities, and the municipal and regional governments. To illustrate, the improvement of roads to have better access to cultivated plots and inhabited places has been an important sphere of contestation in northwestern Petén. For instance, the paving of the road linking Naranjo with central Petén was part of a social movement which mobilized thousands of people in more than 45 communities along the route to the northwest in a struggle that lasted four years (1994-1998), and which attested to the
capacity of the population to muscle the state and other actors to comply with specific demands. Another arena in which Naranjeños, in particular, had endeavored to gain political leverage over their physical space was through the seeking of higher political status, i.e. achieving the change of category from hamlet to that of a village; Naranjo was officially recognized as a village in late 2001. The culmination of territoriality via land titles fit in within this scheme, as well. What I want to suggest here is that in the process of the making of a space into a place, or the setting of spatial meaning (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b), larger strategies to gain further autonomy at the local level were being realized. The ultimate goal of this agenda was the separation of Naranjo from its municipality, to create one on its own, autonomous. This search for increased political power involved the setting up of a territory with precise physical boundaries. Hence, the shifting relationship between the state and the civilian population might be moving to a higher level of contest, one that is played out in the national political system. Ultimately, I argue, Naranjeños were striving in the long run and at a higher level of power dynamics for expanded political territoriality, developments in the making as I departed from the field at the closing of 2002.
APPENDIX A
LAND HOLDERS OF THE NARANJO-CEIBO CORRIDOR
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Arrival Date, Petén</th>
<th>Arrival Date, Naranjo</th>
<th>Reasons for Migrating to the area</th>
<th>Agarrada or Purchase of land</th>
<th>Occupation(s) in 2002</th>
<th>Socio-Economic Status**</th>
<th>Land Title Program?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N1</td>
<td>Jutiapa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1984*</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1992</td>
<td>Farmer and cattle reer.</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N2</td>
<td>Zacapa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1977*</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1992</td>
<td>Farmer and cattle reer.</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N3</td>
<td>Chiquimula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chorti (?)</td>
<td>1993*</td>
<td>Bet. 1993-95</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N4</td>
<td>Escuintla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Bet. 1993-94</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1992</td>
<td>Truck Driver and Cattle re.</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N5</td>
<td>Baja Verapaz</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Bet. 1985-86</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Agarrada, 1986</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N7</td>
<td>Izabal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1980*</td>
<td>Bet. 1981-82</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1989/90</td>
<td>Store owner and cattle re.</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N14</td>
<td>Izabal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1980*</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1992</td>
<td>Farmer and ranch hand</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N15</td>
<td>Chiquimula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>Ca. 1960-65</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Oil co. job</td>
<td>Purchase, 1986</td>
<td>Oil Co. employee</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N17</td>
<td>Chiquimula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chorti (?)</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Bet. 1984-85</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1996</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N19</td>
<td>Santa Rosa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1965*</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1988</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N24</td>
<td>Izabal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1999</td>
<td>Cattle reer.</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N27</td>
<td>Zacapa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1999</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N30</td>
<td>Eastern Petén</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Oil Co. job</td>
<td>Purchase, 1996</td>
<td>Oil Co. employee</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table A-1, continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Arrival Date, Petén</th>
<th>Arrival Date, Naranjo</th>
<th>Reasons for Migrating to the area</th>
<th>Agarrada or Purchase of land</th>
<th>Occupation(s) in 2002</th>
<th>Socio-Economic Status**</th>
<th>Land Title Program?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N31</td>
<td>Chiquimula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Land (came w/ parents)</td>
<td>Purchase, 1994/95</td>
<td>Oil Co. employee</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N33</td>
<td>Quiché</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Purchase, 1993/94</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N35</td>
<td>Jutiapa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Oil Co. job</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Oil Co. employee</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N36</td>
<td>Naranjo (Mexican father; Guate. mother)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Father, émigré</td>
<td>Purchase 2001-02</td>
<td>Illegal activities</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N37</td>
<td>Chiquimula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>1977*</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>Purchase, 1999</td>
<td>Store owner</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N38</td>
<td>Southern Petén</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Land (came w/parents)</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Illegal practices</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>POB</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Arrival date, Petén</th>
<th>Arrival date Ceibo</th>
<th>Reason Migrating</th>
<th>Agarrada or Purchase of land</th>
<th>Occupation(s) in 2002</th>
<th>Socio-economic status**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Petén</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Itza</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Chicle</td>
<td>Agarrada, early 1970s</td>
<td>Cattle g., illegal practices</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Chiquimula</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chortí (?)</td>
<td>Late 1980s</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Agarrada, 1988</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>Jutiapa</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>Ca. 1989</td>
<td>Chicle and xate</td>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Store at border market</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>Mexico, (Guatemala father; Mexican mother)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ladino</td>
<td>Early age</td>
<td>Early age (1960s)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>Father did agarrada in early 1960s</td>
<td>Store at Naranjo, some cattle, some illegal trade</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: Land title program does not apply to the Ceibo area
Source: Field data. For arrival dates I combined my own data with that of CEMEC (2001).
* Source of the data: FONTIERRAS’ archive
**Socio-economic ranking
Socio-economic ranking

Three groups were identified in the study sample (total N=50). The criteria for establishing this ranking includes but is not limited to source of income, amount of land and cattle owned, even place of residence. This stratification is flexible and reflects the heterogeneity that characterized the local population. A degree of leeway applies in those instances where the differences were not so clear-cut, i.e. when people could fell in-between two categories.

The less affluent echelon, I (n=26, 52%), comprised individuals who were likely to be full-time farmers and their livelihood strongly depended on it. However, they might have extra earnings through agricultural and non-agricultural jobs, occasionally and permanently. They did odd jobs, worked for wages, sold wood and other commodities. Except for five individuals in Naranjo who owned two plots of land, the rest of landholders in Naranjo and Ceibo owned one parcel of land only. This cluster included people who obtained remittances from relatives working in the U.S. and those who perhaps owned two or three heads of cattle. The most underprivileged of Naranjeños in this subgroup lived in their own parcels, away from the town of Naranjo.

Stratum II (n=20, 40%), was made up of several substrata. Agriculture was a secondary means of livelihood or was something irrelevant (e.g., oil workers) for one sub-layer. A second sub-group made a living both out of crops and other non-agricultural activities. A third sub-stratum had amassed a cattle herd and had become mid-size ranchers already, that is, people who owned more than 30 heads of cattle. Fourteen of the members of this sub-group owned two, sometimes three plots of land. The rest, five respondents in Naranjo, and one associate in Ceibo, owned just one. The latter were the better-off among all the locals. Financially-wise this group was faring much better than the first one.

The remaining 8% (n=4) has been categorized separately (III). These were individuals involved, specifically in drug trafficking. They had no crops. They were categorized separately because of their specialty - a dangerous one but at the same time a most profitable venture. For obvious reasons they were investing heavily in other, legal, activities, e.g., a hotel, or cattle, or land. In all of the three groups one could find individuals who, on occasion, would engage in temporary illegal practices.
APPENDIX B
LAND USE TYPES AT THE NARANJO-CEIBO CORRIDOR

I identified two main agricultural systems in Naranjo and Ceibo: farming and ranching. An agricultural system is conceived as the series of integrated practices that involve direct intervention and transformation of resources by humans in an effort to produce/yield goods from the land. Farming refers to crop cultivation. Ranching encompasses the planting of pastures and the introduction of cattle.

Farming
The majority of the people who live in the Naranjo-Ceibo strip were small-scale, cash crop agriculturalists. As already indicated, a little more than half of the small-holder sample depended on subsistence cash crops, and, sometimes, wages generated, if only temporarily, from farming-related tasks. Slash and burn was the common farming method at the study site. Slash and burn involves in this region the razing of the vegetation to subsequently let it dry, or alternatively, using the dried out remains from a previous crop, burning this debris, and then proceed to plant on this soil. The system also includes the rotation of the area of cultivation from one season to the next. This system of cultivation works well when there is enough land available and population density is low. The itinerant nature of planting schedules necessitates long fallow periods meant to allow for some soil quality replenishment, which in turn assures continued productivity of the land. At Naranjo and Ceibo very few farmers had enough land to do this kind of planting without compromising the future of their most valuable resource and yet, practically every cultivator I talked to performed slash and burn. At the research site, the threats to swidden practices, another name given to this system, included rapid population growth, fire damage, and nonviable farming practices, specifically the shortening of fallow periods.

Additional problems hampered a more dynamic farming sector at Naranjo and Ceibo. The main one centered on the absence of favorable prices for crops. Depressed prices translated into people’s refusal to cultivate perennial crops. It was worthless, or so the reasoning went, to make long-term investments on plantings for which future earnings could not even cover the costs into which the farmer incurred. Any surplus of corns and beans, i.e. any amount beyond the minimum needed within the household for consumption, was generally sold. And yet, whenever prices were —and they usually were— low, there was always the option of consuming these staple foods. In some instances the lack of tenure security on the land deterred agriculturalists from introducing permanent crops too. Again, the idea was that the risks associated with the possibility of losing the land surpassed any investments as measured in terms of the time and labor that went into them. A description of cropland, the most common land use specifically associated with farming, is discussed next.
Cropland. Cropland refers to areas usually cultivated with annual crops. This category includes both market and sustenance crops, but no other types of systems, for instance tree plantations. The seed of squash pumpkin was the preferred market produce in the Naranjo-Ceibo area. However, price fluctuation made pumpkin seed production inconsistent. The prior year’s price influenced the decision of a farmer to cultivate squash pumpkin seed from one year to the next. The area sown with this crop generally corresponded only to a small portion of the whole land plot because the potential value market of the yield was high. One crop per year was obtained from this planting, going from April through August.

Corn, beans and rice, in that order, made up the most important annual crops for family consumption, and to some extent, for cash revenue. Corn was a must amongst all staples in the diet of any rural Petenero, something that underlies its overall significance both for food security and for economic reasons. Regardless of negative market conditions, and other potential constraints, including limited land accessibility, a farmer always sown corn. Corn was sold due to several possible reasons, two of which are mentioned here: 1) if the amount of harvested corn exceeded the yearly or seasonal household needs, 2) in case of extreme situations, i.e. when cash was needed for emergency expenses. These factors influenced the farmer’s decision concerning how much to plant the next season. Two, and sometimes three, yearly plantings of corn took place. The first ran from May-June through September-October and the second one from October-November to March-April. The third harvest was done generally at the end of the dry months, approximately May through August. Corn, which can be associated with other cultigens, covered the most area in the cropland landscape. The area of corn planted with a parcel varied considerably based on numerous factors, including family size, other sources of income, the price of the grain, and the planting season. The range in size registered in the field went from as little as 2.75 ha. to 9.6 ha.

Black beans came in second among crops important to people in the research area. Bean production was somewhat restricted because of soil quality, weather and market conditions, or due to personal financial limitations. Not all soils are adequate for this leguminous plant, the water regime being a most critical factor for a successful crop. Beans are susceptible to over-watering. Excessive rain on a single day before harvesting time may ruin an entire crop. Only a farmer with enough surplus cash to invest on the seed would venture cultivating beans. In Naranjo yields of this leguminous plant ranged from ca. 22-25 one hundred-pound sacks per hectare. A factor that discouraged bean cultivation was the high costs involved in transporting the product to outside markets. Similar to pumpkin squash, the area of beans under cultivation was small, rarely exceeding 2 hectares in any given plot.

Finally, rice was planted in patches of bajos where enough, constant humidity offered the best conditions. Although none of the informants cultivated rice in 2002 some reported having done so in previous years. This grain faced some of the same limitations as the other crops. The area planted with rice varied according to the suitable land available. In recent years prices had been depressed and very few people showed an active interest in cultivating rice.
When soil becomes fully depleted in a parcel, the farmer needs to search another location where land productivity is still optimal for cultivation, ideally un-cleared forest. Another option is to introduce pasture, one hard to accomplish among the average small farmer. Hence, when land has lost its fertility, the farmer ends up selling his holding, most likely to a cattle rearer.

**Ranching**

This was the second most important agricultural system in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor. Cattle ranching emerged almost simultaneously as farming did, when ex-chicle workers began to settle and started a new life as farmers and would-be cattle rearers.

On the basis of herd size, two sub-groups of cattle growers were identified at Naranjo and Ceibo. One of them was the people attempting to become ranchers, with a herd less than 30 head in size. They made up 28% (n=14) of the sample. The medium cattle grower, the second cluster, owned between 40 and 100 head (n=8, or 16%). These two groups shared common characteristics, the most prominent among them being that they all lived permanently in Naranjo and Ceibo and were, by and large, self-made ranchers. Usually each rearer owned more than one parcel, yet in the aggregate the total area of the land he possessed rarely exceeded 90 ha.

There were three big landowners in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor but they were not part of this study. The underlying pattern of land use and possession at their holdings was essentially the same as that of other cattle growers. Of course, the size of these landholdings was huge in comparison to all others present in the corridor: 450, 480 and 990 ha., respectively. There were cattle on these estates with sizeable herds, the largest one having in excess of 700 heads. These estates also featured fallows in several stages of succession as well as patches of primary forest of assorted areas in size. These absentee landowners hired foremen to oversee the every-day operation of their ranchers. Like the residents of Ceibo none of the three was permitted to claim a legal title to the land. Nonetheless this circumstance had not precluded the expansion of pastureland within their holdings, the use associated with cattle.

**Pastures.** All land covered with grass, whether natural or planted was considered pastureland by people of the research area. Savannas were found in a small stretch between the San Pedro River and firm ground. For the most part cattle grazed on them during the dry season. Because the area of the natural savanna was limited, pasture had been introduced continuously into the area ever since the first estate emerged. As of 2002 grasses such as African Star (*Cinodon plectostachyum*) and German Grass (*Echinocla plystachia*), among others, dominate the meadows and paddocks of the stretch, which slowly but firmly increased in size every year. In the sample drawn at Naranjo and Ceibo there were 12 individuals (or 24% of the sample) whose parcels were completely, or almost fully, sown with pasture. The three latifundia previously mentioned had no less than 80 hectares of grasslands, on each. Other associates had begun establishing meadows in the hope of eventually fencing everything in. This type of land use required extensive areas. In this location people generally had 1 head of cattle per 1.4 hectares of land though this ratio was pushed down at times half as much (i.e. to 1 : 0.70).
Thus in order to establish a mid-size herd, say at least 30 heads, a person needed pasture
on a space 45 ha. in size.

Pasture was usually sown between June and August, in conjunction with the
winter planting season of corn. Locals also practiced burning pastures, especially if
they had been left to decay prior. This was considered a healthy practice because grasses
regenerate better. Neglected pastureland was also a feature present in the study site. This
could happen when the owner of the parcel introduced grass but was unable to make
further investments on the land, such as when high maintenance costs involved in weed
cleaning, setting up fences and other similar works prevented him from turning the land
parcel into pastureland. But there were other reasons for the loss of pasture as well,
namely mismanagement of the land and fire razing. Not uncommonly these areas
reverted to fallow.

Other land uses

Fallow. Fallow land comprised any area left to rest, or abandoned, after a period of
cultivation, or one which had had pasture in the past. Land plots with primary and
secondary vegetation had also turned into fallows due to the recurrence of fires in recent
years. The type of succession germinating on fallows varied according to the terrain
characteristics (i.e., bajo vs. high terrain) and the length of time it had remained
undisturbed. Agriculturalists deemed fallow land as reserve areas for future farming;
when they are several years old, the grown-up trees in them may supply firewood for
home consumption, or for sale. Interviewees indicated that most agriculturalists from
Naranjo and Ceibo usually left the land intended for farming to rest for a minimum of
three years. The existence of a relatively short, inactive period could be explained as a
function of large family size and the (rather) limited land accessibility of a needy
household. The presence of many fallow patches in previously forested lands was an
indication of the high incidence of fires every year, occurrences that were causing much
havoc. One respondent recounted, for instance, how a 9-year old fallow he had eagerly
kept was razed down when it went up in flames in 2000. Unfortunately, many others had
lost whatever forested land they had the same way.

Forest Reserve. A forest reserve had customarily, and deliberately, been earmarked
for the extracting of wood fuel and timber for domestic consumption. It was also the
only place with some remains of primary vegetation that, if need be, could be cleared for
further planting, when all the rest of the land had been denuded. These personal reserves
were fast disappearing though. At Naranjo, in particular, recurrent fires and strong wind
blowing were causing much damage to these forest patches. Forest reserves ranged
considerably in size, from less than 1 ha. to 30 ha. Apparently there was a strong
connection between the economic situation of the landowner and the existence of a large
forested area. The two members of the small landholder sample who still kept “sizeable”
forest patches (27.6 ha. and 22 ha., respectively) worked for one of the two oil companies
present in the region. In other words, these two people were less pressured to cultivate
the land and live off it because their wages provided for their essential needs. Another
initial finding pointed to the reserve as more important to a farmer than to a small and
would-be rancher. Typically, parcels that had been turned all into meadows had no
primary forest. At least two small land holders with no primary forest patches had initiated efforts to putting aside several years-old secondary vegetation spaces for future lumber and firewood uses.

**Quantifying land use types:**

Measuring the area for each category of use in the study location was a complicated matter. In connection to crops, one difficulty rested on variability of the area under cultivation from one season to the next in each individual parcel. Also, the number of farmers would differ from one planting period to the next too. Second, some types of uses could be difficult to pigeonhole. For instance, certain categories of burned patches could be considered either fallow land (because land possessors regard it as such), or regenerating “forests.”

The question lingered: How could the predominant uses of the land within the 50 km$^2$ of the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor be measured, if only at a coarse level? A hypothetical exercise helped out in establishing a reasonable guess. Taking as a basis the land plots found in study sample, the average size of a parcel with less than 50% of its area on grazing land (n=19) was 28.77 ha. Under the assumption that the average peasant tilled, on average, 1.38 ha. of corn during the winter season, and 1.38 ha. of corn plus 0.24 ha. of beans during the summer season, the total area actually used for planting amounted to about 3 ha. per year, on each plot. Furthermore, presupposing that the land needed a minimum of three years to rest so that the soil could recover enough nutrients and be ready for planting again, a peasant would require at least four patches of 3 ha. in order for the cycle to maintain itself, or 12 ha. The average parcel then would remain with, close to 16 ha. of land left for other uses, including pasture seedlings, occasional planting of other crops (most notably pumpkin squash and rice, or fruit trees), a forest reserve, burned vegetation and older fallows. Hence, 50 to 60 farmers who planted between 10 and 12 ha. of land, with crops, per year, would add up to about 550-600 hectares, for the whole study site.

The area of land with pastures could be roughly assessed too. Blocks of pastureland were of different dimensions in the study area. Information collected for parcels with pasture in the Naranjo-Ceibo stretch pointed to a total area ranging from 350 to 400 hectares of pastureland for the interval 2001-2002. The aforementioned large estates held another 1200 to 1300 ha. Hence out of the total 5000 ha. of land in the study site, between 1550 to 1700 ha., or a little more than one third, had already been transformed into pastures, an indication that pastureland was clearly outdoing agriculture as the preferred land use type in the research site. When agricultural lands were added, the percentage of land under any type of anthropogenic use accounted for 42% -or about 2100 hectares, by conservative estimations- of the total area in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor.
Notes

1 In 2002 the price paid to a farmer for a 100 lb. sack of squash seed fetched between Q450 and Q500 (from 57.69 to 64.10 US dollars); the same volume of corn barely yielded Q45 at best.
2 Other researchers have found the same elsewhere in Petén. (See, for instance, Shriar 2002)
3 The total reflects the combined figure for both the rainy (May-September) and dry (October-April) seasons in 2002.
4 The three reasons for not including these individuals in the investigation were that they did not partake of the process of state building, they were absent practically all the time from the study site, and they did not live off their landholdings. They owned large businesses, away in Guatemala City and only occasionally visited the area.
5 All cattle raised in the area were sold in the region, sometimes going to central Petén sometimes to Mexico.
6 No assumption is made here about what “normal” conditions were for an average year: excessive rain, a drought, extended fires could happen; in this descriptive model they are acknowledged but are not accounted for.
7 Based on information from CEMEC (2001), CONAP and The Nature Conservancy (n.d.: 18), and my own data. In this exercise I am extrapolating “backwards” because I am using the 2002 figures of mine to complement the missing data from TNC, collected in 2001 (I had met the researcher who obtained the raw data in the field while doing preliminary dissertation research). The estimation assumed that no significant changes in pasture introduction had taken place from one year to the next.
LIST OF REFERENCES

Abreu, G. Ermilo

Adams, Richard N.


Agar, Michael

Alston, Lee J., Gary D. Libecap, and Bernardo Mueller

Anderson, Benedict

Anderson, James

Anderson, Malcom  
Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Andreas, Peter  
2001  The Transformation of Migrant Smuggling across the U.S. Mexican  
Border. In Global Human Smuggling; Comparative Perspectives. David  
Johns Hopkins University Press.

Appadurai, Arjun  

Archer, Margaret  
1988  Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory. Cambridge,  
UK and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Asociación de Amigos del País y Fundación para la Cultura y el Desarrollo.  

Avendaño-Murillo, Miguel  
2002  El Naranjo: Viejo Oeste sin Ley.  Tabasco Hoy (Tabasco, México) October  
4:6.

Baden, John, and Douglas S. Noonan, eds.  
1998  Managing the Commons. 2nd ed. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana  
University Press.

Baranyi, Stephen, Carmen D. Deere, and Manolo Morales  
Ottawa: North-South Institute

Bernard, Russel H.  
2002  Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative  
Approaches.  Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press.

Bernard, Russell H., ed.  
1998  Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology: Qualitative and  
Quantitative Approaches. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press.

Billy, Santiago  
1999  Las Guacamayas Biological Station. In Thirteen Ways of looking at a  
Conservation International.
Black, George

Bourdieu, Pierre

Brettell, Caroline

Bruce, Robert D.

Bryan Raymond L., and Sinead Bailey

Calderon, Edgar E.

Cambranes, Julio C.

Cardoso, Henrique and Enzo Faletto

CARE-Guatemala and Cooperación Austriaca para el Desarrollo

Carr, Archi
Centro de Monitoreo y Evaluación, CONAP, Región VIII (CEMEC)

Centro para el Desarrollo de la Administración Pública. Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público
1964 Primer Seminario Nacional Sobre el Desarrollo Integral de El Petén, Informe General. Guatemala, Guatemala

Charmaz, Kathy

Chew, Sing C., and J. David Knottnerus, eds.

Clark, Charles
1997 Seeking Legitimacy. The story of Land Tenure in the Petén, Guatemala: Democratic Institutions Awaken amidst Rapid Deforestation and Spontaneous Colonization. MS. University of New Mexico.

Cleary, David

Cole, Ardra, and J. Gary Knowles
2001 Lives in Context: the Art of Life History Research. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press.

Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH)

Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (CONAP)

CONAP, and The Nature Conservancy
Corzo, Amilcar R., Oscar Obando, and Norman B. Schwartz  

Culbert, Patrick  

Dale, Peter  

Dallmayr, Fred R.  

Dardon, Andrés  
1875 La Cuestión de Límites entre México y Guatemala por un Centroamericano. México, México: Imprenta de Ignacio Escalante.

Davis, Shelton, and Julie Hodson  

De Fahsen, Martha R., coor.  

De Soto, Hernando  

De Vos, Jan  

1993 Las Fronteras de la Frontera Sur: Reseña de los proyectos de expansión que figuraron la frontera entre México y Centroamérica. Villahermosa, Tabasco, México: Universidad Autónoma Juárez de Tabasco/CIESAS.

Delli Sante, Angela  

Demarest, Arthur, Prudence Rice, and Don Rice  
Denzin, Norman and Yvonna Lincoln.

DeWalt, Kathleen and Billie DeWalt

DeWalt, Kathleen, Billie DeWalt, with Coral B. Wayland

Donnan, Hastings, and Thomas M. Wilson, eds.


Dunkerley, James

Elton, Catherine

Empresa de Fomento y Desarrollo del Petén (FYDEP)
1969 El Petén la Lucha por su Desarrollo: Leyes Planteamientos Doctrina Objetivos [sic]. Guatemala, Guatemala: Ediciones FYDEP.


Falcon, Romana

Ferrigno, Víctor
Figueroa I., Carlos  

Flynn, Donna K.  

Fontana, Andrea and James H. Frey  

Foucault, Michel  


Foucher, Michel  

Foweraker, Joe  

Frank, Andre G.  

Friedman Hansen, Judith  

Gálvez, Víctor  

Geertz, Clifford  
Giddens, Anthony  

Glasser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss  

Gleijeses, Piero  

Glick, Nina, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton  

Gould, Kevin  

Graham, Ian  


Greider, Thomas and Lorraine Garkovich  

Grünberg, Georg  

Guatemala, Comisión de Límites  

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson, eds.  

Hall, Thomas D.

Harrell-Bond, Barbara

Hendrickson, Robert

Heyman, Josiah McC., ed.

Heyman, Josiah, and Alan Smart

Hobsbawm, Eric J.

Hudson, John C.

Inforpress Centroamericana [Weekly, Guatemala, Guatemala]


Instituto de Derecho Ambiental y Desarrollo Sustentable (IDEADS)
International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences (IESBS)

Jonas, Susan, and David Tobias, eds.

Jones, Grant D.

Kearney, Michael

Kurtz, Donald V.

Kyle, David, and Rey Koslowski, eds.

Lal, Rahindra, Pedro Sanchez, and Ralph Cummings Jr., eds.

Langness, Lewis L.

Latham, Bryan

Latham Robert, Ronald Kassimir, and Thomas M. Callaghy
Lavell, Allan  

Lentner, Howard H.  

Leonard, H. Jeffrey  

Little, Paul  

Little-Siebold, Todd  

Lloyd, Christopher  

Maxwell, Joseph A.  

McCreery, David  
1983 Development and the State in Reforma Guatemala: 1871-1885. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, Center for International Studies


McGee, R. Jon  

McNeely, Jeffrey A., K. R. Miller, W. V. Reid, R. A. Mittermeier and T. B. Werner  
Mejía, José V.  

Mensajero de Centro América, El  
1895 Colección de Artículos. Guatemala, Guatemala: Tipografía Moderna.

Migdal, Joel S.  


Miles, Matthew, and Michael Huberman  

Milián, Bayron, Georg Grunberg, and Mateo Cho  

Millar, Kenton, Elsa Chang, and Nels Jonson  
2001 Defining Common Ground for the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor. Washington, D.C: World Resources Institute

Millet, Artimus  

Mintz, Sidney  

Mitchell, Timothy  

Morales, Paulino  
Morelet, Arthur

Nations, James D.


Navaro-Yashin, Yael

Nordstrom, Carolyn

Ohmae, Kenichi


Palka, Joel W.

Pennington, Terence, and José Sarukhan

Perenco

Perera, Victor, and Robert Bruce
Petén Itzá [Magazine, Flores, Petén]
1940 Petén Histórico. 4 (4): 54-55.

1938a Intensificación de la industria chiclera en El Petén 2 (2): 5, 7, 26
1938b El Petén y sus Maderas Preciosas. 2 (2): 9

Phelps, Dudley M.
1957 Rubber Developments in Latin America. Ann Arbor: Bureau of Business Research, School of Business Administration, University of Michigan.

Piedrasanta, Rafael, coord.
1999 El Petróleo en Guatemala: Aspectos históricos; importancia económica; efectos político-sociales; perspectivas para el futuro. Guatemala, Guatemala: USAC/DIGI.

Pohlenz Cordova, Juan

Proyecto FIPA/Guatemala

Reed, Nelson

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R.

República de Guatemala

Roseberry, William

Rosenfeld, Amy B.
Rubio S., Manuel

Rugeley, Terry

Sack, Robert

Sader, Steve

Schele, Linda, and David Freidel

Schlesinger, Stephen, and Stephen Kinzer

Schmink, Marianne

Schmink, Marianne, and Charles Wood

Scholes, France V., and Ralph L. Roys
Schwartz, Norman

Scott, James


Sever, Thomas L.

Shannon, Thomas R.

Shriar, Avrum J.

Silvert, Kalman
1954 A Study in Government: Guatemala. New Orleans: Tulane University, Middle American Research Institute, n. 21, pt. 1.

Smart, Alan

Smith, Carol, ed.

Sokolow, Jayme

Soza, José María
Sowers, Frederick W.

Spradley, James P.

Steinmetz, George

Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin

Tabasco, Gobierno de

Taylor, Peter, and Collin Flint

Thiesenhusen, William

This Week; Central America and Panama [Weekly, Guatemala, Guatemala]


Thompson, John Eric

1977 A proposal for Constituting a Maya subgroup, Cultural and Linguistic, in the Petén and Adjacent Regions. In Grant Jones, ed. Anthropology and History in Yucatan, Pp. 3-42.

Tierney, William

Tilly, Louise A.

Todorov, Tzvetan

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph

Tudela, Fernando
Turner, Frederick J.

Valenzuela, Salvador
1951  Informe sobre el departamento del Petén, dirigido al Ministerio de Fomento. Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Histórica (Guatemala, Guatemala) XXV: 397-410, Dic. [Published originally in El Guatemalteco, año iv, nos. 236, 237, 238, 239 y 240, 1879].

Vargas, Alberto M.

Vargas, Patricia
1993  Los Embera y los Cuna: Impacto y reacción ante la ocupación española, siglos XVI y XVII. Bogotá, Colombia: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología.

Wallerstein, Immanuel

Weber, Max

Weber, David J., and Jane M. Rausch, eds.

Weinstein, Barbara


Williams, Robert G.

Wilson, Richard

Wilson, Thomas M., and Hastings Donnan

Wolcott, Harry
1995 The Art of Fieldwork. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press.
1999 Ethnography: The Art of Seeing. Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press.

Wolf, Eric

Zamora, José Rubén
2002 La Mafia y el Ejército. elPeriódico (Guatemala). November 12: Year 7, No. 2151: 2-4.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Luis A. Arriola is a native of Guatemala City, Guatemala. He attended Hampshire College, in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he obtained a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts. Then he went on to pursue a master’s degree in anthropology at the New School for Social Research, in New York City. Luis returned to Guatemala, where he spent several years working as a social science researcher, especially among rural populations. He began the doctoral program at the University of Florida in 1999. His intellectual research interests encompass political anthropology, social history, and environmental studies, as well as the possibilities for inter-disciplinary collaborations among these fields.