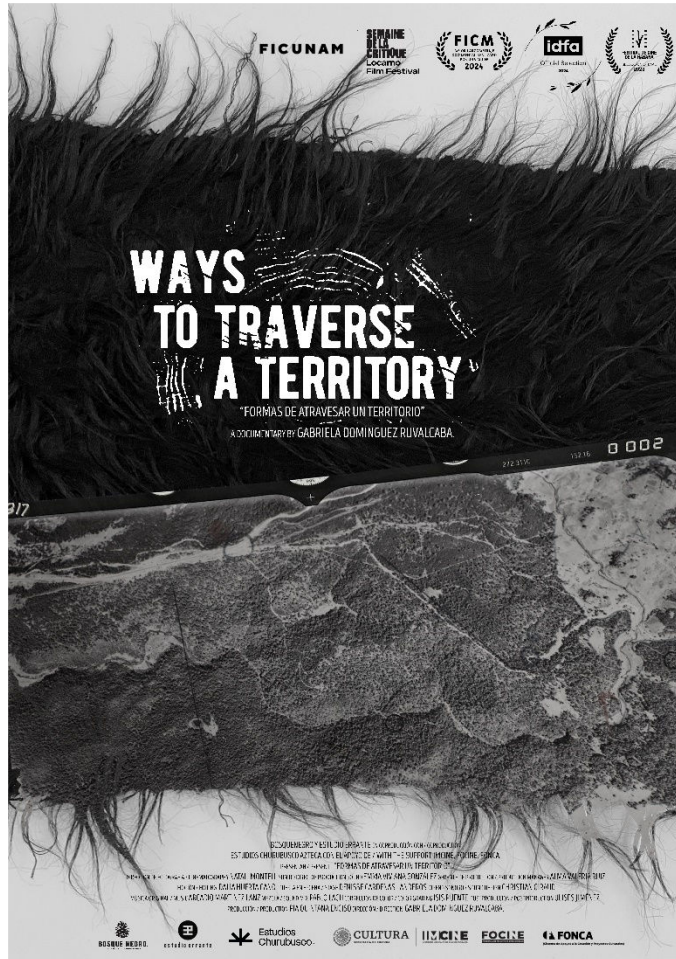




# WAYS TO TRAVERSE A TERRITORY / FORMAS DE ATRAVESAR UN TERRITORIO



## STUDY GUIDE

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## **Ways to Traverse a Territory**

A family of Indigenous Tsotsil women herds sheep on a green mountain slope in southern Mexico. The film observes them shearing and dyeing the wool and walking with the animals through the mountains. Filmmaker Gabriela-Dominguez-Ruvalcaba converses with the women—sometimes literally. The mime-style scenes, in which the women perform their daily activities, and the poetic eye for details, such as tufts of wool swirling like snow through the air, all contribute to a film that explores the ways humankind can shape its environment and the marks it leaves behind.

## **Chiapas**

Chiapas is Mexico's southernmost state. It borders Guatemala, the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Tehuantepec, and the Mexican states of Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Its capital city is Tuxtla Gutiérrez. This state is mountainous, and much of it is covered in forest, including rainforest. The population of Chiapas is approximately 5.5 million. A large percentage of its people live in rural areas. The state of Chiapas is one of the poorest in Mexico. According to Data México's most recent information, in 2015 about 42 percent of the Chiapas population lived in moderate poverty and 30 percent in extreme poverty.

## **San Cristóbal**

San Cristóbal de Las Casas is located in central Chiapas, in the highlands, at an elevation of about 7,000 feet. It has a large indigenous population, and there are also many indigenous villages near the city. According to Britannica, "San Cristóbal is a major cultural and political centre for the Maya and other Indigenous peoples of the region."

## **Tsotsil**

Chiapas has a large indigenous population, which includes the Tsotsil, who are an indigenous group of Mayan Indians. The Tsotsil live mainly in central in the central part of the state. The Tsotsil and the Tzeltal—who are closely related—are the largest ethnic groups in the state. According to the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples, "The Tzotzil call themselves batsil winik'otik, 'true men.'" Further, as explained in an article by the Mexican Government and the National Institute of Indigenous peoples, "The name Tsotsil derives from sots'il winik which means "batman", thus associating the people with a protective divinity in the Mayan cosmogony."

Spanish is the most commonly spoken language in Mexico, however, a significant number of people who live there also speak indigenous languages. That number is particularly high in Chiapas. The Mexican government reports that the most widely spoken indigenous languages in Chiapas are Tzeltal (645,687 inhabitants) and Tsotsil (535,448 inhabitants).

## **Sheep and Wool**

People have been raising sheep for their meat, milk, and wool for tens of thousands of years. There are hundreds of different breeds of sheep, with some raised for meat and some raised for wool, and others for both. Sheep have a number of natural predators including wolves and coyotes. They instinctually

flock together as a way of trying to protect themselves. Some people use dogs to help protect their sheep and also to help guide them in the right direction.

Sheep that are kept for wool are sheared regularly. Hand shearing takes skill in order to shear the wool properly and avoid cutting the sheep. After shearing, the wool is cleaned to remove lanolin—a natural grease that is on the wool—and other contaminants such as sticks and dirt. It can then be dyed. After that, the fibers are separated and straightened, and then the wool can be spun, which is the process of twisting and stretching the fibers into a single stand.

### **Sheep in Tsotsil Communities**

In Tsotsil communities, sheep are a significant source of income. The Tsotsil earn money by selling wool, woolen garments, and wool handicrafts. They also earn money by selling aged sheep and excess rams. In addition, sheep manure is used to fertilize crops. Women have traditionally been the ones to care for the sheep in Tsotsil culture.

Sheep are seen differently to other domestic animals by the Tsotsil, and are not eaten or harmed. Professor Veronica Vázquez-García explains, “Sheep are considered sacred creatures with a soul and an individual name that cannot be slaughtered or eaten; they are members of the family.”

When it comes to raising sheep, the Tsotsil have been able to maintain their traditional methods, even under pressure to change and influences that have come with globalization. Dr. Raul Perezgrovas is an expert on the sheep of Chiapas. He explains that one of the pressures to change has come from the Mexican government, saying, “In the early 1970s, the great number of coloured sheep in the mountains of Chiapas caught the attention of government officials. At the time, this highland region had the highest density of sheep in the whole country. With good intentions, they decided to ‘improve’ what they saw as a small and unproductive local sheep by means of crossbreeding with high-yielding exotic sheep breeds.” According to Perezgrovas, while this approach worked in other parts of Mexico, it was not successful in Tsotsil communities. He explains, “Several foreign breeds were introduced and the outcome of such efforts was always the same: the exotic breeds failed to adapt to the local environment and the availability of native forages, and the animals died in a matter of weeks. More importantly, the Tzotzil women did not like the fleeces of these exotic animals because they could not be processed into woollen garments using their traditional spinning and weaving techniques. The wool of what the women called ‘Mexican sheep’ was too short, too fine, and too white, as compared with the fleeces of their batsi chij, their ‘true sheep.’”

### **Indigenous Peoples and the Natural Environment**

Many of Mexico’s indigenous peoples have a close relationship with the natural environment and depend heavily on its resources. This makes them particularly vulnerable to anything that changes or harms that environment. The UN Environment Programme explains, “Due to their subsistence economies and spiritual connection to lands and territories, most Indigenous Peoples suffer disproportionately from loss of biological diversity and environmental degradation. Their lives, survival, development chances, knowledge, environment and health conditions are threatened by environmental degradation, large scale industrial activities, toxic waste, conflicts and forced migration,

as well as by land-use and land-cover changes (such as deforestation for agriculture and extractives for example). These challenges are further exacerbated by climate change.”

### Study Questions

1. In what ways do the women in this film work together to look after their sheep?
2. How has the relationship between the indigenous and non-indigenous changed over time, as explained in the film?
3. Why do you think this relationship may have changed?
4. What role does language play in the relationship between the indigenous and non-indigenous, as shown in the film?
5. As explained in the film, how does going to school change a person’s life?
6. Why do you think the women use descriptive place names such as “top of the hill” and “rabbit’s cave”?
7. How is the natural environment important to these women, as shown in the film?

### Additional Resources

- Data Mexico, “Chiapas.”  
<https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/chiapas-cs>
- Jennifer Douglass, “The Native Sheep of Chiapas: A Story of Fleeces, Global Markets and Women in Woollen Skirts,” Rio Milagro Foundation.  
<https://www.riomilagro.org/blogstories/the-native-sheep-of-chiapas-a-story-of-fleeces-global-markets-and-women-in-woollen-skirts>
- Government of Mexico and National Institute of Indigenous Peoples, “Tsotsil People.”  
<https://catalogo.inpi.gob.mx/tsotsil>
- National Institute of Indigenous People, “Ethnography of the Tzotzil (Batsil Winik' Otik) and Tzeltal (Winik Atel) Peoples,” Government of Mexico, February 8, 2018.  
<https://www.gob.mx/inpi/articulos/etnografia-de-los-pueblos-tzotzil-batsil-winik-otik-y-tzeltal-winik-atel?idiom=es>
- Dr. Raul Perezgrovas, 2003, “The Native Sheep of Chiapas – a Story of Fleeces, Global Markets and Women in Woolen Skirts,” Seedling, January 2003, GRAIN.  
<https://grain.org/en/article/356-the-native-sheep-of-chiapas-a-story-of-fleeces-global-markets-and-women-in-woollen-skirts>
- John Schmal, “Chiapas: Forever Indigenous,” Indigenous Mexico.  
<https://www.indigenousemexico.org/articles/chiapas-forever-indigenous>

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