

## **“I live for my mother, but I die for my neighbourhood”: MARAS, ‘CLICAS’ AND GANGS IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO**

**By Prof. Dr. Ramiro Anzit Guerrero**

Post- Doctor in Constitutional Rights and Criminal law (UNLAM). Doctor of Criminal Law and Criminal Sciences (USAL). Master of Strategic Studies (INUN). Lawyer (USAL). Full Professor of Criminology and Forensic Practice (USAL- Argentina); Professor at Technology's Faculty of Amazonia (Brazil). Member, South Asian Society of Criminology and Victimology - SASCV (India). British Society of Criminology (BSC). Instituto de Ciências Penais (Minas Gerais – Brazil). Member International Association for Counterterrorism & Security Professionals (USA).

### **Origins**

At the beginning of the 80's, a large number of Salvadoran immigrants who were escaping from the civil bloody wars in El Salvador (1) arrived to the United States, mainly in Los Angeles (California). Nowadays, some of these young people are part of the groups currently known as *Maras*. These gangs have two main sides: *Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13)* and *Mara 18 (MS 18)*. The word *Maras* comes from the comparison with the horde ants because of the way they spread out, invade and wolf down everything on their path. The compound word *Salvatrucha* is made up of El Salvador and *Trucha* (trout). This makes allusion to those who are clever to escape from the Police. Members are known as *Mareros*. Today, more Latin communities are taking part of these *Maras*, especially Nicaraguan, Honduran, Ecuadorian, Mexican and Peruvian people.

Originally, the gang's purpose was to protect the streets where they lived in from other gangs so as they could not take control of their zones. This comes as a reaction against the predominance of the Mexican *Cholos* Neighbourhoods over the East L.A. These gangs are well-known because of the open and sanctioned use of violence, either as protection or aggression, and the systematic practice of crime.

Drug use and the continuous increase in the acquisition and use of weapons have quickly led this spiral of violence to extreme limits. Suddenly, drug and weapons trafficking, robberies and some other crimes became the main *Maras*' activities. Being a member of the gangs has provided from an ID to some unemployed young people - without a family or documentation and who came from scattered homes because of the civil war and misery.

The neighbourhood “Clica” which has a particular way of life called “The crazy life,” has become in a *raison d'être* whose motto is: “I live for my mother, but I die for my neighbourhood”. In many cases, a kind of identification was created among the *Mara* members – “homeboys” or “hommies”. It means to be part of the same family which provided them bonds of brotherhood similar to the criminal mafias'. In addition, solidarity among the members caused complete indifference and disdain from the rest of the society.

Therefore, the American government imprisoned and repatriated the gangs' members when they became aware of the great seriousness of that situation.

After the Chapultepec Peace Accords brought peace to El Salvador in 1992, the American Immigration and Naturalization Service abolished those clauses which considered Salvadoran as war refugees.

An agreement has been signed between the American and Salvadoran Governments since 2000. This agreement establishes the American Government's power to deport those Salvadorans who commit crimes.

The Fact that these criminals - many of them veterans or former guerrilla with such experience to build home weapons – were deported to their home countries allowed gangs to be organized in those Nations. As a matter of the fact, they copied the Californian gangs' model and created a transnational criminal association settled in the U.S.A. but with operational bases in Central American countries. There would be more than 200 gangs which have roughly 3000 members. El Salvador and, Honduras in a similar way, has become a refuge for the powerful criminal unions whose members are mostly for Death Squads former members. They take advantage of the *maras* using them as a smokescreen to manage the drug and weapon trafficking with impunity.

### ***The Crazy Life***

The Mara Salvatrucha's symbols are the number 13 and the letters MS. Members usually tattoo them and some other motifs in different parts of their bodies. The rival Mara has the number 18 as its symbol. Members distinguish themselves by having their hair closely-cropped, loose-fitting trousers and their bodies covered with tattoos, especially on their arms, chest, back and face. Some ringleaders from the border gangs (Guatemala – Mexico) are distinguished by tattooing a tear on their faces. The number of teardrops means the number of charged lives.

It is thought that the three dots on the elbow, knuckles or the gap between the thumb and forefinger would mean "The crazy life". That is the way young people define their lifestyle. Some other motifs are: skulls, swastikas, the Virgin image – Guadalupe Virgin mostly – spider webs, coffins, comedy and tragedy masks (2), bats, tigers, dragons, snakes and scorpions.

Gang members are young people aged 12 to 35 years. However, there are cases in which children up to 9 years of age join up these groups. They not only identify with tattoos, they also use some kind of gesture codes that point they belong to these gangs. At first, many English words and expressions were used but they have been recently replaced for local terms. They also use to paint graffiti on the areas they control and they used symbols that denote the clica rules. Religious images, like the Virgin Maria, or legends with a Gothic style are often used. As tattoos show the member's personal background, graffiti show the gang's history.

Getting into a gang assumes different ways in accordance to the region or country. One of the Mara Salvatrucha's initiation rituals consists on beating the candidate during 13 seconds. This ceremony is called "*Brincamiento*". The candidate must fight with three, sometimes five, hooligans or go through a tunnel composed of "hommies" who beat the person while passing down. Another obligation would be to kill a member of an enemy organization.

Drug consume is something that happens every day either by inhaling adhesive or using more dangerous drugs like cocaine or crack. Marijuana, amphetamines, heroin and some other drugs are consumed as well as alcohol (such as beer, rum, tequila, sugar-cane liquor, etc.) Rocks, daggers, machetes, grenades and all kind of firearms (guns, sawn-off shotguns, submachine guns, etc.) are the most used weapons.

Despite of the fact that *Maras* look like "brotherhoods", they are purely hierarchical associations. Generally, ringleaders are the one who have shown more cold-blooded either at the moment of committing crimes and having greater capacity for leadership.

However, they sometimes vote to decide, for example, what kind of punishment a member should get if he/she breaks the rules. This makes people feel some kind of participation.

There are many rules inside the gangs, but they vary in accordance to the regions. The most frequent rules are, for example, the prohibition to get on well with member of enemy groups or the obligation to take part in fights when the *mara* is involved. Another common rule is to react and act before any kind of provocation, no matter if there are inferiority conditions.

Once someone is part of the *clica*, he/she is a member forever. It is not allowed to leave the group because it is considered as a "desertion". But, it is allowed that young members over the thirties begin to slowly get away from the criminal activity – "calm down" or "stop". This is an opportunity only for those lucky ones who weren't put on jail, in hospitals or even in the cemetery can take advantage.

### ***Recruiting***

Violence is brutal, merciless, unjustified and, above all, visible. Young members live in the streets and they show their tattoos. They don't hide their free access to weapons or their love of drugs. Despite they are the personification of violence, it is important to bear in mind they are part of a society which is full of constant violence along all its social strata. For one hand, violence comes from the police and authorities power. For the other hand, it is also present in private circles, such as women and kids mistreatment, male chauvinism, genre roles and discrimination. It can be seen from the power structures to the family stratum. Violence has gone beyond everything.

There many reasons to explain why *Maras* are still recruiting young members. However, this is a story without fast or unilateral solutions. It is affirmed this phenomenon will not be able to stop if the problem is focused on its police aspect instead of focusing on its social and cultural aspect.

Bloody civil wars, with their traumatic heritage and the American gangs' influence, have made this happen. Also, poorness, unemployment, migratory currents from the country to the town, the growing urbanization, a declining family structure, absent parents, the way young members search for identity and the current violence culture are some other factors. The overcrowding issue is a problem to go into detail: negligible homes where statically 3.3 people live in each room. However, it is common to find until 5 adults and 5 children who live all together in the same room and one kitchen. There are some homes where unemployment, alcoholism and violence are commonplace. In such cases, children and teenagers who don't want or can't stay at home have only one option: growing up themselves on the streets. So, they are easy prey for *Clicas* who offer them an identity and the illusion to belong to a "family". They are not other option: there is plenty of time, adults don't have a job, and kids don't often go to school. There aren't football fields, libraries, cafés, discos or places where kids can gather to do positive activities, either. The "neighbourhood" or the "corner of the street" seem to be the only choice. Leaving school is a consequence of being part of the *Mara*. Therefore, the ones who do not want to leave school are duty-bound to do it because their doors are not open for gangs' members. The fear of violence, drugs consume and weapons are worthy of consideration but unsustainable, then.

Dealing with the Police - more than a relationship- is a clash between them. Both groups hate each other. *Mareros* see the Police as their enemy. Police often use unprovoked violence to beat them as soon as the opportunity arises. Both parts resort to violence as the apparent solution for problems which leads this spiral of violence to rise even more.

Most of the *Maras* young members end up - sooner or later - in prison. It is estimated that about 70% has ever been imprisoned (3). Many of them were sentenced to prison for robbery, mistreatment and homicide. Despite of having some rehabilitation institutes for young gangs, most of them end up in common jails where they are with older criminals and member from enemy gangs. Jails situation leaves much to be desired: overcrowding, health bad conditions, prisoners who stay in jail for months or even years

without a trial or a sentence. New members are recruited in jails, thus this punishment contributes to the spiral of violence.

A Marero lifestyle is, from every point of view, exhausting. According to some surveys (from UCA, Central American University and UNICEF), among young people who have belonged to the *Mara* for more than 5 years, 8 of 10 young members want to get away from the gang. However, this is an extremely hard desire to achieve. They are "marked" by their tattoos and their dependence on drugs. They don't have a job and schools don't want them. In addition, they are homeless, without a family or a social and family to hold on.

It has just been the Catholic Church and some other international cooperative organizations who have been trying to create places where these young people can back them up in their social rehabilitation. Anyway, there is so much to do. One of the programs which has been well considered is the one developed by the **Rosales Hospital** in San Salvador. This centre offers the possibility to erase those tattoos using a laser beam. This means the chance for many young members to begin a new life, be accepted at school and get a job. Those achievements are quite impossible for those who are "tattoo-marked." Unfortunately, the hospital resources are not enough for the number of people who are interested in this treatment. But, this program is a particular example into the process of social reintegration.

### ***Laws against the Maras.***

Crimes committed by *Mareros* range from simple robberies to complex operations with paramilitary commands, crimes to order, illegally border crossing and disputes of territories because of the drugs control and management. *Mareros* are also used, especially young ones, for the drug dealing. They are considered as cannon fodder for dealers who provide young gangs of money, weapons and drugs for self-consuming. They are paid to smuggle in and watch the zone. Their groups are mostly poor and non-educated members who are exposed to a social exclusion situation without a reintegration into the system. Children of only 12 or 13 years old of age are the predominant group who want to gain status into the *Mara*. Dealers also take advantage of those immigrant newcomers, which are cheaper and more reckless because they are coming from situations of extreme poverty. It should be noted that not only poor and immigrants feed the *maras* but also people who belonged to the Central American armed or security forces. Some of them would be part of the intelligence sector or Special Forces. On the other hand, some clandestine repressive associations well-known as "Dark Shadow," (similar to the Death Squads) have emerged. They kidnap or "get rid" of selected targets into the *Maras*. It was found out that members from the Police, among others, are member of these groups.

Several Central American countries have legislated to try to stop the problem. In July 2003, Honduras enacted reforms to its Penal Code, which culminated in the so-called "Law against *Maras*" [Ley Anti-mara ], which sparked an immediate burst of arrests. The months later, in October 2003, El Salvador sanctioned a similar law but harsher. This defines Marero as "anyone who everyday meets up, makes signs, has symbols as a mean of identification, has scars or tattoos their body" (4). This new law gave rise to very controversial arrests.

In 2004, Mexico has come under by the "Crime of Gangs" legislation which makes the arrest of those who are considered as members of the gangs easier. El Salvador has developed a program called "Super Firm Hand Plan" (Plan Súper Mano Dura) whose name makes unnecessary any kind of description (as a result of the criticism, they tried to change its name for Super "Friendly Hand Plan, though)."

However, it has been pointed out that combating the *Maras* with police repression and without any social measures, only worsens the situation. The Mexican writer Rafael

Ramírez Heredia affirms that mareros are like the snakes over Medusa's head: you cut one, ten new arise.

### ***Mexico-Guatemalan Border***

According to numbers from April 2006, there would be about 80.000 gangs in Central America, but especially in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala (6). However, the *Maras* emergence and multiplication is not only happening in El Salvador or Central America. Gangs are spreading out over Mexico and right from there, many groups constantly try to enter to the United States. It is estimated that there are 10.000 younger members in Mexico, and most of them in the State of Chiapas.

The Mexico-Guatemalan line border provides gangs from a space to develop with so much impunity. That allowed them to settle and create their own empire of terror not only against migrants but also against the neighboring people from both countries.

The Guatemalan city of Tecún Umán, which is like as a funnel of the many migrants who dream to try to get lucky in this country, is considered a nest of maras.

The same thing, but on a smaller scale, is happening in the Ciudad Hidalgo, a Mexican border city.

The tactic of gang members is as follows: they mix among migrants in freight trains where they go up in each station. During the trip, they identify the ones who take money or valuable objects with them and those who are most vulnerable, either because of their age or gender. Then, they choose the best moment to act: places with clandestine crosses, spaces of evading immigration controls or spaces where migrants concentrate and refuge, such as railway stations or abandoned houses. When the fist opportunity arises, they attack. They jump through the wagons and steal money, possessions and even the victims' clothes and shoes. They also make victims pay them the fee for protection given against enemy gangs or against the authority power. They are generally armed with knives, machetes and some other sharp objects. Most of the times, and almost without exception, they act under the influence of drugs, alcohol and other stimulants. They are often found in bars, canteens and brothel after they commit the offence. (8) The members of these groups usually come from the neighboring cities. They know the fields very well and are experts on finding places of difficult access, without police surveillance, and getting hidden into the weeds or places which are favourable for the criminal activities. They act with total impunity. Their victims are vulnerable, and the audacity of migrants to go deep into areas of open land is just to evade the migratory controls. Deaths, injuries and rapes are daily crimes. The border gangs act in smaller groups, without a fixed settlement, and they move indifferently in both border areas, so that it is more difficult to find and combat them. Another factor that hinders the police action is the clandestine nature of the victims, who, because of ignorance of their rights, fear of reprisals and mistrust by the authorities, have no motivation to perform the corresponding complaint. This reinforces the situation of impunity which gang members will take advantage.

Although the border *Maras* have shown an extreme cruelty not only when selecting the most helpless victims but also in the kind of violence used, there are many associations of this type in different parts of Mexico. They first spread out in accordance to the border train journey: from Tecún Umán in Guatemala, with Suchiate, Chiapas, to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. The General Power of Attorney (GPA) of Mexico has registered the presence of gangs in Oaxaca, Jalisco, Tamaulipas and Northern California. Also, they have mentioned Guadalajara, and, of course, the Federal District.

In 2006, the II Anti-Gangs Convention was held in San Salvador. About 200 police representatives from Centro America, Mexico and U.S.A. participated and share their own experience and proposals to fight and prevent the gangs' issue.

### **Terror Globalization**

The United States has already warned about the bonds between mareros and the Islamic terrorism. So, the country has started to develop a program to close and get control of the borders with Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Honduras. The aim would be to avoid they get involved into terrorist actions made-to-order as a new criminal gang activity; besides, the activities that members of gangs develop, such as entering of illegal immigrants, murders and operating commands. In accordance to the *Washington Post*, in July 2004, one of the Al Qaeda leader members - Andan El Shukrijumah – would have met with some gang members in the Honduran Republic, after he illegally went in from Nicaragua. Moreover, he would have had meetings in Panama. The terrorist leader's aim would be to commit mareros to attempt on embassies of different countries like Spain, Great Britain and the United States. At the same time, the fanaticism of these young members resembles, in some cases, to Islamic Fundamentalists'. One example is the one which took place in Honduras in 2005 when they attacked with armaments a public bus. Twenty-four people died and sixteen were injured. This was some kind of revenge before the accusation of killing two members against the Honduran Government: they set them on fire in State prisons. The gangs criminal ring has spread out along more than twelve states into the U.S.A and five countries in Centro America. This is another element the U.S. Government takes into account to point out to the members of the gang as a possible terrorist threatening because they are able to use their regular channels for drug trafficking, such as the illegal passage of international terrorists.

#### Notes:

(1) Because of the internal wars in El Salvador (1981-1992) where 70.000 people died, it began a huge Salvadoran migration, both within the limits of the country and to the border countries, especially to the United States and Mexico. In 2000, about one million of Salvadorans were living in the U.S.A., mainly in Los Angeles, California. After the earthquakes of 2001, the number of immigrants raise up.

(2) This curious tattoo is classic symbol of tragedy and comedy and would symbolize, in these cases, according to some, joy and sadness: sadness of "wasting time" in prison, and joy to regain freedom and be able to return to the crazy life of the Mara.

(3) See Juan Balboa, "Emerging, the presence of maras salvatruchas in Mexican territory" ["Ascenso, la presencia de maras salvatruchas en territorio mexicano"], November 2004 (Go to: [http://ciss.insp.mx/migracion/index.php?seccion=noticias&id\\_not](http://ciss.insp.mx/migracion/index.php?seccion=noticias&id_not))

(4) See "Si matan al marero que lo maten! Me importa madres", Diego Murcia and Christian Guevara's interview to Rafael Ramírez Heredia (Go to: [http://www.elfaro.net/Programas/Imprimir/Imprime\\_Pagina.asp?Url](http://www.elfaro.net/Programas/Imprimir/Imprime_Pagina.asp?Url))

(5) See: news on *El diario de Hoy*: <http://www.elsalvador.com/printedf/printedfv1.asp?url>

(6) See: "Maras Salvatruchas didn't accept rules; money, drugs and women, their life goal." (Go to: <http://www.lacrisis.com.mx/maras260204.htm> )

#### **Bibliography:**

Anzit Guerrero, Ramiro. "internacional Security Facts" [*Temas de Seguridad Internacional*]. SyD. Buenos Aires, 2007.

Bartolomei, María Luisa. "Children and Teenagers come into conflict with Law. An essay about The El Salvador Situation" [*Niños/niñas y adolescentes en conflicto con la ley. Un estudio sobre la situación en El Salvador*]. Law Sociology Institute, Lund University, 1997

Candelario, Sheila. "Violence, globalization and literature; or The Eternal Return Dilemma at El Salvador" [*Violencia, globalización y literatura: o el dilema del Eterno Retorno en El Salvador*], en <http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/istmo/n08/articulos/violencia...>

Clancy, Tom. "The tigre teeth" *Los dientes del tigre*. Buenos Aires, Emecé, 2004

Cortes, Carlos. "From the Banana Republic to the Gangs Republic" [*De la banana republica a la república de las maras*], en <http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/istmo/n09/foro/banana.html>

*El Salvador*. Länder i fickformat. Stockholm, Utrikespolitiska Institutet, 2002

Hamilton, Nora & Stoltz Chinchilla, Norma. *Seeking Community in a global city. Guatemalans and salvadorans in Los Angeles*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2001

"Maras Salvatruchas don't accept the law; Money, drugs and women, their aim in life" [*Maras Salvatruchas no reconocen la ley; dinero, droga y mujeres, su objetivo de vida*], in: <http://www.lacrisis.com.mx/maras260204.htm>

Pineda, Eduardo et al. "Young people thirsty for love" [*Jóvenes sedientos de amor*]. El Salvador, 1999

Ramírez Heredia, Rafael. *La Mara*. Alfaguara, Barcelona, 2004