

**FIESTA OF THE SPIRITS, REVISITED: INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE  
POETICS AND POLITICS**

**AMONG MAZATECS OF OAXACA, MEXICO**

**Paja Faudree**

**A DISSERTATION**

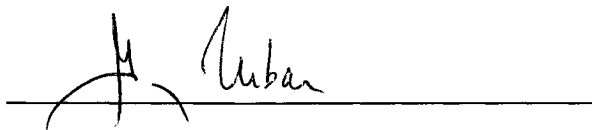
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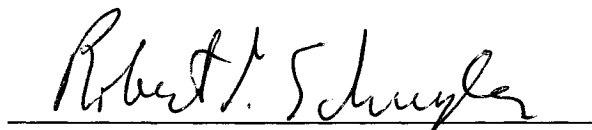
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**Graduate Group Chairperson**

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**To my families, both in the United States and Mexico**

**Thank you**

**Gracias**

**Naina xi katabech'jili**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **FIESTA OF THE SPIRITS, REVISITED: INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE POETICS AND POLITICS AMONG MAZATECS OF OAXACA, MEXICO**

**Author: Paja Faudree**

**Dissertation Supervisor: Greg Urban**

In the interest of understanding why some social movements succeed where others fail, this dissertation analyzes a particular type of resistance movement from southern Mexico. Revitalization movements centered on the creation and circulation of indigenous language texts have become widespread throughout the Americas. Seeking to reverse the myriad marginalizing effects of colonialism and its aftermath on indigenous peoples and the languages they speak, these movements aim to create written literatures for languages that, unlike national ones, circulate primarily orally. Such projects therefore have a dual agenda: to extend indigenous language use into new realms, and to raise indigenous languages' status from languages spoken by peasants and peons to languages worthy of sonnets, plays, and liturgical hymns.

I demonstrate that although language revitalization movements are prominent in Mexico, the majority have failed to stimulate popular interest. While indigenous writings are useful for making national political claims, they remain largely irrelevant and unread locally. By contrast, the initiative I studied represents that rarest of beasts: a success story. Revitalization efforts in Mazatec, the local indigenous language, have met with great popular success. A broad range of speakers now writes poems, stories, and above all songs in their language. Across the region, speakers participate in annual Day of the Dead Song Contests and the burgeoning cassette tape industry the contest has generated. An even wider segment of the population uses these texts as consumers and performers.

In accounting for this relatively rare popular success, I analyze the culturally specific ways that literacy and writing in Mazatec were introduced, thereby coupling them to quintessentially local, ethnically marked practices and values, especially those expressing homage to the dead through the vehicle of song. I then show how the Mazatec situation stands in contrast to other revitalization projects, both local and national. I argue that this contrast stems directly from the paradoxical position indigenous authors and minority representatives generally find themselves in when trying simultaneously to address local and national audiences.

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## Preface: Orthographic and Linguistic Conventions

The orthographic conventions I use in this dissertation are a composite of various conventions used elsewhere, all of which are based, to a greater or lesser extent, on the orthographic conventions of Latin American Spanish. I rely heavily on the most recent work produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL; e.g., Jamieson Capen 1996). I have also incorporated conventions used by indigenous intellectuals that are at odds with SIL's alphabets, particularly on the issues of making their orthographies practical and distinguishing the phonemes unique to Mazatec from Spanish phonology.

The alphabet I use for Mazatec is as follows:

### Consonants

	<i>Labial</i>	<i>Alveolar</i>	<i>Palatal</i>	<i>Retroflexed Alveo-palatal</i>	<i>Velar</i>	<i>Glottal</i>
<i>Voiceless stops</i>	(p)	t			k	ʔ
<i>Voiced stops</i>	(b)	(d)				
<i>Affricates: voiceless</i>		ts	ch	č		
<i>Fricatives: voiceless</i>	f	s		x		j
<i>voiced</i>	v					
<i>Nasals: voiced</i>	m	n	ɲ			
<i>Lateral</i>		l				
<i>Flap</i>		r				
<i>Trill</i>		(rr)				
<i>Glide</i>			y			

The symbols in parenthesis represent sounds occurring only in Spanish loan words that are commonly used in Mazatec speech. The symbol *x* is used here as it frequently has been used in orthographies for indigenous Mesoamerican languages: to refer to the sound that in English would be represented by *sh*, and that in standard Americanist practice would be represented by *š*. The symbol *č* indicates the retroflexed form of *ch*; the retroflexion causes it to sound somewhat like *chr* – a sound Mazatec speakers often refer to as “almost whistled.” The symbol *x* is less retroflexed before another consonant, such that before a vowel the retroflexion, as with *č*, adds an *r*-like quality, producing a sound like *xr*. The symbol *j* before another consonant is a voiceless counterpart of that consonant. Finally, the symbol *ñ* is used here as it is used in Spanish: to refer to the sound that in standard Americanist practice would be represented by *ny*.

### Vowels

	Front unrounded	Central unrounded	Back rounded
High	i, in		o, on
Mid	e, en		
Low		a, an	

Mazatec has four vowels, all of which are voiced. Each also exists in nasalized form, which is indicated by adding the symbol *n* after the vowel. The non-nasalized forms mirror the corresponding vowels in Spanish – i.e., *i* represents what to English speakers sounds like a long *e*, etc. The symbols *o*, *on* vary freely from high back rounded to low back rounded without contrasting.

Finally, Mazatec is a tonal language, with four distinct tone levels. They are numbered one through four, with one being the highest and four the lowest. These are represented by numeric superscripts following the syllable: <sup>1</sup>, <sup>2</sup>, <sup>3</sup>, <sup>4</sup>. Combinations of numbers on a single syllable represent glides in which the tone shifts from one level to another. The actual pitch of any given tone does not fall on any absolute scale but is contextually dependent on preceding and following tone. Tone is extremely important in Mazatec and serves to make lexical, grammatical, and syntactic distinctions.

In the text of the dissertation, I will give the tones in the first instance of a given word or phrase and omit them thereafter unless tone is directly relevant to the matter being discussed or unless a minimal pair is somehow involved. This is similar to what most native speakers do when writing Mazatec. In other words, for the most part they do not indicate tone except in cases where failing to do so is likely to lead to confusion, leaving the reader to settle ambiguities by context.

When excerpting from indigenous authors' work, unless otherwise noted I have preserved their orthographic decisions. Also, unless otherwise noted, when a Spanish version of an indigenous author's text is given it is his or her own.

All translations into English, unless otherwise noted, are my own.



## Chapter One

### Indigenous Language Poetics and Political Birthrights in the Age of Post-Coloniality

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*Ki gúk bátinha, ka danhéll bzaa yell kiá. . . Bene' gúlh blhao'nha, bnhe ki:  
". . . Kát tu lla' yayédo xhína'dao, binhak'biá chét nha' nbánto, chetlhis  
nazuto zebas yawe lhaxhdawto lhe'lhén lhué. Daxhén ba nchajeo kát yayédo, billje  
yenlo kueo kuit llén, bíll chulhallo ka llej chhauto, ka zúto, dag wén chét bi yaditj'lho  
nheto, chét bi yayelho ka nhák xa'o nha xnhao'ka zajze gani. . . Kát bazá chhen will,  
kát babde lla', ka chhayuá l'yiéll, dazán yoo dách chhlhélha, yoo da bayó lo' yixé,  
yoo'gúlh da ba nsanllall bene, yoo ga' bllá bene nbalhas, ga'bditj bidao bda' gál'yid  
gál'nhias. . . Gulhjé nheto, nhizé gat'to, gan nkue bene'gúlh kello'ka. Gunchásto  
banhes bayate, le'bigúkto wzayto lhué kuit'tonhi."*

Years ago, when I left the pueblo<sup>1</sup>, . . . the senior elder, charged with the responsibility of offering wisdom, spoke:

" . . . When you come back, my son, perhaps we will no longer be alive or perhaps the eyes of my heart will have the privilege of seeing you once again. It is probable by then that you will no longer be the same, you will have distanced yourself from the smoke [i.e., of the (pueblo's) hearth], you will not continue with our way of life; I hope that you are never embarrassed of our pueblo nor of your parents who are here. . . Every late afternoon, on returning from up in the mountains, I see so many houses covered with weeds, sold or abandoned, happy places from yesterday, where I saw little groups of naked, shoeless children playing; but now they suffer without people, without the clamoring of voices. . . Leave us to go on here, where our ancestors are. We will suffer the rest of our lives for not having been able to keep you here with us."

-- Mario Molina Cruz, poet from Yalálag (1996: 90-93)  
From "*Ba'daw Yeten Zla'a Zi Yech (Ka Bzaa Yell Kiá)*"  
("The Tortilla Tastes of *Tepejilote*<sup>2</sup> (Leaving the Pueblo)")<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Pueblo" is commonly used in Mexico to refer to indigenous and other small communities. It has different meanings – town or village, but also a people or nation – which allows its use, in the Spanish version of this prose poem, to refer not only to leaving the town but also to leaving its people. However, the Zapotec word, *yell*, does not share this double meaning.

<sup>2</sup> *Tepejilote* is a bitter but edible plant indigenous to Mesoamerica.



Two months after I arrived to begin my fieldwork in the Zapotec town of Yalálag<sup>4</sup>, a man named Roberto Limeta Mestas was killed. According to half the town, he was murdered; according to other half, he was the victim of “friendly fire,” killed not by his enemies, *nuestro lado* (“our side”), but by one of his compatriots, who shot him by accident. He and other men who were on the same side of Yalálag’s longstanding political divide were indeed carrying firearms that day, because at the time they were guarding the *palacio municipal*, or town hall. They were there guarding it precisely because of Yalálag’s political division: the results of the annual election for all municipal offices, from the president on down, had been vehemently contested. Since the beginning of 2000, when the new authorities should have been ceremoniously sworn in, the town had been in the midst of a standoff, and two months later, the frequent appeals to state officials to rectify the problem seemed no closer to being resolved. Limeta Mestas and the rest of his group<sup>5</sup>, claiming they were the rightful winners of the election, held the municipal buildings by force. The

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<sup>3</sup> While this translation into English is my own, and I do have some minimal knowledge of Sierra Norte Zapotec, it relies almost exclusively on the author’s own Spanish version of the text.

<sup>4</sup> Known officially as Villa Hidalgo, Yalálag is located in Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte. Most of its residents speak Sierra Norte Zapotec, but roughly 20% of the town speaks Mixe, an unrelated indigenous language spoken in an area just to the east.

opposing group – which included the family I lived with and everyone else I knew in town, among them leaders well known nationally for their work in pursuit of indigenous rights – continued to call the possession of the municipal buildings illegitimate. In a letter written to the Governor and State Secretary of Oaxaca exactly one month before the altercation at the *palacio municipal*, they wrote of “the *illegal* situation that exists in Yalálag” which “grows more tense and incubates a violent confrontation,” because “the opposing group. . .has usurped the position of municipal authority.”<sup>6</sup> One month later, in the dark hours of the morning, men from the group opposing Limeta Mestas’, fed up with the stalemate, decided to take back the *palacio*. Just before dawn, they staged an attack on the men guarding it – armed, according to them, with sticks but no guns. In the violent struggle that followed, several people from both sides were hurt, but Limeta Mestas was the only one who died.

Although I never met the man – and though, if I had, he likely would not have spoken to me, writing me off as a committed partisan – his death led to a difficult closure in my life as well. In the aftermath of that event, the town was, for a while, filled with state troops and essentially lived under martial law. Yalálag’s political divisions were pervasive and deep, but after the shooting, the hostility in town was more open and bitter than it had been in almost twenty years. Thirty-four suspects

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<sup>5</sup> Limeta Mestas was not, however, one of the group’s leaders.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis in original. Letter to Lic. José Murat Casab, Governor of Oaxaca, and Lic. Héctor Anuar Mafud Mafud, State Secretary, from the Center for the Study and Development of the Zapotec Language and Tradition “Uken Ke Uken,” the Union of Yalalteca Women, and the Council of Elders of Yalálag. February 7, 2000. The violent event at the *palacio municipal* occurred on March 7, 2000.

spent more than a month languishing in a Oaxaca jail – a month and half later, a journalist in the national newspaper *La Jornada*, lamenting the nation-wide failure of institutions for resolving conflicts, would write that “Yalálag’s Council of Elders remain in jail”<sup>7</sup>; a handful spent months more trying to find their way out of the judicial quagmire they had fallen into. Many of these men were actively involved in Yalálag’s cultural revitalization movement. Because of these particular difficulties faced by the movement’s leaders and their families, and because of the general crisis in the town, everything I had come to study – such as the municipal radio station<sup>8</sup> that broadcast in Zapotec and a language workshop focused on teaching Zapotec literacy and producing Zapotec texts<sup>9</sup> – came to a halt. As the weeks turned into months, and still the situation in Yalálag continued without change, I slowly came to realize that I

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<sup>7</sup> Hernández Navarro 2000, published on April 18. The *Consejo de Ancianos* (Council of Elders) of which the author speaks has traditionally been considered the highest authority in indigenous communities, made up of older and respected men who have worked their way up to the position through civic service in lower posts. The *encarcelados* included, for example, a well-respected former president (Maclovio Aquino). Hernández Navarro could safely assume that his audience would read into his statement the patent disrespectfulness of the situation, something akin, perhaps, in the U.S. to holding prominent state congressmen in jail for weeks on end, merely on suspicion of wrongdoing. Note also, though, that the “other side” in Yalálag would not necessarily agree that the men in jail and the group calling themselves the “Consejo de Ancianos” were, in fact, that Council. The conflicts raised within indigenous communities as they try to reconcile older institutions for recognizing authorities – which are themselves not static, as a result of revitalization initiatives like those undertaken in Yalálag – and newer ones influenced by the party system that is political paradigm outside indigenous communities – also in flux in Mexico, with the recent decline of one-party rule – are among the deepest and most pervasive in indigenous communities. This is particularly true of Oaxaca, because most indigenous communities there answer, administratively, directly to the state government and hence administer their own affairs.

<sup>8</sup> I.e., the radio station’s programming and management was locally determined, in contradistinction to most radio stations broadcasting in indigenous areas, which are run by INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista), the governmental agency designed to interface with Mexico’s indigenous population, roughly equivalent to the BIA in the United States.

<sup>9</sup> This is the organization Uken Ke Uken, the lead signatory of the aforementioned letter.

had a hard choice to make: either I had to change my research topic or I had to change my fieldsite (and language), because the project I had come to Yalálag to undertake was, for the foreseeable future, impossible.

It was a hard decision to make because for me – quite selfishly, I see now – Yalálag felt like paradise. I loved the family I lived with; because they lived near the upper edge of town, I could go running in the mountains without most of the town knowing about it<sup>10</sup>; the setting itself was beautiful and, ironically, always invoked a sense of tranquility; and I had already made some headway on learning Zapotec and getting to know Yalálag and its people. Moreover, my project was one I had been working on, in various guises, since before I started graduate school. It was hard to imagine shifting gears so dramatically while I was in the field, far away from a good library or from the guidance of my committee. Ultimately, I chose to stick to my original project, and began the long, miserable hunt for a new fieldsite.

Oaxaca is one of the most culturally diverse regions on the planet. It has seventeen distinct ethnic groups living in an area roughly the size of Indiana, and most of the seventeen speak languages with multiple mutually unintelligible dialects

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<sup>10</sup> Running – which is for me a great alleviator of stress – was obviously an activity almost no women from Yalálag (or, indeed, from rural backgrounds generally) engaged in, having more vital things to do like washing clothes or cooking dinner. After I had been in San Cristóbal for a couple of months and had gone running regularly on the outskirts, where the roads from indigenous communities led into the city, I met a woman in town who recognized me as “the crazy runner.” “Everyone wants to know what are you running from,” she said.

– more than forty in the case of Zapotec, ten or more for Mazatec.<sup>11</sup> So I began visiting parts of the state I had never been to, in search of a community like Yalálag had been before the shooting, one whose inhabitants were actively involved in revitalizing their language and culture in new, innovative ways. I took trip after nauseating trip in the ancient, rattling, chicken-filled buses that once had carried American children to school but now had come to Mexico to die. The buses spat out black exhaust as they coughed their way through the mountains, shedding one of Oaxaca's sierras only to stagger into another, until finally, in the far northern tip of the state, I came to a road too rocky for buses. So I rode in a beat-up pick-up until the road ended in a small town perched on the edge of a deep canyon: Nda Xo<sup>12</sup>, a community in the Sierra Mazateca which turned out to be, at long last, the kind of community I was looking for.

If it were not for Limeta Mestas' death, I would have done my research in Yalálag, and I would never, I believe, have fully understood that communities where language revitalization initiatives have gained widespread popular interest are in fact relatively rare. I would not have had the experience of seeing first-hand how common it is for indigenous intellectuals to live in regional cities rather than in their

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<sup>11</sup> There are also significant numbers of people in Oaxaca who speak other indigenous languages; this is particularly true of the various groups of Chiapan and Guatemalan refugees living in Oaxaca.

<sup>12</sup> This is the Mazatec word for the *municipio*; the official name is Santa María Magdalena Chilchotla, or Chilchotla for short. As with many Mexican states (e.g., Oaxaca itself), the name of the *municipio* and its *cabecera* (seat) are often the same. The *municipio* is a Spanish administrative unit dating from the colonial period. It roughly corresponds to the county in the United States, in that both have geographical extensions larger than a single town or city but smaller than a state.

communities, driven there by the very same economic forces that cause much of the “cultural erosion” that revitalization movements fight against.

Oaxaca is Mexico’s poorest state<sup>13</sup> and also, not coincidentally, its most indigenous, the only state in the country where indigenous people are in the majority. It is thus filled with the kind of communities that have been hit hardest by globalization and by Mexico’s neoliberal restructuring measures of the 1980s and 1990s. With few exceptions, the cornerstone of rural Mexico’s economy has until recently been overwhelmingly agricultural, with corn being far and away the central crop. With the elimination of farm subsidies and the reversal of various post-Revolutionary measures aimed at protecting – and, ultimately, co-opting – the rural peasantry, indigenous farmers were forced to compete on the free market as never before. And with the passing of NAFTA, their fate was increasingly linked to U.S. markets where, it is worth noting, corn continues to be heavily subsidized by the federal government. As a result, the kind of small-scale agriculture engaged in by indigenous communities has become dramatically less viable since the economic crisis of the 1980s. Increasingly, indigenous people are leaving their communities in search of work elsewhere. Oaxaca has one of the highest rates of migration in the country, both domestically and internationally.<sup>14</sup> For example, in Yalálag – which,

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<sup>13</sup> Oaxaca is in an ongoing “race to the bottom” with Chiapas for this distinction. Chiapas is the only state further south than Oaxaca, and is one of several states whose indigenous population, while in the minority, is still quite large.

<sup>14</sup> The Mazatec region is anomalous in this regard; while its rates of domestic migration are near those of other regions of Oaxaca, it has almost no migration to the United States.

though small by American standards, is the largest town in the Sierra Norte – only half of its citizens are permanent residents: roughly 2,500 actually live there, with another 2,500 living in the United States, mostly in Los Angeles. According to locals interviewed by journalists at the time of the confrontation at the *Palacio*, eighty per cent of young men leave the community, primarily for economic reasons although also for educational ones (Goering 2001). These migration patterns have material effects, no less for indigenous writers than for indigenous farmers. One of them is that language revitalization movements in Mexico are frequently played out in regional and national urban centers, and, paradoxically, unfold less frequently in the rural, indigenous communities where indigenous languages remain the primary vehicle for communication.

In communities where such movements are a part of quotidian life, they become enmeshed with other pressing communitarian issues and invariably become implicated in political divisions. Certainly this was true of the unfortunate event that took place in Yalálag in early 2000. As the two groups fought each other that morning in front of the town hall, their bloody hands dragged Yalálag's divisive past into the new millennium, re-inscribing it at the same time with present conflicts. Among these are opposing views about their language and culture, about the meaning of modernity and about their relationship as a community to the Mexican nation-state. And so another lesson I learned from Yalálag, though at the cost of leaving it, was how high the stakes can be for revitalization movements. The fight to preserve and



promote particular ideas about indigenous language and culture is not only figurative but literal as well, and though it may be rare for people to kill or be killed for those ideas, people are nevertheless willing to make great sacrifices to defend them.



I came to the topic of indigenous writers by a circuitous route, and like my “detour” through Yalálag, that particular journey, which I experienced at the time as product of my own incompetence, turned out to provide some critical insights. Before I started graduate school in linguistic anthropology, I was living in New York City and experiencing some success as a writer of poems, plays, and literary journalism. After I won a grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts, I went to live in Mexico for several months, where I continued to write while also seeing parts of the country I had never been to. San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, was one such place. When I arrived, a couple of years had passed since the EZLN<sup>15</sup> uprising of New Year’s Day, 1994. Although peace talks with the government were ongoing, the armed conflict had long since become primarily a political movement, aimed at addressing the many longstanding and long-ignored problems faced by

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<sup>15</sup> The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army). Led by the charismatic, pipe-smoking Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas are a largely (though not exclusively) indigenous army. They – and Marcos in particular – became almost instantly iconic because they always wore ski masks (or bandanas) in public. This feature played a major role in their ability to capture the attention of media outlets across the world.

indigenous people throughout Mexico. Thus the Zapatista leaders quickly came to represent not only the “rank and file” of the EZLN, but also, in effect, all of Mexico’s indigenous people, and they held many meetings and conferences with indigenous people throughout the country in order to take account of their complaints and desires. It was a time of great excitement and ferment among indigenous leaders and for many indigenous people generally. While I was in Chiapas, researching an article for *The Village Voice* on the peace talks, I learned about a collective of indigenous writers and artists based in San Cristóbal. *Sna Jtz’ibajom* (House of the Writer), as it is called, has been written about from different angles by a number of researchers<sup>16</sup>, particularly the renowned scholar and former member of the Harvard Chiapas Project, Robert Laughlin.<sup>17</sup> Among the many things that intrigued me about the collective was that some of the writers, under the auspices of Teatro Lo’il Maxil (Monkey Business Theatre, a part of *Sna Jtz’ibajom*), had created a play about the Zapatista rebellion called *From All for All (De todos a todos)*.<sup>18</sup> The aim was to present it in indigenous communities throughout the Highlands of Chiapas, which surround San

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<sup>16</sup> See especially Laughlin 1995, which discusses the origins of the group in 1982, including Laughlin’s own considerable involvement in the group’s genesis and survival. Another important article on the group is Frischmann 1994.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to take this opportunity to thank Robert Laughlin for the generosity he showed me then, as well as the members of *Sna Jtz’ibajom*, especially Diego Méndez Guzmán, who was at the time serving as the organization’s president. I am also extremely grateful to John Haviland, Carlota Duarte, and Cathy Sullivan for their immense help during my stays in Chiapas.

<sup>18</sup> The title refers to a popular Zapatista slogan.

Cristóbal, and thereby to engage people directly in a dialogue, of sorts, about the meaning of the uprising.

As a writer, I have long been drawn to the relationship between art and politics. I feel that while striking a balance between the two is extremely difficult, it is a deeply worthwhile endeavor. I am drawn to works of art that are valuable in their own right, refusing to become mere vehicles for a political agenda, while at the same time insisting on the need to engage with political issues rather than standing on the political sidelines. So I was intrigued by what the writers from *Sna Jtz'ibajom* were doing because, whether successful or not either as a work of art or as a political tool, I saluted the effort: theirs was a clear attempt to wed politics and art. At the time, the play seemed to me like a blunt instrument with an obvious message, whose value lay less in its sophistication as a work of art than in its ability, precisely because of the simplicity of its message, to engage people in political issues. Of course indigenous people are going to be all for this movement, I thought, because they have been oppressed by Mexico, as colony and then state, for hundreds of years, and the Zapatistas had finally forced the government to pay attention to what its indigenous people want.

Later, though, once I had started graduate school, I began to see things differently.<sup>19</sup> I realized that a play about the Zapatista rebellion was, in the

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<sup>19</sup> My discussion of the Zapatista Rebellion is based on research I did for a paper on the roots of the uprising (Faudree 1998). The paper, in turn, drew from published work by a number of authors, including Burbach 1994, Cancian 1992, Cancian and Brown 1994, Collier 1994a and 1994b, Earle

Highlands, a far more complex and delicate proposition than I understood at the time, more fraught with political and social repercussions than it probably would have been in any indigenous community in Mexico outside the Highlands. The politics of the indigenous communities of the Highlands had played a critical, if indirect, role in the uprising. Many of these communities were land-poor, and their leaders began dealing with the mounting pressures on agricultural production and land availability, through the 1980s and early 1990s, by expelling people – Protestant converts, primarily, but also political rivals. These *expulsados* went in large numbers to the only part of the state where land was available: the Lacandón Rainforest, along the border with Guatemala, which became the organizational center and military stronghold of the EZLN. But through the 1980s and into the 1990s land became increasingly scarce even there, as the exiles from the Highlands had to compete with a number of other groups for land: cattle ranchers seeking to increase the size of their herds; refugees from the violence in Guatemala; landless peasants from elsewhere in the country who were encouraged by the government to relocate there and serve as a “human barrier” to mass Guatemalan immigration. Eventually, the situation in the Lacandón grew desperate – symbolized, as the Zapatista narrative goes, by the repeal of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution that protected communal lands called *ejidos*<sup>20</sup> from being

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1994, Fox 1994, Gossen 1994, Guillermprieto 1994, Katzenberger 1995, Nash 1995, and Wasserstrom 1983.

<sup>20</sup> This is a legal category of landownership in which land is shared communally among community members, roughly equivalent to the reservation system in the U.S. Although the *ejido* system became enshrined as national policy only after the Revolution, and put into practice largely through the agrarian reforms of the Cárdenas presidency, it was meant to “restore” earlier systems of collective

bought, sold, or used as collateral, which was followed shortly thereafter by the passage of NAFTA. On the very day that NAFTA went into effect, many of the *expulsados* took part in the start of the uprising as the ski-masked soldiers of the EZLN. Because such people had been expelled by communities in the Highlands, people from the region had conflicted feelings about the Zapatistas. Communities like Zinacantán, an important Highland community from which many Sna Jtz'ibajom members hailed, had exhibited "centuries of opposition to Indian rebellion" (Laughlin 1995: 528). As such, these highlands communities (or, at the least, their leaders) opposed the EZLN outright.

The more I learned about Sna Jtz'ibajom, the more I realized that my initial impression of the group's unique attempt to "give voice" to the largely neglected indigenous point of view was, to put it mildly, very simplistic. For one thing, it became clear that the "hot house" issue<sup>21</sup> was especially salient with respect to Sna Jtz'ibajom, as outsiders have played a critical role in the group's genesis and ongoing existence. As Frishmann writes, "The daily hard work [of the collective] has been squarely on the shoulders of the writers-actors; nevertheless, their success has also

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landholding that had been eroded during Mexico's colonial and national periods. It was also through this and other clientalist policies that the Mexican state gained the loyalty of indigenous leaders like those in the Highlands of Chiapas, who opposed resistance to the government and disloyalty to the PRI.

<sup>21</sup> This is, coincidentally, a particularly apt image for the Highlands: a booming part of Zinacantán's economy is the sale of flowers, produced in greenhouses. *Zinacantecos* in bright indigenous dress, selling their vibrant flowers in San Cristóbal's markets, are a perennial favorite of camera-toting tourists, who might be surprised at how commercial and lucrative the industry is, and at how tenuously it intersects with local "traditional" practice.

resulted in part from friendships and alliances with outsiders – both Mexican and foreign, including influential members of the anthropological community” (1994: 235). These outside influences begin with the fact that, thanks to the long-running Harvard Chiapas Project, which has brought anthropological researchers into Highlands Chiapas communities for decades, the region has been “the most minutely studied ethnic area in all of Mexico” (Frischmann 1994: 216).<sup>22</sup> By hiring local people to do translation, transcription, and informant work, the project indirectly armed individuals with the skills, desires, and awareness that would later allow them to become members of *Sna Jtz’ibajom*. In 1982, Laughlin had organized, with Norman McQuown, a conference in San Cristóbal entitled “Forty Years of Anthropological Research in Chiapas.” During the conference, a few local men who had been collaborators of the project and had become friends of Laughlin’s made a plea for support:

They explained that we outsiders had made them so much more aware of the value of their culture. We had published many studies, presumably good, but who knows, since they always appeared in distant lands in foreign languages. The younger generation of their people, now attending school, believed they were so smart, but they did not have a quarter of the wisdom of their grandparents. “We want at least to put on paper our customs, our traditions, for our children and our grandchildren.” Following the conference, a seed grant from Cultural Survival permitted us to create *Sna Jtz’ibajom*, and so, unwittingly, I was applied to the task of furthering a cultural cooperative. (Laughlin 1995: 540-541).

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<sup>22</sup> A common joke in San Cristóbal at the time I was there asked what a Highlands family looked like, with the answer being some version of “a mom, a dad, kids, and an anthropologist.”

Laughlin and his national and international contacts have continued to play a critical role in securing financial, technical, and artistic support. Because of the general problem of indigenous language illiteracy, “our [written] texts were being read only in Spanish and with little interest. So it occurred to me to dramatize the contents of our booklets on the puppet stage” (Laughlin 1995: 541).<sup>23</sup> Through Laughlin’s efforts, a former member of the renowned populist theatre company Bread and Puppet Theater came to Chiapas to work with the collective. Later, “the members entreated me to find a theater director” (Laughlin 1995: 541), and Ralph Lee – whose Mettawee River Company is perhaps best known for producing the annual Greenwich Village Halloween Parade – was contacted. He began coming every year to Chiapas to direct the group’s new plays, including *De Todos Para Todos*. Much of the group’s funding comes from international sources: the Smithsonian Institution, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Cultural Survival, the Merck Family Fund, and the Inter American Foundation, among others<sup>24</sup> (Frischmann 1994:

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<sup>23</sup> As Laughlin notes, a precursor to Sna Jtz’ibajom’s puppetry work was INI’s *Teatro Petul*; “the fathers of several of the Sna Jtz’ibajom’s members had been puppeteers” in the *Teatro* (1995: 542). The theater was inspired by the work of the famous Chiapas author Rosario Castellanos; although herself a *ladina*, she wrote from a perspective of great sympathy for Chiapas’ indigenous peoples, thus representing from a more literary orientation an author whose work had some of the same kind of valorizing effect on indigenous self-perceptions as anthropologists. However, the theater was also aligned with INI’s prevailing nationalizing *indigenismo* policies of the 1940s and 1950s, and as such was severely limited in its permeability to indigenous perspectives. Part of my point here, though, is that while the constraints placed on Sna Jtz’ibajom and other groups by outside influences may be free from overt links to the “civilizing” and “acculturating” demands of earlier eras, the agendas of outsiders continue to restrict the possibilities available to such groups.

<sup>24</sup> The Ford Foundation has been particularly generous in funding the Chiapas Photography Project, also associated with Sna Jtz’ibajom. It, too, is aimed at giving indigenous people a “voice,” so to speak, in the promotion of ideas about indigenous culture. But like Sna Jtz’ibajom, it has been made possible largely by the influence of outsiders, particularly Carlota Duarte. Like Laughlin, Duarte

219). In part because of this, the group regularly tours their work in the United States and in urban settings in Mexico. In order to make their work accessible to such strategically important non-indigenous audiences “the live actors’ plays have been predominantly in Spanish” (Frischmann 1994: 222). This also serves to make the works available to indigenous audiences from other linguistic backgrounds, particularly other indigenous intellectuals and writers, who are another major “outside” influence. While Spanish is also used because it functions as a lingua franca between group members, who speak both Tzotzil and Tzeltal, its use not only runs counter to the collective’s stated aims to preserve indigenous culture and language, but also excludes indigenous monolinguals: most women, older people, and younger children. The writing of the Spanish-language scripts is largely the responsibility of the urban Mexican poet and artist Francisco Alvarez Quiñones. He and Lee “are responsible for dramaturgy and final shaping of the troupe’s collectively developed pieces, so that in final production the work has been mediated by their decidedly Western training and perspective – a perspective masked by the group’s actively ethnic public image, which, ironically, is itself controlled to a large degree by these ‘outsiders’” (Underiner 1998: 353).

While this situation is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, the collective’s heavy reliance on outside supporters and funding certainly complicates straightforward notions about it constituting either a vehicle through which

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expends considerable time and energy promoting the project, particularly through cultivating relationships with potential and actual donors.



marginalized indigenous “voices” can be heard, or a case of autochthonous political resistance through cultural and artistic assertion. Hence it is too easy, I think, to claim “the Monkey Business Theatre carefully let the Indians speak for themselves” (Laughlin 1995: 542). Furthermore, while *Sna Jtz’ibajom* is a particularly extreme representative of the role played by outsiders in cultural and linguistic revitalization, given the extent of involvement by anthropologists and others in Highlands Chiapas communities, it is in other ways representative of the larger issue. Indigenous writers and indigenous communities across the country face, to varying degrees, and with varying levels of directness, similar paradoxes when interacting with outside influences.

After I learned this kind of relevant background information – and it was significant to me, as someone who returned to graduate school in part out of frustration with freelance journalism, that such knowledge was hardly available at all in writing by journalists – my appreciation for the practical, philosophical, and ethical dilemmas faced by indigenous writers and intellectuals only deepened. So, too, did my curiosity about how indigenous people who were the purported audiences for their efforts were responding to their work. By the time I finished my coursework and left for the field, I was convinced that a key issue involved understanding how indigenous writers and their audiences interacted, both through texts and otherwise. Through such interactions, it seemed, people were renewing and inventing anew the practices,

norms and values on which social life rests, and through which enduring social collectives become possible.

***Nationalism and Its Discontents: The Modern Renaissance  
in Indigenous Literature***

Across a wide variety of social contexts, human beings have viewed the past as a resource from which intangible entities such as practices, ideas, and values can be recovered and reincarnated in the present. Thus histories from across the world are marked by periods of renaissance in which people retrieve, renew, and, inevitably, reinvent<sup>25</sup> something from the past that was literally or metaphorically lost. The present is no exception, as evidenced by the widespread worldwide emergence of cultural and linguistic revitalization movements. Primarily post-colonial and post-national in nature, these projects are created by indigenous peoples with the ostensible aim of rescuing extinct past practices and endangered present ones from the eroding, marginalizing legacies of colonial and national domination. In doing so, though, they of necessity also engage, deliberately or not, in innovation and creativity, as they adapt their understandings of the past, which are themselves incomplete and selective, to the needs and norms of the present.

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<sup>25</sup> This is a subject that has been written about by many people, from a variety of angles, particularly after the publication of the important edited volume on the “invention of tradition” by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992).

As such revitalization projects are by definition counter-hegemonic, they are also by disposition ethnically purist; nativism and revitalization are two sides of the same coin. Among the most critical tropes on which both notions turn, for the intellectuals who drive them as well as their audiences, are authenticity and, closely related to it, tradition – both of which are tied, in the context of indigenous revivalism and identity politics, to the concept of authority. In promoting conceptions of the past as normative guides for the present, indigenous intellectuals must adopt a view of such past practices that emphasizes above all their link to tradition as representative of an essentialized ethnic identity, codified as the authentic “us” as a people. At the same time, such intellectuals must make explicit the distinctiveness of the practices they promote from present ones, for it is in this difference that their prescriptive value lies. However, this recontextualization raises a tension between the original context and the new one, which turns around precisely the concepts of authenticity and tradition. Although the dynamic interplay of the old and the new is evoked by the names (renaissance, revival) of such movements, the ideology intellectuals use to promote them is explicitly retro-normative. It centers on a notion of tradition embodied in certain past practices that are stipulated as “authentic,” a notion which simultaneously excludes and seeks to replace corresponding practices in the present. Yet tradition represents not only a timeless past that no longer exists, but also its persistence in the present in the form of collective norms – and the slippage between the two lends an inherent instability to what individual actors mean by “authenticity”

and “tradition,” and therefore, also, in the locus of authority for indigenous representatives or leaders. As a result, the essentialized collective identity promoted by indigenous intellectuals, pitched as it is against at least some present norms, often finds itself at odds with the lived reality of many members of their purported audiences.

The ambiguity produced by this semantic instability places both indigenous intellectuals and their revitalization efforts in an inherently paradoxical position. For though such leaders must appeal to authenticity and tradition, their interpretations of these terms are often at odds with the norms of the vast majority of other community members. Furthermore, many of the very qualities that allow indigenous individuals to engage in such projects – that they are highly literate, deeply bilingual, and relatively cosmopolitan – make them further subject to claims of inauthenticity or questionable “traditionality” by the very people for whom intellectuals purport to speak. To put the issue another way: the abilities and ideological dispositions that authorize indigenous intellectuals to participate in national and even international debates and discourses about indigenous rights and indigenous identity are often the very same ones that, from a local perspective, de-legitimize them as authoritative representatives of the community as a whole.



The negotiation of social conflict and difference in the face of large-scale unifying social projects has been a central concern in the social sciences since their inauguration as formal fields of study. From the founding fathers of the disciplines through leading theorists of the present, social scientists have had a deep and enduring interest in how complex social collectivities arise and are maintained despite profound and varied internal differences. One of the most important such lines of inquiry has addressed the construction of the modern nation-state, whose rise as a dominant global paradigm is closely linked historically to the very scholarly ethos out of which the modern disciplines themselves were born.

At the same time, recent social science research has of necessity attempted to come to terms with the emergence of various threats to this paradigm, such as increasing globalization and the emergence of various trans- and sub-national ethnic movements. In Mexico, the interaction between indigenous people and the state as it engages in the ongoing process of incorporating them has perhaps been of special interest because, unlike many other Latin American countries, the Mexican state is relatively strong; and thanks to the Revolution, it has often engaged directly and actively with its indigenous populations rather than, for example, treating them with benign (or not so benign) neglect. On the other hand, the Zapatista uprising – “the first post-modern rebellion” – made only too clear the limits of state power and state relevance. Through both their explicit rhetoric and their careful use of Revolutionary symbols, the Zapatistas demonstrated how completely the Mexican government had

failed to deliver on the Revolution's promise to redress the chronic social inequality and marginalization experienced over centuries by the nation's poor and indigenous populations. The leaders of the EZLN, above all the media darling Subcomandante Marcos, were extremely savvy in their use of the media, and their power within Mexico owes as much to the pressure that their international support brought to bear on the government as it does to the pressure "from below," from the millions of indigenous people in Mexico who are living in conditions of abject poverty.

The portion of North America that has become Mexico is a region that from prehistoric times through the present has exhibited overwhelming linguistic and cultural diversity. Thus the challenges such diversity poses for the modern Mexican state are not new. Long before the Spanish Crown made Mexico a center of its colonial enterprise as New Spain, rulers of several successive Mesoamerican empires faced, in the diversity of the populations they subjugated, many of the same threats to large-scale collective cohesion. The area's immense linguistic diversity has been perhaps particularly problematic for pre-Columbian imperial, European colonial, and nationalistic projects alike. There are today 62 officially recognized languages spoken in Mexico, a number that is itself much diminished from pre-Contact levels due to the massive losses in indigenous populations during the Conquest and subsequent colonization. This number would furthermore expand exponentially if these languages -- many of which, like most Oaxacan languages, have deep dialectal

variation -- were further divided into units reflecting practical levels of mutual intelligibility.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, language use has been one of the key sites of resistance to and critique of such projects. In Mexico -- unlike in neighboring Guatemala, for example<sup>27</sup> -- the primary marker of indigenous identity is language use. As such, its defense and valorization has played a critical role in countering the variety of state efforts aimed at assimilation and the erasure of ethnic difference. Furthermore, many indigenous groups have focused such efforts specifically on the artistic or poetic use of their native languages. In social contexts of extreme power imbalance, the importance played by artistic or poetic concerns is often marginalized as interethnic relations are interpreted in primarily economic or political terms. Yet ethnic conflicts often center on the right to control which cultural narratives “matter” and will be considered emblematic of the core beliefs and values that define, unite, and position a

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<sup>26</sup> As an example, there are four main variants of Zapotec, none of which are mutually intelligible; rather than referring to all four as a single language, linguists and native speakers alike routinely refer to them as “the Zapotecs.” In addition, each of these four branches has a number of dialects, many of which are mutually unintelligible despite long histories of contact. In communicating across such dialectal divisions, even speakers of “close” dialects will generally use Spanish. As a point of comparison, the Summer Institute of Linguistics – the field arm of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, which has been responsible for the majority of basic descriptive linguistic research in Mexico (and worldwide) – places the overall number of Zapotec languages at 57. They list the total number of indigenous languages currently spoken in Mexico at 283 (versus 62, the official count of the Mexican government).

<sup>27</sup> In Guatemala, a variety of other factors – dress, religious practices, parentage, etc. – generally trump language use. In fact, many leading Mayan intellectuals from Guatemala do not speak any native languages, or do so only as a second language, after Spanish. This situation is one that, in my experience, indigenous Mexicans almost uniformly react to with confusion and disbelief. In Oaxaca, which is the only Mexican state where (like Guatemala) the indigenous population is in the majority, people routinely found the idea of an indigenous person who does not speak an indigenous language to be an incomprehensible contradiction in terms.

group within larger collectives such as nation-states. The worldwide emergence of cultural and linguistic revitalization projects is one of the most important indicators of the vital role played in social life by the ability to control poetic expression.

Such revitalization projects take a variety of forms, but one of the most common focuses on the creation of indigenous literatures: a body of poetic<sup>28</sup> texts in indigenous languages, particularly written ones. For written texts, the process of literature creation also includes a secondary process of creating audiences with the skills -- particularly indigenous language literacy -- necessary to put such texts to use. Like other Mesoamerican peoples, Zapotecs and Mazatecs who can read and write are overwhelmingly literate exclusively in Spanish. Though there exist in indigenous languages a vast number of pre-Colombian and colonial texts, the production of written texts in indigenous languages is a discontinuous tradition,<sup>29</sup> abandoned, for the most part, early in the national period, once bilingualism and literacy in Spanish had become sufficiently widespread among the indigenous elite. Thus modern literatures in indigenous languages date almost entirely from the last twenty or thirty years.<sup>30</sup> During this period, indigenous peoples from across the region have witnessed an impressive renaissance of writing in the sixty-two official languages still

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<sup>28</sup> I take my meaning of this term largely from Jakobson's ([1960] 1964) seminal essay on the "poetic function" of language, in which, to paraphrase, "*how* something is said is as important as *what* is said."

<sup>29</sup> As I discuss further in Chapter Two, Nahuatl and Yucatec Maya are somewhat exceptional in this regard.

<sup>30</sup> The Isthmus of Oaxaca, a Zapotec-speaking region, is a notable exception. Modern Zapotec literature has been written there since at least the turn of the century (de la Cruz 1999).



spoken in Mexico. Almost all have at least one indigenous author and various books published in the language; the larger languages have many of both, in some cases several authors and books for each of the main dialects. Because indigenous languages circulate almost exclusively orally – and while the writers in each language are literate, they constitute a tiny fraction of the overall population of any given language – literacy movements have emerged alongside the literary ones, aimed at teaching indigenous peoples how to read and write in their native languages.

The texts indigenous peoples create and interpret include both older and more innovative forms in a variety of media, whose central unifying characteristic is the artistic use of language: oral narratives, written poems and novels, song performances, recorded songs and written lyrics, and radio broadcasts of many of the above. An enduring question raised by revitalization movements concerns the dynamics by which continuity of tradition and the generative potential posed by innovation and creativity are negotiated in practice. This tension between maintaining stasis and introducing change also takes the more particular form here of how such indigenous writers navigate the inherent contradictions entailed by adapting traditional expressive forms to new (Western) genres and media. While these are of particular interest to me because they are live concerns for indigenous writers I know in Mexico, they are also relevant because they have, in various ways, shaped the scholarly work that has been produced on this and related issues.

***On “Great Divides”: Towards a New Methodology***

*On Orality and Literacy: The Missing Third Term*

So much ink has been spilled on the debate about the social implications of oral versus written communication that it seems impossible to add any thoughts on the matter that have not already been said more eloquently elsewhere. The issue has been the focus of intense efforts at theorization in anthropology as well as in such diverse fields as education, history, classical studies, comparative literature, folklore, musicology, and linguistics. Although, like most debates, this one has many variants and shades of gray, positions on the matter cluster around two poles. Some theorists have claimed that the introduction of systems of writing into “oral cultures” – whether historical or contemporary – leads to generalized, universal transformations in cognition and social complexity. Such proponents of the “Great Divide” or “autonomous model” theory of literacy tie the advent of writing to the development of law, democracy, individualism, Protestantism and therefore Capitalism, science, and even rational thought.<sup>31</sup> Theorists in support of the opposing view, known as the

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<sup>31</sup> Goody (1968, 1977) and Ong (1982) are probably the theorists most widely associated with this position. It is worth noting, however, that this position -- which to anthropologists can sometimes seem so shot through with positivist and functionalist assumptions as to be laughable -- also comes in much more sophisticated and interesting forms. For example, see Anderson’s seminal work (1983) on the role that print capitalism and reading played in the rise for nationalism. For all its originality, this argument basically amounts to a novel twist on the “autonomous model,” ascribing to the nation-building process the same modularity that Goody, Ong, and their like ascribed to the construction of complex societies.

"ideological model," have challenged both the monolithic "Great Divide" that the opposing theorists posit between orality and literacy, as well as the linkage they presume between large-scale social change and literacy *per se*.<sup>32</sup> Linguistic anthropologists in particular have emphasized the extent to which viewing orality and literacy as either separable or as uniform in nature across cultures is an inherently untenable position (Besnier 1995, Heath 1972, Messick 1993), pointing out the ways in which preoccupation with the "transformation" from oral to written expression is predicated on Western, "logocentric" views of communication (Derrida 1998, Tomlinson 1995). Just as I sometimes wonder whether there can actually be people out there, somewhere in America, who are truly undecided about whether to vote Republican or Democrat, I have a hard time imagining who, at this point, continues to find the debate useful or edifying.

Certainly one of the interesting trends in linguistic anthropology – though the agenda of this literature is not to engage *per se* in the in debate about orality and literacy – has been to move beyond it by examining in greater complexity the actual dynamics and ultimate social import of the processes by which the many varieties of text are produced, disseminated, interpreted, and used (see, e.g., Bauman and Briggs 1990, Silverstein and Urban 1996, Urban 1996). This growing body of literature foregrounds the role practice and ideology play in text creation and has been

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<sup>32</sup> See Clanchy 1990, Finnegan 1988, Street 1984 and 1993; for this argument in specifically Latin American/Spanish colonial contexts, see Boone and Mignolo 1994, Mignolo 1995, Rafael 1988, Rappaport and Cummins 1994, Salomon 1982.

instrumental in focusing attention on the interaction between the two. It has also had the beneficial effect of creating a space, within discussions of texts, for a consideration of the role innovation and creativity play in “the social life of texts” -- even in cases like revitalization movements where the explicit agendas in play are directly tied to discourses about the past and tradition. Finally, by focusing on texts in social process, such work also allows for a humanistic approach to textuality, by leaving room on the stage for actual human beings to enter and make their views known.

My research draws heavily from the insights of this work, but it also seeks to expand on it in new ways by considering singing as a third term often missing from discussions about the relationship between oral and written communication. Aside from the fact that the noted theorists in the debate have consistently cast it as a question about the nature of the relationship between orality and literacy, influential theorists who are primarily engaged in other scholarly agendas – for example, Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*<sup>33</sup> (1998) – merely reinforce the discursive grooves on the matter as confined to speech and writing. Even otherwise very careful analyses do not consider singing. For example, see Lee’s useful consideration of the implications of Habermas’s work, and responses to it, for notions of textuality, which falls into the common formulation that “the textuality of language raises questions about the

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<sup>33</sup> Thus on this matter, at least, Derrida does not so much transcend the binary nature of Saussurean structuralism as invert and unsettle it, “deconstructing” the relationship of the parts while not introducing new ones as, for example Peirce essentially did – though not through direct dialogue with Saussure – by proposing a tripartite model of the sign.

relations between oral and written communication” (Lee 1992: 416). What about singing? And shouldn’t discussions of genre – which is what follows, in Lee’s article – also consider how song would expand the taxonomy? Lee’s characterization is symptomatic of a pervasive bias in discussions about relations between modes of communication.

Singing is often a critical component in the process by which texts are created, circulated, transformed – singing, in other words, is as central to the process by which “culture moves through the world” (Urban 2001) as is either speech or writing. While an argument about the importance of song as a vital human communicative activity is hardly new, the consideration of singing in studies of literacy, for example, is almost entirely absent.<sup>34</sup> And despite an extensive body of literature on the relationship between music and language<sup>35</sup>, discussions about writing, speech, and music (or song) remain rare. Song has certainly fared far better in discussions about literature, especially poetry; as we will see in Chapter Five, a shaman named María Sabina who never learned to read or write but who was arguably the most famous Mazatec of all time, was hailed by leaders of the Ethnopoetics movement as a “true

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<sup>34</sup> I owe my general recognition of the importance of song, and the frequency with which it is neglected even in work that takes language seriously, to Gary Tomlinson. Many of my ideas about singing, particularly in Mesoamerican contexts, were inspired by conversations with Gary about my work and about his forthcoming book on Amerindian singing.

<sup>35</sup> The Annual Review article by Feld and Fox (1994) gives a particularly thorough review of such literature; among the most important works are Abu-Lughod 1986, Basso 1985, Bauman 1977, Feld 1990, Graham 1986, Mannheim 1986, Seeger 1987, and Urban 1988. Important recent work on language and music includes Fox 2004, Meintjes 2003, and Samuels 2004.

poet”<sup>36</sup> for the songs and chants she used during curing rituals. However, such discussions have often treated songs as either a unique kind of written literature or a special, perhaps heightened, form of oral communication. In other words, it is rare for singing to be considered as a communicative category unto itself, which might, for example, interact with and mediate between written and oral communication in illuminating ways. Thus an issue this research project will raise concerns the unique qualities of singing to create texts of enduring social resonance. Furthermore, I will consider whether a key attribute of song in this respect is the performative flexibility – particularly in comparison to written texts – with which it can relate to new technologies, especially those like cassette tapes, compact discs, and video recordings that might lend themselves to commodification more easily than books.<sup>37</sup> This issue, in turn, raises the question of whether song is particularly useful in the context of revivalism because it can effectively reconcile the innovations that are part and parcel of any revitalization project with traditional or customary practice, inasmuch as successfully integrating the two is a perennial problem in such movements. At any rate, this case study will demonstrate how incomplete the social portrait of text production and textual circulation is without a consideration of the vital role played by singing.

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<sup>36</sup> And, of course, there are numerous examples of poet-songwriters closer to home: Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Patti Smith, etc. But note that the people who call them “poets” are operating precisely under the aforementioned paradigm: they are considered a special class of poet, poets who put their words to music.

<sup>37</sup> I am in dialogue here with a footnote in Anderson (1983: 43): “We still have no giant multinationals in the world of publishing.”

*On Text and Context: Belletristic vs. Sociological Approaches*

Beginning shortly after the collapse in the early sixteenth century of the Aztec<sup>38</sup> capital (on whose razed remains the colonial and national capital, Mexico City, was built), native language literary texts began to be created, using the Western alphabetic script introduced by the Spanish. There has been a great deal of scholarly interest in these texts, particularly those related to initial contacts between Spaniards and Indians, the Conquest, and early colonization.

Research on these texts, both from the colonial-era and thereafter, has typically taken a belletristic approach.<sup>39</sup> Grounded in theories from literary criticism, such work tends to treat the texts it studies as relatively context-independent. Scholarship of this sort focuses on the content and form (i.e., genre, poetic structure, language use, rhetorical strategies, authorial style, etc.) of indigenous language texts, to the near-exclusion of their social contexts of production and use.<sup>40</sup> In much of this

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<sup>38</sup> I use this term, although it is somewhat misleading, because it has become the most common term for referring to the people who ruled central Mexico at the time of the Conquest. The more complete term, the Aztec Triple Alliance, more accurately reflects the fact that what we now refer to as the Aztecs was an alliance of 3 city-states: Texcoco, Tlacopán, and Tenochtitlán, the capital and home of the Mexica, the most powerful of the three allied parties.

<sup>39</sup> See Tomlinson 1995 for a critique of this approach, as well for a discussion of a variety of historical approaches to Amerindian texts (songs) that predate and condition it. See also Hanks 1988 on similar scholarly misapprehension of another indigenous language colonial text (the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Edmonson 1986)).

<sup>40</sup> Of the many scholars who have worked in this vein, in the study of Mesoamerican indigenous literatures Miguel León-Portilla is widely considered the leading figure. He has written widely on the

literature, particularly that on texts dating from the early colonial period, there is a tendency to look at these texts primarily for what light they can shed on ancient Mesoamerican<sup>41</sup> societies.<sup>42</sup> More recent work on modern indigenous writers, while exhibiting a more “present-centered” approach, has nevertheless been driven by many of the same underlying concerns.<sup>43</sup> Such work does take great interest in the personal history of indigenous writers and, to some extent, in how such writers draw on

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topic, and edited a number of anthologies of indigenous language literary texts. See, for example León-Portilla [1962] 1992, 1969, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 2003, and León-Portilla and Shorris 2001.

<sup>41</sup> In this case, I use the term “Mesoamerica” as archaeologists do: to refer to the broad region encompassing what are now Mexico and the Central American states. For the most part, though, I use the term “Mesoamerica” in a different, if pedestrian, sense: to refer jointly to the modern nation-states of Mexico and Guatemala, within which the vast majority of the existing Central American/southern North American indigenous populations live. The term “Mesoamerica” was introduced by Kirchoff ([1943] 1952) to designate most of what are now Mexico and the Central American republics. More problematically, it was meant to identify the region as a “culture area” unified by certain shared cultural and linguistic traits that are pre-Conquest in origin. They stem from the various “high civilizations” (Olmec, Toltec, Maya, Aztec, Zapotec, Mixtec, etc) that arose in the area and produced the famous ceremonial centers that have attracted such archaeological interest. This orientation towards ancient patterns and practices as defining the legitimate object of study has been the most problematic legacy of the term (though see Gossen 1986 for an example of later attempts to revise the concept). The host of value judgments embedded in the term’s original usage are what I hope to avoid by using the term in such a restricted way.

<sup>42</sup> Here, too, the work of León-Portilla has had monumental influence (see especially León-Portilla 1969). An example of the absurd (but not uncommon) extremes to which this can be taken is represented by a television program that aired on a national public channel while I was conducting fieldwork. The program featured discourses by León-Portilla, as well as readings by him of texts in Classical Nahuatl (the Aztec language), on how indigenous peoples (particularly the Aztecs) responded to the arrival of the Spanish. Interspliced was footage of the mostly miserable living conditions of present-day indigenous people, primarily from Chiapas -- allusions to which, in the wake of the Zapatista Rebellion, have come nationally and internationally to symbolize Mexico’s oppression of its indigenous populations. The general thrust of this program was not simply the common argument that Indians have been persecuted for 500 years, but that their present complaints are valid and ennobled primarily by reference to a glorious, pre-Columbian past from which they were ruthlessly torn by colonization and its ongoing aftermath.

<sup>43</sup> The leading figure in this case is Carlos Montemayor, who has written extensively about modern indigenous authors, and edited a number of anthologies of their work (e.g., Montemayor 1992, 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2004a, 2004b).



cultural traditions and knowledge, particularly oral literatures. Nevertheless, this work still places the texts themselves squarely at the center of its analyses. Such scholarship does not focus in great depth on the wider social worlds in which indigenous authors live, and pays almost no attention to the social lives of the texts themselves: how other people, particularly people who are not indigenous authors themselves, read the texts, talk about them, speak them, sing them, and understand them.

There are a variety of reasons why such approaches have been so prevalent, including pragmatic ones. For historical texts, the relative dearth of historical documents that would allow for fuller contextualization of indigenous language texts is an important factor.<sup>44</sup> And for modern texts, the sheer diversity of indigenous languages in Mexico and the numerous obstacles to learning them<sup>45</sup> tend to make

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<sup>44</sup> An exception to this general tendency towards decontextualization in analyzing native language texts is offered by such works as the Scholes and Roys ([1948] 1968) study of an early colonial document written in Chontal Maya. Note, however, that this and other studies like it share the “ancientist” bias mentioned above. The effort to flesh out the context of this text was primarily in the service of reconstructing ancient society in this area, a crucial trade route between the Mayan and Aztec areas. A secondary aim was to use this text to reconstruct something of the initial contact itself, as a famous historical event is mentioned in the narrative (Cortez’s march to Honduras, during the course of which the captive Aztec heir was killed). This particular text – the only colonial-era text in the language, which is markedly different from the Chontal Maya spoken today – was also accompanied by a contemporary Spanish translation. In addition, it was part of a lengthy petition to the Crown, with a massive amount of additional documentation in Spanish, which greatly facilitated the contextualization process. See Faudree 1999b for an analysis of this text and the distortions in its contemporary translation.

<sup>45</sup> These include the radical difference of all indigenous languages from Spanish and other Indo-European languages and (with a couple of exceptions, such as Nahuatl and Yucatec Maya) the complete lack of pedagogical materials or opportunities for formal instruction in them. Note that this is less of a problem for historical texts, which exist only in a very few of the languages still spoken; the vast majority are written in Nahuatl. This is due in part to the use of Nahuatl as a lingua franca both prior to and following colonization.

textual analysis alone, while in itself no small feat, the most feasible approach. In fact, as most such texts appear in bilingual editions, especially the literary ones, many scholars studying this issue operate entirely in Spanish. More importantly, however, such work, both historical and modern, has often been tied to larger efforts to valorize native cultures and languages, including the texts produced in them.<sup>46</sup> This has been particularly true of the more literary texts in indigenous languages, texts in which the artistic and poetic aspects of the language used are critical to the expressive work accomplished by the text.

This body of research has had the beneficial effect of stressing the artistic sophistication and value of Amerindian texts, raising them from the level of documents of purely ethnohistorical or ethnographic interest towards that of being candidates for consideration in the canons of “High Culture.” Such scholarship has also emphasized how many of the distinctive features of Amerindian languages, as compared to Indo-European ones, provide a wide array of differing opportunities for expressive richness and poetic resonance, simultaneously complicating how such

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<sup>46</sup> Attitudes about the relative sophistication of minority languages are both more widespread and tenacious than corresponding views about complexity along cultural or racial lines, and themselves run the gamut in terms of levels of sophistication. At one end are fairly unexamined folk notions about the relative simplicity of indigenous languages, which are not uncommon even among the educated elite of, say, the United States. Many speakers of such languages themselves subscribe to such views, reflected in versions of the statement, which I heard repeatedly over the course of my fieldwork, as “But why would you want to study [our language]? It’s little, just a dialect, not a real language.” At the other end are the more sophisticated but equally problematic scholarly assumptions about the relative complexity of languages and their use. A seminal example would be the work of such “great divide” theorists as Goody and Ong (e.g., Goody 1968 and 1977, Ong 1982). Though these theorists do not deal with language difference per se, they posit the onset of literacy as a transformative catalyst without which “higher” thought processes and true social complexity (advanced civilizations) are impossible, thus implying an inherent inferiority to primarily or exclusively oral languages.

texts can be translated and deepening the terms on which they are read. At the same time, work in this vein, in attempting to raise the relevance of such texts beyond the merely sociological and historical, has weakened or severed the links to their contexts of production and use, which are as critical to their value and meaning as their use of, say, parallelism or tonemic rhymes. In evaluating a work of art, this tension between it and its context is, of course, as old as criticism itself. The history of literary criticism has itself been largely driven by competing urges, on the one hand to view the significance of a literary work in largely contextual terms and on the other to assess it primarily in terms of its internal, self-contained qualities. It is furthermore a tension that, as I will discuss in more detail below, animates modern indigenous language literary movements and the divergent attitudes writers take towards their communities and audiences.

Another scholarly trend that runs counter to the belletristic tradition, however, takes a more sociological approach to indigenous language texts, particularly written ones.<sup>47</sup> Research of this sort has focused primarily on literacy rather than literatures.<sup>48</sup> It has also for the most part dealt with modern (mostly twentieth

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<sup>47</sup> Note however that there are also a number of scholars doing important work on the introduction of alphabetic literacy in the Americas, mostly in the early colonial period. This work deals largely with questions concerning Amerindian perceptions of written texts in light of the shift from oral tradition and other earlier representational practices to the new medium of alphabetic literacy. See Adorno 1989, Boone and Mignolo 1994, Burkhart 1996, Cummins 1995, Damrosch 1993, Gruzinski 1992 and 1993, Hanks 1986, Hanks and Rice 1989, Paulson 1990, Rappaport and Cummins 1994, Salomon 1982.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see Gallegos 1992, Heath 1972, King 1994. There is also a very large literature on the related subjects of bilingual, indigenous, and rural education in Mexico (e.g., Acevedo Conde *et al* 1996, Aguirre Beltrán 1983, Guzmán Gómez 1991, Instituto Estatal de Educación Pública de Oaxaca

century) literacy, and has tended to look at this issue within a large regional or national scope. The contribution that such literature has made is that it has emphasized the various social factors motivating literacy (and, to a lesser extent, literary) movements and conditioning how such movements fare in practice. However, precisely because of the sociological, region-wide approach taken, such researchers generally operate entirely in Spanish, without considering in any specific way the role indigenous languages and indigenous language ideologies might play in either the overall nature or localized incarnations of literacy and literary efforts. And as with the belletristic approach, the weaknesses of these sociologies of literacy reflect longer-standing tensions. Just as the former's elitist agenda weds it, in its decontextualizing tendencies, to an insensitivity to practice, the latter's populist orientation imports, perhaps unwittingly, an inability to take account of local variables, such as interactions with the local (indigenous) language and its metapragmatics. Similarly to the belletristic literature, the tensions between the strengths and weaknesses of the sociology of literacies scholarship find an echo in similar tensions animating indigenous language literary and literacy movements themselves.

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2000, Kowalewski and Saindon 1992, Mena et al 1999, Modiano 1973, Pérez 1984, Seminario de Educación Indígena 1998, Van Vugt 1991).

Finally, outside these two bodies of scholarly literature, there is little or no research on modern literary and literacy movements in Mesoamerica.<sup>49</sup> This is despite the fact that such movements are of widespread national and local importance. Such programs affect, to varying degrees, every indigenous community in Mexico, and constitute a small but highly visible portion of Mexico's commitment as a nation to educational and cultural matters. Nearly every language currently spoken in Mexico has a handful of individuals involved in some way in the production of literary texts in the language, and most of them are also simultaneously involved in efforts to teach indigenous language literacy. Throughout the country there are a variety of local and regional organizations dedicated to the defense and valorization of native languages, many of whom publish literary books and magazines in these languages and/or promote literacy programs in them. The federal government, through its bilingual and adult education programs, spends considerable sums annually on literacy programs in indigenous languages. It produces textbooks for free distribution in every one of the sixty-two officially recognized languages (including multiple versions in languages with high degrees of dialect variation), and it trains and supports the thousands of administrative and teaching personnel necessary to deliver its bilingual and adult literacy programs. It also spends thousands every year

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<sup>49</sup> To my knowledge, there are virtually no book-length studies on either. Kay Warren's book (1998) on Mayan intellectuals in Guatemala perhaps comes closest. However, because it is essentially a study of the Pan-Mayan movement – in which the writers and educators of the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas are important actors – it deals for the most part with issues surrounding identity politics in Guatemala, rather than directly with literacy and literary activities.

to support the creation of literatures in indigenous languages, from the annual grants it provides for indigenous writers to the routine publication of indigenous literatures in bilingual editions. At least a few such works can be found in almost any research library in either Mexico or the United States.

And yet, such books are rarely found in indigenous households. And those who do own such books, unless they have a great deal of experience reading in their own languages (and note that they are frequently reading across dialects), rarely read them. When they do, it is usually with great difficulty, relying on the Spanish translation as much as the indigenous language “original.”<sup>50</sup> This is in part due to the sheer dearth of indigenous language texts, which both limits opportunities for practice and makes such texts, of necessity, a relatively tiny proportion of the reading “diet” of those who would be much inclined to read the texts in the first place, i.e., people who read regularly.

But I also think this situation reflects a deeper reality about indigenous literary movements. Just as the belletrist scholars of indigenous literature and the sociologists of indigenous literacy are choosing their approach to the text/context divide in part in response to the expectations of their audiences, so, too, do indigenous writers. The difficulty, however, for indigenous writers is that they in effect have two audiences, and they are audiences with often widely divergent, even mutually exclusive,

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<sup>50</sup> This is, I realize, a blanket statement, and certainly there are exceptions to it. I will discuss this in more detail, and my reasons for coming to this conclusion, in Chapter Six, which considers reading practices. I will also discuss at that time the central role that Mexican intellectuals like León-Portilla and Montemayor have played in the unfolding of modern indigenous language movements.

expectations. On one hand, they have their “peers”: indigenous intellectuals like themselves and also other intellectuals who – like León-Portilla and Montemayor, for example – are interested in and sympathetic to indigenous causes, in particular the cause of championing indigenous literatures. These are people who are highly literate, with relatively sophisticated understandings about literature. While they are often bilingual, they will only rarely be bilingual in the indigenous language the author writes in and, as a result, will rely heavily or exclusively on the Spanish version of a given text. On the other hand, indigenous intellectuals have an audience of their “peers” in a different sense: people who also speak the author’s indigenous language as their first language. These people have a much wider range of educational experience and literary skills, are less likely to be either well-educated or to have well-developed opinions about literature, and to the extent that they can read the indigenous language, they do so with difficulty, relying on both versions of the text, if not more heavily on the Spanish.

So at the level of language alone, a division of priorities is required of the author with, ironically, the quality of the indigenous language version – on which the author’s very legitimacy as an indigenous author rests – being the least subject either to heavy use or to knowledgeable criticism. On ideological matters, the author often has other difficult choices to make. Concerning the crucial matter of indigenous identity, for example, other intellectuals, indigenous or not, are much more likely than other natives of indigenous communities to have been exposed to national and

international discourses about indigenous rights and indigenous identity. Such discourses often rely – a la Léon-Portilla, for example – on ideas about what it means to be indigenous that turn on notions of faithfulness to tradition and to an (idealized) past. On the other hand, average speakers of a given indigenous language are on the whole less likely to have been either exposed to or convinced by such ideas about indigeneity. As a result, works that trade on such tropes and images are less likely to be popularly compelling or meaningful, even if they are not rejected outright as silly, “old-fashioned,” irrelevant, or whatever.

Thus for an indigenous intellectual to pay closer attention to the text as context-independent – in other words, to become an “ethno-belletrist” – is to turn toward the audience of fellow intellectuals and often, at the same time, away from that of fellow speakers of his or her first language. On the other hand, indigenous intellectuals also have the option of becoming, essentially, sociologists of literacy for their own communities, focusing not only on the texts themselves but on their social contexts of use, by promoting the range of skills needed to “read” texts. While this certainly begins with literacy, it rarely ends there; for the more ambitious writers, it also involves passing on the more intellectual skills required to read texts at a deeper level, skills that include knowledge of wider discourses about indigenous identity and solidarity. By taking this approach, however, indigenous writers largely guarantee that their work will be of little relevance or any deep interest to those who are not speakers of his or her native language – i.e., while they may gain a local audience,



they are likely to reduce or lose altogether the national (or international) one. And though most writers try to blend both approaches it remains a very difficult balancing act to pull off, and few have had much success in doing so. This predicament is gracefully invoked in an article – written, significantly, in Spanish – in a regional literary magazine by the Mazatec author Heriberto Prado Pereda:

Of those who aim to involve themselves in redeeming culture, there are two attitudes:

1. There are those who do so from above and from outside. They are like spectators, they speak of and narrate that which indigenous people do, as if they weren't themselves indigenous. They talk about dances, about communal labor, about stories, about the language, about wakes for the dead... and they never participate. They want to set the indigenous person free but they can't stop depending on the outside. They use the language only for their personal use.
2. Those who live, share, work, and spend their lives in the service of their pueblo, of their culture, participate in everything and are self-directed. They look to liberate their pueblo and their culture from below and from inside. This is the best posture to have. I invite all those who love their pueblo to summon ourselves to fight for the fundamental vindication of our values.

*(La Faena 2(13), February 2001: 15)*



This research project, then, was designed to provide a study of the modern indigenous language literary and literacy movements these intellectuals are leading. By coupling the textual analysis of indigenous language texts with the community-based study of their production and reception, my aim was to address a conceptual problem shared by both the belletristic and sociological scholarship mentioned above -- namely, the underlying assumption that text and context are essentially separable. In contrast, I argue that not only are the two not separable in practice, but understanding the nature of the link between them -- how text and context co-construct each other -- is essential to understanding why people embrace (and resist) language revitalization movements, and how the nature of such movements condition their larger social ramifications. Finally, I hope this study of the relationship between text and context in such movements will shed some light on the problems that indigenous intellectuals have in balancing the two, as their predicament mirrors back to those of us engaged in Western scholarship the ways that prevailing discourses can force us into decisions we would rather not have to make.

***Further Approaches to Texts, Authors, and Audiences:  
Identity Politics and Reading Publics***

[I]t is obvious that even within the realm of discourse a person can be the author of much more than a book – of a theory, for instance, of a tradition or a discipline within which new books and authors can proliferate. . . [W]e might call them “initiators of discursive practices.” The distinctive contribution of these authors is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts.

-- Michel Foucault, “What is an author?” (1977: 131)

What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking.

-- Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* (1974: 16)



Foucault begins his essay on authorship with Beckett’s quote: what matter who’s speaking. Beckett issues the thought as a statement; it is already decided that the author does not matter, and the texts he has written will go on to live whatever life they will without him; his statement will find an audience or not, Godot will show up or he will not, but in any event the text is condemned to live the same existentialist fate that the author himself does. Foucault, on the other hand, ends his essay by recasting the quote as a question, “What matter who’s speaking?” Though the question is rhetorical, by presenting the issue in the interrogative, Foucault is assuming the presence of an interlocutor, an audience. And this leads me to ask the

question, what matter who's listening? If the author is irrelevant, is the audience irrelevant, too?

Foucault uses the quote as a doorway into a discussion that decouples the author from his text in any number of ways, for any number of reasons, that reflect on the social forces that are the subject of his larger project: the excavation of discursive formations and the dissection of the ways in which they dominate and discipline individual actors. This includes, presumably, authors -- perhaps even especially authors, if we take to heart his view of the more "typical" author, as one "whose function is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses in society" (1977: 124). This suggests that authors have a special role to play in the sedimentation and crystallization of discourses that they function as agents of the status quo. Or, in Gramsci's terms (2000), they help to manufacture consent, and to reinforce hegemonic powers.

And yet there is that other category of author, the "initiators of discursive practices." If there is any hope for discursive subversion or transformation surely it resides with them; and, indeed, Foucault also refers to this class of author as occupying a "'transdiscursive' position" (1977: 131). This class of author also seems to mirror a particular kind of "organic intellectual": intellectuals who, rather than being like those discussed above who reinforce hegemonic powers, instead take the lead in formulating and disseminating counter-hegemonic discourses. But how are we to tell the two classes of authors apart? This dissertation deals in large part with

indigenous intellectuals who, precisely because of their explicit ties to particular groups of people (i.e., an indigenous ethnic group), ties that furthermore are precisely what allow them to speak as authoritative intellectuals, could comfortably be classified as “organic intellectuals.” Indeed, a recent study concerning some such individuals – Mazatec schoolteachers from Huautla – claims, “Many Mazateco linguists and schoolteachers. . .rather self-consciously refer to themselves as *intelectuales orgánicos* (organic intellectuals)” (Duke 1995: 2). But what kind of “organic intellectuals” are they? Are they aligned with the dominant classes or are they aligned with the dominated? Is their work truly counter-hegemonic, or is it more deeply complicit with hegemonic discourses and structures of domination with respect to indigenous people, doing what “folklore” often does: accept a circumscribed realm for asserting difference in exchange for not otherwise questioning the status quo? How, especially, are we meant to distinguish between these two classes of authors when we do not have history or hindsight to rely on, when we do not yet have in front of us a wealth of other texts that the author’s work has made possible? What if, in Warner’s terms (2005: 130), the author is “writing to a public that does not yet exist”? Is the author’s work “world-making” (Warner 2005: 149) or merely world-reinforcing? Following Adorno (2001) and borrowing from Marx, is art – particularly art aimed at popular audiences – the opiate of the masses? How do we know whether a discourse is hegemonic or counter-hegemonic? How do we know – given that the realm of culture (and (High) Culture) can be a crucible for

social warfare and yet can also be an arena where social inequality is re-inscribed (Bourdieu 1984) – whether an author’s work is somehow redressing domination or, despite indications to the contrary, in fact abetting it? And if there is such a marked, socially important difference between authors who are “transdiscursive” and those who aren’t, does it really *not matter* who’s speaking? And if this special class of author plays such a central role in the creation of other authors, does it really *not matter* who’s listening, either? And if it really doesn’t matter on either account, does that mean the only thing that matters is the text itself?

Indigenous authors, their texts, and their audiences are the central subject of this dissertation. I ask two overarching questions about these movements that intersect with existing scholarship on textuality, authorship, and audiences or publics. These questions are determined in part by my own intellectual curiosity, but they are also, I believe, driven by my desire to raise questions – even if I do not make much progress in answering them – that the writers, readers, and listeners I know in Mexico would also be interested in. The projects that indigenous authors – and, in different ways, indigenous audiences – are engaged in are fundamentally geared towards affecting social change. Even if one takes the cynical view that indigenous authors are “in it for themselves,” this still constitutes a desire for personal change. And I would argue that given the nature of the game they are playing in – i.e., that the “ante” that allows them to play is tied to their representation of a collective – the desire even for narrowly personal transformation will have social repercussions.

Thus the first question I ask is what constitutes success for their projects and how, in turn, success is produced. Is success linked to the influence of the authors and/or their texts? And does influence consist of a wide readership, or of a particular type of readership? Or does it perhaps amount to the dissemination of the ability to read at all, or the promotion of the ability to write? Does this thus mean writing for a future audience, or becoming, in Foucault's terms, an "initiator" of text production rather than one who merely marshals discourse? I will argue that these competing tensions are not merely semantic, a matter of the different ways that one might define "success." They are in fact built into the project that indigenous intellectuals – and, by extrapolation, other minority representatives – pursue. These authors have a double audience (national/local, Spanish-speaking/indigenous language-speaking, fully literate/variously literate, etc.) and a double agenda (creating a literature/promoting literacy), and achieving success in both is a nearly impossible feat to achieve, in practice if not in theory. The nature of how success is achieved is, therefore, equally heterogeneous. In some cases, the creation of an audience or public looks similar to other models that have relied on a community of readers, who through the reading practices come to share a common interiority or common political goal. These models include Anderson's theory of the role print capitalism plays in imagining national identity, and Habermas's view of a public sphere arising, in part, out of reading practices – that is, until they become corrupted by the very commodification of print that is the engine for Anderson's system. But other

indigenous literary projects, precisely because they are aimed at local audiences and therefore allow for, even privilege, face-to-face communication, come closer to the part of Habermas's model that presents a normative model of rational debate.

And yet, it is not "rational debate"; in this type of project, the primary communicative activity is singing – and singing not in Spanish, but in the indigenous language, which raises a number of questions about the boundaries around public/private, governmental/civic that Habermas's theory presupposes. I thus argue that while thinking about these projects in terms of the creation of publics, or of "imagined communities," can be useful in some ways, doing so presents an incomplete picture, precisely because such models have not considered what special communicative or "world-making" work might be accomplished by singing.

The other question I raise here concerns success at a higher level. Even if a project can be considered successful – whether by authors, audiences, or other observers – how does it stack up against the enduring issue that identity politics are meant, however flawed their methods, to address? Namely, how to such projects fare in redressing social inequality? Identity politics, like multiculturalism, were born out of the crisis of credibility of the late-modern nation-state, a recognition that anti-colonial nationalisms turned the structures of colonial domination against the nation's own most vulnerable people, colonizing them from within. Even in Mexico, where the Revolution was supposedly designed to rectify such problems which were



intensified greatly under the excesses of the Porfiriato<sup>51</sup>, internal colonization once again reared its head, as Revolutionary policy ossified into the PRI<sup>52</sup>; the Zapatista revolt showed how completely the Revolution had failed to deliver on its promises of equality. And so we return again to the question of the boundary between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse, and the ability of discourse and discursive practice to mobilize people. What light do these various kinds of revitalization projects have to shed on hegemony and its limits? If success in this sense is measured by the ability to unite people behind a cause that would subvert hegemonic discourses, how do they get past the pressure that those very discourses exert on their audiences? I argue that the various contradictions in identity politics place indigenous authors in paradoxical positions where transformative ideas can only be promoted at the expense of alienating either the national audience that allows such authors the space to participate in national debates, or the local audience on which their national legitimacy rests.

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<sup>51</sup> The Porfiriato (1876-1911) refers to the 35-year regime of Porfirio Díaz. The immediate precursor to and catalyst for the Mexican Revolution, the Porfiriato was a period of great development and centralization, but also of repression, control, and disenfranchisement.

<sup>52</sup> This is the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which as the name suggests arose in the wake of the Revolution and has had a political monopoly for most of the last century. Its hold on power has steadily weakened; the first non-PRI president, Vicente Fox, was elected in 2000 during my fieldwork.

***Singing for the Dead: A Vision of the Future***

The language revitalization projects I discuss here aim, at least in explicit ideology, not only to increase indigenous language use and extend it into other realms, but also to raise the stature of indigenous languages from those spoken by peasants and peons to languages worthy of sonnets, plays, and liturgical hymns. I will argue that while many of them have been successful at addressing – if not at redressing – these and other national political goals, the vast majority of such projects have failed to stimulate large-scale popular interest, and the production and use of indigenous language texts have remained largely an elite pursuit. While most indigenous language texts are useful for making political claims in regional and national arenas, they are largely irrelevant at the local level: even educated, literate indigenous people remain literate almost exclusively in the national language, Spanish, reading in the indigenous language with great difficulty and not writing in it at all.

By contrast, there are a few revitalization initiatives that, in terms of grassroots relevance, constitute that rarest of beasts: success stories. The revitalization efforts unfolding in the Mazatec community of Nda Xo make up one such case. A wide range of people now create and use texts in their language, particularly as composers, performers, and consumers of songs for the annual Day of

the Dead Song Contest and the cassette tape industry the contest has generated. I compare this case with others from across the country and region, exploring how the projects are variously linked to emergent notions of ethnic identity and, hence, to social persons who relate in complex ways to social entities, from local communities to multi-ethnic nation-states.

In particular, I analyze how the successful project at the center of my study was harnessed to song composition and performance and, through these, to other values and practices with deep social significance. I argue that because it linked the revitalization project to practices that are highly salient emblems of ethnic identity for local people, the initiative was embraced as an intensification of standard practice rather than rejected as inauthentic or false, as are so many projects aimed at social change. I trace the success of this movement to the culturally specific ways that literacy and writing in Mazatec were introduced, thereby coupling them to quintessentially local, ethnically marked practices and values, especially those expressing homage to the ancestors and to unseen deities through song. The project's success is in turn interpretable, I argue, only through evolving discourses about indigenous identities and indigenous languages, as local manifestations of the national history of indigenous-state relations. Also important is the very specific history of how the people of the Mazatec Sierra – a rugged area, relatively isolated until the 1960s – increasingly encountered national and global discourses about

indigenous ethnicity, when hippie “mycotourists”<sup>53</sup> flooded the area in search of the hallucinogenic mushrooms used locally in religious rituals.

This dissertation has seven chapters. Chapter Two gives the relevant historical and ethnographic background for the case study. In it, I discuss the antecedents of modern language revitalization movements by examining singing, speaking, and writing in the cultural context of Mesoamerica. I also examine identity politics in the region, particularly with respect to language and literary movements, both from historical and ethnographic perspectives. This chapter locates the particular community I studied within the constellation of indigenous communities across Mesoamerica, and outlines the general historical and cultural movements that have affected language politics and conceptions of ethnic identity across the region, noting what the Mazatec area shares with other indigenous areas while also highlighting the features that make it unique.

Four ethnographic chapters then follow these contextual chapters. In them, I provide specific evidence for the general argument about why some language revitalization projects – and, by implication, some forms of social resistance – succeed popularly where others fail. I do so through two levels of analysis and comparison. The first concerns comparison across entire communities within Mexico. Many have produced nationally prominent authors, who have succeeded in participating, and even to some extent affecting, national discourses about indigenous

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<sup>53</sup> This is a term I use, following the now widespread use of the term “ecotourists,” to refer to the specialized brand of tourism focusing on “mycological,” or mushroom-based, experiences.

identity and indigenous rights, including linguistic rights. A smaller number of communities, on the other hand, have produced vibrant local movements, where literacy and text production have extended beyond the relatively small number of well-educated, bilingual elites to include a wider section of the population. Essentially no communities, however, have produced both, and in this section I show why this might be the case. I also look in detail at one community where revitalization efforts became locally popular. Here, too, I draw on a point of comparison: one language project in the community gained popular success while another did not, and I play the two cases off each other to understand why this is so.

Chapter Three discusses the annual Day of the Dead Song Contest, a recent cultural and linguistic innovation that has been wildly successful in terms of garnering popular support. In the Mazatec area, Day of the Dead is the single most important holiday, an event that plays a critical role in the life of the community. Through its practices, social ties are repaired and renewed, local identities are forged and displayed, and ideas about persons and groups of persons are articulated and circulated, through a local, distinctly Mazatec form of public representation. A critical component of this public formation is how Mazatecs' relation to the dead. They conceive of them as important interlocutors uniquely available at this one time of year. Equally critical is the vehicle through which they are addressed, which, as in many Mesoamerican communities, occurs through activities at graveyards. Communication with the dead also occurs, though, through the more distinctively

Mazatec practice of seasonal singing, as Mazatec musicians and dancers, dressed to embody the ancestors, roam nightly throughout the community, joining the dead once again with the living. I discuss in this chapter how the song contest now held annually at the start of the Day of the Dead season came to be, and what its social impact has been in terms of spreading literacy in Mazatec and stimulating Mazatec authorship. I analyze the multiple levels on which this contest -- as the primary engine behind an entire movement of Mazatec composership, performance, and entrepreneurship in the form of cassette tape production -- has been so successful because of the ways in which it draws from highly salient cultural values and practices. Finally, I discuss how this contest and the related activities it initiated has in turn fed back into multiple social processes, such as the recruitment of the most linguistically vulnerable young people to participation in these activities and, through them, to discourses about Mazatec personhood.

Chapter Four presents an opposing case, a revitalization project that represents a popular failure. Both the song contest and the Day of the Dead holiday more widely represent the locus at which discourses about the importance of community solidarity become especially widespread and explicit, and various practices during that time become outward expressions of this ideology of inclusion. That particular view of social unity serves as background and foil to the deep religious divisions discussed in this chapter. It presents the history of one of the most contentious events in the life of the community I studied: the birth of the Mazatec Indigenous Church.

The church is a nativist religious movement that aims to replace the Eucharist with the hallucinogenic mushrooms used locally in curing rituals called *veladas*. Although it has attracted a few ardent followers, it remains very small, and a large portion of the general population is openly hostile to the church and its ideas. I discuss the textual and singing practices of Mazatec church members, and the ways these relate to practices traditionally used in *veladas*, before exploring how the similarities and differences condition arguments other local people have about the church. I consider the broader social implications of these arguments and how they relate to notions of local and ethnic identity and to moral personhood in order to suggest why the Mazatec church failed where the song contest thrived. Finally, I discuss what this pair of cases says generally about revitalization and other counter-hegemonic projects engaged in by ethnic minorities, in terms of the double constraints placed on such movements, from “internal” ones such as local and traditional authorities to “external” ones such as governmental and Church institutions.

This tension between internal and external factors is also discussed in the final two ethnographic chapters. Chapter Six considers national discourses about ethnic identity, and the alternately liberating and limiting features of the identity politics to which they are tied. However, the point of entry for this issue is the particular historical moment at which such modern and post-modern discourses came to be experienced on a massive scale by inhabitants of the Mazatec Sierra. This was the moment at which the Sierra’s psychedelic mushrooms were “discovered” by

outsiders, converting them into a commodity. Such processes of globalization placed what is for many Mazatecs a vehicle for access to the most intimate aspects of Mazatec culture squarely in the path of forces that would sustain it through veneration while also destroying it through appropriation.

Chapter Six continues and broadens the consideration of the national context in which the Mazatec case is situated. Here the issue is taken up from the perspective of authors whose work has had much more traction on the national scene, while remaining largely ineffective locally. I discuss some of the practices of reading indigenous language texts, texts that – with the notable exception of songs, a genre which is relatively rarely used by indigenous authors – are primarily published in bilingual editions. I discuss the way the text, through these practices, becomes a double entity, residing in neither language’s version alone but rather in the semantic coupling of the two. This renders the text, I argue, unstable in ways that single-language texts are not, in turn making the process of reading such texts inherently difficult for all but those most familiar with the peculiar demands of the form. These qualities, furthermore, mirror a doubleness at a higher level that indigenous authors must address, the double audience: local on the one hand and national on the other, audiences whose expectations are often mutually exclusive.

Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation by returning to a consideration of Day of the Dead and the new song contest attached to it, through the lens of paradoxes born of such tensions between national hegemonic discourses and local



attempts to subvert them. While one of the dark legacies of the post-colonial, post-modern celebration of diversity is the worldwide eruption of ethnic violence, a brighter one is perhaps the global emergence of revitalization projects such as the one presented in this case study. But though less bloody, this side of interethnic conflict is likewise fraught with dangers and risks. For the inherently dialogic nature of cross-cultural interaction requires an accommodation to the terms on which the interaction rests, even if, as is often the case, those terms are themselves subject to debate. Claims to rights within the polyethnic, postcolonial nation-state become necessarily linked, I argue, to codified notions of culture and tradition through the presentation of the culture to those who do not belong to it. And yet the very vehicles for making such claims, like the individuals most likely to employ them, are often suspect on local terms, violations of the very norms they seek to promote.

## Chapter Two

### People of the Deer, Land of the Eagles: The Roots and Legacies of Modern *Indigenismo*

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. . .the grandfathers would tell this legend: “when the God of places distributed the lands of this universe, some picked out the valleys, others the canyons; others still the coasts and the land near rivers, and only the Mazatecs accepted these parts that no one wanted because they were inhospitable and far, with the aim of living free from everyone. This God, surprised, asked again and again if it was true what he heard, and the Mazatecs reassured him of their decision to dwell, with *Chikon Tokoxo*<sup>1</sup> as guide, in the lands of the huge carnivorous eagles.

. . .The eagles hunted then the new inhabitants, carrying them off to their nests in the mountains to feed them to their children. The Mazatecs finally had the idea of fooling them, and placed on their heads baskets or *chiquihuites*,<sup>2</sup> such that upon passing by the dominion of the enormous birds those objects made of reeds or straw were what they carried away, and immediately then the brave Mazatecs hunted the eagles instead, killing them instantly.”

For this reason, the old people say that we wear the *mecapal*<sup>3</sup> in front, and always carry our heads erectly and with pride, because the eagles could never carry away our heads, not like the “Indians” [sic] of other tribes that wear the *mecapal* on their chests, because those very eagles took off their ancestors’ heads.”

-- Renato García Dorantes<sup>4</sup> (*La Faena* (2001, 17-18))<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This deity is the Lord (*chikon*) of Nindo Tokoxo, or the Cerro de Adoración (Mountain of Adoration), a sacred mountain just outside Huautla de Jiménez, the largest town and “capital” of the Mazatec Sierra. At least one early historical account (*Relación de Teutilán*, 1581) claims that Quetzalcoatl (“the plumed serpent,” a major ancient Mesoamerican deity) was worshipped throughout the general area, and specifically in the Sierra as Chikon Tokoxo.

<sup>2</sup> *Chiquihuites* are wide-mouthed willow baskets often used for transporting or storing food (bread and tortillas especially).

<sup>3</sup> A *mecapal* is a strap or “tump-line” made of *ixtle* fiber, used for carrying heavy loads on one’s back.

<sup>4</sup> García Dorantes is a Huauteco businessman and intellectual who writes frequently for *La Faena*, a literary and cultural magazine produced in Huautla. Feinberg (2003), who discusses him at length,



And so, as some Mazatecs would have people believe, they are the only Indians left in Mexico who haven't already lost their heads. While the reality of what unites Mazatecs and sets them apart from others is not nearly so heroic or primordial, this story does indicate something of the contradictions entailed in comparing Mazatecs to other indigenous people from across the region. It also raises the question of whether, the author's assumptions notwithstanding, the group of people we call "Mazatecs" is housed behind nearly so bright and binding a line. In many ways they act the same way their neighbors do; they use *mecapales* and *chiquihuites*, ubiquitous items of material culture in indigenous Mexican communities, pointing towards a kind of "Mesoamericanness" in which Mazatecs, like other indigenous groups, participate. And yet, in other ways, Mazatecs are different from the other indigenous peoples in their neighborhood and beyond. Furthermore, many of them –

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refers to him as Huautla's "most visible" and "ambitious culture broker and one of the wealthiest men in town" (221, 225), a position that brings with it a considerable amount of ambivalence in the eyes of other locals.

<sup>5</sup> This particular version of the story references Huautla in particular, "the place of the eagles" (Martínez Gracida 1883); in one of his pioneering trips to "Huautla," Frederick Starr wrote that the women's "*huipils* are among the most striking we have seen, . . . decorated with elaborate embroidered patterns. . . . The favorite design is the eagle" (1908: 231-232). However, this story also exists in various other forms throughout the Sierra (e.g., Boege 1988: 106-107). One of the most interesting pertains to the era, prior to the arrival of the Spanish, when the Mazatecs were dominated by the Mexica: the man-eating eagles "flew around the heads of the Mazatecs and carried away in their claws the children and short people in order to take them to Tenochtitlán. It is from there that the question can be traced, asked more than once by some Mazatec, 'You, there in Mexico City, you eat meat?', because the meat eaten in Mexico City was from the Mazatec children stolen by the great eagles, symbol of Mexico power" (Neiburg 1988: 13-14).

like the Mazatec writer who authored the story above – *insist* on their difference, on having a unique group identity. The question is where, and on what basis, such a line is drawn.

The view of Mazatec personhood expressed in the above story contrasts sharply with ideas that other people have about Mazatecs, turning these popular conceptions on their heads by making virtues of purported Mazatec vices. Even relative to the various indigenous populations surrounding them, Mazatecs are said to be “difficult” and stubborn and suspicious, extremely hostile to outsiders. Various reports written by spelunkers illustrate this particularly clearly. For more than 30 years – significantly, since roughly the same time that hippies first arrived in the area in search of “magic mushrooms” – cavers have come to northwestern Oaxaca to investigate its two vast systems of caves; although neither has yet been fully explored, each one is already known to be among the deepest and most extensive in the world. They lie under the mountains on either side of the massive Santo Domingo Canyon, which at over 6,000 feet deep is deeper than the Grand Canyon. The northern one, Sistema Huautla, extends underneath most of the Sierra Mazateca, while the other, Sistema Cheve, lies in an adjacent area to the south, inhabited by people who speak Cuicatec. As told by well-known caver Bill Stone, who has led numerous explorations of both systems, “the difference between the north and the south sides are [sic] momentous in terms of the politics.” The Mazatecs, he claims, were (and are) openly hostile to the cavers, constituting an obstacle the explorers must surmount

alongside floods, cave-ins, falls, hypothermia, and oxygen depletion. He claims that the Mazatecs, because they view caves as “portals to the underworld,” believed the explorers “had come to their land for the purpose of communing with the devil,”<sup>6</sup> explicitly reflected when the people called the cavers “*brujos*.”<sup>7</sup> He continues, “as such, it was not uncommon for us to have our ropes cut by machetes,”<sup>8</sup> actions that at least once nearly killed someone, an event that continues to figure in international stories about caving in the area as well as in local discourse.<sup>9</sup> However, the south side is a different story:

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<sup>6</sup> Although I can’t say I ever heard any actual Mazatecs talk about “devils” and caves, there are widespread beliefs that each unique geographical feature, such as a cave, has its own *chikon* (earth spirit), to whom respect and, sometimes, payment must be made in order to avert harm. I did hear numerous stories during my fieldwork about the dangerous power of caves; almost every community in greater Nda Xo is within walking distance – but, probably not coincidentally, *not* immediately next to – a sizable cave (though most do not connect to the main system). In particular, I heard various permutations on the idea that caves were places of great treasure that could only be had at great loss: the discoverer would never get married, or would never be happy again, or would cause loved ones to die. For a discussion of cavers and local ideas about caves, see Feinberg 2003.

It is also worth noting that at least historically there have been other associations with caves, which, among other things, have served as burial places for “kings and nobles of the Mazatec nation” (Aguilar, quoted in Cline 1966: 286). More recent archaeological work in the Sierra has confirmed the use of caves as elite cemeteries (Steele 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Stone translated this with the rather exoticizing term “warlock.” Though Stone himself does show some respect for the wide cultural differences between his group of cavers and the indigenous people they deal with, popular press articles about the cave expeditions, from *Outside Magazine* to *Wired Magazine* to *National Geographic*, are shot through with such “orientalizing” references to the Mazatecs, “machete-wielding locals convinced the gringos are devil worshippers who come to steal ancient Mayan [!] gold” (Philipps 2006).

<sup>8</sup> On another expedition, Stone managed to get AT&T to donate 22 kilometers fiber-optic cable in order to allow communications from underground. “But the might of AT&T’s fiber optics, as it turned out, was no match for a machete-equipped Mazatec Indian community...[W]hole kilometers of fiber-optic cable were slashed by locals. A black wire strung through the jungle might anger the spirits of the cave, the peaceful Mazatecs thought. A few hacks with the machete was all it took to disconnect elaborate plans. ‘We have to figure out how to explain this to our sponsors,’ Stone says” (Ganter 1994).

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Juan García Carrera’s interview with Renato García Dorantes on the matter, in the inaugural issue of *La Faena* (1(1), February 2000: 5-9).

On the other side of the Santo Domingo canyon is the Cuicatec Indian tribe, and that particular group was less hostile [i.e., historically] to outsiders than were the Mazatecs. . . .Because of that, number one, they all speak very good Spanish, the amount of Cuicatec that is spoken indigenously today is much, much less than is spoken on the Mazatec side, and as such they [i.e., the Cuicatecs] don't have the mysticism associated with caves that they do on the northern side.<sup>10</sup>

Such ideas are by no means limited to cavers. Feinberg quotes a Mexico City resident who had visited Huautla: “‘The people are just creepy,’ he said. ‘I mean, they’re *real* Indians, scary ones. Not your happy, smiling Maya Indians in Yucatán but real Indians who just don’t like you’” (2003: 192). I heard similar things from other outsiders when I was “auditioning fieldsites” while looking for a new place to work after Yalálag became impossible. Almost to a person, people I asked for advice about working in the Mazateca – including foreigners, Mexican nationals, and other indigenous Mexicans – referred to Mazatecs as “*cerrado*” (“closed”), difficult to work with and not welcoming to outsiders.

In the story about the eagles, however, echoes of these supposedly negative characteristics of Mazatec personhood are transformed into evidence of valor, as Mazatecs alone display the wisdom and courage that status as “true Indians” would demand. While this could be chalked up to a common rhetorical move within the

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<sup>10</sup> All direct quotes here are taken from an interview of Bill Stone posted on the National Geographic website. “Field Dispatch: Race to the Center of the Earth” concerned the expedition he led in February–April, 2004, aimed at establishing Cheve Cave, in the Cuicatec region of Oaxaca, as the world’s deepest cave (Video: “The Politics of Caving,” <http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/caverace>). Ultimately inconclusive, that trip was followed by another the following spring and another in the spring of 2006. As of this writing, that expedition, which cost the lives of two cavers, has still not “reached the bottom.”

paradigm of identity politics, it also has a parallel, if not its origins, in the fact that the Sierra Mazateca is in the paradoxical position of being located in the heart of Mesoamerica and at the same time being, until recently, one of its most remote “backwaters.” While such a situation is perhaps not atypical of many indigenous Mexican communities, it has meant that a place like Nda Xo is in some ways very similar to indigenous communities throughout the region and yet in other ways is quite unique. Nowhere is that tension clearer than when considering the history of written texts in the region, and the terms on which that legacy is played out in the present.

***Literacy, Education, and Text Production in Mesoamerica:  
Pre-Conquest Civilizations to Present-Day Nation-State***

This study discusses research carried out in the northern mountains of the southern state of Oaxaca. I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork in various communities in the Sierra Mazateca, located squarely in the center of what has come to be called Mesoamerica. Although it is arguably antiquated, the term “Mesoamerica” reflects the transnational, macro-regional character of many of the trends this ethnography seeks to address: the rise of indigenous revitalization movements, particularly with respect to indigenous languages; the current moment in

the dynamic landscape of indigenous-state relations and the social ramifications implied by its character; and the relationship between these two, forces that are on the one hand predominantly cultural forces and on the other predominantly political. Furthermore, the term also reflects certain historical as well as historiographic realities with enduring legacies bearing directly on relevant matters in the present, particularly the character of modern language revitalization movements and the notions of ethnic identity on which they rely.

*Before and After the Spanish: Different Literacies, "Classical" Mesoamerican Texts, and Their Decline*

As is well known, Mesoamerica was the seat of a number of overlapping and, in some cases, mutually influencing societies based on intensive corn agriculture. By the time of the Conquest,<sup>11</sup> some Mesoamerican "city-states" exhibited a level of social stratification and centralization that rivaled those of the leading cities of Europe and, indeed, the globe. An important quality, however, that distinguished Mesoamerica within the New World concerns indigenous systems for recording information. While, for example, there were among the Andean peoples mechanisms

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<sup>11</sup> Or, depending on the yardstick used, much prior to it, as in the case of the Maya. The persistence of other forms of "complexity" notwithstanding (hereditary elites, extensive trade networks, elaborate religious systems, etc.), lowland Maya civilization is considered to have "collapsed" several centuries before the arrival of Cortés (see Sabloff 1992), leaving its famous ceremonial centers abandoned.



(*quipus*) for recording numerical information, that region did not appear to have writing systems of the sort found in Mesoamerica.<sup>12</sup>

Generally, these writing systems are characterized as being of four distinct, ethnically-identified types: Mayan, Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec. However, there were also earlier, less complex systems (Olmec, Teotihuacan Culture, Toltec, etc.); and other ethnic-linguistic groups – e.g., the Otomí and Tarascan peoples (King 1994: 27), though likely others as well – also appear to have used the four primary systems, or related/modified versions of them. There are important differences between the different systems, both in structure and use, but there are also several broad characteristics that they share. These writing systems were the basis not only of books (codices), but also of inscriptions (glyphs) on monumental architecture; pre-Columbian Zapotec writing, for example, now exists almost exclusively in this latter form. The texts deal overwhelmingly with religious and political themes: calendrics, place names and their foundational histories, the histories of nobles (ruler succession, marriages, military exploits, and divine ancestry). Furthermore, the texts appeared to be created and used primarily in service of the political agendas of the elites; and, indeed, in other ways writing circulated primarily among elites. There were special schools that taught the art of writing; and reading, interpreting, and, importantly, *performing* the texts were likewise specialized and esoteric skills. It is worth noting that this is quite similar to the situation in Europe in the fifteenth century: not until after the invention of the printing press (c. 1450) did literacy rates rise significantly,

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<sup>12</sup> See Marcus 1992 for an overview of these, upon which much of my discussion here relies.

and even then, literacy and formal education long remained largely restricted to the nobility and upper classes. And yet in Mesoamerica, precisely because the texts were so visible – in the case of glyphic texts on monuments and buildings, they literally inhabited the centers of the civilizations that created them – written literatures were very important to ancient Mesoamerican societies. “Knowledge of writing may have been restricted to the priestly classes or to bureaucrats engendered by the growth of empire, but these were in their own way literate societies” (King 1994: 27).

The differences between the various Mesoamerican systems pale especially when the group is compared to the Western script and literary traditions introduced by the Spanish. The most obvious difference is in the nature of the scripts themselves. The Mesoamerican scripts are “mixed” systems, with component signs of various types: iconographic, ideographic, logographic, phonetic, all of which vary from Western alphabetic script in that they are largely pictorial. In other words, the elements of these systems come closer to what Peirce would have identified as iconic signs, rather than signs that are purely symbolic because purely arbitrary, as are the individual letters of an alphabet.

Furthermore, as numerous scholars of ancient Mesoamerican texts have pointed out, the contexts and practices of use for these texts were likely quite different from those dominant in Western society. In particular, the *performative* contexts and practices of these texts were likely critical to their meaning and importance. Of course, performance was important to Western traditions as well –

we need only think about how the Bible is animated in the context of Catholic Mass to become aware of this. But the point is that we must be careful about assuming that the reading practices common in Western practices bear any resemblance to the reading practices of ancient Mesoamerican texts. Furthermore, the interpretive caution warranted by the radical cultural incommensurability in the context of Old-New World contact is greatly exacerbated by the fact that we do not have a large body of secondary literature contemporary with that historical era to draw on. If we were to read the Bible in isolation, without either a rich array of historical documents to draw from, or current use to rely on by analogy, our means of accessing the performative contexts in which the Bible was used in, say, the fifteenth century would be severely restricted. And yet to greater and lesser degrees that is precisely what scholars are forced to do with pre-Columbian texts.



Spanish domination of the Americas (1521-1821) combined political and economic aspects with religious and ideological ones. The papal charter on which legal possession of the Indies was based stipulated the mission of Christian (Catholic) evangelization as a requirement for “just conquest” and as the moral and legal basis

on which the Iberian powers were granted the right to intervene in the New World.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, this effort to convert the Indians was predicated on the necessity of educating them, however cursorily, on the fundamentals of Christianity. This in turn required the conquerors themselves – especially members of the clergy --to undertake a reciprocal process of education, as they began learning what they needed to in order to conduct their evangelical work.

The existence of a pre-Hispanic literary tradition in Mesoamerica has had great implications for European Conquest and colonization as well as indigenous responses to European colonial policies. The Spanish colonizers were quite aware both of the existence of writing among Mesoamerican peoples and of the power implicit in the ability to control the production of written texts. “The pre-Hispanic peoples of Mesoamerica,” King writers, “made extensive use of writing in both secular and religious affairs, and the Spaniards, like other colonial and usurping powers, were quick to realize the dangers inherent in the literary preservation of indigenous knowledge” (1994: 6). Thus one response by the colonizers to the existence of Mesoamerican writing was to destroy it. The dearth of existing pre-Colombian codices is testament to the relative success of that effort, and those books that remain are evidence of how many such books there once were and how

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<sup>13</sup> These are the famous bulls of 1493 issued by Pope Alexander VI, in which the papacy drew an imaginary north-south line dividing the Indies into two spheres of influence, and “made donation” of the Americas jointly to Spain and Portugal. This document also provided the legal basis for waging war justly against the inhabitants of the Americas by stipulating the right – and obligation -- of secular authorities to secure, by force if necessary, the entry of Catholic missionaries into the territory (Muldoon 1979: 137-138, Parry and Keith 1984: 271, 287).

resourceful indigenous people were at hiding and protecting them. Nevertheless, the vast majority of pre-Columbian texts did not survive. In addition to what became the standard practice of razing existing centers – including the texts they contained – and building new ones atop their ruins, the destruction of indigenous writing also meant burning the books and torturing the indigenous elites who hid them. A well-known example from Yucatán captures this generalized response:

The famous (or infamous) and well-documented idolatry trials conducted under the supervision of Fray Diego de Landa while he was Franciscan Provincial in 1562. . . included the wholesale destruction of Maya codices as well as the more easily reproduced idols. [The result was] [t]he loss of a major part of these ‘books of the devil,’ the gradual extinction of a priestly class who could interpret them, and the general decline in literacy after the Conquest (including a total loss of the ability to decipher the pre-Columbian glyphs). . . .  
(Farriss 1984: 291, 313)

The existence of written texts in what became New Spain also, however, produced an opposite response: that of respect for the people who devised, created, and used such texts. The first efforts to record native languages and native literatures in Western alphabetic scripts stemmed directly from the evangelization process, as Spanish priests set about educating themselves on the customs and languages of the native peoples whose souls they were charged with saving. As some of the first Europeans to live for extended periods of time in the Americas, these priests were the first Westerners to have in-depth knowledge of the languages, social practices, and cultural knowledge of the indigenous populations of the New World. Throughout the

colonial period, priests across New Spain developed orthographies, vocabularies, and grammars in the service of helping the clergy learn the indigenous languages. And although the recording and collection of native texts by priests was usually linked to the goal of eliminating native practices under the banner of “the extirpation of idolatry,” their desire to understand and document such practices in large part furnished the impetus for recording a wealth of texts in native Mesoamerican languages. Some Spanish priests, led by Sahagún and others<sup>14</sup>, engaged in recording in Western script the content of the native books. Part of this process also meant teaching Western literacy and, eventually, Spanish as well to native scribes and intellectuals, who became critically important to the colonial bureaucracy. Efforts to instill the skills of Spanish fluency and alphabetic literacy – whether in Spanish, or Yucatec Maya or Nahuatl (which, as before the Conquest, continued to function as a lingua franca), or some other indigenous language<sup>15</sup> – were aimed primarily at indigenous elites. As the colonial project unfolded, the ranks of such intermediaries, who held such status by skill and background, also swelled with a new kind of “middlemen”: mestizos, offspring of European and indigenous heritage who in addition to being bilingual were often truly bicultural as well. The growth of such a group of people who called into question the very boundary between Indian and

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that even Landa himself participated in such activities, ultimately: after being exiled to Spain in part because of the severity of his methods during the idolatry trials, he wrote a detailed treatise about Maya culture.

<sup>15</sup> There are copious colonial documents in both Yucatec Maya and Nahuatl. There are also sizable if smaller bodies of literature in other languages, among them Otomí, Mixe, Mixtec, Tarascan, and Zapotec (King 1994: 43-44), and fewer or even isolated documents in other languages.

Spanish meant that the initial period of relative fluidity in the early colonial period hardened into codified colonial policy that institutionalized, both semantically and materially, the divisions between indigenous peoples and the Europeans.

The sheer linguistic diversity of Mesoamerica, and its partial mitigation by the selective use of some indigenous languages as lingua francas, meant that through most of the colonial period texts were produced not only in Spanish but in indigenous languages as well. “Despite the Crown’s insistence the Spanish be established as the sole language of the colony, the sheer impracticability of such a task given the size and nature of the terrain, coupled with the church’s desire that the Indians be converted in their native tongue, ensured not only the survival of the majority of the Indian languages but also their transcription to the phonetic script” (King 1994: 44). The majority of these were produced for legal and administrative purposes, particularly relating to things such as land claims, disputes about and record-keeping for tribute payments, and other issues to be settled in the special courts set up to deal with legal and political problems having to do with the Indians, which employed literate, bilingual scribes and translators. Such native intellectuals and elites, however, also produced literary and historical texts in their languages, including some specifically meant solely for indigenous audiences; among the most famous are a handful of esoteric and sacred texts such as the books of the Chilam Balam, the Popol Vuh, and the Cantares Mexicanos.

However, as before the Conquest, the majority of the indigenous population neither learned to speak Spanish nor became literate in Spanish nor in indigenous languages; those were skills acquired almost exclusively by the indigenous elite. Furthermore, by the end of the colonial period, increasingly few members of even the elite were literate (in any language). Farriss's description (though she refers particularly to the Maya case, the situation in the Yucatán was mirrored in most of New Spain) illustrates this trend:

During the early postconquest decades there were. . .Maya nobles who. . .were completely *ladino*: that is, they spoke and wrote Spanish 'as well as any Spaniard.' The friars' evangelization policy was responsible for this. Seeking to reach the Indian masses through their hereditary leaders, they had gathered the sons of the nobility into boarding schools attached to the friaries. . . [Yet] In the late eighteenth century, Spaniards still concerned about their nation's civilizing mission confessed their signal and complete failure after centuries of colonial rule to implant the Spanish language among the Maya. . . .By the late eighteenth century, we find scattered reference to *batabs*<sup>16</sup> who were well conversant in Spanish, and to noble youths who were pursuing studies in Merida.<sup>17</sup> But they were referred to precisely because they were exceptional. It should be noted that, although the level of literacy among the Maya nobility had declined greatly since conquest, there still existed an educated cadre in each community who were perfectly literate – in Maya.

(Farriss 1964: 97, 111)

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<sup>16</sup> Yucatec Maya word usually translated as *caudillo* (leader or chief).

<sup>17</sup> The colonial capital of the Yucatán peninsula.



The “cultural apartheid” (King 1984: 6) at the heart of the colonial enterprise – the general separation of “castes” through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms, with only a relatively few number of intermediaries – was, obviously, an instrument of empire and a tool of colonial repression. And yet, somewhat ironically, this institutionalized separation of populations allowed for the widespread persistence of Amerindian languages, such that to this day – in Mexico, at least – language use remains the least common denominator as a marker for indigeneity. Thus despite great losses from both disease and warfare in the indigenous populations during the Conquest and early colony, vast numbers of indigenous people survived. As Farriss writes of one indigenous Mexican population (though, again, she could as well have been speaking of most of them), “The physical survival of the Yucatec Maya was ensured by the vigorous demographic recovery that began around the turn of the eighteenth century. . . . [However, T]he survival of Maya culture is a considerably more debatable issue” (1984: 86). Nevertheless, that continued existence of the population categorized as “Indian” – here and everywhere else in Latin American with large indigenous populations -- created what could be called “the Indian problem.”

The two distinct goals of the colonial enterprise are succinctly captured by the soldier and chronicler of the Conquest, Bernal Díaz del Castillo: “To bring light to those in the darkness, and also to get rich, which is what all of us men commonly seek” (quoted in Farriss 1984: 29). The evangelical project of the Catholic

missionaries and the economic one of the colonizers often came into conflict, even violently so, but what the two shared was a desire, at bottom, to assimilate the Indians into European civilization. The overwhelming diversity among the indigenous peoples lumped together under the category “Indian” and the enormous cultural and linguistic differences between them and the Spanish colonizers continually posed challenges for this overarching aspiration. This dilemma raised, for the Spanish, a host of questions – practical, theological, ontological, moral, legal – about how the subject populations should be dealt with. This in turn initiated the tradition of *indigenismo* – not only the post-Revolutionary policies of the Mexican state that are most closely associated with the term, but the much larger tendency, beginning under colonialism, to characterize indigenous populations as a substrate for one form or another of “social engineering.” The upshot has been a long history of thought about indigenous peoples in Mexico – and the Americas more broadly – from the perspective, and shot through with the agendas, of non-indigenous peoples rather than indigenous peoples themselves. Indeed, the very terms under which such people were initially and subsequently classified – labeled from the earliest European contact forward as “Indian,” and re-labeled subsequently (though with the category itself remaining largely intact) as “indigenous” – betray this point of view, foregrounding difference from European and later national “culture” at the expense of emphasizing diversity within the category and similarity across it. As a result of this categorization and its enduring legacy, social and especially ethnic identity has been a

consistently salient issue. Language use has played a special role in this dialogue: linguistic difference figured prominently in the initial Contact classification process (e.g., Cortés [1522-1525] 1993, Díaz del Castillo 1982), and it has subsequently played a critical role in scholarly attempts to grapple with its consequences (Clendinnen 1987, Greenblatt 1991, Todorov [1982] 1984).



From the perspective of modern indigenous literary movements, there have been three main legacies of this history. The first is that, though glyphic literacy was a definitively discontinuous tradition among indigenous people in Mesoamerica, the existence of pre-Columbian writing systems is far from irrelevant for modern indigenous writers. Indeed, they frequently stress this legacy in claiming legitimacy and in furthering their political agendas, and indigenous literacy instruction often includes minor attempts at teaching the meaning of the ancient glyphs.

The second legacy concerns the work of priests throughout the colonial period<sup>18</sup>, as a result of which initial orthographies in Western script were devised for

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<sup>18</sup> Note that the date at which the first substantial linguistic works appear in a given language varies widely. For a number of reasons (size and density of speaker base, relative accessibility, potential for profitability, etc.) Zapotec was one of the earliest languages tackled. Fray Juan de Cordoba completed an exhaustive multi-variant vocabulary in 1578, just 50 years after the Aztec capital fell to the Spanish (Cordoba 1578). On the other hand, initial liturgical texts in Mazatec, spoken by a more widely dispersed population in an adjacent but far more remote area, do not appear until more than two centuries later, at the end of the eighteenth century. Humble vocabularies, nowhere near the scope of Cordoba's, do not appear until around 1830. The first extensive treatises of the language appear in the

almost all Mesoamerican languages.<sup>19</sup> In many cases these orthographies are deeply flawed; for example, almost no colonial orthographies marked for tone, a feature central to many Mesoamerican languages (and, not coincidentally, absent entirely from Indo-European ones). Native intellectuals are themselves keenly aware of such flaws, and they know that these shortcomings stem in part from the very specific goals the Spanish priests had in mind when creating them. Indigenous intellectuals often state the correction of such externally derived alphabets as an explicit goal for their literary and literacy efforts. They view these flaws as directly linked to the entire larger project of domination and oppression. Nevertheless, these initial works are important in constituting a point of departure: as many indigenous intellectuals themselves assert, these early texts provided certain basic tools for analyzing indigenous languages, and many features of the original orthographies are still in use today.

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late nineteenth century (Belmar 1978 [1892] and Brinton 1892), roughly 300 years after similar work first appeared in Zapotec.

<sup>19</sup> Whatever remaining gaps existed were filled beginning around the middle of the twentieth century by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), as part of its own (Protestant) evangelization project. Unlike the Spanish priests, SIL missionaries are trained linguists whose analyses of indigenous languages are for the most part much more sophisticated than those of the Spanish priests. This includes the orthographies they devised, which often include diacritics and other augmentations to the standard Spanish alphabet in order to code for phonetic properties of indigenous languages not present in Spanish. Ironically, however, this specialized nature of their orthographies has prevented them from being widely used by indigenous writers and intellectuals, who for practical reasons tend to prefer alphabets without special characters.

A third legacy is that there exists today a large body of texts in indigenous languages from the colonial period,<sup>20</sup> many of them ritual or religious in nature.<sup>21</sup> The birth in the colonial era of indigenous literatures (in the Western sense of the term) marks the beginning of the long history among indigenous elites of using written texts to negotiate the discrepancy between widely varying systems of expression and divergent schema for the ascription of social identity, a project that continues to animate indigenous literary movements in the present. These foundational texts include manuscripts originally prepared by Europeans with the help of native informants, and primarily with other Europeans in mind.<sup>22</sup> More important for modern indigenous writers and linguistic activists are texts produced by native writers themselves. Among these are legal petitions and the like that indigenous people, in navigating the changed social landscape in the wake of

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<sup>20</sup>Note that another important difference between Mesoamerica and the Andes as regards indigenous literatures is the fact that the Mesoamerican area has a vastly larger number of indigenous language colonial manuscripts. This is itself partially a product of the difference in the two areas, noted above, with respect to pre-Hispanic writing systems.

<sup>21</sup> I highlight the artistic texts for the purposes of this study, but there also exists a huge body of legal and political texts in indigenous languages dealing with such things as genealogies, titles, land disputes, and petitions to the Crown (e.g., Roys 1939, Scholes and Roys [1948] 1968). I include as “artistic” texts such as the books of the Chilam Balam in Yucatec Maya which are heterogeneous and “virtually unclassifiable” (Farriss 1984: 247) within Western genres, including historical, calendrical, astrological, prophetic, medical, ritual, and mythic materials (Gibson and Glass 1975: 379-380).

<sup>22</sup> Of the many figures worth noting here, arguably the most important was Fray Bernardino de Sahagún ([1932] 1971, 1970-1982). One of the first priests to arrive in what had been the center of the vast Mexica (Aztec) empire, his sophisticated methodological approach set him apart from other clergy working in a similar vein. His monumental, multi-volume *Florentine Codex* – an exhaustive compilation of texts and commentaries from sources in Classical Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec rulers -- is the result of working closely over a period of many years with native informants, and features his own extensive commentaries on the materials they provided. Its obvious biases notwithstanding, his work has proved an invaluable resource for scholars of central Mexico as well as for modern indigenous intellectuals, activists, educators, and writers.

colonization, used as a means for participating in the discourses concerning them, their history, and their future. In addition, many such native-authored texts were aimed at an exclusively indigenous audience -- texts that, because of their “idolatrous” content, were “quite deliberately, and for the most part successfully, guarded from Spanish eyes” (Farriss 1984: 401).<sup>23</sup>

Both these types of native texts more than any other set the precedent for modern indigenous literary movements. This is so not only in that they constitute a long-standing tradition that can be built on and appealed to for authority, but also because their existence has great relevance in current political debates over cultural and linguistic rights. From the first contact between the Old World and the New, indigenous populations have been regarded with competing tendencies towards glorification (“the Noble Savage”) and vilification (“the ignorant savage”), viewed alternately as representing purer expressions of an essential humanity or as representing debased and sub-civilized expressions of human potential. Closely tied to this tension have been attitudes towards indigenous languages and their relative “sophistication,” which have oscillated between an assumption of the inherent inferiority of such languages and the valorization of their richness and complexity. The prevalence of the former view during the colonial period is part of what the

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<sup>23</sup> There are numerous texts of this sort. Among the most famous are those in Nahuatl (e.g., Bierhorst 1985, León-Portilla [1962] 1992, Lockhart 1993, Sahagún 1970-1982), Yucatec Maya (Barrera Vasquez 1965, Bricker 1981, Brinton [1882] 1969, Edmonson 1982 and 1986, Roys 1933 and 1967), and Quiché (Tedlock 1996; for a text in a closely related and adjacent language (Cakchiquel) see Brinton [1885] 1969). For a survey of such texts, see Gibson and Glass 1975.

Spanish priests involved in writing grammars and compiling native language texts were reacting against; proving the Indians not only had souls but were as fully human as Europeans would have profound consequences for the nature of the evangelical project.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the persistence of such views today about the relative lack of sophistication of indigenous languages is the foil against which modern indigenous authors and language activists operate.<sup>25</sup> The ability to invoke a long tradition of sophisticated literatures in native languages thus becomes a key tool for furthering their political, cultural, and linguistic agendas.

The final legacy was, ironically, the beginning of the demise of native language literacy and literatures towards the end of the colonial period, though not until Independence would the tradition be heavily assailed. The early efforts of Spanish priests to devise alphabets for indigenous languages and to record native texts in writing were tied to the desire to teach certain sectors of indigenous populations to be able to read liturgical texts in their languages. At the same time, priests aimed to teach at least the elite to speak and write Spanish. Given the

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<sup>24</sup> The ultimate goal of such a project was, for Sahagún and others of like mind, the creation of an indigenous elite bilingual in Spanish and literate in European alphabetic script – an elite that one day might rise to the level of clergy themselves. Tragically, the permeability of race and status pervading such an ideology was one that fell victim, as colonization moved forward, to the hardening of the boundary between European and indigenous as the steady increase of mixed-race individuals called its very existence into question. For more on this hope and the tragedy of its demise, see Ricard 1966.

<sup>25</sup> Such views were a starting point for figures such as Boas, Sapir, and Whorf. They championed the comparative study of language as both methodologically foundational to anthropology as a discipline and corrective of widespread popular biases about “primitive peoples” and their languages. Note also that though their ultimate goals differed widely, these early linguistic anthropologists, like the early Spanish priests, were involved in a similar “salvage” operation to record native language texts before they disappeared.

overwhelming institutional weight behind Spanish, coupled with Mesoamerica's high level of linguistic diversity, it is not surprising that under Independence, literacy came to mean, with very few exceptions, exclusively literacy in Spanish. Though the very first generation of literate elites under colonialism was followed by several generations of others who continued to use the "technology" of alphabetic literacy introduced by the Spanish for their own purposes, increasingly, too, indigenous elites wrote in Spanish, sometimes at the expense of writing in their native languages.<sup>26</sup> While the use of indigenous languages themselves appears to have been as vibrant as ever<sup>27</sup>, their circulation became almost exclusively oral by the nineteenth century, when the colonial regime was replaced by the new, nationalizing state. Thus the practices of written text creation and use become tightly associated not only with the Spanish language but also with larger nationalization projects. This trend found especially strong focus in the wake of the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which indigenous peoples became incorporated into the Mexican nation-state as never before.

Thus the history of indigenous language text production and literacy prefigures it for a later renaissance. The "classical era"<sup>28</sup> (pre-colonial and colonial

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<sup>26</sup> The Nahuatl historian Ixtlilxochitl (1891-1892) is a prime example and a case in point.

<sup>27</sup> Or even *more* vibrant, as various studies on post-Conquest population increases among indigenous peoples would suggest.

<sup>28</sup> This use of the term is not to be confused with the distinct phases of the various ancient Mesoamerican societies (e.g., Classic Maya). Note, though, that Classical Nahuatl is the term used to designate pre-Columbian and Conquest-era Nahuatl.



both) gives way to a period of decline and disuse, which then sets the stage for a neo-classical period of revival, in which discontinuous traditions can be revitalized according to contemporary concerns. The dawn of this renaissance in the twentieth century marks the beginning of the modern period of indigenous language literary and literacy movements.

*Independence: National Unity and the Hegemony of Spanish*

While social identity played a critical role in Independence movements of all Latin American countries, the consolidation and expression of *criollo* identity was the prime factor mobilizing action against Spain. In Mexico, comparable to Peru and the other Andean countries with valuable mines (Brading 1971), the constant immigration of wealth-seeking peninsular Spaniards, who entered the colonial hierarchy above the *criollos*, caused increasing unrest among American-born elites (Brading 1991, Halperín Donghi 1993). “Indian” identity, on the other hand, at the (proto-) national level continued to be ascribed and prescribed, and the social position and material conditions of life for indigenous peoples within the post-colony differed very little from what they had been under the colonial regime. Very few indigenous people participated in the 1819-1921 war for Independence, and their explicit inclusion in Mexico as part of the *criollo* elite’s nation-building project was on purely

symbolic terms. The Indian as symbol was deployed in order to distinguish American-born Latins from their European counterparts through appeal to a glorious but inert past; its effect was to deny any place within the national space for Indians living in the present<sup>29</sup> (1991). This legacy of the Independence era has continued to haunt, in a variety of guises, the modern Mexican nation-state (Bonfil Batalla 1987, Lomnitz 1992; for a similar argument about Peruvian nationalism, see Flores Galindo 1986). The liberalism that both ushered in Independence and flourished in its aftermath, to the extent that it articulated attitudes about contemporary indigenous populations at all, sought their gradual erasure through a “whitening” (*blanqueamiento*) of the population. Indeed, following Independence, nineteenth-century liberal privatization and capitalist expansion led to massive land expropriations, not only of the Catholic Church’s vast land holdings but also those of indigenous communities. As a result, the eighteenth century witnessed the dramatic growth of haciendas in southern Mexico, precisely where the density of indigenous populations was the greatest (Wolf 1959). Obviously, this had a powerful negative

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<sup>29</sup> See also Stephens ([1843] 1963), an early traveler’s account of visits to Mesoamerica’s Mayan ruins that embodies this rupture between past and present. It also came, through the popular excitement it generated, to play a precipitating role in a twentieth century variant of this perspective within Western scholarship, through the pursuit, primarily by the Carnegie Institute (see Sullivan 1989), of archaeological investigations of the Maya to the neglect of the ethnography of modern Mayan populations (except in the service of archaeology, e.g. Roys 1933, 1939, 1967, Scholes and Roys [1948] 1968; see Farriss 1984 for a discussion of this).

effect on these peoples, eroding the land base that had traditionally insulated them from the worst excesses of colonial rule.<sup>30</sup>

Insofar as Independence was built around a rejection of colonial rule, the political philosophy driving the creation of the new nation involved embracing the ideas of the Enlightenment, above all the ideal of egalitarianism. This, then, meant a radical reevaluation of the Indian and a new chapter in the story of “the Indian problem.” With the declaration of equal rights for all and the expansion of citizenship rights to all ethnic groups, including Indians, official policy was aimed at redressing the systemic inequalities that pervaded the colonial era. Yet the implementation of such official policies often negatively affected Mexico’s indigenous populations, in some ways making their conditions of life worse than they had been under colonialism:

In the period following independence from Spain, the Indian languages were to experience the greatest threat to their existence. No longer was there a strict separation between Spaniard and Indian, affording both social and geographical space to the perpetuation of indigenous cultures coupled with specific legal protection. Rather, the nature of the emergent mestizo culture demanded the disappearance of the Indians, particularly their languages. (King 1994: 55)

The steps the Mexican state took to disempower the Church greatly hurt the Indians as well: the native population could no longer rely on the protection and assistance of religious authorities against the secular ones, as they had during the

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<sup>30</sup> For the role this played before and after the Caste War see Bricker 1981, Reed 1964; for the role the wealthy “henequen kingdom” of Yucatan played in the Mexican Revolution, see Joseph 1988.

colonial period. And with the abolition of the colonial courts that dealt with disputes pertaining to the Indian populations, they no longer had a special venue in which to plead their claims. This placed the Indians at multiple layers of disadvantage compared to, for example, their mestizo and creole fellow citizens, for whom the language of bureaucracy was far more familiar. The Indians' disadvantage pertained not only to competence in the Spanish language itself, most narrowly construed, but also, more broadly, the pragmatics of the entire Western legal system, itself evolving through the ongoing development of Enlightenment thought. Nahuatl, Maya, and other indigenous languages lost the status they held under colonialism, as semiofficial languages routinely used in administrative and legal settings. Obviously, this trend also meant a dramatic decline in the production of indigenous language texts, since literacy in indigenous languages was so heavily tied to the importance under colonialism of indigenous language documents. With this loss, indigenous language literacy lost not only its primary institutional backing and, thus, its most important source of valorization. It also lost the most important context in which such literacy skills were practiced and through which, directly and indirectly, they were transmitted. Thus, what literary traditions in indigenous languages had survived their colonial decline had, by the end of the national period, almost entirely disappeared.<sup>31</sup>

“The symbolic power of Maya and Nahuatl expressed in their status as secondary

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<sup>31</sup> There are exceptions, but they are striking in their scarcity. For example, Léon-Portilla (1984) has insisted that Nahuatl has been written without interruption since the early colonial period, but in doing so he emphasizes that this makes the history of Nahuatl literature and literacy *unique*.

official languages gradually disappeared after the Declaration of Independence, and they reverted to predominantly oral forms of expression” (King 1994: 73).

Furthermore, the liberal ideas that drove policy-makers to seek equalizing measures, alongside the quest during the period for a unified national identity, led to beliefs that formal schooling in the national language, Spanish, would be both a great leveler and great unifier. Though in practice the majority of indigenous people never had access to formal schooling, during Independence what education was available for indigenous people was now available only in Spanish.

Finally, by the end of the national period – an era that coincided historically with the emergence of modern academic disciplines, including anthropology, and in which Social Darwinism had great influence – nationalist thought had come increasingly to see “the Indian” as an impediment to the creation of a modern Mexican nation. At least some intellectuals during the Porfiriato promoted the notion that the only real solution to this problem was assimilation, which turned crucially on the vehicle of a national educational system. Justo Sierra, a leading intellectual who was to become the minister of public instruction and fine arts, captured this sentiment when in 1902 he wrote of Mexico’s linguistic diversity that it was “an obstacle to the complete formation of the consciousness of the motherland,” and that linguistic uniformity through suppression of indigenous languages would be “the invaluable vehicle of social unification” (quoted in King 1984: 58). This particular strain of

nationalist thought thus prefigured the *indigenismo* that would become so central to post-Revolutionary Mexico.

*From Revolution to Renaissance: The Changing Face of Indigenismo*

Unlike the Independence movement, indigenous people participated not only symbolically in the Mexican Revolution but literally as well, as was the case with Emiliano Zapata and so many of his followers. The use of Zapata's name and image nearly a century later by the EZLN is testament to the precedent such revolutionaries set for the inclusion of Mexico's indigenous peoples in the nation, as well as a critique of the nation-state's failure to deliver on the Revolution's promise in that regard.

This failure arises in part from the deep ambivalence with which the modern Mexican nation has viewed its indigenous peoples, from the Revolution through the present. Such ambivalence is inherent in the brand of *mestizaje* espoused under indigenist policies, at least in the early post-Revolutionary era. Although *indigenismo* had roots in the post-Independence era, it blossomed as an official, institutionalized discourse with the rise of the post-Revolutionary state. Furthermore, while Revolutionary *indigenismo* shared with its Independence-era precursors the goal of integrating indigenous people into the nation, it held a quite different view of the

indigenous people themselves: rather than being *indios*, the “backwards” peasants of the national period, indigenous people – now referred to as *indígenas* -- were seen as victims of the state’s historical abuse and neglect. They were considered a segment of the Mexican population that the nation had the ethical obligation to bring fully into national life, thereby eradicating the chronic poverty and marginality in which they so often lived. Proponents of *indigenismo* promoted a policy that viewed Indians as distinctive, recipients by descent of a unique cultural heritage, and yet at the same time recognized such difference only to the extent that it could be overcome by *mestizaje*: in converting Indians into *campesino* peasants one was also creating Mexican citizens (Bonfil Batalla 1987, Frye 1996, Lomnitz 1992).

Particularly influential in the early post-Revolutionary period was the thinking of José Vasconcelos, who served as Mexico’s secretary of education. In his seminal work *La Raza Cósmica* 1997 (1925), he claimed that Hispanic America, crystallized in the person of the mestizo, was made up of “the cosmic race” of humanity, a superior race that had bred out of it the extremes of the “pure” races and who would bring about the peaceful “third age.”<sup>32</sup> He offered miscegenation (a new form of eugenics, it could be argued, which rejected racial purity for racial hybridity) as a requirement and the prime vehicle for the progress of humankind – and thus,

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<sup>32</sup> Vasconcelos’s ideas were also aimed at a Mexican nationalism that would challenge American imperialism. This aspect of his work is part of what resonated with the Hispanic rights movement of the 1970s and 80s. In 1979, the Department of Chicano Studies at UCLA published his work in a bilingual edition, reflecting a time when Latinos had taken up Vasconcelos’s work, valorizing and reinterpreting the concept of “*la Raza*” for their own purposes, as a group excluded from the nation-state and articulating an emerging post-modern sensibility.

furthermore, for the modernization and development of the Mexican state. The canonical Mexican, then, is the mestizo, and the “Indian problem” can be solved by making Indians more like mestizos, thereby producing the cultural homogeneity that would be the basis of a new national unity.

The post-Revolutionary agrarian reforms of the Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) were key to this process of “Mexicanization.” These reforms had the ultimate effect of incorporating indigenous communities into the nation-state as never before by co-opting the ruling indigenous elite and the offices from which they operated, inasmuch as access to federal benefits and protections was predicated on continued allegiance to the federal ruling party.<sup>33</sup> One of the most important such programs introduced the *ejido* system, a federally-dependent system of allotting and maintaining communal lands which to this day form the basis of indigenous communities’ collective identity and economic and political power (Friedrich 1977, Joseph and Nugent 1994).

Indigenous languages, which during the Independence era had been reduced almost exclusively to oral circulation, now experienced a new threat. In keeping with the focus on national identity formation, the school system was conceived as a mechanism through which to unite the country linguistically, by promoting Spanish and discouraging the use of indigenous languages.

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<sup>33</sup> This has furthermore had the recent, unfortunate effect, as PRI’s hold on power weakens with the rise of a viable multi-party system, of sharpening the division within many indigenous communities (in Chiapas, e.g.) between the ruling, PRI-allied elite and the rest of the community (e.g., supporters of the EZLN).



[I]t became common practice to refer to the Indian languages as dialects, thus negating their true linguistic nature. In parts of Mexico, mestizos still refer to the Indian languages as dialects and consider them inferior forms of expression because they are (incorrectly) thought to lack grammar and an alphabet. In turn, the Mexican education system, with its emphasis on the cultivation of strong nationalist values, has legitimized the Spanish language as the only one capable of transmitting official knowledge. (King 1994: 61)

However, the *indigenismo* of this period also gave way, over time, to other variants that were less concerned with national identity and more concerned with national progress and economic development. The policies of this later era, ultimately, had a far greater effect on indigenous education and, therefore, indigenous literacy and text production. Later post-Revolutionary views – led by the ideas of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1973) – promoted the concept of “acculturation” rather than policies dominant in the early post-Revolutionary period, in which incorporation was seen as the best vehicle through which a new national unity could be forged. In contrast, Beltrán argued that indigenous communities, rather than being a part of a broad peasant populace, were best viewed as parts of “intercultural regions”: regional systems of “caste-based” domination. In these “regions of refuge,” mestizo and ladino elites, who dominated regional capitals, perpetuated systems of domination that propagated colonial and Independence-era exploitation of indigenous people. The *indigenista* policies of this era were thus aimed at breaking these power structures, above all through education. This included practical education such as

agronomy training and health campaigns, but also more formal education in Spanish that promoted literacy, narrowly and broadly construed: the ability to read and write, but also the ability to understand written texts so as to participate in the life of the nation.

In 1970, Beltrán was named director of INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista), and under his leadership it took on something of a new character. While regional INI offices had gradually been added since the organization's founding (1948), under Beltrán the number of regional centers rose dramatically, and they were charged with combating the "intercultural power" emanating from the regional capitals in which they were located. During this time, the rural education system (in which most indigenous children were educated) also expanded substantially, as INI took over institutions promoting bilingual education.<sup>34</sup> This growth is directly responsible for the increasing need, and hence training, for bilingual schoolteachers; it is also directly, if accidentally, responsible for educating indigenous people who in many cases went on to pursue further education outside of their communities. Members of both groups have become key figures in modern indigenous rights movements,

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<sup>34</sup> Prior to this, from its 1935 introduction in Mexico forward, the SIL had been largely responsible for what was, in effect, "bilingual education." Though the SIL's institutional underpinnings were obviously quite different from the Mexican government, the SIL has long had a policy of deference to, if not outright collaboration with, the agendas of the states in which it works. The SIL has also shared with the Mexican state many of the same "civilizing" and modernizing impulses with respect to Indians as the Mexican government, which was reflected in their literacy education. The division of labor between national education and literacy training in indigenous languages – which later, after the government's termination of the SIL's contract in 1979, would become unified under the national system of bilingual education – was formalized in 1951 when "virtually complete responsibility for literacy training was given to the SIL. . .and the INI devoted itself to projects of regional integration" (King 1994: 65).

including linguistic activism that often takes the form of literary and literacy projects in indigenous languages.

The final and more or less ongoing iteration of *indigenismo*, which overlaps with the previous one, has also been an important influence on such movements. A seminal moment in this era was the 1968 student movement, although the period actually began earlier in the 1960s, with the growth of a “generational rupture in Mexican anthropology” (Lomnitz 2001: 231), as the general counter-cultural ethos of the decade gained momentum and Marxism gained influence in Mexican universities.

By 1968 the identification of Mexican anthropology with official nationalism was at its peak. The new National Museum of Anthropology, which was widely praised as one of the world’s finest, had been inaugurated in 1964, and the National School of Anthropology (ENAH) was housed on its upper floor. The institutional infrastructure of Mexican anthropology was firmly linked to the diverse practices of *indigenismo*. . . .Mexican anthropology had provided Mexico with the theoretical and empirical materials that were used to shape a modernist aesthetics. . . . It was charged with the task of forging Mexican citizenship both by “indigenizing” modernity and by modernizing the Indians, thus uniting all Mexicans in one mestizo community.”  
(Lomnitz 2001: 231)

The reaction to this institutionalized alliance between the discipline and the Mexican state was led by dissident anthropologists who critiqued Mexican anthropology not only as an academic discipline but also as a policy-making project; precisely through institutions such as INI and Mexico City’s famous National Museum, Mexican anthropologists had long been involved not only in “studying”

Mexico's indigenous populations but also in shaping the nation's policies towards them.

[A] new generation of dissident anthropologists had begun to emerge, denouncing the academic and political monopolies that Mexican anthropology was subject to, as well as the discipline's excessive ties to U.S. institutions and ideas. The strongest criticism came from ethnologists and social anthropologists, who were interested in breaking the domination of *indigenismo* and returning to the discipline's critical engagement with the problems of poverty, hunger, and the cultural and political domination fomented by the Mexican state. (de la Peña 1997, 58).

A decisive moment in the dissident movement was the infamous Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968, in which hundreds and perhaps thousands of protestors were killed (there has never been any official accounting of the event), and thousands more were arrested. Students and some dissident professors from ENAH had joined the student movement, which even after the massacre continued to be brutally repressed by the Mexican government. Two years later, in 1970, five of those academic/activists published the landmark volume *De eso que llaman antropología mexicana (That Which They Call Mexican Anthropology)*, which “accused [the *indigenista* bureaucracy] of being inefficient and corrupt” and “attacked almost all the practices that ruled the discipline, from monumental archaeology for tourists to *indigenista* paternalism” (de la Peña 1997: 58). The work infuriated the anthropological/indigenist establishment but became very influential among younger intellectuals.

Eventually it joined with other forces – above all, increased indigenous and *campesino* activism and the increasing influence nationally of various indigenous intellectuals -- to push *indigenismo* policies in the direction of what came to be known as *indigenismo de participación* (participatory *indigenismo*), which “specifically negates the previous position [on *indigenismo*], which was that the Indians were unprepared both socially and culturally to play a part on the definition of official *indigenista* policy” (King 1994: 66). Under this new paradigm, which by the 1980s was the prevailing view, indigenous people would be (at least in theory) more directly involved in formulating national policies that affected them.

In practice, the new *indigenismo* found expression not only in changing educational policies promoted by INI and other governmental agencies, but also in the increasingly visible role indigenous intellectuals – particularly those from Oaxaca -- played in formulating national policy. A key element of this new moment in indigenous politics in Mexico has been the ongoing development of modern indigenous language activism and revivalism, including the promotion of indigenous language literacy and the production of indigenous language texts. These issues will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six, which takes up the recent history of indigenous activism and new discourses about ethnic identity, and how both relate to the modern renaissance in indigenous language literatures.

*Legacies and Lessons: A View from the Margins*

If we look at the broad sweep of Mexican history, we see that the ambiguity with which the state views its indigenous people is a many-faced and tenacious ghost, haunting attempts to create anew the present with the unresolved contradictions of the past. This essential ambiguity is born of the two poles between which official attitudes about Mexico's "Indian problem" have oscillated: the recognition of indigenous difference as an essential element in the multi-ethnic colony or nation, and the desire to erase such difference and replace it with cultural homogeneity. At one extreme, indigenous people and their languages, though almost always seen as in some ways inferior, are allowed to persist in spite of their difference; at the other end of the continuum, the price for equality and full access to society's bounty is the eradication of Indians' difference, a "discipline," in Foucault's terms, that is exacted, if not exclusively, then often primarily through control and elimination of indigenous languages. The unresolved conflict at the heart of such a system is its fundamental inability, in practice if not in theory, to find a space within the collective (whether nation or colony) where recognition of difference and full participation in the state can co-exist.

Literacy, education, and writing have been intimately bound up in these vacillating national policies and thus partake of the same basic ambivalence. Thus for all the liberal universalist discourse which often attends the promotion of literacy and

universal education, the knowledge offered through such programs is never neutral but is an extension of the structures of power and domination. Such projects, intentionally or not, import the fraught issues underlying “the Indian problem”: who and how indigenous identity is defined and used in practice. The fact that indigenous languages in Mexico became, by the Revolution, almost exclusively oral in circulation even among the elites meant that, in contradistinction to the colonial and even pre-Columbian periods the practices of written text creation and use become associated with the Spanish language and hence with larger nationalization projects. From the perspective of indigenous peoples themselves, this has meant that literacy, writing, and formal education has been largely inseparable from the “civilizing” and developmental agendas of this state; thus whatever benefits might be conferred by learning to read and write are inevitably tied to the requirement of accepting, at least in part, state-promoted definitions of and attitudes towards indigenous people.

Finally, the fundamental ambivalence with which the state has viewed indigenous Mexicans, and its pervasive inability to grapple fully with the essential diversity among Mexico’s indigenous peoples, has created widespread mechanisms of marginalization. From the colonial period forward, the state has been highly selective in its recognition of indigenous diversity, and even in periods with relative acceptance of indigenous difference has privileged some forms of difference over other, and has paid attention to some indigenous populations at the expense of ignoring others. The effects of such marginalization have certainly not been uniformly negative; for

example, indigenous languages are often most widely spoken in areas where the apparatus of the state that would suppress them has been weakest. Nevertheless, from the perspective of individual populations, to say nothing of particular individuals, the experience of the benefits and pressures issued by the state has varied widely.

Furthermore, the scholarly literature on Mexico's indigenous people both falls victim to and is complicit in the ongoing marginalization of some of those people. Just as the Spanish focused the colonial enterprise on the centers of pre-Conquest Mesoamerican societies, scholars too have given far greater attention to these areas of Mesoamerica and to those peoples who are the direct heirs of the region's "high civilizations"; the focus on Mesoamerica's pre-Hispanic writing systems is part and parcel of this, as they are indices of social complexity. Both archaeological and historical studies are tied in part to this weighted character of both pre-Columbian and colonial society, in which the closer one is to the "nuclei" of empire, generally speaking, the greater the density of the material traces that serve as data: archaeological remains, historical documents, etc. But whether of necessity or not, the focus on particular areas of Mesoamerica – with correspondingly less attention being paid to the rest – has profoundly shaped existing scholarly literature. Scholarly interest stimulated by pre-Hispanic writing systems and, later, colonial indigenous language texts has taken a similar form: while the scholarly literature on pre-Columbian and classical (i.e., colonial-era) texts in Nahuatl and some Mayan languages is well-developed, the literature on, for example, Mixtec and particularly



Zapotec writing is far thinner, and the drop-off in the scholarly literature on linguistic/ethnic groups beyond those few is exceedingly steep. There are exceptions, of course, such as the pioneering Scholes and Roys (1948) volume concerning the one existing colonial document in colonial Chontal Maya. Yet even here, the same general biases are present: part of the attraction of the document and, therefore, part of the motivation underlying the work has to do with the fact that it is written in a Mayan language, albeit a less well-studied one. Furthermore, the text was of interest largely because of its content: it describes a particularly striking Conquest-era event – the death of Cuauhtémoc, son of Moctezuma and heir to the Aztec throne – and thus embellishes what is otherwise fairly well-represented in the scholarly literature, namely, indigenous views of the Conquest and early colonialism from the perspective of people who were quite close to the center of the Aztec empire.

Ethnographic work concerning modern populations exhibits a similar kind of bias, through concentrating heavily on the living descendents of the peoples who produced Mesoamerica's "high civilizations" (with writing being the marker *par excellence*). At the broadest level, this has meant modern work on Mesoamerica has largely been directed at groups living in what are now Mexico and Guatemala (the primary site of the pre-Conquest "high civilizations"). Within those two nations, anthropological research has privileged populations linked linguistically and culturally with the Aztec (central Mexico) and Mayan (Yucatán, and the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala) civilizations and, to a somewhat lesser extent, on the

Zapotec and Mixtec areas of Oaxaca. From the perspective of indigenous languages, for example, this means that research has focused on thirty-four (the thirty-one Mayan languages, Nahuatl, Zapotec, and Mixtec) languages in both countries. This is itself a generous estimate of scholarly attention; a few Mayan languages are well studied and the rest far less so, and within the other three languages some variants are far better studied than others. Even so, this is less than half the 85 officially recognized languages in the two countries combined (62 in Mexico, 23 in Guatemala).

Entire peoples thus become confined to the peripheries of state projects on the one hand and scholarly ones on the other. As we will see in more detail below, the Sierra Mazateca, and, to a slightly lesser extent, the entire Mazatec region has been one such peripheral area, a land made of “parts that no one wanted because they were inhospitable and far,” a place that perhaps suffers, perhaps prospers, but in any event is characterized by this double marginalization. Historically, Mazatecs were shut out of the benefits, such as they were, of being part of the empire – while of course, on the other hand, the fact that the Sierra was such a “backwater” meant that its inhabitants were also insulated from imperial excesses. To this day, the region remains far less nationalized than either the equally mountainous Cuicatec area to the south or the Mazateca Baja to the east, for example.

Part of this is directly related to national administrative structures, particularly the division into states. The Sierra Mazateca is located on the very edge of Oaxaca

state. Nda Xo itself is perched on one side of the Petlapa River canyon, and Puebla state begins on the other side of the river; Nangui Ni and Río Sapo (two other sites that were important to my research) are within walking distance of the border with Veracruz. The entire region historically and presently is oriented towards centers in both of those other states. Cities like Tehuacán (in Puebla) or Cordoba (in Veracruz) are the ones people are most likely to visit for economic, educational, or religious reasons, or to migrate to in search of work. By contrast, Oaxaca City is a long way away, few Mazatec people migrate there, and few people from the Sierra would go there at all if not for the express purpose of taking care of state business. Although they are the third largest ethnic group in the state, members of the fourteen smaller groups form a much greater presence in the capital, and compared to Zapotecs and Mixtecs, for whom Oaxaca is not merely an administrative but also a commercial center and educational, most Mazatecs are far less familiar with the city and have far less experience dealing with the state bureaucracy. This is furthermore related, in ways both complicated and straightforward, to the fact that by regional standards the highland Mazatecs are both relatively poor but also relatively conservative. For this reason they are less involved in the clientalist system through which the Mexican state exerts much of its influence on indigenous communities.

Mazatecs are also relatively marginalized when it comes to scholarly literature. While the people from the entire Oto-Manguéan family/Oaxaca region are relatively understudied, Mazatecs are considerably less well represented in the

scholarly literature than the two larger ethnic groups from Oaxaca, Mixtecs and Zapotecs, and are less well represented than, for example, the Mixes<sup>35</sup>, whose population is half their size. Though written some years ago now, the following analysis of literature on Mazatec peoples remains largely true today:

The Mazatec [sic] are not well represented in historical and anthropological literature and most published material on them (chiefly a growing body of data on linguistics) is recent. Modern ethnological reports, archaeological accounts, and historical documents are relatively sketchy and sparse. . . . Thus we still lack a reliable historical treatment of the Mazatec. . . . Most of the investigation of the ancient and modern Mazatec areas remains to be done. It is an interesting, important, and neglected region that warrants further consideration. (Cline 1966: 270 292-3).

Almost no new historical work on the Mazateca has been produced since then. The linguistic work Cline alludes to was carried out mainly by members of the SIL. This work included pioneering work on tone by Kenneth Pike (1948) as well as Cowan's famous article on Mazatec whistle speech, documenting the language's whistled register in which speakers communicate by whistling the tonal contours of normal speech (1948). The SIL was particularly active in the decade or two before he was writing, but it has since produced relatively little new work on Mazatec. Since then, there have also been some new ethnographic works produced about the Mazatec

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<sup>35</sup> Note that Mixe is not an Oto-manguean language (as are most Oaxacan languages), but rather a member of the Mixe-Zoque family.

region. These studies fall into two broad types: sociological studies of a dam built in the lowlands, which displaced some 22,000 Mazatecs, and anthropological works on Mazatec shamanism (discussed in more detail in Chapter Five). Not only are these studies quite circumscribed in terms of content, but they are few in number.

Clearly, this weighted nature of the scholarly literature is largely driven by “facts on the ground” rather than intellectual bias *per se*: the vast majority of the indigenous Mesoamerican peoples live in Guatemala and Mexico; in Mexico, the majority live in central and southern Mexico, etc. But whatever the causes, the effects are clear: marginality at one level perpetuates further marginality at others. While it is arguably true that the more we know, the more we know how little we know, the view from the margins also suggests that the less we know, the less we are equipped to learn what we do not know.

***On Authenticity, Indigeneity and Unity:  
An Introduction to the Sierra Mazateca***

<i>K'uakuan ninga</i>	In this way
<i>Kinijch-chija je ndi chjon</i>	we lost the likeness of our
<i>neina jña</i>	patron saint.
<i>K'uakuan ninga</i>	In this way
<i>Lijme tso jmitje si ti kuan ni-i</i>	the crops failed.
<i>K'uakuan ninga</i>	In this way
<i>Toft-tofti kitsoba je chita</i>	the people scattered.
<i>K'uakuan ninga</i>	In this way
<i>Sakjai sakjai kjima naxinanda</i>	many problems arose, people.
<i>Ali niba jon</i>	But don't be sad.
<i>Tjin i k'a chita xi tso nga tojobe</i>	There are people who say they
	still see her,
<i>Nga f'i kanengui</i>	that she comes to wash her hair,
<i>Tojo tso'ba je</i>	that she is still here,
<i>I tinjnako na</i>	she is here with us.

-- Heriberto Prado Pereda, from the song "*Ts'e Magdalena*"  
("The *Magdalena*," 1997: 84)

To the south of town there is a spring which in the rainy season is full of water. . .and it was precisely there where Saint Mary Magdalene's apparition appeared. . . .Every morning she would arrive to take water from the spring, and would wash her long hair, the long hair that one day would dry the feet of lord Jesus. . . .

In the town there also lived a very humble person called Jnalé Ndoña (Soledad Antonia) who daily would go for water at this spring, when suddenly the saint appeared. . .and asked that a hut where she could live be made for her, and in the meantime she would go live with Jnalé Ndoña in her little shack. . .[S]omething incredible happened: from the moment that she arrived in the house of Soledad Antonia, the saint turned into a statue. And from then on people from town went there to bring her flowers, candles, and to pray, shedding their tears and sorrows. Then Jnalé Ndoña asked the people to

construct a little chapel for the saint, for which all the inhabitants participated by contributing poles, rope and thatch, and by raising that first chapel. . . .

Chilchotla was at that time like the promised land that the old testament tells us about, a place of manna, milk and honey; it was hot country that produced all types of fruit in abundance, and for that reason many people from other towns came to this place looking for better conditions of life. From San Lorenzo, Santa Ana, San Antonio, Mazatlán Villa de Flores, San Mateo, and principally people from Huautla, as happens today with Mixtecs and Náhuatl[sic]. . . . For that reason in Chilchotla, in truth, all variants of the Mazatec language were spoken. Meanwhile, with the passage of years our saint became covered with dust because the people didn't touch or clean her, out of respect and because they thought doing so could incur a disaster.

In this way the old people and average citizens met to come to an agreement about sending the saint to Oaxaca, so that the restorers there could perform their work on Mary Magdalene. . . . [T]hey took her to the capital of the state, walking various days with love and faith, because in that time there was no other method of transport. Once they arrived in the city of Oaxaca, they looked for a sculptor who could repair the deterioration, and the artist asked the people from Chilchotla to give him one month to repair the saint. The Mazatecs from Chilchotla obeyed. . . . but they had not even arrived in Chilchotla when they were advised to return urgently to the Oaxacan capital, and so they went back to the sculptor's home. . . . [T]he sculptor told them that Mary Magdalene had not been made by men, that she was alive, that at the moment he started to sand her she began to bleed. She had said they should return her as quickly as possible from where they had taken her, less a misfortune pass in Oaxaca.

And so the men from Chilchotla took her back. But in a town pertaining to the Mixteca (whose name is not known), before they arrived, the saint began to weigh a great deal, so much so that the men could not carry her further and so spent the night there in order to leave at daybreak for the Sierra Mazateca. But when they tried to carry her they could not, and so there she stayed as patron saint of that Mixtec place, and the Mixtec headmen said that such was the desire of the saint, and with pleasure they would contribute by having a replica of Mary Magdalene made. . . . and those from the committee agreed without first consulting the people.

A short time later they brought the copy of the image of Mary Magdalene to Chilchotla, that is not the original, because they left the

original in *nangui nsoba*.<sup>36</sup> And thus things began to change in Chilchotla. Before, the land produced *guasmole*<sup>37</sup>, gourds, yellow zapotes, custard apples, oranges, and bananas, and also *chile* in abundance. But these began to disappear and now nothing remains, only rocks, some *guayabas*, and rain; not a 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of July<sup>38</sup> passes on which it is not raining, and one can hear the lamentations of the people, adults above all, about how they left the saint in another town that no one can locate, which in the Mazatec language<sup>39</sup> they just call *Nangui Nsoba*.

There are other people, though, who claim that the saint never left Chilchotla, and say that they have seen her. Many people who have taken the mushrooms<sup>40</sup> have said that the saint has spoken to them and has counseled them about how they should live, that there shouldn't be envy<sup>41</sup> or animosity, [but rather, one should live by] pardoning, living [with], and serving one's neighbor.

-- Alberto Prado Pereda (2000: 19-20)  
From "The History of Mary Magdalene, the Saint  
who Appeared in Chilchotla"

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<sup>36</sup> "White land" or "blank land" (*Nangui* (land) + *nsoba* (white, blank))

<sup>37</sup> Although in other parts of Mexico *guasmole* is the name for a particular mole (sauce in which meat is served), here it refers to a particular type of bright yellow-orange fruit that grows in the lowlands. It is something of a "luxury" good because it grows only at low altitude and because its short season coincides with Day of the Dead, it is much desired during the fiesta. In Mazatec, it is known as *to<sup>3</sup>jnti<sup>3</sup>*.

<sup>38</sup> Feast (saint) days for Mary Magdalene.

<sup>39</sup> In the original, the phrase used is "el dialecto Mazateco." This is but one example of the frequency with which even indigenous intellectuals (in this case, both the author and the magazine's editor) have internalized or become habituated to dominant discursive conventions about the inferiority of indigenous languages (see King quote above, on referring the assumptions behind referring to indigenous languages as "dialects").

<sup>40</sup> The phrase used here is "los honguitos." The use of the diminutive, on par with its use in other contexts to convey affection and intimacy, is one of the ways speakers have of indicating that the mushrooms here are "special," hallucinogenic rather than merely edible ones.

<sup>41</sup> In the original, "envidia."





These two authors are among the Mazatec intellectuals who have been centrally involved in the creation of a modern Mazatec literature. They are the most active and prominent of such figures in Nda Xo; they are also half-brothers. Embedded in their two different perspectives on the local story about the town saint, whose presence emanates from the town spring<sup>42</sup>, are two quite different views of modern life in a marginal indigenous community, in a place far from centers of power like Oaxaca city. What both authors agree on is that Nda Xo is no longer what it once was. The return to the Sierra by way of the city is ultimately one of loss: the statue of the patron saint, symbol of the very community itself, becomes too heavy to bear, and for the men charged with such heavy cargo the price for returning home and going on with their lives is that they return with less than they left with. What these two authors also agree on is that nevertheless the future is one of hope: the saint, the spirit who watches over them, has not abandoned them even if her statue, her physical presence, is lost forever.

What the authors disagree on is what the loss means, and what it consists of. In one version, we have a vision of a fractious, divided people, whose problems are at least in part internal; in the other, the people must deal with their sorrow in the midst of a world that has changed around them. These differences say a great deal about

how each author feels the people from Nda Xo should react to the community's "fallen state." As we will see in the chapters that follow, these two versions also reflect two profoundly different views about the locus of "authentic" Mazatec identity and the nature of social unity in an indigenous community like Nda Xo. What attitudes should people take towards the the past, and what actions are entailed by them? Is someone to blame for the fact that things are not as they used to be? If the present is an impoverished replica of the past, what should be done about it? Is that lost past recoverable, and if so, how?

To put these matters in other terms, terms that have relevance for indigenous intellectuals as much as for scholars: what role do modern life and its trappings play in "being indigenous"? Is modernity an inevitable reality in the lives of indigenous people, or is it lethal to true indigeneity on the one hand and/or social unity on the other? To what extent are the answers to these questions linked to the enduring national preoccupation with "the Indian problem," and the quest it generates, to reconcile national unity and modernity with indigenous difference? And to what extent are they linked to social realities, past or present, that are distinctly Mazatec? For the people who live in the Sierra Mazateca have been subject, as indigenous people, to the same ambivalence with which the Mexican state has treated all the Indians within its borders; they, along with all of Mexico's other indigenous people, have been viewed as a stumbling block along the road to achieving a unified national

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<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the town is named (in Mazatec) for this spring: Nda Xo means "foaming water" (*nda* (water) + *xo* (foam, froth)).

identity and a modern nation. And yet, given the Sierra's historical status as a zone of marginality, the people of the Sierra have had their own unique history of relations to the state and other nationalizing and modernizing forces. And, of course, they have also had their own distinctive reactions to such forces, their own cultural strategies for negotiating the tension between such forces and the force exerted by tradition.



*The Mazatec Region: A Geographic Overview*

There are at present roughly 215,000 speakers of Mazatec, almost all of whom live in the northern tip of Oaxaca state, in southern Mexico.<sup>43</sup> Although the region is a relatively small one in the state as a whole, the Mazatecs are the third largest indigenous group in the state (behind the “big two”: Zapotec and Mixtec), and are also one of the largest in the country.<sup>44</sup> Although the Mazatec area has a great deal of geographic variability, it is divided into two regional units: the Sierra Mazateca and

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<sup>43</sup> The actual figure from the 2000 national census was 214,477; this figure is now undoubtedly well over 215,000. It is a well-documented national trend that speaker populations of indigenous languages are rising rapidly. For example, in 1970 the number of Mazatec speakers was less than half what it is now (101 541), and in 1990 roughly ¼ of the 2000 figure (168 374).

<sup>44</sup> Mazatec speakers form the ninth largest group (INEGI 2000).

the Mazateca Baja, which correspond, respectively, to the Cañada and the Papaloapam, two of Oaxaca state's eight geographical regions. This division into a lowlands and a highlands reflects not only geographical differences but historical, linguistic, and political ones as well, dating from at least one thousand years ago. The highlands and lowlands are now even more deeply divided by the Presa Miguel Alemán, an enormous hydroelectric dam built between 1949 and 1955 during a modernizing period of great infrastructural expansion throughout the country. The dam effectively bisected what until then had been a continuous region. This left only a thin strip of Mazatec speakers – sandwiched between the southern edge of the dam to the north and Chinantec speakers to the south – to unite the two, and displaced some 20,000 Mazatecs (Barabas and Bartolomé 1973: 4). The Zona Baja lies to the east and south of the dam, and includes the inhabited islands within the dam itself. The Sierra lies in the mountainous region to the west of the dam, and includes lowland areas along the western edge of the dam. Such communities – two of which were fieldsites for my research – are referred to locally (and confusingly) as the *baja*, meaning the lowlands *within* the Sierra, to which they clearly belong, both administratively and linguistically.

Two small, non-indigenous cities “anchor” either end of the Mazatec region, Teotitlán de Flores Magón (otherwise known as Teotitlán del Camino) to the west and Tuxtepec to the east. Both are connected by long and mountainous but paved highways to Oaxaca city as well as to other major regional cities – Tehuacán in

Puebla, Cordoba and Orizaba in Veracruz. A rural highway running along the southern edge of the Mazatec region connects Teotitlán and Tuxtepec. On the other side of the highway, to the southeast, live speakers of Chinantec, to the south speakers of Cuicatec, to the southwest speakers of Mixtec, and to the northwest speakers of Nahuatl. The highlands area, to the west of the dam, is larger and more densely populated than the lowlands. The highlands also have far more *municipios*: there are four in the lowlands (Ixcatlán, Soyaltepec, Jalapa, and San José Independencia), whereas there are nineteen in the Sierra. Of those, the largest and most important are Chilchotla, Tenango, Mazatlán, and especially Huautla, which is the Sierra's longstanding religious capital and has come to be its political, cultural, and economic capital as well. For historical reasons that will be discussed below, land in the Sierra is privatized. Settlement patterns tend to be extremely dispersed, with each *municipio* having a *cabecera* (center) with a relatively small percentage of the total population, and myriad smaller communities of varying size, in which the majority of the *municipio*'s population lives. Nda Xo/ Chilchotla, for example, has a municipal population of a little over 20,000; approximately 1,500 of those live in the *cabecera*, while the remaining 18,500 live dispersed across more than a hundred smaller communities.

Such communities in the highlands exist across a wide range of climatic zones and range in altitude from near sea level to 2,500 meters (or more). For example, the communities where I did the bulk of my fieldwork were part of the same *municipio*

but were very different both in size and climate: the *cabecera* of Nda Xo is located at approximately 1800 meters, while Nangui Ni (“Tierra Colorada”), a *ranchería* of some 250-300 people, is located at approximately 500 meters. The Sierra is a very rugged area, full of caves, canyons, and precipitous drop-offs; the land is rocky and almost never flat, making agriculture an arduous task. The main crop is corn, followed by beans and squash. In the highlands in particular, for most of the twentieth century coffee rivaled corn in importance, and became the leading cash crop; as late as the early 1980s coffee was still so important in the Sierra that school attendance would drop precipitously during coffee season, when children were needed by their parents to assist in the labor-intensive task of harvesting and processing coffee (Pearlman 1981: 81). However, in the last decade or two, as a result of neo-liberal reforms and fluctuations in the world coffee market, coffee prices have fallen to the point where, while almost every family has some coffee, very few harvest it for sale. In the lowlands, sugar cane is an important cash crop, and cattle ranching is prevalent in some areas. Most families own at least a few chickens, and sometimes one or two pigs or goats. Though wild game is increasingly rare, people living in more isolated communities do hunt and eat the animals they find in and around their *milpas* (cornfields). People also eat the wide variety of wild fruits, vegetables, and grains found throughout the Sierra; the land is in general very fertile, covered with dense, lush vegetation and, at higher altitudes, cloud forests.

Like most parts of Mesoamerica, the Sierra Mazateca has a rainy season and a dry season, though there the rains are heavier and last much longer than elsewhere in Oaxaca. The rains run roughly June through September or October, and unlike central Oaxaca, where it generally rains daily but only in the afternoons, in the Sierra, heavy downpours can last for days on end. Because of this, roads frequently wash out in the rainy season, isolating smaller communities for days or even weeks, and mudslides are both extremely common and very dangerous.<sup>45</sup> The rains will begin to slack off by October but can easily last into November and December or even January. The only truly dry months are March, April, and May. Despite the fact that the region is generally very humid for most of the year, during these months water becomes extremely scarce, and because water rights are a constant source of dispute, few communities have any kind of centralized water distribution system. The SIL missionary Eunice Pike wrote (1971) that in the dry season women from the community outside Huautla where she lived in the 1950s would begin to line up at the spring before daybreak, where they would spend hours waiting for their water jugs to fill, drop by drop, before lugging the water home. 50 years later, for poor people in many communities, waiting in line at the spring for water and hauling it back home is still a fact of life in the dry months. Wealthier people construct cisterns where they

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<sup>45</sup> During my fieldwork, a landslide in Nda Xo (just outside the *cabecera*) killed 9 people, an event covered in news reports in both the United States and Europe. The following year, after years of infighting, Nda Xo managed finally to act on longstanding promises to pave the road into town from the Teotitlán-Huautla highway; just after the first couple of kilometers were paved, a landslide dumped a number of boulders (one as big as a house), in the middle of the road, destroying it. Finally, there is a particular kind of hallucinogenic mushroom, the “landslide” (*derrumbe*) variety, which appears at the site of fresh mudslides.

collect rainwater during the wet months and then guard it jealously in the dry ones.

People who own trucks will make extra money during the dry season by driving out the road towards Huautla where there is a spring that never goes dry, filling up drums with water and selling it; buying water this way is expensive, though, as one drum of water (approximately sixty gallons) costs roughly one day's wages.

Finally, the Sierra and the lowlands are quite different linguistically. The Zona Baja has a relatively low level of internal linguistic variation, and the Mazatec used in the Baja is utterly unintelligible to speakers from the Sierra. Dialectal variation is considerably higher in the Sierra, with as many as 8 distinct dialects (Gudshinsky 1958); however, people living in the central Sierra (including Chilchotla, Huautla, and Tenango) speak the same dialect, with minor variations. Most communities in the Sierra are, by national standards, quite conservative linguistically; 95% or more of the population of most *municipios* in the Sierra speak Mazatec, and the rate of monolingualism among Mazatecs generally is over 25%, which places the group near the top of the list nationally.<sup>46</sup> There are also isolated mestizos or speakers of other indigenous languages who live in Mazatec-speaking communities, in most cases because they have married in or because they live in a given town for employment reasons (e.g., schoolteachers, medical personnel in clinics, administrative staff in municipal offices, etc.). There is also, however, one

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<sup>46</sup> In Chilchotla, for example, 96.7% of the population speaks Mazatec, of whom 38.5% are monolingual (INEGI 2000).



*municipio*, San Juan Coatzospan, which since the colonial era has been inhabited by speakers of Mixtec, a linguistic island surrounded by Mazatec speakers.

*People of the Deer: A Sketch of Mazatec History*

Relatively little is known about Mazatec history prior to the arrival of the Spanish. The following account – which labels the Mazatec a “*tierra de brujos*”<sup>47</sup> -- is a not uncommon (if more satirical than many) scholarly characterization of region’s history:

The Mazatecs lack history. No one knows where they come from nor how they traversed the first centuries of their existence. . . .People without art. . .without important ruins, without notable tombs, without codices, without jewels, [the Mazatecs] are a people, to judge by these deficits, sufficiently weak or peaceful so as not to have gained, thanks to their warlike actions, an honorable place in history. Neighbors of Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Totonacs, their singular position in the region they occupy even now tell us that this people was a lamb in the midst of tigers, a blank space between the richly colored zones of those that have come to be known as the “high cultures of Mesoamerica.”

(Benítez 1970: 35)

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<sup>47</sup> “Land of witches” (or, as Bill Stone would have it, of “warlocks”; I am grateful to Duke’s (1996: 55) discussion of this passage, which drew my attention to it). This exoticization of the Mazateca region is not uncommon either. For example, the first account of a mushroom ritual -- that element of Mazatec cultural practice which would go on to make the entire region famous -- refers to the shaman overseeing it as a “*brujo* (witch),” retaining the term *brujo* throughout the English-language account (J. Johnson 1939a).

Nonetheless, we do know a little about the history of the area. Most sources agree that the highlands/lowlands division reflects not only geographic and linguistic realities, but also longstanding political ones as well. As early as 890 A.D. the entire lowlands region was united under one ruler, and by 1300 two separate kingdoms, one in the lowlands and one in the highlands, had been established (Espinosa 1910).

Around this time, the Mazatec region came under the partial influence of the Mixtecs. Most scholars seem to agree that sometime between 1300 and 1456, the Sierra came sufficiently under Mixtec control that San Juan Coatzospan, the isolated community of Mixtec speakers<sup>48</sup>, was established (Villa Rojas 1955, Gudschinsky 1958,); some, however, date this occurrence to the later era of Aztec rule, when Mixtecs staged periodic raids on the Sierra (Pearlman 1981). In 1456, the Aztecs invaded Oaxaca and eventually brought the Sierra under their control; presumably it was sometime during this period that some group of people inhabiting the area we now think of as “Mazatecs” began to be known by a variant of that term, as the “people of the deer.”<sup>49</sup> The Aztecs placed administrative centers in Teotitlán and Tuxtepec, at either ends of the Mazatec region (Pearlman 1981: 62-62, Feinberg 2003: 39-40).

Little, however, changed internally in the area; the new rulers extracted tribute through the Mazatec nobility, and the two kingdoms themselves remained intact (Villa Rojas 1955, Gudschinsky 1958). Two temples were erected in Teotitlán,

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<sup>48</sup> Presumably at roughly the same time, Mixtecs also established two Mixtec-speaking barrios in Huautla de Jiménez (Pearlman 1981: 63, Feinberg 39).

<sup>49</sup> From the classical Nahuatl word *mazaatl* (“deer”).

which became the religious center towards which the highlands kingdom became oriented (Martínez Gracida 1883). Presumably during this period elite Mazatecs spoke Nahuatl. No sources discussing Mazatec history speculate on how and to what extent Mazatecs participated in Mesoamerican literacy or text production. However, the three (and perhaps four) known colonial Mazatec *lienzos*, at least two dating from the early colonial period and exhibiting some stylistic conventions (as do many *lienzos*) of Mesoamerican pre-Columbian writing (Cline 1966, Rincón Mautner 1996), suggest that Mazatecs did participate, if peripherally, in the larger Mesoamerican culture of literacy and the production of written texts.

Like many other peoples who had been subjected to Aztec rule, Mazatecs allied themselves with the Spanish against the Aztecs during the Conquest (Martínez Gracida 1883). Villa Rojas goes so far as to say the region was “among the most easily subjected to the new regime of authority” (1955: 71). However, the relative ease of that transition did little to put the brakes on the demographic crisis that the Mazatecs suffered immediately after the Conquest; primarily small pox but also other epidemics were apparently responsible for cutting the population of the entire Mazatec region in half (Villa Rojas 1955: 71, Pearlman 1981: 65-66). Because of this population decline, the relative isolation of the Sierra, and its lack of resources valuable to the Spanish, the *encomiendas* in the area established in the sixteenth century were very short-lived (Boege 1988), rendering the Sierra once again, as it had been under the Aztecs, a place of only peripheral importance.

The failure of evangelization efforts in the Sierra during the colonial period further contributed to its peripheral character. As was the case under the Aztecs, Teotitlán was established at the religious center of the region. The Franciscan Fray Martin de Valencia led the mission and entered the Sierra in 1524 (Weitlaner and Hoppe 1967: 516). By 1548 the Franciscans had built a church and monastery in Teotitlán, but 20 years later had abandoned them to secular clergy (*Relaciones de Teotitlán*). After the Franciscans, the Dominicans, based in Villa Alta, were thought to have taken over responsibility for a while for the evangelization of the Mazatecs and Chinantecs. However, they seem not to have fared much better than the Franciscans, having never established a permanent presence in (or even near) the Sierra, either. No priest seems even to have mounted a serious study of Mazatec, and what little was produced for religious purposes, mainly *confesionarios* and *vocabularios*, is very schematic and did not appear until the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>50</sup> By contrast, linguistic work, some of it comprehensive, was conducted by priests on neighboring languages as much as 200 years earlier. Furthermore, even those Mazatecs who had been exposed to the teaching of the priests, though they might attend mass, “continued practicing their traditional ceremonies in caves, springs, and sacred places in the mountains. This attitude concerning religious practices and beliefs is the same that persists through the present” (Villa Rojas 1955: 72). Thus, “According to all sources, the evangelization of the Mazatec Sierra during

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<sup>50</sup> See Ygnacio Arrona 1796, 1797.

the colonial period can be considered a failure, compared to other areas of Mexico” (Pearlman 1981: 70). This marginal status is, predictably, also reflected in what little scholarly literature we have on Mazatec history; as Feinberg notes (2003: 41), numerous scholars who have offered sketches of Mazatec history skip from early colonial period to the eve of the Revolution, with little or no commentary about what transpired in the Sierra during those many years in between.

Mazatecs were involved in the fight for Independence, helping to secure Oaxaca City’s *zócalo* (central plaza) in 1810 and Teotitlán’s in 1815. They also fought against the French intervention of the 1860s (Pearlman 1981: 71). At roughly the same time (1857) hereditary titles were abolished, and the last highlands “kingdom” (“*reino o cacicazgo*”), which until then had “still been tolerated by the Mexican government,” and which united Huautla and Chilchotla under the same *cacique* who was selected for a life term, came to an end. This last Mazatec “king,” named Manuel Vicente, was said to have died in 1869 at the age of 130.<sup>51</sup> Informally, leadership of this type persisted for a bit longer, and on Manuel Vicente’s death the *cacicazgo* passed to an unnamed man, “the last cacique, lord of Chilchotla,” who was subsequently assassinated by his followers in the 1880s (Bauer 1908: 247-248).

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<sup>51</sup> I generally treated such claims about people (mostly dead and mostly men) living to such old ages with some skepticism. However, during my fieldwork, I was surprised at how commonly I heard stories about people living well past 100. For example, the article cited below (in fn. 40) is an interview of a Huauteco who claimed he was 109 years old at the time; it was followed by an interview of a woman who reportedly was also 109. Feinberg (2003: 62) also comments on how often he heard such stories.

During this same period, as liberal reforms led to the expropriation of the communal and Church lands, land was privatized and increasingly concentrated into large landholdings. The first foreign-run *finca* in the Sierra dates from 1893. A coffee-growing estate, its arrival marked an agricultural transformation in the area, as soon coffee haciendas appeared throughout the Sierra (Duke 1996: 60, Feinberg 2003: 44). One of the largest was located at the *ranchería* María Luisa in the *municipio* of Nda Xo; its ruins lie along the road between Nda Xo and the highway into Huautla and maintain a broken grandeur that hints at the immensity of the enterprise in its heyday. The foreigners who owned the *fincas*, many of them (as in Chiapas) Germans, were also responsible for introducing silkworm raising (Pearlman 1981: 72), a cash endeavor that many families from Huautla engaged in, including that of the famous shaman María Sabina. Meanwhile, in the lowlands, Porfirio Díaz was expressing his gratitude to the people of the region, who had supported him with soldiers early on, by “modernizing” the region with roads, etc. (Villa Rojas 1955: 73). These actions would ultimately lead to the dispossession of the very people the president was ostensibly helping, by accelerating the arrival of cattle ranchers to the area (Feinberg 2003: 46). Finally, the period around the end of the Independence era and the beginning of the Revolution marked the beginning of the first substantial works on Mazatec language and history. In one of the earliest and most important, the author, Francisco Belmar, writes, “I have found nothing written in the language. The absolute lack of works relating to it has inspired me to essay this slight study of a

language deserving special attention for its ethnographic importance. The scanty material I have forces me to make my work small” (1892; see also Brinton 1892).

As was common for many indigenous regions, the Revolution marked the beginning of a new era of nationalization for the Mazatec area. Many Mazatecs who had never before left the Sierra fought in the Revolution (Pearlman 1981: 73). When they returned, they brought with them stories about their experiences in the broader nation and new ideas about nationhood; the odd interview in *La Faena* with old men who were alive at the time of the Revolution reflects something of the effect this era had on shifting attitudes towards the state on the part of *serranos*.<sup>52</sup> The Sierra Mazateca also produced two men who became heroes of the Mexican Revolution, Jesús and Ricardo Flores Magón. Towns were renamed in their honor (Teotitlán de Flores Magón, Mazatlán de Villa Flores). New schools eventually erected in the region as a result of post-Revolutionary *indigenismo* policies were named for them as well, and schoolteachers frequently drew on their legacies in fostering nationalist identification among Mazatec students (Pearlman 1981: 72-72).

Finally, during the Revolution, many people fled the *cabeceras* and formed smaller settlements in what at the time were largely uninhabited lands attached to haciendas (Cowan 1954: 89). After the Revolution, when the post-Revolutionary state began to break up large landholdings and enforce land redistribution, this dispersal of the population was further accelerated, leading to the type of scattered

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<sup>52</sup> For example, the first issue of *La Faena* (February 2000, 1(1): 14-15) featured the interview of a man who actually fought in the Revolution, on the side of the *Carrancistas*.

settlement patterns present today. Families with the means would often try to acquire lands not only in or near the *cabeceras* but also in outlying areas (Cowan 1954: 89). Certainly this was true of many of the wealthier and even “middle class” families in Nda Xo, and canonical discourse about life in the Sierra before polygamy became increasingly uncommon involved prospering *campesinos* who kept one wife “in town” and another one or two (or more) “at the rancho,” in a more remote settlement where the majority of the crops were grown.

*Mushrooms, Coffee, Hippies, Dams, and Violence: Ethnographic Research  
about Mazatec Communities*

Shortly after the Revolution had ended and the post-Revolutionary state was solidifying, the first articles on “Mazatec culture” began to be published, followed by the first full-length ethnographic works concerning Mazatec communities. A brief sketch of this literature thus also outlines the major historical trends that have affected such communities during the course of the twentieth century. Ethnographic studies of the Mazateca fall fairly easily into two broad categories: studies on the impact of the various forms modernization has taken in the Sierra Mazateca and studies of practices and knowledge that represent bastions of tradition that resist such forces. It is also true, however, that much of this research aims to consider how these two competing



classes of forces interact or manifest themselves in Mazatec society, and as such their division into one grouping or the other is necessarily somewhat arbitrary.

Almost all of the ethnographic work that has focused on Mazatec cultural continuity has concentrated on the rituals and beliefs surrounding Mazatec mushroom use, which I will discuss in Chapter Five. As we will see, much of that literature, both scholarly and popular, focuses specifically on a particular shaman, María Sabina, who is arguably the most famous Mazatec of all time and certainly was a central figure in the recent history of the Sierra Mazateca. The other research focusing on “traditional Mazatec culture” includes a few general, largely descriptive articles on Mazatec society<sup>53</sup>, and a number of more analytic articles on more specific aspects of Mazatec culture. These include discussions of “Mazatec witchcraft” (Basset 1939), house building (G. Cowan 1946), the Mazatec calendar<sup>54</sup> (Weitlaner and Weitlaner 1946), “head-washing” in marriage ceremonies<sup>55</sup> (Pike 1948), public speeches by the

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<sup>53</sup> Starr 1902 and 1908, Bauer 1908, Johnson 1939, F. Cowan 1946, Pozas 1960, Weitlaner and Hoppe 1967.

<sup>54</sup> A more recent study on the Mazatec calendar is “El calendario mazateco actual como fuente para el estudio del calendario antiguo” (Carrera González and Doesburg 2001). This collaboration between a Western academic and an indigenous intellectual is, as the title suggests, aimed at using present calendrical practices to illuminate past ones. However, while all Mazatec intellectuals and many other Mazatec speakers are at least passingly familiar with the calendar, and although as recently as the early 1980s it was still in active use for agricultural purposes (Pearlman 1981), current usage of the Mazatec calendar is extremely rare if not apocryphal. Thus this study shares with another by the same author (discussed below) a desire to rescue what has been lost from the past rather than to document present practices.

<sup>55</sup> Another study of marriage ceremonies is a booklet published in 2000 by this same indigenous intellectual from Huautla, *La Reconstrucción de la Boda Mazateca en el Contexto Huautleco* (Carrera González 2000b). Unlike the Cowan article, however, this work is not concerned with documenting present wedding practices but rather with “discovering” and recovering practices from the past.

municipal president (F. Cowan 1952), communal labor (G. Cowan 1954), social organization (Hasler 1959), cosmology (Hasler 1960), kinship terminology (G. Cowan 1947, Stavenhagen 1960, Kirk 1966), and place names (Jamieson 1977). Longer works in this broad category include primarily compilations and analyses of Mazatec tales and myths.<sup>56</sup> As a group, this body of literature emphasizes the extent to which Mazatecs have resisted acculturation, maintaining practices and beliefs that are markedly different from both Western and Mexican national societies. And, indeed, this work conforms to and furthers one of the prevailing discourses about Mazatec identity: that Mazatecs are among the few Indians in Mexico who have held fast to their traditions and resisted modernization and nationalization. As García Dorantes claims in his story about the man-eating eagles, “we [Mazatecs] carry our heads erectly and with pride, . . . not like the ‘Indians’ of other tribes.”

Studies of changes in Mazatec society over the course of the last century have focused on one or more of the major vectors of modernization in the Sierra: coffee, the dam, roads, hippies, and political parties, which arrived more or less in that order. Although coffee was grown on *fincas* in the Sierra since the end of the nineteenth century, coffee production in the area didn’t “take off” until the late 1930s. This was the era of Cardenista agrarian reforms, which represented a great expansion of the federal government’s power into rural and thus largely indigenous communities. Since coffee – unlike crops such as corn and beans – was then and is today a cash

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<sup>56</sup> G. Cowan 1953, Castro G. 1956, F. Cowan 1963, Inchaustegui 1977 and 1983, Portal 1986, Ríos Nolasco 1992.

crop rather than a subsistence crop, the increase in coffee cultivation meant that the Sierra became tied in new ways to the market economy.

It also meant the introduction of new forms of wealth and authority. “Coffee caciques” – men whose status was based less on rank than on class<sup>57</sup> – came increasingly to have more political power, ultimately eclipsing the *Ch<sup>4</sup>ota<sup>4</sup> Jchi<sup>1</sup>nga<sup>3</sup>* or *Consejo de Ancianos* (Council of Elders), men who had risen to power through the traditional cargo system by serving in a succession of civic posts (Neiburg 1988; see also Baird 1991). In 1958, the government founded INMECAFE (Instituto Mexicano del Café), which by 1961 was operating in the Sierra through its regional office in Huautla (Duke 1996: 61). The agency’s purpose was to modernize Mexico’s coffee industry by supporting small-scale coffee producers, including, in theory, dealing with them directly and circumventing local middlemen. Many local caciques, however, managed to co-opt INMECAFE officials and thus used state structures meant to protect the small coffee producer to preserve their own power instead (Neiburg 1988, Boege 1988).

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<sup>57</sup> I am alluding here to the cargo system or civil-religious hierarchy (also known as the *mayordomía* system). A large body of scholarly literature contends this system was the traditional cornerstone of political and religious authority in Mesoamerica. Such a system was, at least in theory, based on rank: one worked one’s way up the system by serving in lowly and then successively more important posts. This system was also (again, at least in theory) a “leveling” mechanism: higher posts were relatively costly, both because their unpaid responsibilities required officeholders to work in the municipal center (and therefore not in their own fields) and to finance municipal fiestas, particularly those for patron saints. However, many scholars have also documented how, over the course of the twentieth century, this institution has changed dramatically, as younger men who have gained wealth through commercial enterprises have begun “buying into” the system at the top, without having served in the lower posts (e.g., Cancian 1992).

In the late 1980s, the price of coffee collapsed; in 1989, the government ended INMECAFE as part of that year's massive deregulation of agriculture, itself part of a much larger program of neoliberal restructuring precipitated by Mexico's debt crisis of that decade. The precipitous drop in prices and lack of governmental support for coffee production had a profound impact on the Sierra's economy. "For many growers, the cost of harvesting their crop. . .exceeded the value of the coffee, and they let the beans die on the branch" (Feinberg 2003: 56). The people I know in Nda Xo, making similar cost-benefit calculations, harvested their coffee only for their own use. Many have participated in various programs run by NGOs designed to provide new sources of income. These have included the introduction of vanilla beans and passion fruit (*maracuyá*) and, in one particularly unusual project, the creation of an ostrich farm; none of them, however, have been very successful.<sup>58</sup>

Large public works projects have also greatly shaped life in the Sierra Mazateca in the last decades. The most important of these were the construction of the Miguel Alemán dam and the completion of the first road into the Sierra. The dam was completed in 1955 and involved flooding of a vast and fertile territory in the

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<sup>58</sup> Vanilla has been a quite successful cash crop elsewhere in Mexico, but in the Sierra it seems mostly to be used by women to scent their hair. Passion fruit is not widely eaten in Mexico, so in the Sierra most people use it to make fruit water or to flavor *aguardiente*. The later is particularly popular locally, and many local shopkeepers sell it; see *La Faena* 1(4, June): 20 for the interview of a *Huateco* merchant who runs a "*hospitalito para bebedores*" offering a variety of flavored *aguardiente*; of his clients, he says, "many request the famous maracuyá."

Feinberg claims that one substitute product that Huautla has turned to is schoolteachers: "As one ex-INMECAFE worker who settled in Huautla told me: 'Huautla lived on coffee. Now it lives on teachers'" (2003: 93). As we will see in Chapter Six, Huautla does indeed "export" teachers to communities across the Sierra.

heart of the lowland Mazatec area. The dam project also forced the relocation of roughly 22,000 Mazatecs, most of them monolingual (Villa Rojas 1955, Barabas and Bartolomé 1973); this caused massive social upheaval, especially for those who were relocated some distance away. In the words of two prominent researchers, it constituted a “program of ethnocide” (Barabas and Bartolomé 1973: 3).<sup>59</sup> Further flooding has forced subsequent relocations, and continues to threaten many communities located around the edge of the dam.

The construction of the dam and its aftermath both furthered the distrust in the area of the federal government and at the same increased dependence upon it, while also leading to the area’s increasing urbanization and insertion into national life. While the dam had a less direct effect on the people from the highlands, it did deepen the social distance between the highlands and the lowlands, especially since the government addressed a number of “compensatory” development programs towards the people of the lowlands, which had the effect of nationalizing and urbanizing the area more quickly than in the Sierra. Among the most important of these governmental interventions was the founding of an INI center in the lowlands, which has attached to it a radio station<sup>60</sup>; the Sierra has no such radio station. INI’s system of radio stations broadcasts in rural areas in the local indigenous language(s), and for

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<sup>59</sup> Other important studies on the dam and its effect include Villa Rojas 1955, McMahon 1973, Partridge and Brown 1983 and 1984, and Barabas and Bartolomé 1983.

<sup>60</sup> XEOJN, “La Voz de la Chinantla,” located in San Lucas Ojitlán, a Chinantec-speaking town.

many indigenous communities it is one of the most important vehicles through which *indigenismo* and other national policies are encountered.

The completion of the road between Teotitlán and Huautla affected the people of the highlands more directly and profoundly. Before the road was opened, transport was entirely by foot or by animal; merchants relied on mule drivers (most of them Nahuatl speakers) for transporting their goods in and out of the Sierra. Begun in 1952, the road was completed by 1963<sup>61</sup>, though it was not paved until 1989 and until then remained an arduous, eight-to-ten-hour journey. The road to Chilchotla – like roads to other communities accessible off the main Huautla-Teotitlán road – was completed a few years later, though it remains unpaved. The road further elevated Huautla's importance, making it the unparalleled economic and political capital of the Sierra. The road also brought with it many other things: national institutions like INI and INMECAFE, schools, medical clinics, access by vehicle to the rest of the country (as coffee once had, the transportation of people and goods also represented a new opportunity for generating wealth), and new opportunities for migration. Eventually, the road also made possible the arrival of the many trappings of modern life: telephones, televisions, public address systems, computers, and, very recently, the Internet.

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<sup>61</sup> Surprisingly for such an easily dated event, authors are not in agreement about this date; Pearlman claims it was 1963 (1981: 74), Feinberg that it was 1959 (2003: 49). Pearlman explicitly references the importance the road had to her analysis of changing gender relations in Huautla: "The period of rapid change that began with the entry of the Teotitlán – Huautla road is the framework of this study" (1981: 75).

Finally, the road also brought with it two more new social forces: hippies and political parties. Both became directly and openly tied to social divisions and factionalism, which in extreme cases led to violence. Hippies will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, but, in brief, these “mycotourists,” like coffee and cars, were seen by many as novel economic possibilities. The newfound prosperity and prestige of some people, however, particularly when achieved through the “selling” of cultural property led inevitably to conflict (and, in the case of María Sabina, attempts on her life). Likewise, the rise nationally of opposition parties placed new pressures on systems by which local authorities in the Sierra were selected. Under the post-Revolutionary state, federal benefits and programs were administered through local leadership, which had the effect of allying such leaders with the PRI (Joseph and Nugent 1994). Once opposition parties began to affect local politics in the 1970s, and the party system increasingly became the paradigm, “traditional” leaders like the *Consejo de Ancianos* found it very difficult not to participate in such a system and be viewed as party-affiliated, which generally meant tied to the PRI. This in turn raised the question of whether leaders truly served the interests of the community, or rather those of the party. The Usos y Costumbres law of 1994 was meant to circumvent this by allowing indigenous communities to hold non-partisan elections,<sup>62</sup> but at least in the Sierra such a system has often operated in name only.

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<sup>62</sup> This is a law enacted in Oaxaca that recognizes the right of indigenous communities in the state to elect presidents and other municipal officials following traditional customs and practices, rather than through political parties. This was groundbreaking legislation, the result of years of struggle by indigenous groups. The state of Oaxaca – though it is only one of Mexico’s thirty-two federal entities

Like many indigenous *municipios* in Oaxaca, Sierra communities have chronic problems with contested elections, which in many cases have resulted in violence (e.g., Feinberg 2003: 53-55).

This second type of research, then, in focusing on the impacts of modernization on Mazatec communities, also centers on the intersection of conflict and identity. This linkage between conflict and identity takes different forms, from political conflict born of the collision between local and national systems for creating authority (Neiburg 1988, Boege 1988), to social conflict generated by competing claims about packaging “Mazatec culture” for outsiders (Duke 1995, Feinberg 2003).

Haunting the edges of all these studies on Mazatec communities are two issues of relevance to this dissertation: community unity and emergent ethnic identity. Both of these matters are tied in various ways to the two competing forces driving scholarship on Mazatec communities, themselves artifacts of competing pressures on indigenous communities, especially in light of the nation’s ongoing campaign for development, modernity and national unity: persistence and continuity on the one hand and adaptation and innovation on the other. To return to the theme raised by the story about Huautla’s eagles, who are the “Mazatecs,” anyway? Does it matter that -- based on what we know historically about Mazatec ethnic identity and indeed indigenous identity throughout Mesoamerica – identification with this group of

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(thirty-one states and Mexico City) – has a whopping 570 *municipios*. This figure is nearly a fourth of the national total and nearly twice that of the state that follows (Puebla) (INEGI 2000). Thus the law directly affected a considerable percentage of all the *municipios* in the nation and has gone on to become the model for further indigenous rights legislation across the country.



people that scholars call Mazatecs had only limited emic validity? What difference does it make that such pan-regional notions of indigenous identity are now espoused by indigenous intellectuals? And is it relevant that their investment in such categories, which is often explicitly normative with respect to other members of the ethnic group, is often quite different from that of scholars? Finally, to return to the writings of the two half-brothers, where does the locus of authentic indigenous identity lie, in a lost but recoverable past or in the perhaps degraded but vibrant society of the present? And whose decision is it to determine which view is “true”?

### Chapter Three

#### In the Land of the Cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>: The Annual Day of the Dead Song Contest

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*Tatsjejin nga kjabuya  
isien nixtjin xi nchifu'ánijun  
ngasandie.*

*Jé tsijemána nga k'e nchifu  
'ánijun  
ñanga je inimájin xi tichunjin k'e  
kó xi jé inima tjingase nixtjin.*

...

*Isien nixtjin xi tjijno inima,  
isien nixtjin xi jé inimájun,  
kuibi xi s'uína,  
stsitsijen ngatjún ngasandiena,*

...

*kui ngasandie xi tatséjibi,  
kui kjabuya xi tatséjibi,*

Death is not eternal,  
You spirits that descend from  
heaven to life.

I feel your presence here among  
us flawed ones, below,  
where we who are alive are dead,  
and you who are dead are alive.

...

Living souls,  
dead souls,  
this is our fiesta,  
where for a moment we make our  
two worlds appear,

...

in this life that is not eternal,  
in this death that is not eternal.

-- Juan Gregorio Regino<sup>1</sup> (1992: 16)  
From "Tatsjejin nga kjabuya"  
("Death is not Eternal")

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Gregorio Regino is by far the best-known Mazatec writer. He is from the lowlands (in *municipio* of San Miguel Soyaltepec). Because he does not directly figure in the revitalization activities taking place in the Sierra, his work will be discussed further in Chapter Six.



The very day I arrived in Nda Xo for the first time was also the first time I heard about the contest. I knew the place then, though, only by its Nahuatl name, Chilchotla<sup>2</sup> -- or more officially, Santa Maria Magdalena Chilchotla. My first stop in the Sierra Mazateca had been Tejao (Huautila de Jiménez), the largest town in the Sierra Mazateca. Tejao is by self-perception as well as by widespread if ambivalent<sup>3</sup> consensus the center of the Sierra, the region's economic and cultural capital. After all, Huautila was historically the region's central market; it had also been the home of the famous shaman María Sabina, whose "discovery" by Western researchers as a "high priestess of the magic mushroom" had literally and figuratively put the town and, indeed, the entire region on the map.<sup>4</sup> Huautila is also the home of the vast

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<sup>2</sup> Chilchotla, also, in earlier documents called "Chilchotlán," means "place of the green chili peppers" (*chi*[i]/[i] (chili) + *choo* [xoo] (greenness) + *tl[án]* (place)). This name bears no obvious relationship to the Mazatec name, Nda Xo, routinely translated as "Agua Espuma" in Spanish and meaning, in English, "foaming water" (*nda* (water) + *xo* (foam, froth)).

<sup>3</sup> Huautila's importance is universally acknowledged, but people from elsewhere in the Mazateca take issue with the general arrogance of Huautila natives, as well as with their specific claims to the unrivaled dominance of their hometown. In the words of a native *huauteca*, "Huautila de Jiménez, the most important city in the Sierra Mazateca, . . . is the intellectual capital of the Mazatec world," Castañeda 1996: 7, 23, my translation). While not obviously untrue, such a statement also ignores the importance of the many other Mazatec centers -- Chilchotla, for one, but also Mazatlán, Temascal, Tenango, Jalapa, and others -- that while not the famous "Ciudad de los Hongos" that Huautila is have also made important contributions to Mazatec history and society. Another frequent complaint made by people from other parts of the Sierra, *ranchos* especially, is that people in Huautila treat them "like hicks," in response to which some try adopting the Huautila way of speaking.

This ambivalence about Huautila will continue to surface, especially with respect to education, literacy, and ideologies about language use. It will become especially relevant in Chapter Six, in discussing competing standards for both spoken and written Mazatec.

<sup>4</sup> Chapter Five will discuss this in more detail.

majority of the region's schoolteachers,<sup>5</sup> as well as some of its most prominent intellectuals. In Huautla I had sought out a couple of them, and one<sup>6</sup> told me I should pay a visit to Chilchotla.

A few days before we met he had been a judge there for the first (and, to date, the only) annual Mother's Day Song Contest.<sup>7</sup> Held at one of the two critical "poles" of seasonal change – the impending onset of the rainy season -- this contest for songs written in Mazatec was itself inspired by another, older contest. This older, much more established contest is held annually for the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*), a holiday taking place roughly when the rains end and the dry season begins. The Day of the Dead contest was also hatched in Nda Xo, the *cabecera* of the *municipio* of Chilchotla.<sup>8</sup> Though numerous other Day of the Dead spin-off contests now exist throughout the region, the one in Nda Xo is the oldest.<sup>9</sup> It remains the

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<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, the fact that most of the Mazateca's bilingual schoolteachers are from the region they work in makes it rather unusual in ways that directly affect bilingualism, literacy, and language ideologies in the area.

<sup>6</sup> Lic. Florencio Carrera González (see Carrera González 2000b and 2001; he is also discussed in Dalton 1990 and Feinburg 2003). I am very grateful to Edward Abse for initially putting me in contact with Maestro Carrera.

<sup>7</sup> Mother's Day as a holiday has very little importance locally. This discrepancy between its cultural resonance and that of Day of the Dead is central, as will be discussed here, to the popular success of the one contest and the popular failure of the other.

<sup>8</sup> The *municipio* of Nda Xo is, by state and Sierra standards, a particularly large one geographically (347 km<sup>2</sup>), with a population of more than 21,000 people dispersed across more than 100 communities located in highland, lowland, and mid-range environments. The *cabecera*, or county seat, is also called Chilchotla/Nda Xo, and with a population of roughly 1,500 people is by far the largest settlement in the *municipio* (INEGI 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Tejao (Huautla) now also has a Day of the Dead contest, but it was established after Nda Xo's and remains the less prestigious and smaller of the two, with fewer participants and spectators.

largest and, by general consensus, the most important contest for the composition of original Mazatec-language songs.

The entire *municipio* of Nda Xo is widely considered the Mazateca's most "traditional." This reputation is linked in part to the relatively high general level of "linguistic conservatism"<sup>10</sup> in the *municipio*, but it also turns on certain highly visible practices that constitute celebration of "Mazatec culture." These include both the continued observation of practices recognized as "old" that have a long and (relatively) continuous duration in the community, and those that, if not necessarily categorized as "new," are seen as a form of revitalization, a resurgent expression of ethnic pride. Of the former, by far the most widely discussed is the Day of the Dead fiesta in Nda Xo. It is famous not only for its duration but also its exuberance and its "colorful" character. Of the newer practices, the most famous is the song contest. It now formally inaugurates the Day of the Dead fiesta, taking up the entire first day of the fiesta's nine. When it ends, around sunset, the first night of the fiesta begins and those in whose honor the fiesta takes place -- the ancestors, the dead -- arrive to share the earth once again with the living.

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<sup>10</sup> Locally, this is reflected in a number of linguistic indexes, such as the percentage of the population who are monolinguals, the percentage whose "*lengua materna*" is Mazatec, the prevalence with which Mazatec is the language of daily life, and the relative "purity" of the Mazatec spoken. The latter -- which is conceived of particularly in terms of degrees of "contamination" by Spanish and will be discussed in Chapters Four and Six -- is a favorite target of indigenous intellectuals, and is countered with purist attitudes and the generation of neologisms. The first two indices are best addressed by reference to the 2000 national census (some of these figures are discussed in Chapter Two), which was taken just before I began my fieldwork; as I was tromping around the region for the first time, trying not to wipe out in the ubiquitous mud of the rainy season, I was consistently humbled by seeing, stuck to the side of even the most humble and remote houses, INEGI's little sticker indicating the

***Day of the Dead  
and the Return of “the Indian Problem”***

Throughout Latin America the celebration of the pan-Roman Catholic holidays of All Saints’ Day (*el Día de Todos Santos*, November 1) and All Souls’ Day (*el Día de Animas*, November 2) is generally referred to collectively as the *Fiesta de Todos Santos*, or simply as *Todos Santos*.<sup>11</sup> Although this name is widely used in Mexico as well, it is also known there by a term that has come to be seen as canonically Mexican: *el Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead.<sup>12</sup> The official part of the fiesta – at least as far as the Church is concerned -- centers around the celebration of special masses on November 1 for all the saints and November 2 for the souls in Purgatory.<sup>13</sup> However, “Most observers would agree, ironically, that Mass in Mexico is the least-salient part of the holiday” (Brandes 1998a: 360). From the local people

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household’s data had been recorded for the census. A glance at the figures does indicate that Chilchotla is indeed quite conservative linguistically (as is the region on the whole).

<sup>11</sup> Locals in Nda Xo tend to use this name when speaking Spanish, referring to the holiday as “Todos Santos.”

<sup>12</sup> Although commonly referred to in the singular (*día*), this holiday actually lasts two days (or more in some parts of Mexico, especially Oaxaca). For this reason some scholars have accurately pointed out that it is more correctly Days (plural) of the Dead (e.g., Childs and Altman 1982, García Hernández and Merlin Arango 1993, Lomnitz 2001). This is certainly the case in the Sierra Mazateca, where the fiesta lasts much longer than it does elsewhere – a full ten days, rather than merely two. However, I will continue to refer to the holiday in the singular not only because it is customary to do so but also because, as will be discussed in more detail below, it reflects local beliefs about the fiesta with respect to the living, the dead, and differential temporalities.

who celebrate the holiday to the tourists who flock to see it to the scholars who study it, most people emphasize instead the “folk practices” that occur outside the church and apart from the masses as the most important part of the fiesta. These include the erection of elaborate altars in homes, businesses, public places, and graveyards; the making of *ofrendas* (offerings) for the deceased in the form of candles, flowers, food, toys, and drink; ritualized bell ringing and begging; and above all family vigils at the graves of the deceased. Halloween, the version of this holiday as observed in the United States, incorporates some of these elements by including ritualized begging, special foods (sweets), and representations of death (skeleton costumes, jack-o-lanterns). However, it is a version so thoroughly secularized -- and so largely divorced from contemplation of the dead -- that most of the religious elements critical to the holiday’s celebration in Latin America and specifically Mexico are not present in Halloween at all (see Brandes 1987, 1998b).<sup>14</sup>

Day of the Dead is thus quintessentially Mexican, Mexico’s most famous holiday as well as a highly salient national symbol. In part for this reason, it has been of special interest not only in the popular imagination, to tourists<sup>15</sup> and casual

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<sup>13</sup> In Nda Xo, as in most of Mexico, people hold graveyard vigils on saints’ day (November 1<sup>st</sup>) for *angelitos* (children who have died) and on souls’ day (November 2<sup>nd</sup>) for the *difuntitos* (people who died as adults).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the symbolic competition between Halloween and Day of the Dead within Mexico as a reflection of larger political tensions between the U.S. and Mexico, see Brandes 1998a.

<sup>15</sup> Day of the Dead has become a booming business in Mexico. The most famous sites at which it is celebrated attract droves of national and international tourists alike. At two of the most famous -- Mixquic, just outside Mexico City, and around Lake Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán -- the ritual enactment of Day of the Dead has become explicitly commodified, as “some mourners insist that

Mexicanophiles alike, but also to scholars from a variety of disciplines.<sup>16</sup> It is “often cited as a manifestation of a uniquely Mexican view of death,” (Brandes 1997: 273) and the Mexican “cult of death” features prominently in Mexican art and literature.<sup>17</sup>

A canonical example of the latter is Octavio Paz’s popular and influential book of essays *El laberinto de la soledad (Labyrinth of Solitude)*, especially the chapter entitled “The Day of the Dead”:

*Para el habitante de Nueva York, París o Londres, la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios. El mexicano, en cambio, la frecuenta, la burla, la acaricia, duerme con ella, la festeja, es uno de sus juquetes favoritos y su amor más permanente. Ciertamente, en su actitud hay quizá tanto miedo como en la de los toros; mas al menos no se esconde ni la esconde; la contempla cara a cara con impaciencia, desdén o ironía. . . .El desprecio a la muerte no está reñido con el culto que le profesamos.*  
(1959: 52).<sup>18</sup>

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tourists pay for taking photographs . . . enact[ing] what they know to be an exotic performance in exchange for cash” (Brandes 1998: 392). In the words of the Mexican intellectual Carlos Monsiváis, “Kodak takes possession. . . .Mexico has sold its cult of death and the tourists smile anthropologically satiated” (1970, quoted in Carmichael and Sayer 1992: 9). Closer to home, in Oaxaca city and the Zapotec town Xoxocotlán just outside of it, the “Kodakification” of Day of the Dead has also taken place, though to a somewhat lesser extent. The sites on which this ethnography is based are not at all touristed in this way. Nevertheless, the tourist industry does indeed have an impact, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>16</sup> Among these are Bade 1997; Brandes 1997, 1998a and 1998b; Carmichael and Sayer 1992; Childs and Altman 1982; El Guindi 1977; Lok 1991; Norget 1996; and Nutini 1988.

<sup>17</sup> For visual art, the most famous example is the satirical work of José Guadalupe Posada, though artists such as Kahlo, Orozco, and especially Rivera have also featured *muertos* themes in their work. For Mexican literature written in Spanish, see Brodman 1976 for a discussion that includes the works of Paz, Rulfo, Fuentes, Castellanos, and Revueltas, among others.

<sup>18</sup> “The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain, or irony. . . .Our contempt for death is not at odds with the cult we have made of it.” (Paz 1985: 57-58).



While Paz's meditation on "the Mexican view of death" is remarkable for its eloquence, it is but one of a multitude professing the point of view that Mexicans hold a relation to death that is unique, and a distinctive component of Mexican national identity.<sup>19</sup> Day of the Dead is thus seen as epitomizing this view, as well as providing its most complete expression.

The uniqueness of the Mexican view of death as expressed in Day of the Dead is seen in turn as the singular legacy of pre-Conquest Mesoamerican civilizations.<sup>20</sup> The religion of these ancient peoples are perhaps best known for an overwhelming obsession with death, strikingly displayed by a long and richly documented history of ritual human sacrifice.<sup>21</sup> "The Day of the Dead, perhaps more than any other single Mexican ritual," Brandes writes, "is also believed to be either a basically pre-Conquest Indian survival with a European Catholic veneer or a near-seamless fusion of pre-Conquest and Roman Catholic ceremonial practices" (1997: 274). This legacy

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, many scholars have dissented from this point of view ( e.g., Navarrete 1982). However, the point is that these linked beliefs – that Mexicans have a unique relationship to death, and that this forms a central part of national identity – continue to hold enormous popular and intellectual appeal.

<sup>20</sup> As many scholars have pointed out, the mythic valorization of pre-Colombian Mesoamerican societies that has played such a central role in Mexican nationalism has been critical in distinguishing Mexico from Spain, a central dominating force in the country's long history. This is true, of course, of the United States as well.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, ancient Mesoamerican religions are also well known for other features – their sophisticated calendrical systems, for example, or the heavily mythologized pyramids that tourists travel in hordes to visit each year. But as evidenced, for example, by the recent blockbuster movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* (in which the plot turns around a curse-casting trunk of gold Aztec coins, appropriately stamped with stylized skulls, which turn those who steal them into the "living dead"), the Mesoamerican "cult of death" continues to enchant the popular imagination.

is, furthermore, seen as a living one that survives in the modern practices of Mexico's enormous number of indigenous peoples, descendants of the death-obsessed ancient Aztecs, Mayas, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and others. Take, for example, the following view by two scholars of Mexico's Day of the Dead:

It is clear that the beliefs and practices associated with contemporary observance of the fiesta of *Días de los Muertos*, although not a direct and simple survival of a pre-Hispanic ritual, have their roots in the ancient religions of Mesoamerica. . . . However successful the Spanish church may have been in the destruction of state cults, it is apparent on closer scrutiny that much "Catholicism" of contemporary Indian communities is pre-Hispanic in origin, especially the beliefs and customs relating to death and the dead.

*Días de los Muertos* is observed to some degree in all regions of Mexico and by all classes of society, but probably nowhere more elaborately or traditionally than in the state of Oaxaca.<sup>22</sup> Away from the political and economic center of the republic, Oaxaca with its large native population of Zapotec, Mixtec, and other Indian communities has resisted cultural change and maintained a more traditional way of life.

(Childs and Altman 1982: 6-7, 18).

Later, these authors will state that a particular Zapotec practice concerning the afterlife "is, of course, the survival of an ancient pagan belief" (20). One of the most comprehensive academic works on the subject, Nutini's study (1988) of Day of the Dead in rural Tlaxcala, is primarily an ethnographic salvage project, aimed at capturing what is left of the "cult of the dead" before it vanishes in the face of

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<sup>22</sup> This is a widespread attitude about Oaxaca. Most books on Day of the Dead discuss Oaxaca to some extent, and books on the folklore and indigenous cultures of Mexico often focus on Oaxaca in discussing the holiday.

modernization and increasing Catholic orthodoxy. This reveals the underlying supposition that Day of the Dead is, despite the (superficial) imposition of Western Catholic elements, at its (threatened) core a basically pre-Colombian Mesoamerican event.

Of course, such suppositions are problematic, not least because existing historical evidence on the subject is contradictory.<sup>23</sup> However, I am less interested in the debate about the origins of Day of the Dead per se than I am in the wider sociological implications of how they are viewed. Regardless of how the present *muertos* festival came into being, most of the Mazatec people I know view Day of the Dead, despite its obvious innovations, as the annual instantiation of an ancient ancestral ritual. As the *huauteca* Alejandrina García Castañeda wrote in *La Faena*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Brandes is particular has questioned the historical accuracy of the assumption that Day of the Dead is an essentially indigenous celebration surviving from the pre-Colombian era. It is worth noting, though, that this claim is made in the service of his own argument that “this fundamentally Spanish Catholic ritual, which is really a vast collective mortuary rite, . . . developed a unique flavor during the colonial period . . . [due to] the devastating impact of death and suffering during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (1997: 294). It is an interesting argument, and more convincing for its willingness to take the colonial era of indigenous history as seriously as the pre-Colombian one. But such an argument also does not fully address why viewing Day of the Dead as a primordial event continues to have such allure, not least for indigenous people themselves. And as with the arguments it refutes, it raises yet again – though in this case to be slaughtered rather than resurrected -- the immortal ghost of the Authentic Indian who has somehow survived, as if by the pristine magic of cultural cryogenics, from pre-Colombian days to the present.

<sup>24</sup> The monthly magazine *La Faena. Herencia Cultural de los Mazatecos* is “una revista mensual de cultura, etnoturismo, economía, espectáculos, sociales, información general y política.” It had its inaugural issue in February of 2000, shortly before I began my fieldwork. It is the only of its kind in the Mazatec region, and is published mostly in Spanish, with some Mazatec and occasionally a little (broken) English. Unless otherwise noted, texts quoted from the magazine were originally written in Spanish. *La Faena* takes its name from the Spanish word used in the Mazateca for communal labor, usually called *tequio* elsewhere in Mexico and, in Mazatec, *xa<sup>1</sup>va<sup>3</sup>sen<sup>3</sup>* (*xa<sup>1</sup>* (work) + *va<sup>3</sup>sen<sup>3</sup>* (half)), cf. *nd<sup>1</sup>ia<sup>3</sup> va<sup>3</sup>sen<sup>3</sup>* (*ayuntamiento* (town hall)) (*nd<sup>1</sup>ia<sup>3</sup>* (house; building) + *va<sup>3</sup>sen<sup>3</sup>* (half)). Its logo features stylized conch shells, which in the Sierra are blown to summon men for communitarian labor.

about the fiesta and the *huehuentones*<sup>25</sup> at the center of the fiesta, “We know, of course, that the *Huehuentones*. . . existed since centuries past, before Christ” (November 2000, 1(10): 10). Or as an author mentioned in the previous chapter, Heriberto Prado Pereda of Nda Xo, writes, “Although some think that [Day of the Dead] was imposed by the Dominican or Franciscan missionaries as a medium for evangelization, I believe that our fiesta is pre-Hispanic. Of course we know that our ancestors greatly venerated the dead, and that rather than time swallowing this up without a trace we have numberless symbols of this heritage” (2001: 14).

Such beliefs are linked in a number of complex ways, I believe, to views about indigenous peoples that date back to the earliest contact between European colonizers and Amerindians. Specifically, these views are in dialogue with *indigenismo* policies, not only those clearly codified policies of the post-Revolutionary Mexican state but also those of its colonial and Independence-era precursors. Such policies sought to analyze or define the role of indigenous peoples in the social collectivity, particularly in relation to non-natives. Obviously, though, these policies, for all the nuance of even their benign proponents (e.g., Las Casas), were written from the perspective of non-natives and were conceived in terms of the concerns of non-indigenous sectors of society.

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<sup>25</sup> *Huehuenton* comes from the Nahuatl (“little old man”) and refers to the old ones or ancestors in whose honor the *muertos* fiesta takes place. The term appears to be used as such, as part of Day of the Dead, much more widely in the Mazateca than elsewhere. Although *huehuenton* is the most common spelling of the term in the Sierra, elsewhere it is most commonly spelled *huehueton*, without the medial “n.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, Mexico as a nation has now – and has had historically – a deeply ambivalent relationship to its indigenous peoples. Attitudes towards Day of the Dead, official and popular alike, exhibit this ambivalence. On the one hand, Day of the Dead has a unique relationship to Mexican nationalism, as a highly visible and canonically Mexican event. And yet on the other hand it is marked as distinctly indigenous, albeit in a very circumscribed sense. For the inclusion of indigenous peoples in the Mexican nation has often been on symbolic – which is to say, stipulated and selective – terms, such that indigenous people are licensed to participate in larger Mexican society on strategically controlled terms. These terms not only privilege the ancient past of Mesoamerican peoples over their present, but are also partial in their celebration of present indigenous cultures, cultures whose assertion of difference poses no great threat to modernity, whose departure from norms of national identity is confined to certain themes or certain times of the year.

Perhaps no single site exhibits the ambivalence with which Mexico regards its indigenous people as clearly as does the National Museum of Anthropology and History.<sup>26</sup> The grand first floor of the museum is taken up with a history and taxonomy of Mexico's pre-Columbian civilizations, complete with exquisite artifacts and dramatic dioramas depicting images of the country's glorious past. At the center of these exhibits are the displays of Aztec society, with the famous Aztec Stone of the

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<sup>26</sup> The Museum has been critiqued by a number of scholars. Among the most important are Paz (1972) and Lomnitz (2001).

Sun (mistakenly labeled the Aztec Calendar), long-time symbol of the Mexican nation, occupying the central place of honor -- the crown jewel of Mexico's ancient wealth. Leaving aside the "Mexico City-centered account of the history of power in Mexico" (Lomnitz 2001: 226) embodied in the Museum's ground floor layout, the Museum also has an entire second floor that many visitors to the museum never even see; indeed, many guidebooks barely mention it, and photographs of the museum's treasures rarely include anything from that part of the museum. That floor is dedicated to Mexico's modern indigenous populations; it is a floor full of dusty displays in small rooms with low ceilings, replete with all manner of "folklore" (costumes, dances, fiestas and rituals, music, oral literature, and the like), and whatever richness is to be found there is much diminished compared to the magnificence imparted to the peoples displayed on the first floor. The small Mazatec exhibit features a female manikin in a Sierra *huipil* – a style of dress that a decade or two ago would have been worn by most women but today only a very few old women wear such clothing for anything other than special occasions. Echoing in the background, a recording of the most famous woman to wear such a *huipil*, the shaman María Sabina, chants away years after her death. Yet this woman who has become the symbol of all Mazatec people was elevated to such a status not by Mazatecs themselves, not even by other Mexicans, but by an American researcher, R. Gordon Wasson, who claimed her story was important because it added a "fundamental chapter to the cultural history of primitive man" (Wasson 1983: 10).

Not surprisingly, some of the displays from the second floor of the Museum, particularly those of Oaxacan peoples, feature displays about Day of the Dead -- for *muertos* is perhaps the folkloric manifestation *par excellence* of indigeneity in Mexico.<sup>27</sup> It thus constitutes a very special – and profoundly uneasy – site at which practices construed as traditionally indigenous intersect with those conceived of as typically Mexican (and, therefore, mestizo).<sup>28</sup> As such, Day of the Dead represents both a co-optation of indigenous beliefs and practices, as they are pressed into the service of nationalist agendas, and a successful containment of such practices as they are confined to circumscribed realms: a single time of the year, a restricted range of licensed practices.

Such ideas about the terms on which displays of indigenous identity are allowable promote ideas like that of Alejandrina García Castañeda, above: it becomes acceptable to enact the *huehuentones* during *muertos* because in so doing one breathes life again, on safely temporary terms, into an ancient Mesoamerican past, too remote from the present to be threatening. “Folkloric” practices such as those

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<sup>27</sup> A less cynical view of the relative importance of Day of the Dead nationally is also possible, and not incompatible with the above. If Day of the Dead is a potent national symbol of the country’s surviving Indian heritage, part of its appeal and traction is that it is at once ethical and nationalistic: Mexico, unlike almost all other Latin American countries, had a Revolution, a massive popular movement meant to “deal with” its indigenous peoples rather than, as in parts of South America, for example, merely killing them off. Indeed, it was this ethical “promise” made by the Revolution to Mexico’s indigenous peoples – a promise that, after nearly a century of PRI autocracy and corruption, was centrally at issue in the Zapatista rebellion.

<sup>28</sup> A relevant issue here that is nevertheless beyond the scope of this study is the role Day of the Dead has played over time in the ongoing and contested construction of Mexican nationalism in the Mexican – and international – public sphere. Lomnitz’s recent work (2001 and 2005) provides brilliant analyses of the subject.

attached to Day of the Dead are thus perceived as not unlike the items in the second floor gallery of the National Museum: they are perishable celebrations in which the community dusts off the remnants of the past, embodying them for the time being only, dressing itself in its ancestral folklore as one would *huipiles* or *calzones*<sup>29</sup> that, once the fiesta is over, will be abandoned once again for the visible trappings of modernity, the Western, factory-produced clothing of everyday life. The altars and masks and musical instruments will be consigned once again to the margins, to a fixed and frozen place in Mexican cultural history.

And yet, in practice, the boundaries between the past and the present, between folklore and “folk practice,” are rarely so hermetically sealed. While national discourses may find recognizable echoes at the local level, they often meet various and unexpected fates there as well, as they leave the control of national policy makers and promoters -- which include, as Gramsci reminds us, a great number of “organic intellectuals.” For celebrating the enactment of past tradition as something more than merely an academic exercise, as practices that are instead embraced across a broad swath of the community, also means importing at least some permeability to individuality on the one hand and to present practices and beliefs on the other, including in both cases those that refuse to restrict themselves to essentialized and authorized representations of the past. The disjuncture between the ancient context in which, for example, Day of the Dead activities ostensibly unfolded and the present

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<sup>29</sup> These are pants of *manta* (white homespun cotton). They are for men the equivalent of *huipiles* for women: traditional clothing now worn daily only by elderly men, or by other men for special



one in which they are reincarnated – an environment of Protestants and plastic masks and cassette tapes – is thus a space that lends itself to innovation and newness, in which tradition can become recast in the clothing of modernity and modernity can be harnessed to recovery of tradition. Furthermore, once entire communities are involved in celebrations and enactments of the ancient past, the matter of what constitutes authentic representation of that past becomes subject to debate. If at its core “the Indian problem” turns on how the nation chooses to manage its ambivalence about its indigenous peoples, “the Indian problem” takes on a new character when viewed from the perspective of indigenous communities like Nda Xo. The echoes, distortions and oppositions to national discourses about indigeneity – responses at least some indigenous people have had to “the Indian problem” – are part of what this ethnography seeks to explore.

*Fiesta of the Spirits, a la Mazateca:  
Welcoming the Cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>*

Like most indigenous or minority peoples, Mazatecs find ways to negotiate these tensions between tradition and the innovations of modernity on terms that are inflected by local ideas about identity on the one hand, and regional, national, even international ones on the other. In other words, Mazatecs negotiate indigenous

identity on terms whose ambivalence is animated by the very sorts of pressures that animate the tension between tradition and modernity. This in and of itself is not unique, for it mirrors the situation of indigenous groups throughout the country, as they navigate the conflicts between cultural continuity and innovation, both among the generations and across the geographic-discursive continuum from local to national and beyond. What is interesting, however, is how Mazatecs work through the relevant conflicts by calling upon their relations to the dead and the fiesta in their honor as a vital resource.

In Mesoamerica the two main community-wide holidays in most indigenous areas are Semana Santa (Holy Week) and Day of the Dead.<sup>30</sup> In the Sierra Mazateca, unquestionably the most important fiesta is Day of the Dead.<sup>31</sup> Unlike most areas, where Day of the Dead is basically a one- or two-day event, in the Sierra Mazateca it lasts nine days<sup>32</sup> and, importantly, nights. It is famous regionally even among the indigenous communities that surround it and have their own Day of the Dead fiestas of which to be proud. It is also widely considered, by locals and outsiders alike, to be not only the Sierra's most "colorful" fiesta but also its most traditional. Most of the

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, many other seasonal and life cycle celebrations are equally if not more important in many ways, but they are usually not celebrated by whole communities as such, but rather by largely kin-based subsets thereof.

<sup>31</sup> In fact, in the Sierra, Semana Santa is a fairly minor event. In the Mazateca Baja, however, Semana Santa is considerably more important, and in some communities (e.g., Soyaltepec Island, inside the dam) it is the central holiday.

<sup>32</sup> Local discourse generally claims the fiesta lasts ten days, but it actually lasts nine: November 27<sup>th</sup> – December 5<sup>th</sup>. In some Sierra communities it is a day or two shorter because they "break the piñatas" before the 5<sup>th</sup>.

explicit ideology surrounding the fiesta underscores its link to the past generally, and specifically to dead relatives and ancestors. The various names by which the fiesta is called in Mazatec suggest as much: *s'oi<sup>1</sup>k'en<sup>4</sup>* (“fiesta of the spirits” or “fiesta of the dead”), *s'oi<sup>1</sup>chi<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>jchi<sup>1</sup>nga<sup>3</sup>* (“fiesta of the ancestors”), *s'oi<sup>1</sup>cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* (“fiesta of the black men”)<sup>33</sup>, *s'oi<sup>1</sup>cha<sup>1</sup>xo<sup>3</sup>'o<sup>3</sup>* (“fiesta of the umbilical cord men” -- i.e., men who are tied to the land by their umbilical cords, who spring forth from the belly of the land)<sup>34</sup>. This final meaning has a double sense – that the *cha<sup>1</sup>xo<sup>3</sup>'o<sup>3</sup>* both arise from the earth and return from it, as the place they “live” when they are not with the living – which is echoed in discursive conventions used to refer the dead, “*los señores que vienen del ombligo del mundo*” (“men who come from the navel of the earth”) (Prado Pereda 2001: 14).

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<sup>33</sup> *Cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* (*cha<sup>1</sup>* [man, person] + *jma<sup>2</sup>* [black]), or *los negritos* (“the black men”), calls to mind *negritos* who take on the role of the quintessential other in various folk festivals throughout Mexico -- and, indeed, Latin America. Huanuco, Peru is famous for its “Danza de los Negritos” which, like those of the Totonac region of Mexico, are said to be linked to the presence of African slaves. Local lore surrounding Yalálag’s “Danza de los Negritos,” the town’s most important fiesta dance, is that it dates from a night in the eighteenth century when Yalalteco merchants en route to Guatemala were forced to spend the night in Chiapas’s Lancandón Rainforest and were wakened in the night by dancing cannibals playing music on bones. Yalálag’s Taller de Lengua y Tradición Zapoteca, however, makes the questionable claim that the dance stems from adoration by Yalalteco traders and pilgrims of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Guatemala (*Uken ke Uken* archives).

As Bricker (1981) discusses about the Maya, dances and ritual dramas introduced by the Spanish that featured conflicts between Christians and Moors became reinterpreted locally in terms of traditional enemies. In the Mazatec region, I never heard the Spanish gloss used unless a translation was requested, and even then was often translated as “*viejitos*,” “*antepasados*,” etc.; *Cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* are always represented as old people or ancestors and never in black face (or black animal face), as is done in the cases above. Thus the “othering” invoked by the name *Cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* is more ambivalent, marking not political or cultural difference but that of existence itself: the dead as set apart from the living.

<sup>34</sup> A traditional practice, now falling into some disuse, is to bury the umbilical cord of a new baby next to the house, symbolizing the child’s tie to his or her place of birth. As one Mazatec commented, when asked where he was from, “I’m from right here. My umbilical cord is buried here.”

As is standard in Mexican indigenous communities, the fiesta includes the making of altars to the dead<sup>35</sup> and long, familial visits to the graveyard to burn copal incense, make offerings, bring flowers<sup>36</sup>, and light candles<sup>37</sup>. It is also a holiday full of smaller events involving family and *compadres*; these celebrations are centered on food, above all the making and serving of *mole* for which family chickens are killed. This part of the fiesta is particularly important in the Sierra because, as the region's most important holiday, it is the time of the year when people who have migrated out of the Sierra are most likely to come home and visit family, both dead and living.

However, the most distinctive and uniquely Mazatec<sup>38</sup> part of the fiesta is the way it revolves around ritually enacting a visit from the ancestors, for whom it is said

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<sup>35</sup> Starting in 2002, Nda Xo began an altar contest for Day of the Dead, in part a response to the overwhelming popularity of the song contest. So far it has not attracted more than a few entries, but it is interesting for the ways in which it attempts to further, in a different expressive medium, some of the same agendas – while encountering many of the same tensions – that animate the song contest. It may also prove an interesting arena for the increased participation of women. In general, women tend to be more heavily involved in altar construction than men. On the other hand, women's participation in the song contest -- and in most of the specific practices it draws on from the fiesta itself -- has remained quite limited.

<sup>36</sup> Especially *naxo ngojo*, “flower of the dead” (*naxo* (flower) + *ngojo* (hole, grave)), which is known in Mexico by the Nahuatl word *zempoalxochitl* (*zempazuchitl*) and in English as golden marigolds.

<sup>37</sup> In the Sierra, once the candles are lit, they become tied in a direct way to the dead being honored, such that they require careful vigilance. If a candle burns all the way down, the dead person will be burned, and so must be extinguished before then. This must be accomplished not by blowing out the candle but by snuffing it out with a flower; I do not know whether these beliefs are common elsewhere in Mexico. Wasson mentions María Sabina doing this in his first famous article about *veladas* (1957); in a typically exoticizing move, he later wrote that that very gesture, taking place at the beginning of the *velada*, casts the room into darkness and from that point forward “the proceedings take place, pagan-fashion, on the floor, the habitual practice of the American Indian” (1980: xxii).

<sup>38</sup> A few other groups in Mexico also feature ritualized house-to-house dancing; such as some Chatino communities in southern Oaxaca (see Greenberg 1981). It appears that in none of them, though, does this ritual dancing feature so prominently, last for so many days, and involve so completely such a wide portion of the community.

that the year between fiestas passes as just one day: the holiday is thus, in this deeper sense, the Day of the Dead, the one metaphorical “day” when the dead will commune with the living before going away again until the following year.

In the Sierra, musical performance plays a key role in representing the ancestors. From dusk to dawn for all nine nights of the fiesta, groups of musicians and men in disguise<sup>39</sup> – the *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* or *cha<sup>1</sup>xo<sup>3</sup>'o<sup>3</sup>*, or *huehuentones* -- go from house to house dancing and singing, symbolically embodying the arrival of the dead. The musicians and dancers from each group go to the graveyard on the first day of the fiesta, where they disguise themselves as the ancestors. Upon leaving the cemetery, they ring the church bell in order to signify their arrival, before proceeding to sing and dance in individual homes.<sup>40</sup> In return, the people in the houses offer them bread (especially *pan de muertos*<sup>41</sup>), *xan<sup>1</sup>* (*aguardiente*, cane liquor), beer, *ncha<sup>2</sup>* (*atole*, a

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<sup>39</sup> This part of Day of the Dead is highly gendered. The musicians are almost entirely male: adult men, male youths, and some boys; often they are the male members of a single extended family. The dancers, also, are almost exclusively men, generally youths and young men who have not yet married. Because the dancers are disguised, some women do try to pass themselves off as men. It is considered a bit dangerous, though, for women to do this: the disguises, the often heavy drinking, and the festive and nocturnal nature of the occasion all contribute to a sense that the men embodying the *huehuentones* are not as controlled by social propriety as they would be in daylight, in their ordinary lives. Thus women who dance as *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* usually go with male relatives or *compadres* who can “watch over” them.

<sup>40</sup> Most people open their houses to the *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>*, although some families – particularly Protestants – will not. Knowing this, most *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* groups simply avoid those houses, although, for whatever groups do on occasion find themselves playing outside homes to which the door is never opened. Even Protestants, though, participate in other parts of the, including the breaking of the piñatas.

<sup>41</sup> “Bread of the dead,” a special, anise-flavored bread often shaped to resemble the dead.

corn drink) and *ncha<sup>21</sup>san<sup>3</sup>* (*atole agrio*<sup>42</sup>), *ch'oin<sup>1</sup>* (*chayote*, a seasonal vegetable), cacao, oranges, cigarettes, firecrackers, beeswax candles, sweets, hot cocoa – any of the various special foods and drinks that are also placed on the altars to the dead. Because most must of these items must also be bought they are luxury goods which many families can afford only on special occasions.<sup>43</sup> During daylight on the last day of the fiesta, the groups of *huehuentones* return to the homes where they have been welcomed more than once, playing music and dancing for a final time. This time they are given piñatas – not the papier-mâché kind one can purchase in any urban market in Mexico, but ones homemade from old or broken crockery (which are much more dramatic when broken than cardboard ones), filled with candy or fruit and covered with colored tissue paper. After the groups of *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* have finished visiting houses they go to the basketball court at the center of town, between the *palacio municipal* and the church. There they string up the piñatas one by one and bring members of the audience, blindfolded, out to swing at the piñatas, to the great delight of the kids, who rush in to beat each other to the spoils. Once the piñatas are all broken, around dusk, the *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* leave the way they came: they ring the church bell on their way to the cemetery where, after a few sad songs saying goodbye to the ancestors until the year to come, they take off their disguises. They leave the

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<sup>42</sup> This is a slightly fermented form of *atole*. It is served with a light topping of black beans and a special sauce made of ground chili peppers and sesame seeds. It is a ritual food, labor-intensive to make, and is served on most special occasions (weddings especially), and always for Day of the Dead.

<sup>43</sup> Note that these items don't include those most commonly found in urban Day of the Dead celebrations (on which popular conceptions of the holiday in the United States are based): strings of

graveyard<sup>44</sup>, heading home as members of the living once again, and the fiesta formally ends.<sup>45</sup>

The notion of the fiesta being a bastion of old traditions is a sentiment constantly mirrored in its explicit ideology. This includes, on the one hand, pride in the way the fiesta, Mazatec style, is longer and more elaborate than it is elsewhere in Mexico, where “the Indians of other tribes” don’t take as much care and aren’t as sustained in their celebration of the ancestors. On the other hand, explicit ideologies about the fiesta involve claims that Day of the Dead is the central holiday of the year, an event whose importance derives largely from the fact that it is the one time when

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tissue paper cutouts, special candles decorated with foil and ribbons, skeleton toys, and, above all, sugar skulls.

<sup>44</sup> During the fiesta, the social boundaries around the graveyard are perhaps particularly fluid, but during the rest of the year people in Nda Xo are careful to delimit the liminal, other-ized space that cemeteries occupy. Graveyards are ambivalent spaces: the resting place of the loved ones now gone, they are also places of danger where the living expose themselves to the power of “bad airs” and harmful spirits. To a person, everyone I met in Nda Xo – Protestants and Catholics, poor and wealthy, traditionalist or modernist – held some version of these beliefs about graveyards. Their outward expression takes the form of a practice I routinely saw people engage in when returning from the cemetery: lighting copal incense or redolent leaves like laurel and bathing oneself in the smoke.

<sup>45</sup> The traditional part of Day of the Dead does indeed end there; that evening, for the first night in nine, the musicians do not play and the night is disquietingly quiet. As one woman said to me during my first muertos in the Sierra, “That night you won’t hear a sound. It’s very sad.” Recently, however, Nda Xo and other Sierra towns have begun bringing in rock bands from Oaxaca or other nearby cities to play concerts the evening that the fiesta ends. These concerts stand in stark contrast to the character of the fiesta itself: the music is loud, amplified through loudspeakers and people dance as couples in front of the band. These concerts have received a mixed response: more traditional members of the community find them either irrelevant or offensive, a violation of the spirit of the fiesta, while young people have generally greeted the concerts with enthusiasm.

An interesting occurrence at one such concert suggests, however, that the generational divide might not be as great as it sometimes seems. The audience was made up almost entirely of young people, particularly young men, who are among the most enthusiastic users of whistle speech (which is highly gendered: only men actually whistle, though women do understand whistle speech). Between two songs, the bandleader called out something to the effect of “Chilchotla, let me hear you cheer!” The audience responded by whistling. The bandleader repeated his plea and again was greeted by whistling. “Okay!” he said. “I guess people in Chilchotla don’t know how to cheer.”

Mazatecs are faithful to tradition, to the ways of the past. As one Mazatec writer says of those who fail to observe *muertos*, “*El que deja de hacer eso, deja de ser indígena*” (“He who fails to do that ceases to be indigenous”) (Prado Pereda 2001: 15). While this ideology is perhaps particularly explicit and elaborate among members of the educated elites who are most interested in cultural revitalization, it is also, importantly, true of those who are not indigenous intellectuals, such as the many Mazatec musicians.

At the same time, though, this fiesta has also been the forum for some of the Sierra’s more interesting social innovations, in part precisely because it attracts such interest from across almost all groups of Mazatecs -- especially the young people who play such a crucial role in perpetuating (or eliminating) cultural practices. This has especially been the case with the music that features so prominently in Day of the Dead festivities. One of the most visible – or, actually, audible – features of quotidian life in the Sierra Mazateca is the nearly ubiquitous presence of Mazatec music: songs sung in Mazatec, in the general style of the music for Day of the Dead, by the same groups of musicians who perform nightly during the fiesta. Few homes are without at least a cassette or two despite their expense (each one costs more than the average daily wage for men working as agricultural peons), and the music from these tapes blasts day and night from cars, shops, public buildings, and private homes. Nearly every village, even the very small ones, has at least one group of musicians, and most of them are headed by a man who writes his own songs in Mazatec and



aspires to produce, if he has not already, a cassette tape of his music. These tapes are, however, a recent phenomenon, having emerged only in the last twenty years. And though the musical tradition and the customs by which it is performed are much older, the composition and performance of songs in Mazatec is as recent as the cassettes, particularly that of individually authored songs.

The emergence of this “new tradition” is directly tied to the founding of the annual Day of the Dead song contest<sup>46</sup>, one of the most interesting and potent cultural innovations of recent decades in the Sierra. The first contest was held more than twenty years ago in the *cabecera* of Nda Xo. The contest is a prime example of “ethnofolklorization”: a canonically Durkheimian representation of “Mazatec culture” is displayed for members of it, on terms that are explicitly and reflexively ideologized as such. In other words, while tourists and other “outsiders” may be present, these particular displays of codified culture – if you will, metaculture (Urban 2001), or cultural ideas about culture – are not for them but rather for “insiders,” for the very people who are the subject of the cultural meta-commentary. Thus the core of the contest is a celebration of Mazatec traditions and provides a forum for the emphasis of Mazatec cultural history and social continuity. Yet the framework within which these traditions are put on display and, indeed, the very act by which “Mazatec

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<sup>46</sup> There may be one musical precedent in the Sierra for the contest. I could find no other mention of this in the scholarly literature, but Weitlaner and Hoppe (1967: 521) claim that an “aesthetic manifestation” of Mazatec culture is “their love of music, and almost all towns have at least one band. In the principal fiestas bands from neighboring towns get together to compete.” Regarding his visit to Huautla, Starr (1908) also mentions the importance of the town band.

tradition” becomes essentialized as such are innovations in intricate dialogue with contemporary pressures and influences. And, furthermore, the contest – and even the entire fiesta it inaugurates – is a point of entry by which modern (and post-modern) themes and concerns brush up against this overwhelming preoccupation with the Mazatec past, therein constructing a dynamic Mazatec future.

***The Contest and its History: “Ethnofolklore”  
and the Beginnings of a Mazatec Literature***

The contest for one of the *muertos* fiestas I observed, in the fall of 2002, marked the twentieth anniversary of the first Day of the Dead song contest held in Nda Xo. As it was conceived from the beginning as a vehicle for both the promotion of literacy and the advancement of linguistic and cultural revitalization, its history is intimately tied to the history of both education and ethnic relations in the region and in Mexico generally.

Two of the central figures in the genesis of the contest are the half-brothers we met in the previous chapter, Heriberto and Alberto Prado, authors of the two texts about the apparition of Mary Magdalene, who appeared at the spring in Nda Xo. Their particular history will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter; the background information relevant here is that both, as young men, were studying to

become priests. During their training, they were actively involved in Church activities in Nda Xo, including outreach aimed at increasing the participation by local Sierra people in Church practices. Of these, the one whose legacy has been most enduring involved the introduction -- or, more precisely, the invention, as no such tradition previously existed -- of Mazatec-language songs. As Alberto would later write in *La Faena*:

It was a rainy afternoon in 1970, when, sitting in the corridor of the rectory of the church [of Chilchotla], the priest Nahún Pérez Carlos, with his words, lit the fire. He commented that the people hardly participated in the masses, their fuller participation was needed and something should be done about it. So he asked Heriberto Prado Pereda to translate the songs in Spanish into Mazatec. Heriberto went about the translations, but argued that when they were translated faithfully the songs lost their meaning, and so he suggested creating his own songs in Mazatec. Nahún welcomed the idea and Heriberto began work on the songs.

That's how the first Mazatec mass came to be, with songs that were quickly being sung throughout the entire Mazateca. . . .From there, more masses followed [10 in all]. . . .

In 1980, we realized that the most important fiesta of the Mazatecs was being lost (Todos Santos). At that time, someone would play a violin, accompanied by a guitar and the teponaxtle<sup>47</sup>, and the men in masks would just say "Cha-só-o, Cha-so-o-To-limón [sic]."<sup>48</sup> So there was an urgent need to revive our customs. The idea, then, was to organize the first Concurso de Los Huehuentones. . . .

For that reason, we formed a committee called "Comité pro-Rescate de la Cultura Mazateca" [Committee for the Revival of

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<sup>47</sup> The *teponaxtle* is the traditional log drum of the Mexica and other groups, hollowed out from the bottom and with an H-shaped slit cut into its top. The drum is sounded by striking the two resulting tongues with mallets.

<sup>48</sup> Again, *Cha<sup>1</sup>xo<sup>3</sup>'o<sup>3</sup>* means, literally, "umbilical cord man"/ "men" (Mazatec nouns are almost never marked for number), i.e., men who are tied to the land by their umbilical cords, who spring forth from the belly of the land. *To-limon* (*lima*, a citrus fruit common in Mexico) would refer to a place name, the place the particular dancers and musicians are from.

Mazatec Culture; CIPRECMA], whose members were Heriberto Prado Pereda, Alberto Prado, Celiflora Prado, Teodoro Zaragoza, Librado Carrera, Eulogio García y Jovita de la Cruz, but whose goal was always that all the people would become active in the Catholic Church.

...

That first contest attracted a great deal of attention, because the people began to realize that with our mother tongue it was possible to work wonders composing songs. In actuality, Chilchotla is the cradle of the composers, the municipio whose songs have become the most widespread. It was an example to be followed, because many communities throughout the municipio of Chilchotla also hold their own Todos Santos contests every year, as well as other municipios across the Sierra.

(*La Faena* 1(10, November 2000): 14)

What is left out of this account is the fact that the genesis of the song contest was linked not only to a desire to revitalize *s'oi<sup>1</sup>k'en<sup>4</sup>* (*Todos Santos*, or Day of the Dead) – the most Mazatec of holidays, the locus of “Mazatecness.” The contest was also conceptualized as a vehicle for further stimulating Mazatec literacy, on which the spread of Heriberto’s songs for the Church largely depended. Out of frustration with what existing orthographies there were for Sierra Mazatec,<sup>49</sup> Heriberto had devised his own orthography for writing the lyrics of his songs. A somewhat idiosyncratic system (it uses upper case letters to indicate nasalization, for example),<sup>50</sup> it was nevertheless very successful as a practical orthography.

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<sup>49</sup> For reasons that will be discussed further in Chapter Five, the SIL – which played a critical role in the development of indigenous language orthographies and literacy elsewhere in Mexico – had little impact on such matters in Nda Xo.

<sup>50</sup> The text excerpted at the beginning of the next chapter appears in the orthography Heriberto devised; nasalization is indicated by the capital letters M, N, and Ñ.

However, the fact that he relied on written texts, and furthermore ones in a self-devised orthography, meant that the issue of literacy was foregrounded from the beginning: in the process of teaching his new songs to people he invariably wound up teaching his alphabet at the same time. This was further underscored once the Church began publishing his songs and disseminating them throughout the region. The intended audience for these songs was huge – essentially all Mazatecs, with the exception of the relatively few Protestants; however, its members, if literate at all, were literate only in Spanish. The songs were designed for use in formal masses as well as in the catechist-led substitute for them celebrated in the vast number of rural communities that do not have a resident priest. In such communities, the majority of the Church’s local operations – holding weekly services, carrying out the Church’s routine activities, arranging for the priest to come for special events – are left to the catechists to carry out; priests thus come for special occasions only. And in both formal masses and services directed by catechists, anything in Mazatec, including the songs, has to be led by locals – i.e., catechists -- since none of the priests (except Heriberto, when he was a priest) speak Mazatec. Furthermore, the catechist’s “job” requires not only basic understanding of and literacy in Spanish, as he (or she) would be called on to give a translation of the priest’s homily and read and translate verses from the Bible. Also necessary were basic musical skills -- the ability to sing and to play the guitar or violin -- since he or she would need to be able to lead the people in

singing. As a result of both their literacy and musical skills, catechists<sup>51</sup> were key intermediaries in the process of reaching the larger audience of Mazatec speakers.

Teaching literacy in Mazatec thus became critical. Heriberto, along with Alberto and others, held workshops across the region to teach the songs to people, especially catechists, while also teaching Mazatec literacy. The contest was conceived as a way to further this education process. It provided further incentive to the catechists (and others) to learn the new Mazatec songs for the Church, while at the same time encouraging them to use those new skills to produce songs of their own.

In discussing the contest with me, Heriberto himself frequently referred to the contest as “hitting two birds with one stone.” By this he meant that it assisted people in learning the orthography he designed for his songs and at the same time encouraged them to participate more fully in the larger project by writing songs themselves. Furthermore, these twin goals were linked, at a higher level, to another pair of goals: promoting more active involvement with the Church while also valorizing “Mazatec culture.” As Heriberto wrote in one of his books, the aim is to “revalorize our culture” because the musicians of the area “*ya no tocan canciones autóctonas*<sup>52</sup>” (they no longer play autochthonous songs; Prado Pereda 1993). The

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<sup>51</sup> Though most catechists are men there are also women catechists, and at least one woman has written Mazatec songs for the Church. However, because of the highly gendered nature of the Day of the Dead fiesta in the Sierra -- women participate openly in the evening visits by the *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* only as hostesses in homes -- almost no women are involved in composing songs for the contest or, consequently, for wider circulation on cassettes.

<sup>52</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, “*autóctona*” (autochthonous) has a specific meaning to him which derives from Liberation Theology.

contest was critically important not only in spreading literacy in Mazatec to at least key members of every community in the Sierra, but also in providing the impetus for what was to become a burgeoning language revitalization movement.



The contest is held every year on October 27<sup>th</sup>, the first day of the fiesta. It features a main competition for adults, and for the first time in 2002 a children's division was added. Though the contest in Nda Xo proper is still by far the largest, with more than a hundred participants and a huge crowd of spectators, there are now "spin-offs" in other communities throughout the sierra, held on other days of the fiesta. These contests feature groups of musicians who, along with groups of *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* dancers, present new songs in Mazatec which they hope will place among the top five entries, which earn cash prizes. Some groups enter more than one song, although they must pay a separate entry fee for each song.

The song itself is the core of each entry, and a written version (of the words only<sup>53</sup>) must be submitted in advance. As most of the composers learned to write using Heriberto's orthography, his is the most widely used. However, there are also others, which complicates matters for the judges: the alphabet used in governmental

publications, especially in the Sierra's bilingual schools; the orthography used by Huautla intellectuals, particularly those trained in a special ethnolinguistics program (which will be discussed in Chapter Six); and, most confusingly of all, self-devised alphabets devised by individual authors, which may be inconsistent and/or borrow from the other orthographies. Generally, a member of the group, most often its leader, composes the song. In some cases, though, the author will be an "independent composer,"<sup>54</sup> a man who writes songs in Mazatec but does not have his own group of *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>*.

But equally important is how the song is performed. The number of musicians is usually about six or seven: at least one guitar or *guitarrón* and sometimes more, a goatskin drum, a *teponaxtle*, almost always a violin or two, and sometimes smaller instruments like tambourines, rasps, or triangles. Most of the musicians also sing, except those playing violins. In addition to the musicians, each group of *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* also has a group of dancers; with extremely few exceptions, both musicians and dancers are male. The basic dance step itself is a simple, repetitive step on the downbeat from one foot to the other; it is, after all, a step the *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* will make thousands of times over the course of an evening, and children are taught to do the step from the time they can walk. And so as long as one is "in the ballpark" of

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<sup>53</sup> None of the composers I interviewed knew how to read (let alone write) music.

<sup>54</sup> Alberto Prado, for example, has not had his own *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* group for some years. However, he generally enters at least one song in each contest, often for *Cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup> Centro*, a group from Nda Xo's *cabecera* which is wildly popular with the *cabecera*'s young men but does not have an active composer.



the right kind of dancing, the focus – both in the contest and in regular nightly festivities during *muertos* – is not on the dancing itself but rather on the costume, and, in the contest, on how dancers enact themes from the song.

Again, this normally involves presenting to the audience an essentialization of Mazatec culture. These dances feature symbols and practices explicitly marked as traditional, such as women in *huipiles*<sup>55</sup> and men in *calzones*, shamans using mushrooms in *veladas*, women entering a *ndo<sup>4</sup>ya<sup>3</sup>* (*temascal*, a ritual/medicinal steambath) after childbirth, and people worshipping the sun. Some of the dance presentations are quite elaborate; more unusual “props” used in recent years have included corn stalks, *metates* (which are heavy), gorilla suits, piglets, and small trees. When the *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* appear as *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* – i.e., as stylized representations of the ancestors, the dead – they do so in different costumes than those many of them actually use in their nightly visits to homes, which generally rely heavily on Western, mass-produced clothing.<sup>56</sup> Rather, they appear in what has come to be codified as

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<sup>55</sup>The dancers are trading on the extent to which the *huipil* has become a powerful emblem of “Mazatec tradition.” The *huipil* – with cross-stitched embroidery of flowers, birds, and deer, atop wide alternating ribbons on fuchsia and blue – is also widely prized for its beauty and symbolism. Examples of it are staples in tourist shops in Oaxaca and Mexico City, and one was worn often by the Mexican artist (and great *artesanía*-phile) Frida Kahlo. Although a few women, in Huautla especially, now make a living selling *huipiles*, only a few old women wear them for everyday use – women like María Sabina, who wore one all her life, and whose fame made the Sierra *huipil* (or a woman wearing one, at least) a national and international symbol of “the Mazatec people” and of (mystical) indigenous Mexican culture more generally. Most women, though, like the woman who blessed the Pope (see Chapter Four), wear them only on special occasions – their own weddings, above all, but also if they happen to take a particularly public or symbolic role in a fiesta or other ritual event.

<sup>56</sup> Feinberg (2003: 110) claims the *huehuentones* “must not wear a stitch of their own clothing – all the clothes are borrowed from someone else.” In my experience, though people do spend the entire fiesta swapping clothes (the better to disguise oneself), no one expressed any prohibition of this sort on wearing one’s own clothes.

their “traditional” form: in *calzones* and white manta shirts; in huaraches or, better yet, barefoot, rather than Western shoes; in handmade wooden masks, rather than papier-mâché or rubber ones; and in sombreros woven from branches of the *jonote* (a kind of tropical linden tree), handmade in the lowlands in whimsical shapes<sup>57</sup> with wide brims and exaggerated, pointy tops.

However, in part because young and unmarried men are among the most active participants – some of whom will have returned from nearby towns and cities, where they gone for work or schooling -- many such performances articulate with modern themes. The 2001 contest, occurring a little over a month after the September 11th attacks, included such an entry, which went on to win third place. It featured a song about Bin Laden, complete with airplanes crashing into buildings, Uzi-toting Arabs, exploding bombs, and an enraged President Bush being consoled by Mexican President Vicente Fox.<sup>58</sup> That same year, another group featured an accordion player for the first time, which though a staple of Mexican folk music only rarely surfaces in the Sierra. Rubber masks have also become increasingly common. Political figures such as Bush, Fox, and Fidel Castro are favorites, as are masks with the ghoulish themes common to Halloween; in 2002 a man who dressed like a mummy was an especially big hit.

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<sup>57</sup> Some claim that these hats are meant to evoke the shape of mushrooms.

<sup>58</sup> Among the *cha<sup>1</sup>xo<sup>3</sup>'o<sup>3</sup>* dancing house to house that year there were a number of Bin Ladens who – because I was the only non-Mexican at the fiesta (and an American to boot) – liked to take occasional jesting potshots at me with their plastic guns, to great general amusement.

The introduction of modern themes does meet with resistance, however, and the tension between innovation and tradition plays out in how the contest is judged – not only by the official judges but also the “informal” ones: audience members and participants alike. The criteria by which entries are formally judged has shifted across the years and from one community to the other; no official records are kept of the contest from one year to the next, even in Nda Xo, making it difficult to make specific comments on the judging process.<sup>59</sup> However, the general criteria seem to be the quality of the lyrics (including the written version), the quality of the musical performance, the quality of the dance “presentation” (especially the dancers’ costumes and what they do on stage to enact the song), and originality. Thus there is no specific category for how “traditional” the entry is, and the emphasis on originality actually pushes at times in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, a traditionalist ideology pervades discourses about the contest, and people explicitly valorize entries that represent and pay homage to “Mazatec culture,” to the ways of the ancestors. The following excerpt from an article in the Oaxaca state newspaper written about Huautla’s 2005 contest captures the conflict between tradition and modernity particularly well:

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<sup>59</sup> In fact, one year I “rescued” the contest’s written entries from being used as toilet paper, but not before some had been made into papier-mâché masks.

Pablo Morales Carrera, researcher on Mazatec culture, agreed definitively with other *huautlecos* that the *huehuenton* contests held in various venues of the region “have converted tradition into a show.” They said that by carrying out the contests in this way “the spirituality is being lost” which is an integral part of the fiesta dedicated to the honor of the dead. Furthermore, they indicated that such an attitude is fostering the “commercialization of our culture,” such that the various groups of *huehuentones* that attend do so in order to win the monetary prizes that ordinarily are offered.

Valeriano García Martínez, coordinator of the cultural group Ndi Xitjo<sup>60</sup> (Little Ones who Spring Forth), also a painting instructor in the María Sabina House of Culture, noted the particular case when “in an irresponsible manner” the panel of judges offered the first prize to the group called Cha Xohó Najjnrra (The Huehuentones of Huautla<sup>61</sup>) when [their performance] “had nothing to do with the tradition of *los muertos*,” and that the only thing that set them apart was that “they play instruments well, like the violin.” In addition, “they are omitting the sacred element,” elaborated Valeriano García Martínez, who suggested that in order to win first place, the theme should concern the netherworld [inframundo], offerings and all that refers to this sacred day for the Mazatecs.

In the case of the contest held by the María Sabina House of Culture, García Martínez considered that the same error was made. . . [when the jury] awarded a mediocre group first place, with a prize of 5000. He criticized competitive nature of the contest, because he said “it shouldn’t be a question of competing, but rather of sharing among Mazatec brothers.”

For his part, Alejo García García of San José Lindavista, Chilchotla, claimed that the groups of *huenhuentones* that received the first prize in both contests “don’t dance the way they should, but rather as if they were dancing a *cumbia*.” He went on that the elders and the ancestral

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<sup>60</sup> *Ndi xitjo*, generally translated in Spanish as *pequeños que brotan* is an idiomatic expression for the Sierra’s hallucinogenic mushrooms.

<sup>61</sup> The group’s name, “Cha Xohó Najjnrra,” is one I would spell “Cha Xo’o Najnča,” which actually means something more like “The Huehuentones of the Center [of Town]” (*najnča* = “center of the *pueblo*”). The spelling in the article is idiosyncratic and was, I assume, provided by one of the locals interviewed, since the journalist, who is stationed in Oaxaca, is not a native of the Sierra. Such discrepancies in how speech is represented in writing are ubiquitous and a constant communicative obstacle.

*huenhuentones* who bequeathed this culture “danced with tranquility.” Finally, he recommended that the organizers “first investigate” so as not to commit these errors.

(E. García Carrera, 2005)

This situation is quite different from the contests I observed. The winning entries for those years have been songs whose themes were very much in keeping with the traditionalist discourse: songs that lamented how much things have changed since the days of the ancestors, or celebrated the richness of Mazatec culture despite the poverty of so many people in the Sierra. While the more “creative” or unusual entries often place within the top five – those like the Osama Bin Laden song, for example, or a story one man thought up to explain the traits of a particular mountain – they never won first place. A look at some of titles alone from various composers gives a sense for the prevalence of the more traditional themes:

<i>Enle chita jch-chinga ngas'a</i> <i>Kjuan kan-ñato octubre</i> (Luis Pulido and Saúl Valente)	The Words of the Ancestors The 27 <sup>th</sup> of October
<i>Tsin kjua-iaxkon</i> (Alberto Prado)	There is No Respect
<i>Sole na-in jch-cha</i> <i>Jch-chaskon s'i je</i> <i>Tjian chotsen s'i nanguina</i>	The Grandfather's Song Let's Respect this Fiesta Let's Go to the Fiesta of Our Pueblo
<i>Tojo jña so s'en</i> <i>To so k'uas'in iane jin</i> <i>Sera ni, naxo ni, sjongo ni</i> (Pedro Pineda)	Who Else If Not Us? This is the Custom Candle, Flowers, and Copal

<i>Kuina nisjein f'ichotsen no jin</i>	In These Days They Come to
	Visit Us
<i>Jo tsoyani nga ni 'ñion</i>	Why Do We Adorn [i.e., for
	<i>muertos</i> ]?
(Crescencio García)	
<i>T'a ts'e ya naxo tsitin</i>	About the Arc of Flowers
<i>Jokuan nisjein jch-cha</i>	That Which Happened in the Past
(Modesto Espinoza)	
<i>Ts'e cha xo'o</i>	The Song of the Cha Xo'o
<i>Chja jch-chingana ngas 'a</i>	Our Ancestors
(Chajma Prado)	

Nevertheless, the comments of these assorted intellectuals from Huautla demonstrate some of the competing forces in play in these contests. Participants, judges, and audience alike must navigate their way through the paradox at the heart of the contest, which is that it employs a recent invention, to promote an idealized image of Mazatec tradition and the Mazatec past; and that furthermore it relies for its success on its being embraced by relatively young members of the community, people for whom the trappings of modernity are an integral part of life. The prizes are a case in point. While they are smaller in Nda Xo than in Huautla (the top prize is now about 2000 pesos), they are still big enough for the money itself to be a real incentive. And yet, as we will see also in discourses about the mushrooms, some people are very uneasy with the idea of Mazatec culture being a “business.” They have a strong sense that there are “right” and “wrong” reasons for participating in the contest that are directly tied to one’s relationship to the past.

Many of the songs use overtly political messages as an attempt to “split the difference” between the traditionalist conventions and the pull of modernity, particularly the desire to make the songs speak to pressing current issues. Songs of this sort address life in the present by denouncing poverty and marginalization, but do so through taking on an explicitly indigenous identity whose authority rests on continuity with Mazatec tradition. Here, too, some of the titles are revealing:

<i>To cho'nda kjit'ane jña</i> <i>Tofi tofi xo nča nik'ien na jña</i> (Heriberto Prado)	We'll Never Stop Being Peons Little By Little They're Killing Us
<i>Xkon ma xone jña</i> (Modesto Espinoza)	Poor Us
<i>Kjuabale chita xa</i> (Silverio Pineda)	The Sadness of the Authorities
<i>Jat'ats'e kjua imana</i> <i>Kjua xi kjima</i> <i>Katjab'eno ndiya Méjico</i> (Luis Pulido and Saúl Valente)	That Which is Poverty Present Problems Stop Moving to Mexico (City)
<i>Kjuñ'e xi tiyojian</i> (Lucio Gallardo)	Our Suffering

The last of these represents the way songs of this type try to address directly current problems. But it is informative for another reason as well: its explicit appeal to overcome internal divisions.

**Kjuañ'e Xi Tiyojian  
ts'e Lucio Gallardo**

Jme kjiñ'e kjimachon ni  
naxinandana,  
Jme kjiñ'e kjimachon ni  
naxinanda jan  
To kjima to kjifeni nixrjein xi  
tiyo jña,  
To kjima to kjifeni nixrjein xi  
manguia Ñña,  
Tibitjason yijeni jo tso enle ,  
na-in na,  
Tibitjason yijeni jo tso xon enle  
na-in na.  
I xo na kuan tsakin nana jña  
Kuino-iani xoñui i tsakin na jña.  
Jmeni xi kuan naxinanda jan  
Kuino-iani soñui i tsakín na Ñña.  
Kuindoba tsa kjuach-chan,  
Kuindoba tsa jin nxian  
Kuindoba tsa kjuasi,  
Kuindoba tsa ko ch'in  
Je tiyojian jña ndixo  
'Ñion maxriñale na-in na  
Je ndiya sejnaya na-in jch-chana  
Jme kji ñ'e kjimachon ni  
Je tiyojian jña ndiño.  
K'uangoni kjima k'ue nga jngo  
Chita xa sasenda  
Ja b'exko, ja b'exko ndi miyole  
Ja b'exko, ja b'exko ndi chitale  
Jme xi chijano ti'mina,

**Our Suffering  
by Lucio Gallardo**

What difficulties we have in our  
pueblo  
What difficulties we have in our  
pueblo now  
What our ancestors told us would  
come to pass  
What our dead relatives told us  
would come to pass  
Is happening today to us  
Is happening today to us  
Your hate will bury you, they  
said.  
Your [in]fighting will kill you,  
they said.  
What is going to happen to our  
pueblo now?  
Look what will happen to us:  
Wars will come  
The end of peace will come  
Endless fighting will come  
Sickness will come  
This is what we are living now  
One can see that our Father  
approaches  
That we can encounter him in  
the road  
Walking in the darkness  
But will we recognize him?  
Look what happens whenever we  
elect  
New authorities  
Each one together with his own  
people  
Each one together with his  
friends  
What things do you need?



Chita ima kuasenko i ti'mina	The authorities ask us,
Tonga iani xi beni nga je kakson	But when they arrive at the table
ya mixale,	of power
Tonga iani xi beni nga je kakson	But when they arrive at the chair
ya xilele	of power
Jmeni xi s'ian ndixo,	Who pays any attention to what
	we say?
Jga ñ'e kakson jña iso'nde	What can we do in this world
Jt-tin xo kuiyo jña	In this difficult situation?
Kjuasi lijme chjile	Let us come together
Kjuajch-chan kuicho mani,	Let us work as a group and end
	our fighting
Kjuasi lijme chjile	Let us come together
Sijngone yijona, kjuasi lijme	Let us unite, let us come
chjile,	together,
Ñion maxriñale na-in na	For our Father approaches
Je xo ndiya sejnaya na-in	He approaches on the road.
jch-chana.	

Calls to transcend factionalism and cries against the evils of divisiveness pervade Day of the Dead songs in the Sierra. All the political songs listed above voice such concerns explicitly, as do many of the traditionalist ones; essentially all of those promote such a message indirectly, through the implicit appeal to unite behind the ways of the ancestors and reverence for the past. Valeriano García Martínez, the *huauteco* interviewed above, essentially articulated the same sentiment when he expressed the desire for the contest to be an occasion for sharing rather than competing. And, indeed, discourses about inclusiveness are ubiquitous during the fiesta. As we will see in the following chapter, factionalism is a fact of life in Nda Xo; many people, though they may lament it, speak of internal divisions as if they were a foregone conclusion. And as we saw in the previous chapter, political

divisions and politically-motivated violence are chronic problems in many Sierra communities, including Nda Xo. A glance at state and national news coverage of the Sierra reveals just how prevalent such problems are. Aside from the slight but dependable attention paid to the Sierra in feature stories – highlighting the *riqueza cultural* of the Mazateca, and above all, María Sabina’s legacy – it is mentioned in the news almost entirely because of infighting: road blockages and building seizures, election disputes and political disputes, and, not infrequently, assassinations.

During Day of the Dead, however, the emphasis of conversations about internal discord shifts away from the divided reality of the present towards a more idealistic, even utopian, discussion of what the community could and should look like. In casual conversation as much as in the messages of the songs, people stress how bad it is to fight amongst themselves and how important it is for people, from families to the entire community, to unify. And, finally, this ideology of inclusion and solidarity finds expression not only in words but actions, too: extending an invitation to eat *mole* at one’s house during Todos Santos is one of the most effective ways to mend frayed relationships and leave interpersonal differences behind.

***“Hitting Two Birds with One Stone”: On the Contest and its “Success”***

How successful the contest is at promoting such communitarian ideals and erasing factionalism (however temporarily) is much harder to assess than other measures of its effectiveness. In many ways the contest has been astonishingly successful. In almost every community in greater Nda Xo -- if not the entire Sierra, thanks to the spin-off contests that Nda Xo's has produced -- there are at least one or two men, many of them catechists, who over the course of the year will write a few new songs for Day of the Dead. Most of them will write the words down in the process of composing the songs. They will then use copies of the written text in teaching the songs to the other men and boys in his group, who will in turn sing them repeatedly over the course of the fiesta, taking them into homes throughout the region. People hearing them, including young people who are some of the weakest Mazatec speakers, will learn some of their favorites. And if the men from the group go on to record a cassette of their music, the ripples will extend even further.

In a region where thirty years ago there were almost no widely circulating songs sung in Mazatec, for most people Mazatec songs are now a part of quotidian life. Today the priest's songs for the Church that the contest was meant to promote, by disseminating the skills they depend on, are sung by thousands of people every week in communities across the Sierra. Indeed, for many people the songs have

become so natural a part of the experience of going to Mass or attending Church services that they are not thought of as having an author at all. Young people continue to learn the songs by listening to them but also by consulting the various published books of the words (or photocopied sheets from them), thus learning not only the songs themselves but at the same time how to read in Mazatec.

Finally, the sheer energy and enthusiasm with which people participate in the contest and the penumbra of practices around it suggest the extent to which the project has been embraced by *serranos*. Although the allure of the prizes is certainly a motivating factor, it is worth noting that the contest merely *begins* the fiesta; the money is distributed and the first blush of glory gone before the fiesta itself is even under way. The *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* spend weeks if not months preparing their songs, and after the contest is over the group will sing its new song(s) a hundred times or more over the following week and a half, in each house they enter. At that point, the contest is, for most people, irrelevant and pales in comparison to questions of whether the songs is *nda kji*, beautiful, whether *se pegó* (it “stuck”), whether *je kuan nda*, it all turned out well. And as my friends in the Sierra were constantly showing me, the fiesta is fun, and a large part of why that is so is because of the music, because of the joy of singing, old songs or new, one’s own or someone else’s.

This, then, is a community where indigenous language literacy and language revitalization has been extraordinarily successful. In a comparative national study of such projects, it would constitute an interesting and largely unique case, one that

would perhaps contain clues as to why some literacy programs, especially indigenous language ones, are much more successful than others.<sup>62</sup> And certainly some of the effectiveness of native literacy in the Sierra Mazateca is explicable in terms of larger sociological variables that set Mazatec communities apart from other indigenous communities in Mexico, factors such as low migration rates, high retention of members of the educated elite, low levels of bilingualism, low educational and (Spanish) literacy levels, etc. However, such an approach has serious limitations in its ability to understand the nature of this particular language revitalization movement and why it has been so successful— or, conversely, why other areas sharing many of the same sociological factors have not sprouted similarly widespread movements. Even taking a more standard ethnographic approach will provide an incomplete picture, for what drives the success of this particular case is the unique way in which text and context intersect in a culturally harmonious way. The texts here are virtually meaningless independent of the complex of larger cultural practices and investments in images of community that they both refer to and embody: even the song contest itself does not consider the song alone as the “text,” but rather as the inextricable heart of a larger cultural performance. Their poetic qualities resonate in highly specific, culturally salient terms, and the appeal such texts have is itself linked to and propagated by the ways in which such texts are tied into a much wider system of cultural discourses, values and practices.

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<sup>62</sup> This wider comparative context will be taken up in Chapter Six.

The song contest was thus successful precisely because it was *not* modular a la Benedict Anderson's ([1983] 1995) ideas about how national communities are imagined into being. Rather, this revitalization project was specifically, carefully tailored by truly local intellectuals in order to be congruent with local values and practices. Furthermore, the issue of why the contest was successful is not merely an academic question. Educational and language policy planners almost always have national interests or at least supra-local ones that encompass multiple Nda Xos. They routinely take some kind of modular approach, using the same type of program and following the same procedures across the country. Accommodations to cultural diversity often treat the matter as if it were merely one variable in a larger equation, and so stop at providing the same materials in each language – or, at a more sophisticated level, each dialect – without ever addressing the cultural difference in any meaningful way.

The “emic” nature of the contest takes several forms. By linking it to practices that are highly salient emblems of ethnic identity for local people – especially those expressing reverence for the dead by singing for them – the initiative was embraced as an intensification of standard practice rather than rejected as inauthentic or false, as are so many projects aimed at social change. This is particularly true of “top down” projects – those run by the state above all – whose animating agendas, to say nothing of the method by which they are delivered, are often profoundly at odds with the needs and concerns of local people. As King

(1994) points out, in order for literacy to take root it needs to be surrounded by a culture where written texts – and not just any written texts in this case, but rather indigenous language texts – have practical utility and value; teaching someone to read, even providing materials to be read, are really, then, just first steps.

Another crucial element that has allowed the revitalization project to be responsive to local concerns is its ability, through the Day of the Dead song contest and the cassette tape industry it generated, to bridge public and private, sacred and secular spheres. In turn, that flexibility has provided a forum for a particular kind of discourse. Namely, the discursive space is one in which people can work out, through the songs and their responses to them, ideas about politics and the meaning of community, and especially ideas about “Mazatec identity.” Because the heart of the revitalization project was tied to Day of the Dead and homage to the ancestors, it was also tied to the prevailing ideologies about both as loci of community solidarity and as vehicles for mending social rifts. Singing during *muertos* is singing for the dead as well as, and perhaps more than, the living. Having such an audience entails certain responsibilities, above all that the living should come together to celebrate the arrival of the dead, heightening further the imperative for unity. The passage with which this chapter opens speaks clearly to this issue. Written by the most famous Mazatec writer, who is not even from the Sierra but rather from the Mazateca Baja, his poem nevertheless reflects a widespread cultural motif about the immortality of death, and, because of that, a “community of the living and the dead” becomes possible. The

“neutrality” of the Day of the Dead practices to which the contest was harnessed, as well as the fiesta’s pervasive, often explicit ideology of inclusiveness and harmony both contribute further to the creation of a special social space, a particular kind of “public sphere,” an *ethnicized* public sphere.

Among the most important things that this arena does is to display and promote distinct social personae, or images of persons (Agha 2005). The song contest – like the revitalization project that will be discussed in the next chapter, the Mazatec Indigenous Church – relies on the promotion of normative, standardized images about Mazatec identity: a “virtuous Mazatec” should venerate the ancestors by singing to and for them in Mazatec, should lift up the community by celebrating the ancestors’ values, should use the mushrooms as the ancestors themselves did. But whereas the Mazatec church elicited, quite by accident, statements about what Mazatecs are *not*, the contest was received as the articulation of what Mazatecs *are*. The perceived artificiality of practices the Mazatec church advocates threw into relief widespread, assumed customs and the often implicit ideologies motivating them. The contest, on the other hand, presents a vision of Mazatec identity that is far more recognizable to most Mazatecs by simultaneously establishing continuity with longer-standing practices and leaving space for their innovative adaptation to new influences. The contest and the penumbra of activities surrounding it thus provide the infrastructure through which Mazatecs are recruited to the social personae –



ethnicized identities: a “good” or “traditional” or “authentic” Mazatec – which are at the heart of the songs themselves.

Finally, by linking the new language initiative to music and singing, and particularly singing in Mazatec, the project also became harnessed to notions of core “Mazatecness.” As is the case with most indigenous Mexicans, for historical reasons discussed in the previous chapter there is a very strong, often explicit ideology among Mazatecs that their language is an essential part of their ethnic identity. However, while such beliefs about their language are not unique to Mazatecs, another conviction is: because of its tonal nature (and also, perhaps, because of whistle speech), the Mazatec language is seen as fundamentally “musical.” During the course of my fieldwork, I routinely heard statements to the effect that “our language is almost like singing.” Furthermore, music and singing are central to practices seen as quintessentially Mazatec. This includes not only some of the musical Day of the Dead practices discussed above, but also the singing and chanting to deities (and ancestors) that occurs during mushroom ceremonies, a particularly strong locus of “Mazatecness.” To a person, the composers I interviewed said that because of the tonal qualities of Mazatec, the lyrics always had to be written first and the music later. While some composers talked as if they found this situation limiting, most seemed to experience it as a magnificent opportunity to marry speech more completely to music. Some authors even play with tone in their songs; Alberto Prado wrote a particularly interesting “tongue twister” song for children called “*Chi<sup>4</sup>nga<sup>4</sup>*,

*Chi<sup>1</sup>nga<sup>2</sup>, Chi<sup>4</sup>nga<sup>3</sup>*” (“Pig, Old Man, Shirt”) which seemingly delights in the richness a tonal language can offer songwriters.

***The Muertos of Muertos: Why the Contest is More than an Ethnographic Postcard***

The article excerpted above, which describes the genesis of the contest, ends with a comment on its precarious future. For all its popularity, the contest, like all cultural activities, is dependent on funding:

The sad thing is that there has been no public institutional support, because although there have been serious projects in this respect, they’ve forgotten about us. The prizes that have been offered for the participants have been provided by the generosity of donors who show interest in the revival of our culture, such as the case of the municipal government.

(Prado Pineda 2000, 14)

The flip side of this, however, is that the very lack of institutional support purchases the contest’s relative neutrality and freedom from institutionalized interests. This is critical to the argument I make here about the role the song contest plays in negotiating social conflict. Part of the reason the song contest was embraced so widely, I believe, is that the holiday to which it is tied is perceived as broadly communitarian. And while Alberto and others may not be cognizant of this benefit,

Heriberto, as we will see in Chapter Six, is sharply aware of the “bargain with the devil” represented by accepting outside funds (from governmental cultural organizations, in his case). Furthermore, because of the contest’s affiliation with the Church, Alberto and Heriberto, perceive this funding issue quite differently. The next chapter will flesh this disagreement out more fully, but in brief, Alberto sees the Church as local, communitarian, and therefore neutral; Heriberto, on the other hand, views the Church as external and representative of a particular interest, with conditions and costs thereby implied by its support. The difference between the two brothers also speaks to just how precarious social unity is in Nda Xo and how quickly assumed solidarity can disintegrate.

The emphasis placed during Day of the Dead on idealized unity is pitched against a backdrop of deep social divisions in Nda Xo. Some of those will be discussed in the following chapter, as will a language revitalization project that is in many ways a foil to the song contest. Ultimately, however, despite the Mazatec Church’s lack of local popularity, it raises troubling questions about what, at a deeper level, “success” in activist projects such as these consists of. In many ways the contest appears to be a success story precisely because it transcends the merely folkloric. Because the contest clearly bleeds into the rest of the year, spilling out of the holiday box to which the Mexican state might want to confine it, it is hard to make the argument that the people who participate in it and the activities attached to it are merely “putting on” Mazatec identity for the fiesta. And yet the radicalism at

the heart of the Mazatec Church's agenda asks whether at a deeper level the song contest is merely promoting the status quo. Anyone who has stayed more than a week in Oaxaca city can bear witness to the regularity with which indigenous people from all around the state camp out in the *zócalo* in front of the *palacio municipal* or stage a protest at the state's highest court or block off streets in order to get the government's attention. Especially in contrast to other parts of Mexico, Oaxaca can seem at first blush like a land of angry Indians who have finally had enough. But as one Oaxacan intellectual told me, "In Mexico, you can protest all you want; the problem is getting someone to listen to you." In other words, there is a circumscribed social space within the nation where voicing dissent and expressing difference are acceptable; as long as one stays within the "designated protest area" one's right to speak out is protected. However, in confining oneself in this way – in sticking to places where it is "safe" to be an Indian – one also limits, perhaps, the power to bring about deep social change, to take truly transformative steps towards social justice.

The people from Nda Xo who are involved with the song contest and those who adhere to the Mazatec church ultimately take very different positions on this matter. Despite the fact that their ultimate goals, at least in the abstract, are quite similar – among other things, to valorize Mazatec culture and tradition – they have quite different ideas about the social personae who can do this important work. These images of social persons meet very different fates, which in turn affect the practical success of these respective projects. The fact that one project has had greater popular

uptake than the other merely complicates matters further: if an army is what it takes to change the world, how many does it take to make an army?

The slippage and, alternatively, the congruence between the identities proposed by these authors and the identities accepted by their audiences sheds light on why revitalization projects may meet with such different fates. But this split at the local level is also linked to a related bifurcation at the national level. Throughout the Americas, globalized discourses about ethnic plurality and indigenous rights have “touched ground” through local forms of cultural assertion, led in many cases by indigenous authors. In Mexico, linguistic affiliation has often been the single most salient marker of ethnic identity, particularly in relations with the state. As a result, indigenous authors often focus on promoting indigenous languages – through literacy and text production – to further their political agendas.

But this approach places indigenous authors in a paradoxical position. By using a local, ethnically marked language intimately tied to indigenous identity in order to address national political concerns, such authors must address a double audience. Their interlocutors – local, native language speakers on the one hand and national, Spanish speakers on the other – often have mutually exclusive expectations. Thus many indigenous authors have been somewhat successful at addressing national political goals; in Mexico, nearly all of the officially recognized languages have at least one indigenous author and various books published in the language, and the larger languages have many of both, in some cases several authors and books for each

of the main dialects. Nevertheless, the vast majority of such projects have failed to stimulate grassroots interest, and the production and use of indigenous language texts has remained largely an elite pursuit. While most indigenous language texts are useful for making political claims in regional and national arenas, they are largely irrelevant at the local level. As the organizers and members of Sna Jtz'ibajom saw, texts printed in indigenous languages, including those written by native authors, largely go unread.

The aggressively local focus of the two language projects in Nda Xo thus seems, at first blush, to represent something of a departure from this norm. Yet here, too, the pressures of the dual audience are refracted through the various fates of the projects and the essentialized identities on which they depend – and, ultimately, through the social identities attached to the authors themselves. While Heriberto and his followers in the Mazatec church present ideas about Mazatec personhood that are rejected by locals, these ideas are heavily influenced by and quite consistent with post-colonial national and international discourses about indigenous rights and indigenous resistance, notions that often locate “authentic” indigenous identity in a pre-Western past and anti-modern present. On the other hand, Alberto and the other promoters of the Day of the Dead song contest have the opposite problem. The ideas about indigenous identity that they espouse are embraced locally, but through the lens of post-colonial discourses many indigenous intellectuals, including Heriberto, adhere to the visions of indigenous identity that the movement holds up smack of co-option,

of the willingness to accept a license arena for protest – the realm of folklore – in exchange for not otherwise disrupting the status quo.

And so seen in comparison with a more politically activist project such as the Mazatec church, one that at least claims to be more resolutely indigenous, the song contest is perhaps not the success it at first appears to be. At the same time, as we will explore in the chapter to follow, the popular success that the song contest has achieved remains a distant dream for the promoters of the Mazatec Indigenous Church. In tandem, then, the two cases raise obvious questions about how one measures success in weighing the ability of such efforts to affect social change. At a deeper level, however, this combined case study hints that perhaps the reason these two projects seem to be so thoroughly reciprocal in their limitations and their strengths is an artifact of the question itself, of the very effort of measure “success.” The relevance of this concern will come even more sharply into focus when, in Chapter Six, we pull away from the specifics of the Mazatec case and consider the broader landscape of indigenous literatures nationally and internationally. For we will see that the relationship between indigenous intellectuals and the scholars who observe them has been a close if ambivalent one, a relationship that calls into question the underlying agendas animating the counter-hegemonic goals at which revitalization projects are ultimately aimed.

## Chapter Four

### The Mazatec Martin Luther: Scenes from a Nativist Reformation

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“The Church is his Bin Laden.”

-- Alberto Prado, of his brother, Heriberto Prado.

<i>To sasa bitjatone jisonde je</i>	We pass through this world for only a moment
<i>To sasa fatoni kujab'itsjen na</i>	Only for a moment does our way of life live
<i>To sasa bitjatone jišti ndišo</i>	Children, babies, we live only for a moment,
<i>To sasa fatona nşoba jch-chinga</i>	Only for a moment do the ancestors pass here
<i>To je tifet'ani kujab'itsjen na</i>	Already our way of life is coming to an end
<i>To je tifet'ani kujanda na Nñã</i>	Already our treasure comes to an end
<i>To je şo tifini chita jch-chinga</i>	Already the ancestors pass on
<i>To je şo kama Nñã jos'in kan'e</i>	Already we leave the way we left
<i>To kjai kujab'itsjen nşã fi tjingui</i>	Other beliefs are the only that continue
<i>To kjai kujab'itsjen nşã sikjitjason</i>	Other ways of life are the only that survive
<i>Likuiti sisin na jiştina Nñã</i>	Now our children pay no attention to us
<i>Je kasik'engui kujab'itsjen-na</i>	Now they let our way of life pass away
...	...



<i>To i sijch-cha jian nga Ñña</i>	But here we all forget
<i>Śi kujajch-čan, śi kujajt-ti na Ñña</i>	Our anger and divisions
<i>To i sijch-cha jian nga Ñña</i>	Here we all forget
<i>Śi kujajch-čan, śi kujajt-ti na Ñña</i>	Our anger and divisions
...	...
<i>Mmela śi kuan na Ñña nga kuişkan</i>	So why do we go on fighting
<i>ne Ñña</i>	
<i>Nga to i sa n'e kjit'a Ñña ts'e naina</i>	If every year we perform this rite before God?

-- Heriberto Prado Pereda, from the *Misa Autóctona Mazateca*, the special mass held annually in the Sierra Mazateca for Day of the Dead



The Mazatec Indigenous Church grew out of one of the most shocking recent events in the social life of Nda Xo. It was also a pivotal event in the history of the large extended family at the epicenter of this event, the Prado family, one of the community's most prominent and widely respected. Within the family, as within the community as a whole, the often bitter arguments surrounding this event explicitly concerned religious difference. However, as the arguments unfolded they pulled into their wake a number of other hotly contested issues: differing conceptions of tradition, modernity, authenticity, language use, indigenous identity, and even the meaning of community itself. Thus arguments about religion were almost never only about religion. While they often expressed very specific and localized concerns and

differences, they came to both condition and exemplify most of the broad, pressing social issues with which community members grapple, as do indigenous people throughout the hemisphere. Thus religious affiliation in Nda Xo has become both a symbol of difference as well as its substance, as religious allegiance also entails adherence to divergent views about social solidarity, indigenous identity, and modern life in Mexico.

The revitalization project at the heart of the Mazatec Indigenous Church stands in marked contrast to that represented by the song contest discussed in the previous chapter, not only in their respective aims but also in their levels of success. Whereas the song contest has been astonishingly popular, the new church discussed in this chapter has gained little popular traction, and instead has managed to strengthen the very tendencies it seeks to “correct.” Taken in tandem, then, these two stories constitute a pragmatic commentary on revitalization projects and the constraints under which they operate. However, these two chapters also offer theoretical insight about those very constraints. What are the limits under which counter-hegemonic actions and discourses operate? At what point does resistance reinforce the very order it seeks to subvert? How can actors on the ground both participate in prevailing practices and public spheres and at the same time not place themselves at the mercy of their hegemonic force? It is often said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it; the experience of Nda Xo suggests that

we are doomed to learn history, and, whether we will it or not, drag the grand narrative of the past, with all its silencing biases, into the present.



My first day in Nda Xo – the day I heard about the song contest for the first time – was also the first time I caught a glimpse of the important role religion played in the Prado family, as well as in Nda Xo more generally. Not until much later, though, would I understand how religious differences are linked, like Day of the Dead and its song contest, to tensions between “traditional” Mazatec practices and cultural innovation and change. These are in turn tied to deep divisions in the community on the one hand and on the other to their critical annual cessation – which happens, crucially, during *muertos*.

Alberto was the first one I spoke to that day. Maestro Florencio sent me in his direction, telling me he was not only one of the leading figures of the revitalization efforts in Nda Xo but also “*un hombre muy amable*.”<sup>1</sup> I began my fieldwork

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<sup>1</sup> I did not realize until much later that the fact that Maestro Carrera sent me to Alberto first was implicitly a comment on Alberto’s brother, Heriberto. Everyone (including Alberto) agrees that, as regards the emergence of song composition in Mazatec, Heriberto is the single most important figure, not only in Nda Xo but in the entire Sierra. He is, however, also known (in that expression so ubiquitous in Mexico), as “*muy especial*,” i.e., difficult, and is a highly divisive figure to boot. The fraught nature of the relationship between Heriberto and Florencio (and, indeed, most other Huautla intellectuals) is based not only on the ambivalence Florencio, like many, had about Heriberto as a religious figure. It also stems from the fact that Florencio and other intellectuals trained by “real

interested primarily in texts written in indigenous languages, and after telling Alberto that was why I had shown up in Nda Xo -- a place that gets very few outside visitors, and almost no foreigners -- he showed me some of the various things he had written in Mazatec, especially songs for the Day of the Dead contest. He also showed me an illustration of the Mazatec calendar he had on his wall, with the names of the 20-day months written in Mazatec, as well as some of the articles he had written for *La Faena*. After about 3 hours, he told me he was very sorry but he had a meeting to go to, the weekly meeting of his *kjuachikon*<sup>2</sup>; I would later learn these had been in decline but were revived in reaction to the founding of the Mazatec Indigenous Church. He told me that at any rate the person I should really speak to was his brother, Heriberto, who, he said, was the *real* Mazatec author. Later, when I knew

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linguists” (through the CIESAS ethnolinguistic program, or through IEEPO’s bilingual schoolteacher program; see Chapter Six) have somewhat competing intellectual stakes, particularly having to do with the issue, ever contentious among indigenous intellectuals, of orthography. The difficult nature of their relationship was made particularly clear to me one afternoon a couple of weeks after I arrived in Nda Xo, when I was living with Heriberto and his family. We were eating lunch in the back room of their store, which was divided from the front part by a sheet that blocked us from view without keeping us from seeing whoever stopped by, when Florencio appeared. He and Heriberto spoke, rather unusually, in Spanish rather than Mazatec. Furthermore, it became clear from the behavior of Laura, the priest’s wife, and from their subsequent comments, that they did not want Florencio to know I was there. This general pattern of locals drawing lines around relationships in ways that surprised me was one that I encountered repeatedly, and began to interpret as a sort of “zero-sum” view of relationships that furthermore relate directly to the sharp internal divisions within the community discussed in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> *Kjua<sup>4</sup>chi<sup>3</sup>kon<sup>3</sup>* (*kjua<sup>4</sup>* (thing [substantive marker]) + *chi<sup>3</sup>kon<sup>3</sup>* (white, or light-skinned, person; sacred, sacred spirit)) would perhaps best be translated as “prayer group.” These function, though, much like *cofradías*, although without the deep history of traditional *cofradías*, and with much greater participation by women. Each one is associated with a locally important saint, and between them they carry out many of the religious activities of the community, from cleaning and maintaining the church grounds to sponsoring religious fiestas. In other ways, they are also similar to *Comunidades de Base*, although they are pointedly devoid of the politicized character of much Liberation Theology.

him better, Alberto would say, comparing his own place as a Mazatec writer to his brother's, "Me, I'm nothing next to him."

And so he took me to see Heriberto, who as it turned out had gone to Huautla that day. So until he returned I waited in his store with his *compañera*<sup>3</sup> Laura, who upon meeting me invited me to stay with them. Heriberto returned in the late afternoon, and we talked for a while as he showed me the books of his songs that had been published locally under the auspices, and at the encouragement, of the regional bishop, Hermenegildo Ramírez Sanchez, M.J. Bishop Ramírez, who is based in the prelature of Huautla, continues to serve there more than thirty years after he was given the post.<sup>4</sup> By the time Heriberto and I had talked a bit it was late in the afternoon, and he and Laura had an errand to run; they invited me to come along. I would have preferred, however, to go back to Huautla to pick up my things, and since

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<sup>3</sup> This term, too, had a significance I could not possibly know at the time, and revealed the ambivalent feelings – stemming from the events discussed below – that many people in Nda Xo, including Alberto, have about Laura.

<sup>4</sup> The Prelatura de Huautla was founded in October of 1972 by the Congregación de Misioneros Josefinos, an order of the Catholic Church founded in Mexico by José María Vilaseca in 1872, as part of the centennial celebration of the order's existence. Beyond the dedication of its priests to St. Joseph, the mission of this order is to evangelize to the indigenous and poor. Although now involved in various other countries (El Salvador especially, but also Chile, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Angola), the misioneros Josefinos have been most active in Mexico. They have worked primarily in indigenous areas; the choice to found in their centennial year a new prelature in the poorest, most indigenous state in the country was thus an explicit extension of their founding legacy. Monsignor Ramírez Sánchez, who was born in Mexico City, arrived the following year, and has served as Huautla's bishop ever since. Administratively, the prelature is subordinate to the Archdiocese of Antequera, Oaxaca, and oversees 7 parishes spread across 19 *municipios*. Chilchotla (Nda Xo) is one of these parishes; another is San José Tenango, the parish where Heriberto served as priest.

where they were going was on the way out of town towards Huautla, I thought I'd walk with them and their two boys until a truck came along.<sup>5</sup> Trucks are very scarce that late in the day, though, and one never came along. So I wound up staying with them on what turned out to be a trip to a *sabio* (*cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>chji<sup>4</sup>ne<sup>4</sup>*)<sup>6</sup>, or shaman, who, as is typical (and indicative of the ambivalence with which people regard *sabios*), lived out of town a bit.

Heriberto and Laura were making an addition to their store by carving out the rock behind it, and the one-armed man they had hired to do it was, they felt, making almost no progress. So they had come to see the *sabio* to find out if they had somehow offended a *chi<sup>3</sup>kon<sup>3</sup>*, or master-spirit<sup>7</sup>, and if so, what they should do to

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<sup>5</sup> Transportation within the region is almost exclusively by foot or pick-up truck (*camioneta*). The pick-ups are privately owned and, as has been discussed about other areas of Mexico (e.g., Cancian 1992), ownership of one both indicates the acquisition of a certain amount of wealth and is an important means for generating it. In Nda Xo, the family widely considered the richest – the Bravos, who, in Weberian fashion, are Protestants – has a number of grown sons who run *camionetas*, one of which I rode in that first day. And so it was that I was also introduced to the infamous Mazatec machismo, said by many of their neighbors to be linked to the long tradition of polygamy. (*Mazatercos*, my Zapotec friends called them, punning on the Spanish word (*terco*) for stubborn). Upon hearing that I was interested in learning Mazatec, the driver – seeing that the only other person in the cab was a middle-aged woman who spoke only Mazatec – said (in Spanish) that in that case I should marry him, and learn the language “in bed, through my kisses.”

<sup>6</sup> *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>* (person) + *chji<sup>4</sup>ne<sup>4</sup>* (master, knower (of))

<sup>7</sup> These earth spirits – or “spirit-owners” -- are widely discussed in literature on Mazatec cosmology and religion (see especially Feinberg 1996, from whom the previous term comes). They are generally thought to be attached to particular places; each unique geographical or topological feature – a source of water, a cave, a hill or mountain – has its own *chi<sup>3</sup>kon<sup>3</sup>*, and failure to treat it with proper respect – or the infliction of accidental offense – can have negative, even disastrous, consequences. I have also heard such spirits referred to as *la'a* (generally translated by locals as *duende* in Spanish). This term, though, seems to have a more unambiguously malevolent connotation, and such spirits seem to be attached to less important, nondescript locations.

remedy the situation. The *sabio* chanted a number of prayers that involved consecrating some tobacco and cacao seeds, folding them into little packets Heriberto and Laura would later bury at the corners of their store, and performed a *limpia* on each of us.<sup>8</sup> As we walked home in the dark, the boys kicking rocks in the moonlight down the stony road, there was a new, surprising level of intimacy and warmth among us. At the time I read it as a reflection of the fact that we were all getting to know each other a little, and had done so through the vehicle of a particularly salient, heightened experience. Now, though, I think it also had a great deal to do with their perception of factional solidarity that involved me, too: I had, without knowing it, chosen sides in an unfolding ideological conflict that had been tearing the Prado family, and Nda Xo, apart.



Indigenous Mexican communities like Nda Xo are far from alone in having deep religious divisions that at times give rise to extreme actions, including murder. In the last two decades alone many of the world's bloodiest conflicts -- those in

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<sup>8</sup> This purification/healing ritual is also extremely common in Mesoamerica, particularly in indigenous areas. In the Sierra Mazateca, it involves the purification of the body and spirit by smoke from copal incense while prayers (usually in Mazatec) are uttered. The most critical element, though, requires passing a curing object from nature over the person in a sort of brushing, wiping motion. Many people use eggs, but that day the shaman used, as many do, a cluster of flowers and branches with leaves, which must be either freshly cut or taken from an altar.

Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine, or Darfur, for example, and even, arguably, the “War on Terror” – have been ones in which religious differences play a critical role.<sup>9</sup> As has been widely noted in literature about Mesoamerica, feuding is a common occurrence in many indigenous communities,<sup>10</sup> and the threat of internal violence is one backdrop against which social interactions, including disagreements, take place. Many of these disagreements are not cast in explicitly religious terms.<sup>11</sup> This is true of Nda Xo as well. Though elections officially take place under the system of Usos y Costumbres, the rise nationally of opposition (i.e., non-PRI) political parties has led to an increase in official political organizations such that there are now five recognized political organizations in the *municipio*. Even by regional standards this is excessive, especially for a community of its size. People often lament this situation

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to obscure the fact that these conflicts arise from diverse causes, nor that some are only secondarily related to religious difference.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Nash 1970, Greenberg 1981 and 1989, Friedrich 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Not all or even most of the internal violence in indigenous communities is explicitly motivated by religious differences. Land disputes are also a major cause of internal violence. During my fieldwork, in June 2002, a massacre in Oaxaca made the front page of *The New York Times*: 26 people from the southern Sierra Zapotec town of Santiago Xochiltepec were killed by members of the same town over a longstanding land dispute (Weiner 2002). In Yalálag, the divisions and the violence they have produced (see Chapter One), have been primarily political, as has much of the recent internal violence in other parts of the Sierra Mazateca. In Huautla, political violence between members of different political parties led to the unusual -- and violence-perpetuating -- situation that for awhile the town had three presidents, referred to derisively by locals as “the three wise men” (Feinberg 2003: 54). The town widely considered the most violent in the Sierra, Mazatlán, is one whose inhabitants are known in the region as “*los peores de toda la Mazateca. . . [S]on revoltosos y cabrones*” (Bellinghausen 1999). There, the recent decline of the PRI has spawned a paramilitary group responsible for lethal violence at elections in 1995 and 1998. In the intervening three years, until the state governor finally interfered, 30 people were assassinated and many more wounded and tortured (Perez U., 1998).



as a sign of deep discord and as a radical departure from the past in which the community was (ostensibly) more united.<sup>12</sup> However, divisions explicitly viewed as religious are arguably the most salient, particularly in daily life; certainly they affect and involve both genders more directly than the explicitly political ones, which are dominated by men. In addition, as I will argue here, such divisions, however much they are explicitly framed in religious terms, are also intimately linked to many other social differences.

Within Nda Xo it has been several years since religious differences have been blamed for bloodshed; nevertheless, arguments about religion still occur frequently and are often quite contentious. The religious arguments and differences of opinion I will describe here took place in various parts of Nda Xo, but especially in the relatively populous *cabecera*.<sup>13</sup> Although these arguments first erupted before I arrived, they coincidentally took on a certain urgency around the time I began my

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike these other towns, Chilchotla does not have a history of election-related violence. Nevertheless, even explicit attempts at unity almost invariably fail. In the 2004 elections, the various opposition parties -- i.e., those other than the local organization ORIEZA (Organización Regional Indígena Emiliano Zapata), affiliated with the PRI, which has won all the elections since the rise of opposition parties -- attempted to run a unified opposition candidate. The negotiations involved some 2500 people and took place on the municipal basketball court, which is to say directly in front of the Town Hall where the current officials, all from ORIEZA, could directly observe the discussions from the second floor gallery. The initiative failed, however, over accusations that one group had brought in 17 truckloads of “*acarreados*” from the ranchos, in violation of prior agreement, to unfairly favor its candidate. Of him, coffee farmers from one of the other organizations said, “He has become an eternal opposition candidate in this town. Including this time, he’s been a presidential candidate in Chilchotla three times, and that’s why the opposition never wins.” (García 2004; my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Similar arguments doubtless took place in other parts of the Mazatec Sierra near Nda Xo, especially Huautla and San José Tenango, the two largest *municipios* in the Sierra and, for historical reasons, the most important both to the Church as well as to the particular individuals involved.

fieldwork, which not so coincidentally was roughly when the Mazatec Indigenous Church began to take shape. In Nda Xo, as in much of Mesoamerica, Protestant evangelization beginning toward the middle of the twentieth century<sup>14</sup> was initially highly controversial. One infamous incident in July of 1961 involved a large extended family of recent Protestant converts, all of whom -- including the babies and children -- were hacked apart by machetes while they slept, an event that was attributed locally and in the national press to religious feuding.<sup>15</sup> However, although such “defection” of community members away from the default religion of syncretic Catholicism is ongoing, Protestantism now represents a fairly stable variable in the overall configuration of religious affiliation. In contrast, the arguments I discuss here, rather than taking the more typical form of disputes between Protestants and Catholics, concern the far more unusual and localized rift between Catholics on the one hand and nativist former Catholics on the other, adherents of the recently founded Mazatec Indigenous Church.

Before I discuss the founding of the church, however, I must first describe the relevant preceding history, which was intimately tied to post-Vatican II efforts at ministerial outreach on the part of the Church. A critical part of such efforts locally

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<sup>14</sup> Initial protestant evangelization in the area took place beginning in the late 1930's under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. As the SIL missionaries were the first to promote indigenous language literacy, and as the promotion of Mazatec literacy was furthermore a critical component of their mission, I will discuss Protestant evangelization in more detail in Chapter Five.

<sup>15</sup> Pike 1971: 164.

involved the birth of popular Mazatec-language literacy, which was in turn linked to the history of songwriting in Mazatec, the living corpus of Mazatec-language songs that grew out of it, and, finally, to the personal history of those who were instrumental in promoting them all.

***The Collected Works of the Brothers Prado:  
A Tale of Two Siblings and the Creation of a Mazatec Literature***

The single most important figure in Mazatec songwriting is Heriberto Prado Pereda. He is the oldest son of a relatively successful *campesino*,<sup>16</sup> Eusebio Prado Escobedo of Nda Xo, who, while not wealthy even by local standards, owned enough land and other resources to be able to afford two wives.<sup>17</sup> Eusebio was central to the

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<sup>16</sup> The development, in the Sierra, of a Mazatec professional or middle class that is only indirectly tied to agriculture is a recent event. It dates from the second half of the twentieth century, when coffee brought a relatively new level of wealth and, with it, insertion into the market economy. The Prado family is not atypical. The father was a prosperous *campesino*, and of his 14 children, all are professionals or married to professionals (teachers, mostly, but also government employees, merchants, one house builder and one mariachi), except one, who is married to a *campesino*, a man who won the Todos Santos song contest in 2001 but who is also one of Nda Xo's most notorious drunks.

<sup>17</sup> Polygamy was widespread in the Sierra even a generation ago, and most of the middle-aged people I knew – especially in the *cabecera*, where families tended to be better off than in the ranchos – were the products of polygamous marriages. Most involved two or three wives – as with Eusebio's brother – or occasionally four. However, a man from one of Nda Xo's larger ranchos, who died a few years before I arrived, was legendary: accounts varied but placed his number of wives somewhere between thirty and forty, with upwards of 80 children “and who knows how many grandchildren.” He was a large

founding in 1963 of Nda Xo's annual *Feria del Café* (Coffee Fair), an event once widely attended by people from across the Sierra and which at the time celebrated the rising local importance of coffee as a lucrative cash crop. By the time I began my fieldwork, though, the fair had become "very sad." While still well attended, the event had become a ghost of its former self, a reflection of falling coffee prices and, with them, coffee's local importance. Had Eusebio not died at a relatively young age he might have reached a level of prominence similar to that of his only brother, Anacleto Prado Escobedo, who has three wives and once held the highest civic post, that of municipal president.<sup>18</sup> Eusebio's 14 surviving children by his two wives (two by the second died in early childhood) grew up in the same unusually close-knit

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landowner and employed many *mozos* (day laborers), for whom, as is customary, he was required to provide the large mid-day meal; thus, people claimed, he needed many wives to prepare it. Some people also claimed that particularly poor families would offer their daughters to him and men like him, as a means of securing relatively comfortable lives for such young women. By the time I began my fieldwork, polygamous marriages were becoming rare. With the possible exception of a case discussed below, I knew of only one man under fifty who had more than one wife, a song composer who won the *Todos Santos* song contest in 2002 and ran for municipal president in 2004. This situation was, however, semi-secret: his second wife, the younger sister of the first, almost never left the house, and some people I mentioned it to were surprised to hear he had more than one.

<sup>18</sup> Achieving this office when he did was a greater index of general social standing in the community than it is now, as he did so under the older system that relied on the Council of Elders to name such posts. As Neiburg (1988) writes of the nearby *municipio* of Tenango, whose situation in this respect mirrors Nda Xo's, the *cabildo* or *consejo de ancianos* fell into sharp decline after the rise of political parties rivaling the PRI, particularly in the last decades of the twentieth century. Now, achieving such posts is seen more as a reflection of personal wealth, and, related, of one's standing within a given political party. Several people remarked, with some disgust, that the president serving a three-year term for most of my fieldwork – who, in his mid-thirties and a merchant by vocation, had a far different civic profile from that the living ex-presidents had when elected -- "doesn't even speak well," meaning he was uncomfortable speaking, especially Mazatec, in public. This is an image very much at odds with that presented by Florence Cowan at mid-century (1952) of the critical social role played by the President's weekly public addresses.

Mazatec-speaking household. While it was not atypical for co-wives to live together, the more common situation -- or at least the discursively normative one -- would be for them to have separate households, one "in town" run by the first (i.e. "legitimate," and in a number of ways, favored) wife, and another at the *rancho* run by the second.<sup>19</sup> The family's close situation was no doubt intensified by the fact that the first wife, Doña Francisca (Pereda), was bedridden for some thirteen years, leaving the second wife, Doña Aurelia (Pineda), to care for her and all the children and to run the household as well.<sup>20</sup>

From an early age Heriberto was both bright and interested in religious matters, which caught the attention of the local priests. Heriberto and some other Mazatec intellectuals sometimes speak of the presence of the Church in the Sierra as if it began in 1972, when the Josefino missionaries arrived. While this simplifies a more complex evangelization history dating back to the mid-sixteenth century, it accurately depicts the lived reality of most people in the Sierra: evangelization in the colonial period was not very successful, and there had been no permanent Church presence in the Sierra since before the end of the nineteenth century and possibly as far back as the late eighteenth. Thus, the Josefino presence in the Sierra at the time

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<sup>19</sup> A common expression in Nda Xo alludes to the first wife being the cathedral and the second the chapel. Occasionally, a married man would tease me by asking if I wanted to be his "chapel," which always elicited laughter when by-standers and eavesdroppers saw that I "got the joke."

<sup>20</sup> One of her daughters-in-law remarked several times that Doña Aurelia used to say, of Doña Francisca, "Funny, she was in bed all those years, but she kept having kids!"

was groundbreaking and, because quite recent, intent on extending its influence. And so under the sponsorship of the bishop in Huautla, after Heriberto finished *secundaria*<sup>21</sup> he left Nda Xo for the seminary in Tehuacán.<sup>22</sup> Eventually one of Heriberto's half brothers, Alberto, followed Heriberto into the seminary, and for a time the two of them studied in Tehuacán together with the intention of becoming priests.

The seminary where they studied was the Seminario Regional del Sureste (Regional Seminary of the Southeast, or SERESURE). It was founded in 1969 and flourished in the wake of the post-Vatican II movement in Latin America called Liberation Theology; while the movement was strongly opposed elsewhere in Mexico, it became very important in the south (Sherman 1997), which, not coincidentally, is the country's poorest and most heavily indigenous region. Three bishops in the "Pacífico Sur" (Oaxaca and Chiapas) were particularly important in making that region a stronghold of liberation theology and the "most radical" of

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<sup>21</sup> This is the equivalent in the U.S. system to middle school or junior high school. Particularly in Heriberto's generation this was an achievement in and of itself. Though the standards have since changed, it was not uncommon at that time – and remains so, in some of the smaller and more isolated Sierra communities – for grade school (*primaria*) teachers to have only finished the *primaria* themselves. Such teachers, though, were at least functionally bilingual, a skill that is by no means commonly held today by students who finish *primaria*.

<sup>22</sup> Tehuacán, in Puebla state, is the closest large city to the Sierra, and today continues to be a very important commercial center for people from Nda Xo. It is also common for people from the Sierra to work there at some point in their lives, and many migrate there more or less permanently. People from the Sierra thus tend to be much more heavily oriented toward Tehuacán and Puebla (city) than either the Mazateca Baja and the cities at the far end of it (Temascal, Soyaltepec, Tuxtepec) or toward Oaxaca city. Unlike most other rural and indigenous people in the state, people from the Mazateca rarely go to Oaxaca except on administrative business having to do with the state government.

Mexico's 18 such pastoral regions. Bartolomé Carrasco, archbishop of Oaxaca, and Arturo Lona Reyes, bishop of Tehuantepec, were the leading forces in the Church in Oaxaca during the 1970s and 80s an extremely progressive institution (Norget 1997: 4). And Don Samuel Ruiz, the famous bishop of Chiapas, actively documented government corruption and mistreatment of the indigenous population prior to the 1994 EZLN uprising. The most notable expression of unrest in the south, the rebellion was fueled in part by liberationist ideas. Don Samuel subsequently played a crucial role in mediating between the Zapatista insurgents and the government. He thereby incurred the wrath of Chiapas's pro-government ranchers and ladinos and earned the title of the "Red Bishop." SERESURE became a critical resource that these bishops and other liberationists relied on. The seminary's mission was to further the liberationist ideal of "integral evangelization," in the service of which seminarians, as part of their training, combined their theological studies with practical pastoral experience. In this way, SERESURE's "priests-in-training" were particularly important in spreading liberationist ideals while also serving local needs, as the rural areas where most of the people lived suffered a chronic shortage of priests (Norget 1997: 4).

This mission was, furthermore, very compatible with that of the Sierra's Josefino priests, whose focus on indigenous communities, especially in Oaxaca, also meant concentration on poor ones. Thus the promise offered by the Prado boys fit

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neatly into the goals of local and regional clergy, and the enthusiasm with which their ecclesiastical aspirations were encouraged reflects the general turn at the time that the post-Vatican II Church had taken towards greater acceptance of local customs, practices, languages, and even actors. Although the Prados would not be the first natives of the Mazateca to become priests, from the initial Catholic evangelization of the region through the present very few have done so. At the time the brothers entered the seminary, there were no priests working in the Sierra who were native to it, and therefore none who spoke Mazatec – a serious limitation in an area with a relatively isolated populace and a high proportion of monolinguals.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the Prelatura de Huautla had been founded precisely out of recognition of the fact that the Sierra was “underevangelized,” a situation that was especially salient due to the persistence of practices marked as problematic from the standpoint of the Church, such as polygamy and the ritual use of hallucinogenic plants. The Prado boys’ interest in the priesthood was seen as potentially very beneficial for the Church, and the two were strongly encouraged by the bishop and the other priests to complete the long years of training.

Even while still studying at the seminary, the two Prado brothers became important religious leaders in the community. Their linguistic and cultural

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<sup>23</sup> In the 1970s, when the brothers were studying in the seminary, the percentage of monolinguals would have been much higher, but even in 2000, 97% of the population of the *municipio* of Nda Xo spoke Mazatec as a first language and 40% were monolingual in it.



positioning and high level of education afforded them deep respect locally, and the “hands-on” pastoral work of SERESURE’s training meant they were actively involved in various outreach activities aimed at increasing the participation by local Sierra people in Church practices. Of all of these activities, among the most important, and certainly the one whose legacy has been most enduring, involved the introduction -- or, more precisely, the invention, as no such tradition previously existed -- of Mazatec-language songs.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the introduction of Mazatec language songs began with those Heriberto wrote for Church masses. The Day of the Dead song contest was initially conceived as furthering the process of disseminating the songs throughout the community by promoting literacy, the valorization of Mazatec language and culture, and the further participation in Church activities (at least in theory) by encouraging other people to become song writers, too.

Thus the inspiration for the composition of Mazatec-language songs grew out of a pair of contradictory realities that are nevertheless, paradoxically, often co-determining as well. While the Church aims to incorporate “underevangelized” indigenous peoples more completely, the very characteristics of people that elicit such an impulse are also what so often frustrate it. In this case, the heart of the paradox takes the form that fuller involvement in the Church often proceeds as ethnic pride diminishes; and yet the Church makes itself attractive to indigenous people the more it exhibits tolerance of indigenous difference. Certainly liberation theology operates

by embracing the idea that affirmation of the reality of indigenous identity is a prerequisite for deep, widespread evangelization. Or to put the issue in the language of liberation theology, promoting more active involvement with the Church while also valorizing “Mazatec culture” falls under the rubric of *concientización* (“consciousness-raising”) and *enculturación*.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed many of the songs Heriberto began writing are heavily influenced by liberationist ideas, beginning with the conceptualization of the entire project itself. And with time, over the successive collections, the liberationist influence became increasingly explicit, as it also began to affect the content and aims of the songs themselves.<sup>25</sup> Two of the collections contain prefaces by Bishop Ramírez, in which he addresses the audience – explicitly categorized as speakers of Mazatec – with a level of familiarity (using the second person singular familiar form in Spanish

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<sup>24</sup>*Concientización* comes from the Brazilian populist educator Paulo Freire’s notion of *conscientização*. This method of peasant education emphasized the development of critical thinking through reference to quotidian, locally salient, political issues and situations. Under liberation theology this concept became an evangelization tool by promoting assimilation of the gospel through everyday experience, including the lived reality of oppression and poverty. The related concept of *enculturación* “denotes a process wherein the priest or church agent evangelizes through the norms of the local community, using them as a sieve of interpretation, producing a kind of hybrid ‘indigenous theology’ (*teología indígena*)” (Norget 1997: 15).

<sup>25</sup> Heriberto’s first book, published in 1986, emerged in the years in which liberation theology became increasingly influential in southern Mexico, having arrived in the country nearly a decade behind other parts of Latin America. I should note, however, that his later books, published in the 1990s, appeared after liberation theology fell increasingly out of favor, as the conservative pope John Paul II acted to suppress the movement. In 1990, SERESURE was closed down, having been “accused of being a hot-bed of radical theology,” and Carrasco, the liberationist bishop of Oaxaca, was replaced in 1992 by a conservative one, effectively neutralizing the liberationist tone of the region (Norget 1997: 4). Nevertheless, liberationist ideas survived, most publicly in the person of Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas, and more privately in the work of people like Heriberto.

throughout) that invokes the solidarity and intimacy liberation theology sought to create. “Friends and brothers,” he wrote, “these songs in the Mazatec language. . . will allow you. . . to sing to God with your mouth and your heart, and in this way you can participate more fully in the Eucharist, in the Sacraments and on other occasions when you come together with Christian Mazatec people to praise God.”<sup>26</sup> A fellow priest describes one of the collections as “a cry from the Mazatec people that invokes their God from the abyss of their oppression, their marginalization, and the inhumane situation in which globalization has condemned them to live”; he then goes on to invoke a famous saying of Monsignor Oscar Romero, the renowned martyr for the liberationist cause.<sup>27</sup>

Heriberto himself, in his introductions, draws explicitly on classic themes of liberation theology. For him, Mazatecs are the “dignified descendents of the Olmecs” who “want to offer the world their cultural riches” (1994). He dedicates his songs to “my Mazatec brothers, especially the poorest ones, that they may be inspired to recover their dignity” (1986); in another volume, he dedicates them to “all Mazatecs, especially the choirs and singers lost in the mountains who with their message and work awaken the hope of giving birth to a better community,” and to “all those who put their pen, thought, and courage in the service of indigenous peoples. . . and to

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<sup>26</sup> Prado Pereda 1986 and 1991; quote from Prado Pereda 1986.

<sup>27</sup> “But the voice of justice no one can kill” (Archbishop Oscar Romero, quoted by Pbro. José Luis Sánchez García, in Prado Pereda 1991).

those writers who promote the literature of ‘deep Mexico’<sup>28</sup> (1997). He also dedicates songs to “*los grupos de base de la sierra*” (1991), designating some songs specifically for their celebrations, and others for the purpose of *concientización*, to educate people about problems ranging from cholera to the effects of neoliberalism (1994).

Perhaps the most pointed way Heriberto shows the influence of liberationist ideas is in creating songs for *La Misa Autóctona* (“The Autochthonous Mass”): songs written specifically for the masses held on *Todos Santos* (Prado Pereda 1986, 1991). Here he is explicitly drawing on the stated goal of Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes of Tehuantepec to make his diocese into an *iglesia autóctona* (“autochthonous Church”), where people can encounter Christianity ““from their own [sociocultural] reality”” (Lona Reyes, quoted in Norget 1997: 15). Inasmuch as Day of the Dead is seen, by Heriberto as well as many other Mazatecs, as the bedrock of “Mazatec identity,” it is also the single most important locus at which, according to liberationist thinking, the Church should make itself permeable to local custom, thereby maximizing local participation in the life of the Church.

And, indeed, the music Heriberto (and, later, others as well) wrote for religious occasions and for masses especially – the *muertos* masses above all – was

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<sup>28</sup> This refers to Bonfil Batalla’s seminal book *Mexico Profundo* (1987), which, while not drawing on liberationist ideas *per se*, did share many of the same political impulses, especially with respect to the Mexican state.

astonishingly popular and extremely successful in encouraging people to participate more actively in Church services and activities. As a result of Heriberto's efforts and those of his brother and others heavily involved in performing and teaching the songs, they are now sung every week by thousands of Mazatecs across the Sierra, in religious ceremonies ranging from the full Catholic mass to small, family-based ceremonies for the sick and the dead. Even the "outsider" priests, none of whom knew more than a few phrases in Mazatec, learned many of the songs, and they, too, sing them during mass each Sunday.

Both brothers continued to be actively involved in this project even after Alberto decided not to complete his studies. He left the seminary to marry a woman from Nda Xo who, like him, was from a prominent but not especially well-off family; her father, Gonzalo Avendaño Martínez, was extremely well-respected and had served twice as municipal president.<sup>29</sup> In leaving, Alberto assured the bishop that he would always be very involved with the Church, and he went on to become Nda Xo's chief catechist. He remains heavily involved in the Church's activities, serving as one of the leaders of his *kjuachikon*, leading various Church-sponsored civic activities

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<sup>29</sup> During his first presidency in 1963 – the same year, significantly, the Coffee Fair was founded – construction began on the only road into Nda Xo; Alberto's uncle Anacleto headed the committee overseeing it. Though the road is a winding, rocky one that periodically becomes impassable by landslides and falling boulders, its completion three years later was a momentous date in the history of Nda Xo (*La Faena* 2 (13, February 2001): 18).

(most importantly, the annual Day of the Dead contest), directing the music every week for mass, and regularly providing the Mazatec version of the priest's homilies.

Heriberto, on the other hand, finished the seminary, and after his long years of study he returned to the Sierra. He went on to be formally ordained as a priest in the *cabecera* of Nda Xo. The ordination ceremony marked the culmination of his triumphant homecoming. Local Church officials asked families throughout the *cabecera* to host visitors, and the celebrated event was one that local people from across the Sierra traveled in droves to attend.

Heriberto was ultimately stationed in Tenango (*Ja<sup>4</sup>č'a<sup>l</sup>*), a nearby *municipio* speaking essentially the same dialect of Mazatec as the *municipios* of Nda Xo and Tejao. There, he had a dramatic impact on the involvement of local people in Church activities. Along with subsequent events I will discuss below, this is demonstrated by comments such as those of a woman who made national and international news when, dressed in a traditional Sierra *huipil*, she performed a *limpia* on Pope John Paul II during his famous visit to Mexico in the summer of 2002.<sup>30</sup> Originally of Jač'a but now living in Tejao, she was interviewed there by *La Faena* shortly after that event:

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<sup>30</sup> While there, he canonized the Church's first indigenous saint: Juan Diego, the man to whom the Virgin of Guadalupe (key symbol of Mexican nationalism and indigenous evangelization) appeared. He also beatified the "martyrs of Oaxaca," two Zapotec men from San Francisco Cajonos (just down the road from Yalálag) who informed Church authorities about idolatrous practices in the town and were killed by their *paisanos* for it (a history of religious division that has, in various guises and at various times, haunted indigenous communities throughout Mesoamerica, including, as here, Nda Xo).

**Juan García Carrera (editor of *La Faena*):** Where did you learn how to give *limpias*? You had family who were *curanderos*?

**María Magdalena García:** I'm not a *curandera* but I know how to give *limpias*. Before, I would give *limpias* with eggs and rue to my children from the time they were little. At present, I have 12 years of actively participating in religious activities. I recall that it was the ex-priest Heriberto Prado who brought us into the religion; he organized us.<sup>31</sup>

This is a not atypical allusion, particularly for someone who, like María, was originally from Jač'a. It attests to the enormous impact Heriberto had on local Catholic practice, increasing active involvement by many while also, even then, helping to make Church activities more permeable to local ethnic traditions. The fact that it has become customary in the Sierra for religious officials to be given *limpias* in this way at the beginning of each mass is, for example, directly linked to his officiating at masses where he initiated and encouraged the practice.

It seems hard to overestimate the symbolic and practical importance of Heriberto's presence as a priest. He represented an enormous opportunity for evangelization by the Church. Finally, the Church could count as one of its own someone who was both culturally and linguistically conversant with the local people from the community. He was a resource people could turn to; he would understand their words directly and could mediate in a way other priests could not; people could confess their sins, and their troubles, in Mazatec and for the first time know they

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<sup>31</sup> *La Faena* (2(25): July-September, 2002, p. 6.

would really be understood. He translated the words of certain key prayers and activities into Mazatec – the Lord’s Prayer, the rosary, and, above all, the sign of the cross – and as a result many people from the Sierra could for the first time utter these in their own language.

At the same time, Heriberto’s presence was critically important in making the Church itself – if not on the whole, then at least as it was instantiated through his own actions – more receptive to local realities. For example, he performed the sacrament of marriage for second and subsequent wives, something none of the “outsider” priests would do. He also baptized babies born of such unions.<sup>32</sup> As here, too, he was the only priest who would do so he became especially sought after, respected, and, ultimately, beloved. Precisely because he filled needs no other member of the clergy could, his influence and reputation extended well beyond Jač’a, where he was stationed, across the entire Sierra.

Meanwhile, throughout his time as a priest, he continued to write songs, to promote them throughout the Sierra, and to hold workshops teaching catechists and others to learn the songs and to write their own. Over time, the songs no longer were seen as ones he authored. They slowly became community property, such that by the time I began my fieldwork most of the people younger than he and Alberto – as well

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<sup>32</sup> In my experience, parents are very preoccupied if their children are not baptized, whether for such institutional reasons or financial ones, lest they die before receiving the sacraments.



as older people who did not begin coming to Church regularly until after the songs were widely known – did not know that Heriberto had written them.<sup>33</sup> Any understanding of Heriberto’s impact on the community would be incomplete without an examination of the hundreds of songs he wrote and whose lyrics he published.

**kui<sup>4</sup>Nndja<sup>1</sup>le<sup>4</sup> nai<sup>3</sup>na<sup>1</sup> nga<sup>3</sup> en<sup>1</sup> na<sup>1</sup>:**  
***Let Us Sing to God in Our Language***

*kui<sup>4</sup>Nndja<sup>1</sup>le<sup>4</sup> nai<sup>3</sup>na<sup>1</sup> nga<sup>3</sup> en<sup>1</sup> na<sup>1</sup> / cantemos a dios en nuestra lengua*

(*mazateca*)<sup>34</sup>: so was titled Heriberto’s first book of songs, which was also the first book of modern literature written in Mazatec.<sup>35</sup> The title itself emphasizes that the importance of the collection resided less in the music itself than in the fact that the songs were written and sung in Mazatec. Although the published editions of the songs were bilingual (in Mazatec and Spanish), most of the songs were always sung

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<sup>33</sup> For example, in one of the newspaper articles written about events recounted below, Heriberto is said to be acclaimed by locals for having *taught* them songs in Mazatec.

<sup>34</sup> *kui<sup>4</sup>Nndja<sup>1</sup>* (sing [imperative] + us [inclusive]) - *le<sup>4</sup>* ((to) him) *nai<sup>3</sup>na<sup>1</sup>* (God) *nga<sup>3</sup>* ([definitive]) *en<sup>1</sup>* (word, language) *na<sup>1</sup>* (our [inclusive])

<sup>35</sup> This book was published in 1986. In the Mazateca Baja, the first book was *Tatsjejin nga kjabuya / No es eterna la muerte (Death is not Eternal)*, published by Juan Gregorio Regino in 1992. An excerpt of the book’s title poem appears at the beginning of Chapter Three.

only in Mazatec.<sup>36</sup> In addition, when people subsequently reproduced the texts, they did so only in Mazatec, omitting the Spanish translation. Thus, in contrast to some of the bilingual written texts discussed in the Chapter Six (poems, stories, etc.), with these songs it was much more clearly the case that the primary text was the Mazatec one. Though the initial work of reading the songs, before they were memorized or sufficiently familiar not to need “decoding,” exhibited some of the same characteristics of those other written texts, the Mazatec version was clearly foregrounded.

The music itself is fairly simple, both instrumentally and compositionally, and is highly reminiscent of the music played during Day of the Dead. It relies on the same narrow range of instruments: at minimum at least one guitar, sometimes more, and on occasion a violin or two, a drum, a *teponaxtle*, a tambourine, and in some cases a bass violin.<sup>37</sup> The music is centered on the voices, which almost always sing in unison and break into harmony only on the occasional climactic note. The instrumental accompaniment involves at most 3 or 4 measures of introduction, then music based around a few basic guitar chords. It is heavily influenced by vernacular music heard throughout Mexico: *rancheros*, *corridos*, ballads, and the like. Each song lists the general category of its rhythm (“*balada lenta*,” “*balada moderna*,”

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<sup>36</sup> The exceptions are a handful of songs written in Spanish only.

<sup>37</sup> Among these, the bass violin is the one instrument Todos Santos musicians never use, because it is not very portable.

“*ranchero*,” “*huapango*,” “*saya*,” “*corrido*,” etc.) and its key in the do-re-mi scale. It then indicates how the guitar chords correspond to the text, using a numbering system linked to charts for each key given in the back of the book. None of this was repeated for Heriberto’s subsequent volumes of songs, as it became clear people could learn the music very successfully without such aids.<sup>38</sup> Many musicians, though, continue to note the key for each song in their copies.

Furthermore, at least in this first volume the message itself was, in its relative novelty, secondary to the medium of language itself: the texts of most of the songs were boilerplate messages about Catholic belief. This was so for at least two reasons, the first being functional.

Almost all of the first book<sup>39</sup> was dedicated to the first several Mazatec masses (mentioned in Alberto’s article, excerpted in Chapter Three). Heriberto and later others primarily aimed to supply choral music for formal Catholic mass, thereby entering a centuries-long tradition of Western composers who have also done so. In the words of Bishop Ramírez, the assembled songs “seek to fill the role of liturgical texts of the Ordinary of the Mass or of the respective moments of the Eucharistic

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<sup>38</sup> This was no doubt enhanced by the fact that people learned the masses not as isolated songs but as part of a longer unit, the entire mass.

<sup>39</sup> The incidental songs at the back of this volume have never been as widely used or known as the masses. They include primarily songs for special occasions, such as Christmas and weddings (including the famous “Naxo Loxa,” mentioned in the previous chapter, which was not written by Heriberto).

celebration” (Prado Pereda 1986, 3). Thus the songs fell in the set sequence reflecting the order of the Mass: an entrance song (Introit); the Kyrie; the Gloria; a “meditational song” (Gradual); a song for the Gospel Acclamation; the Credo; an Offertory; the Sanctus and Benedictus; the Lord’s Prayer; the Agnus Dei; a communion song; and a recessional song.<sup>40</sup> As the songs for the Ordinary<sup>41</sup> are settings of specific, fixed texts, authors have relatively little textual freedom here. The settings of those texts involve inexact, approximate translations into Mazatec (from Spanish), and vary some from mass to mass. The imprecise, variable nature of the translations<sup>42</sup> is part of why the Bishop concedes that the texts cannot be considered fully liturgical, despite their social utility (Prado Pereda 1986, 3). Furthermore, even the songs for the Proper of the Mass -- which either do not involve settings of particular texts or are free translations chosen from among the hundreds of Proper prayers -- place strong constraints upon the author’s creativity, given that each must perform a specific function within the context of the mass.

The other reason why the earlier song books – the first one in particular – relied on such canonical Catholic content is historical. These songs, and the project by which they were disseminated, needed to be “religiously correct” in message

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<sup>40</sup> The Sanctus and Benedictus appear in the same song. Some of these masses do not contain settings of either the Credo or the Lord’s Prayer.

<sup>41</sup> Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus, Agnus Dei.

<sup>42</sup> Reading between the lines of the translations, one can also see evidence of the difficulties that translation caused for Heriberto, difficulties that eventually led him to write new texts for his songs.

precisely because they were an experiment. They represented a new tool to be used in the ongoing project of evangelizing the people of the Sierra. This emphasis, however inexplicit, was on minimizing the disruptions in existing practice that this new instrument might produce. Acceptance of the songs hinged on continuity with preceding musical and linguistic practice. From the perspective of the audience – Mazatec speakers -- the instrumental music and, of course, the language in which the songs were written were both very familiar; and the content of the songs, if novel, was only mildly so. The innovation of these songs thus resided not in any of those aspects but rather in how they introduced into the Church ethnically marked practices common in the community which previously had been excluded from Church activities. The songs made it possible for local people to use their *lengua materna* in the Church in new ways, and they also allowed Mazatecs to use traditional music not to welcome the return of the dead but rather to spread the Gospel and glorify God. From the perspective of the Church, on the other hand, support for the project required that the songs remain faithful to Catholic doctrine. For local Church officials, who did not speak the language and had only passing familiarity with *muertos* music, the novelty arose from the use of a new language, Mazatec, to impart canonical messages about Christianity.

Nevertheless, the songs do have some distinctive qualities, some of which turn on aspects of the Mazatec language itself. In general the lyrics are organized into

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quatrains and couplets, often alternating between the two; this structure lends itself particularly well to reliance on common poetic tropes, perhaps particularly prevalent in sung poetry, such as repetition and parallelism. Certain aspects of Mazatec further heighten this, by providing abundant opportunities for internal and terminal rhymes. The language is composed of short words and a relatively small phonemic repertoire, in part because of its tonal richness. Furthermore, Mazatec tends to place demonstratives, pronouns, and various affixes and clitics at the end of utterances (and, therefore, the ends of lines of text). This fairly small set of lexemes further enhances the musical possibilities of Mazatec text composition, since it includes near rhymes, true rhymes, and tonemic minimal pairs:

*jña<sup>1</sup>*: us (inclusive)  
*jña<sup>2</sup>*: them

*ji<sup>3</sup>*: us (singular)  
*jin<sup>4</sup>*: us (exclusive)

*ts'an<sup>4</sup>*: mine  
*tsan<sup>42</sup>*: ours (inclusive)

*-li<sup>23</sup>*: yours (sing.; at end of utterance)  
*-le<sup>31</sup>*: (at end of verb) or *-le<sup>4</sup>* (otherwise):  
his/hers/its/theirs

*je kuan ts'ja<sup>3</sup>kie<sup>4</sup>*: I have loved  
*je kuan ts'ja<sup>3</sup>kie<sup>3</sup>*: he has loved

*b'e<sup>3</sup>jo<sup>2</sup>an<sup>3</sup>*: I clean  
*b'e<sup>2</sup>jon<sup>32</sup>*: we clean (inclusive)

*si<sup>1</sup>je<sup>1</sup>*: he/she/it asks (requests)  
*si<sup>1</sup>je<sup>13</sup>*: I ask

*si<sup>1</sup>ca<sup>3</sup>sen<sup>1</sup>*: he/she/it sends  
*si<sup>3</sup>ca<sup>3</sup>sen<sup>13</sup>*: I sent

*tsjoa<sup>3</sup>-le<sup>4</sup>*: I give him  
*tsjoa<sup>2</sup>-le<sup>23</sup>*: I give you (singular)

Finally, the lexical repertoire is primarily confined to words in common colloquial (though not overly informal) use, rather than, for example, using an exalted, elevated or archaic register. Common loan words are used -- *hostia*, for example, and *café* -- rather than, for example the “purifying” neologisms Heriberto would turn to later. Because of the religious context, and the lack of equivalent expressions in Mazatec for some common Christian speech in Spanish, this places unique pressures on some Mazatec words. For example, as there is obviously no traditional expression in Mazatec for taking Communion, the author uses expressions that would seem unorthodox in Spanish but have the effect of aligning the act with quotidian practice. The following illustrates this, as well as some of the qualities discussed above:

<i>je naxinandali naina</i>	your people, God,
<i>kaf'i sixat'ali nd'ei nd'ei</i>	came to greet you today
<i>je xo ngañ'ionli machjenle</i>	for they need your support
<i>kui skine nili</i>	therefore [lit] they are going to eat you

(Second Mass, Prado Pereda 1986, 31)

In a similar vein, some words are pressed into service for an extremely wide semantic field, drawing on their daily usage while also expanding it. Nowhere is this more the case than with the word *kjuanda* (*kjua* [substantive] + *nda*<sup>43</sup> (good<sup>43</sup>). It has a variety

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<sup>43</sup> Not to be confused with *nda*<sup>1</sup> (water, river).

of common uses: good fortune, goodness, a thing of beauty, and, most strikingly, the often accidental discovery of the hallucinogenic mushrooms that spring up across the Sierra during rainy season. In the songs, its semantic field is even wider<sup>44</sup>:

<i>tjian k'ile kjuanda</i>	we're going to give him [God] <b>the best</b> we have [i.e., as an offering; also, to give glory to; to praise] (1986, numerous)
<i>je kjuanda xi kj'as'insijele xi sitjason</i>	is the <b>gift</b> that I ask of you (1986, 11)
<i>kitse kjuandale jisond'e joni ng'ajmi</i>	the world is full of your <b>glory</b> in earth as it is in heaven (1986, 17; 41; 53)
<i>kataf'i na jin kjuandali ji</i>	that your <b>kingdom</b> come to us (1986, 29; 41)
<i>kjuanda katatsjali je naxinanda</i>	that your people <sup>45</sup> give <b>thanks</b> to you (1986, 43)
<i>kjuanda chitsele naina xanyale jña chita ima</i>	the <b>Good</b> News of God I will teach to the poor (1986, 58)
<i>kjua tsjana kjuandale nga kjit'a, nga kjit'a</i>	always give me your <b>grace</b> , always (1986, 134)

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<sup>44</sup> The Spanish translations for these same passages are, respectively, as follows: *lo mejor, el favor, gloria, reino, gracias, Buena [Nueva], voluntad, gusto por platicar, soluciones*.

<sup>45</sup> This is one of the more beautiful Mazatec words: *naxin* [rock] + *nanda* [water], and signifies – much like the Spanish term *pueblo* – both a town or settlement and the people who live in it; a community.



*to tsin ni kjuas 'in kjuanda*  
*nga kuas 'in tiyo xkuaya*

there is no **agreement** this way  
we exchange insults instead  
(1991, 20)

*k'ue nga sak'ua biyojt-tin jña*  
*nga bijnčia jña jngo kjuanda*

when we come together  
to seek **unity**  
(1994, 53)

Beyond these features of the songs rooted in the unique qualities of the Mazatec language itself, the more original aspects of the songs rely on adding local details or attempting to present the messages in local terms. In other words, they follow the localist bent at the heart of Liberation Theology without adopting its more controversial, overtly political agenda. Some songs rely, for example, on explicit agrarian imagery, as in this song spoken in the voice of God:

*joni s'i nangui xi kixind'e*  
*jmeni nga ndani nanda machjenle*  
*kju'ati s'in machjenle t'a ts'an chita*  
*jmeni nga kju'ejnakon ni*

like the dry land  
needs water to be fertile  
men too need me  
in order to live

(Second Mass, Prado Pereda 1986, 21)

Even the few early songs that touched on social themes were only weakly political:

*[mele Jesukristo]*  
*katafet'a chita xi tsinle*  
*tsojmi tje, katafet'a*  
*ngats'i jixti nd'i*  
*xi ch'in tjinle*

[Christ longs]  
that there be none who lack  
for the harvest, that  
all the children  
be free from sickness

<i>katafet'a chita xi nitojme jin</i>	that there be no one in need
<i>xi tjinle, ngoson kji katas'ena</i>	that we all be equal
<i>ngats'ine i jisond'e</i>	here in the world
<i>katafe xi kjuaton in</i>	that there be an end to
	exploitation
<i>kjuanda in xi katas'e</i>	that there be goodness
<i>katafet'a chita i kjinejin</i>	that there be no ill will
<i>kjit'a xikjin</i>	between one another
<i>je xi kjuatjochia in katas'e</i>	that there be love
<i>jo tso kjuatexomale je naina</i>	as God himself brought
<i>tonga li kjin kjuini je xi kju'as'in</i>	but those who bring this change
	will not come from outside
<i>to jña xo s'en ku'a ko naina</i>	only us, helped by God

(Third Mass, Prado Pereda 1986, 45)

One of the few incidental songs at the back of the first book, “*je ya kafé*” (“The Coffee Tree”), is particularly inventive in the way it uses a coffee tree that does not bear fruit as an analogy for service to God and community. Rather than being a song about poverty as a product of exploitation, the message here extols the virtues of hard work that might enable the worshipper to honor God’s commandment to help the poor:

<i>tonga tsa kju'ati ima tiyo jña,</i>	but if we, too, are poor
<i>tme xi ku'iletsa iani xi tsinle</i>	how can we give to those in
	need?

(Prado Pereda 1986, 135)

In the later songs that are more overtly political, the attempt to make the texts locally relevant intensifies. So, too, does the message about the importance of unity, which emerges on more gentle and less strident terms in the excerpts above, and especially in that at the beginning of the chapter. This explicit yearning for a unified community takes on, over time, an increasing urgency, as the songs come to embrace the more provocative teachings of liberationist thought. The songs also begin to draw an ever brighter line around the limits of community, defining in increasingly politicized terms the division between “outsiders” and “insiders.” As in many of the *muertos* songs, solidarity becomes defined not only in terms of internal cohesion but also as a product of preserving a clear separation between “us” and “not us.”

Therefore it is particularly ironic, as we will see in the following section, that the community division leading to the birth of the Mazatec Indigenous Church sprang from the perception that Heriberto and his followers had come to look more like foreigners than locals, more like betrayers of the community than promoters of it. For the songs, and the collaborative efforts aimed at promoting them, were conceived as a new, activist form of community building. Both Heriberto and Alberto, as well as other family members and friends from CIPRECMA (Committee for the Revival of Mazatec Culture),<sup>46</sup> were actively involved in promoting them throughout the

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<sup>46</sup> The core members, catechists all, also performed under the name Grupo Claridad, which later became Jt-tin Nda Xo (Grupo Aqua Espuma, *agua espuma* being the literal Spanish translation of Chilchotla’s Mazatec name, Nda Xo). It was under this last name that the group made its first (eponymous) cassette recording, of the sixth mass written by Heriberto.

Mazateca. They went to communities across the Sierra to teach the songs, and every Sunday the group performed and led them during mass. Throughout the year, they also led people in singing them for a wide variety of religious events occurring outside the church, from *posadas* to celebrations for saints to weddings to ceremonies for the dead. They recorded cassettes of the music so that people could play the music at home, as both entertainment and as learning aids. These first cassettes of Mazatec-language music established a trend that would go on to become much more widespread and popular than any of the performers could possibly have imagined, kicking off a cottage industry in the production of Mazatec-language cassettes.

On the one commercially produced cassette made by Grupo Claridad there is a photo of the members. They are standing in a field, smiling, with the backdrop of Nda Xo's highest mountain behind them, which is visible from almost any place in the greater *municipio*. In this photo they are in effect physically representing the act of addressing – singing to, teaching, reaching out to, including – the audience: members of the community, all the people who live, work, and die in Nda Xo. It is a poignant commentary on the events following the cassette's release that this group, who went across the Sierra singing songs extolling the importance of unity, would be split in two by the founding of the Mazatec church. And Heriberto, its author and leader, would become one of Nda Xo's most divisive and reviled figures.

***The Birth of the Mazatec Indigenous Church:  
Textual Practices and Ideologies, Singing, and Veladas***

The period when these songs were born was an extended one in which Heriberto and his half-brother Alberto lived collaborative and closely parallel lives. Their very names mirror this: their full names -- Heriberto Prado Pereda and Alberto Prado Pineda -- are in fact so similar that local people who do not know them well often get them confused.<sup>47</sup> Even their own brothers refer to them as a unit, “my brothers who’ve done so much for our culture.”

However, this long period of symbiosis and collaboration came dramatically to an end when Heriberto was forced to leave his position as priest. While serving in Tenango, Heriberto met Laura. She was at the time in her mid-twenties and legally married, with three children on the eve of adolescence, having begun “unofficial” married life, as was customary until very recently, in her early teens.<sup>48</sup> Accounts vary

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<sup>47</sup> Such confusions occurred several times during my fieldwork: I would be talking with someone about one brother when it would become clear that my interlocutor thought I meant the *other* brother instead. A particularly telling event of this type occurred with respect to the Mazatec Indigenous Church (discussed below).

<sup>48</sup> As continues to be the case in the present, couples generally “paired off” first, with the formal wedding often following several years later and also including the baptism of any children from the union, after the considerable money such celebrations require has been raised. Until a generation or two ago, it was very common in the Sierra for men and women to find mates shortly after puberty, when they were in the mid- or even early teens. María Sabina, for example, married when she was 14; Alberto’s mother married at 15. Heriberto’s mother married when she was even younger, 13, and as she was not yet menstruating she slept in the same bed with her mother-in-law until she “became a woman.”

about the circumstances under which the relationship between Laura and Heriberto deepened. According to Laura, she left her husband before becoming involved with Heriberto because her husband wanted to take her half-sister as a second wife. She would not agree to accept this situation and defended her decision even when the municipal authorities brought her in front of the *ayuntamiento* and tried to convince her to remain in the marriage.

According to others in Nda Xo, however, she left her husband for Heriberto. In this version people hold her actions in particular disdain because she was the legitimate wife -- i.e., married not only legally but also in the eyes of the Church -- of another man. "If she hadn't already been married, I think the people would have accepted it," one man told me. This remark indicates how relatively common it is for priests to have illicit relationships on the side -- so common, in fact, that there is a widespread expression for it: "In Mexico. . . [m]uch is also said of the hypocrisy of the clergy, the *padre gallo* (lit. rooster priest) who preaches morality in the pulpit and fathers illegitimate children on the side" (Loewe and Hoffman 2002, 1144).<sup>49</sup> The comment also indicates that such relationships are acceptable only when they do not

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<sup>49</sup> This attitude was epitomized by the reaction in Mexico to the film *El Crimen de Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*, 2002), which centers on a newly minted priest's illicit relationship with a young woman. The Church was outraged by the film and led protests against it, but "its viewers haven't considered it so offensive and have seen it as a valid approach to an unconcealable reality" (Carro 2003). It became the highest-grossing Mexican film in history (Hoberman 2002).

become too public or socially disruptive.<sup>50</sup> In any event, the union of Heriberto and Laura was kept quiet for some years. Laura had a son by Heriberto and lived with him in a house they built some distance out of Nda Xo's *cabecera*, on land Heriberto inherited from his father.

Eventually, though, when the son was already several years old, the bishop learned that Heriberto had in effect taken a common law wife (they have never officially married<sup>51</sup>). Here, again, accounts vary as to how Church officials reacted. According to others in town, Heriberto willingly chose to leave the priesthood. The bishop gave Heriberto a year to consider his options and decide which vocation he would like to pursue: father of the Church or father of a family. At the end of it,

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<sup>50</sup> During my fieldwork, one of the priests in Yalálag – coincidentally or not, he was, like Heriberto, a local – had a relationship with a girl that resulted in her getting pregnant. At the time, I was struck by how people, while not condoning the situation, seemed not at all surprised that a priest would do such a thing. “You know how priests are,” was a phrase I heard more than once. Rather they were particularly judgmental about the fact that the priest at first refused to take responsibility for the young woman's situation. When I told this story to people in Nda Xo they had much the same reaction. It was interesting, however, that when the Church's sex abuse scandal in the U.S. blew up during my fieldwork some locals were horrified to find out the priests were molesting children rather than women. “Oh, that's worse,” one man told me, a typical response.

<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that this may in part be due to the fact that Laura never officially divorced her husband. In my experience this is common in such cases in a country as heavily Catholic as Mexico, where divorce (or annulment) requires considerable resources and the willingness to deal with the bureaucratic difficulties required.

Whatever the circumstances were under which Laura and Heriberto became involved, the reality of the situation was a very difficult one for Laura, as almost no one looked favorably upon her, including members of Heriberto's family and her own. She is a very strong and willful person, exhibiting a tough public persona that stands in marked distinction to that of most local women. She demonstrated this as well as her abundant sense of humor when I asked, not long after meeting her, if she and Heriberto were married. She answered, “We got married in *union libre*,” meaning they were not actually married at all. I confused this with a *rancho* in Tenango near the one where she was born (Union Hidalgo), which provoked great laughter on her part and which she still teases me about.

Heriberto continued attempting to do both, which forced the bishop's hand.

According to Heriberto, he was kicked out of the priesthood. He was, he claims, pressured unfairly to leave by the bishop and singled out precisely because he was local and, more to the point, indigenous. In conversations with me he never went so far as to claim the bishop's actions were motivated by racism per se, but he clearly felt he had been the victim of a double standard. He claimed that his behavior – which he would freely admit was problematic: “I know very well that I am a great sinner”<sup>52</sup> – was not so out of line with the actions of other priests as to warrant the punishment he received.

In any event, Heriberto fought the measure vigorously, and left the Church on deeply embittered terms. Furthermore, this animosity was personal: his own experience of the Church, and, as he saw it, that of all people from the Sierra, had been almost exclusively through the Prelature of Huautla and the man who had headed it since its founding, Bishop Ramírez. Many people in the community interpreted the event as deeply personal as well; on the whole people were scandalized by these events. This was in large measure a reflection of how adored and revered Heriberto had become, as the area's only native priest; his departure from the priesthood thus constituted an unwelcome return to a Church whose officials all came from outside and who were seen by many as out of touch with their needs and

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<sup>52</sup> Prado Pereda, n.d., 1.



realities. On the other hand, however, the circumstances of Heriberto's new union were particularly offensive by local norms. Laura's abandonment of her "legitimate" family, which included not only a legal husband but also children who were not yet grown, for a man who had taken a vow of celibacy cast the virtuousness of both into serious doubt.

Nevertheless, the outrage this scandal provoked might have blown over had the ex-priest not then formalized the rift with the Church by founding The Mazatec Indigenous Church. The Mazatec Church grew out of several contentious events having to do with relations between local people and Church authorities.<sup>53</sup> These began after Heriberto officially left his post as priest in the Catholic Church on August 1, 1997. In the following year, in the wake of the scandal, as many people adjusted to his new public persona as a "family man" rather than a priest, people also began to talk to him about problems between their communities and Church authorities. On September 15, 1998, he held a meeting with representatives of several such communities from across the Sierra, in which they aired their assorted grievances with the Church. Regardless of the particular forms they took, almost all these problems were an expression of the lack, as the representatives saw it, of

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<sup>53</sup> I am relying here on newspaper articles, accounts written by locals, and oral histories. Although I did not myself witness these precipitating events, during the course of my fieldwork I did see firsthand similar conflicts between priests and communities. The parish priest for Nda Xke, to which Nangui Ni pertains, was run out of town shortly after I arrived; according to at least one account, when he finally drove off in his truck (which would have been Church property), people were so mad they pelted it with rocks, cracking the windshield. Lesser problems also surfaced with his successor.

genuine respect, understanding, and interest on the part of Church authorities for the needs and concerns of the people they were ostensibly meant to serve.

A little over two months later, the municipal authorities of one such community, the small *municipio* San Miguel Huauteppec, met with Heriberto about problems they had been having with the parish priest, who was resident in Santa María Asunción, an adjoining and much larger *municipio*. According to these authorities, the priest belonged to the leftist political party PRD<sup>54</sup> and only attended to those affiliated with the same political party. Because the authorities from San Miguel were allied with the PRI, the priest “maltreated” the parishioners of San Miguel in various ways, taking with them an “attitude of superiority and despotism” and providing many “pretexts and excuses” for not performing various masses that had been pending for more than a year. He made arrangements to perform baptisms and weddings and arrived very late or very early, then proceeded with the rites regardless of whether or not people were present; sometimes he never arrived at all.<sup>55</sup> Most “absurd and cruel” of all, he insisted that people from San Miguel bring those who were dying to him in the parish seat rather than traveling to them to offer

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<sup>54</sup> Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Democratic Revolution Party), the most left-leaning of Mexico’s three main political parties. It emerged out of the alliance out of several small leftist parties and a segment of the most liberal (and therefore disenfranchised) members of the PRI.

<sup>55</sup> Note that weddings and baptisms are among the most important and therefore most expensive events in the Sierra; given the relative poverty of the area, many families save for years to raise the money required. Without a priest there to perform the rituals at their center, these entire events become doubly “infelicitous.”

extreme unction, reportedly saying to the people, “Go on and put them in the car and I’ll attend to it for you here”<sup>56</sup> (García Carrera 1999).

As a result, in late November, 1998 members of the *ayuntamiento* asked Heriberto to perform masses for them instead. Heriberto explained to them that he no longer had any official authority in the Church. However, they argued “that was no problem, that when a government employee retired from his work, he subsequently performed services privately, that in the same manner he [Heriberto] could attend to them since he knew the trade” (Palacios Cházares 1999). After meeting with them once more, and receiving a formal request for his services from the municipal president, he agreed to perform masses in December for the Virgins of Juquilita and Guadalupe, for Christmas, and for New Year’s (Prado Pereda, n.d., 4). Later, when interviewed by regional newspapers, he claimed he had no choice but to do as the community asked, because it would have been impossible to remain silent in the face of such humiliation and abuse directed at indigenous people (Palacios Cházares 1999). During the same period he also began to perform baptisms, for which he issued baptismal certificates. In addition, communities that also had conflicts with the Church began to petition his services. In late January of 1999, he went to celebrate masses in an *agencia* of Huautla (the seat of the prelature, where the bishop

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<sup>56</sup> In the original, the priest was quoted as using the second person familiar, further emphasizing the supposed disrespectfulness of the priest. If the priest did say this or something like it, such a comment and the attitude it symbolized would indeed be very offensive, and either strikingly ignorant or dismissive of the emotional, logistic, and financial difficulties involved in doing as he said.

was resident) for the municipal authorities recently elected there,<sup>57</sup> and especially to perform baptisms.<sup>58</sup>

This latter situation, taking place in his own “back yard,” provoked an extremely angry response by Bishop Ramírez. In February of 1999, he called a meeting of the catechists from the parish, in which he explained Heriberto’s situation, declaring that the sacraments administered by him were not valid. Subsequently, Heriberto and the authorities from San Miguel met with the bishop and, later, with other priests, including the parish priest in question. These meetings ended without resolution, and after them the battle lines became more strongly drawn than ever, with Heriberto and his supporters insisting on the virtue of his actions while Church authorities continued to condemn them. The bishop issued a pastoral letter distributed throughout the prelature, directed at priests and catechists as well as the general public. It declared that Heriberto had no authority to administer sacraments of the Catholic Church since he had “voluntarily retired from the Catholic priesthood and had freely decided to live with a women in concubinage” (Ramírez Sánchez

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<sup>57</sup> In sub-municipal communities – *agencies* and *congregaciones* – new authorities are elected every year; this is in part because these positions are unpaid, and thus constitute something of a hardship for those fulfilling the posts. In the *cabecera* of Nda Xo the authorities occupy paid positions, and are elected every three years.

<sup>58</sup> I suspect that hearing Heriberto was “still in business” on this front was especially attractive precisely because before retiring he had been the only priest willing to perform baptisms for children born of unions not recognized by the Church.

1999). The bishop and other priests also publicly denounced Heriberto from the pulpit.

Members of the communities who had sought his help became divided. Some continued to support Heriberto while others opposed him.<sup>59</sup> Authorities from a few other communities invited him to celebrate various masses, even after being told not to by Church officials. And Heriberto continued to honor these requests, claiming that, “The more forcefully the Church discredits me, the more they [the people] invite me” (Prado Pereda n.d., 5).

In the meantime, Heriberto also began to garner support from citizens of Nda Xo, including some who were among the most prominent participants in local Church activities. In December 1998, on the feast day for the Virgin of Guadalupe, three women from the Sierra were consecrated as “Indigenous Missionaries of Our Lady of Guadalupe”<sup>60</sup>; Bishop Ramírez officiated at the ceremony, which took place in Nda

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<sup>59</sup> One of the newspaper articles about these events claimed that in San Miguel, at least, the division reflected party affiliation: *priistas* (PRI supporters) worshipped with Heriberto in a chapel in the center of town, while *perredistas* (PRD supporters) worshipped in another chapel in one of the town’s barrios (Palacios Cházares 1999). The journalist also noted that in San Miguel, as most communities in the Sierra, the introduction of party politics initiated a “new era” in which municipal power was highly disputed, and thus the religious rift might prove especially explosive if coupled with political divisions. This is not, however, a claim I heard others make, either about San Miguel or about other communities, including Nda Xo. Whatever Heriberto’s party inclinations might be, he is not public about them, and he later explicitly stated the anti-partisan stance of the Mazatec church: “We are at the service of all without distinction. We aren’t at the service of one party nor of the caciques” (Prado Pereda n.d., 9).

<sup>60</sup> The Misioneras Indígenas de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe were founded in 1992 in La Providencia, Huautla, with the “unique goal of working as needed with the people of our indigenous communities and in order to achieve this we consecrate ourselves to God and live in community” (Comunidad de Misioneras Indígenas, 1998). The *misioneras* must follow 6 stages of commitment for distinct periods

Xo and prominently featured Heriberto's songs. Two months later, the conflict between Heriberto and the bishop came to a head, and ultimately the *misioneras* declared their solidarity with Heriberto. Within the next year, others from the community did so as well, including some of Nda Xo's longstanding catechists, most of whom were also members of Heriberto's family.

The social effects of these "defections" were numerous and sharply felt. Because the Catholic Church plays such a central role in social life and civic administration, departure from the Church carries widespread ramifications not unlike those experienced elsewhere in Mexico by Protestant converts. At the extreme end, such converts risk being murdered, as has happened even recently in Chiapas. Residents of the Nda Xo *congregación* of Amatlán who joined the Mazatec church received death threats from the neighboring community of La Luz, through which they have to walk to reach their village from where the road ends.

Even in less extreme form the social rifts cause severe disruptions in relations with people who remain faithful to the Church. For the *misioneras*, the price was even higher: supporting Heriberto ultimately meant leaving their position with the Church, which in turn meant a change not only in their social standing but also in their material conditions, since they could no longer depend on the Church for food

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of time, culminating in a lifelong commitment, and at each stage take vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Thus the *misioneras* had official standing with the Church, which, as with priests, provided them with housing and sustenance. Two of the *misioneras* consecrated that day took two-year vows (the fourth stage), and the third took a five-year vow (the penultimate stage).

and housing. At the same time, those who did not ally themselves with Heriberto were very frightened by the departures of those who had been among the strongest supporters of the Church. In response to this perceived threat to the Church, the *kjuachikons*, which had been in decline, were enthusiastically revived.<sup>61</sup>

These events constituted the antecedents of what Heriberto and those who left the Church in solidarity with him came to call the Iglesia Indígena Mazateca, the Mazatec Indigenous Church.<sup>62</sup> Actual membership in the church is quite small. In Nda Xo proper it is made up primarily of members of Heriberto's own family: one of his first cousins (an older, unmarried woman), his biological mother, and his full sisters and their families, though the husbands are less enthusiastic and more sporadic participants.<sup>63</sup> A couple of other nuclear families in Nda Xo also belong, and there are a few more small groups in other settlements in the greater *municipios* of Nda Xo,

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<sup>61</sup> The *kjuachikons* focus primarily on religious themes and discussion of the Bible rather than the political issues championed by Liberation Theology. Therefore, these are in harmony with the Church's conservative ethos under John Paul II.

<sup>62</sup> After the conflict with the bishop, Heriberto and his various supporters met in San Miguel and then in the *agencia* in Huautla in March 1999; at this second meeting, they adopted the term "Iglesia Indígena Mazateca." Thus the group existed as a clear entity by the time I began fieldwork a year later in mid-2000, though many of its policies and practices had yet to be formalized.

<sup>63</sup> I.e., neither his father's second wife nor any of his half-siblings participate. Neither do his full brothers, although the one who lives in Nda Xo flirted with the idea for a while, attending its services over many weeks, before going back to attending Catholic mass. He in fact lives next door to his mother and directly across the street from Heriberto, providing a level of daily intimacy that underscores the rift within the family.

Tenango, and Tejao.<sup>64</sup> The latter, for example, is where the *misioneras* now live, having opened a small store to support themselves. These other groups each have perhaps 10 adults and sometimes fewer, usually from a single extended family. All told, the church claims less than 100 adult members from across the Sierra, whose full population is roughly 100,000; even in Nda Xo, where the group in the *cabecera* is the strongest and most committed, less than 2% of the population (perhaps 25 out of 1,500) has joined the Mazatec church. In all cases, however, the nature of the Church's membership indicates something of the social costs of joining it (or perhaps, for some of Heriberto's sisters, the costs of refusing to do so). Because joining means in most cases doing so as a family, those who participate almost all have extended families who also belong, or alternatively they are individuals who do not have their own nuclear families (e.g., widows and single adults).

These high social costs stem from the policy the Mazatec church takes towards the Catholic Church. In the first years after the Mazatec church was born, its members were preoccupied with how to negotiate their relationship with the official Church. This was particularly true of Heriberto and the *misioneras*, whose affiliation with the Church had been formal. Although from the beginning members stopped attending regular mass, for a while they continued to attend Masses for special

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<sup>64</sup> The fluctuating nature of the membership makes exact figures impossible. In addition, as in the case with Heriberto's brother (above), the status of many remains liminal for some time before their allegiance becomes clear (or is forced).



occasions such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals, especially when they involved family members and *compadres*. Eventually, though, they settled on a more hard-line policy. Today the Mazatec church is pointed in its opposition to the Catholic Church. Its members are prohibited from having any association with the institutionalized Church. They never enter its buildings or use any of its trappings in family religious ceremonies. They also do not contribute to its annual “dues” or other collections taken for saints’ days and other fiestas, a position that many people take issue with because the division it assumes between religious and civic activities is, in Nda Xo as elsewhere, rarely clear-cut.

Precisely because this distinction is so hard to make in practice, it forces a normative approach to the separation between civil and religious (“private”) spheres. In other words, the group devises explicit rules about behavior that then become a means for structuring practice (rather than, for example, making explicit a code of conduct derived from existing practice). Where the group draws the line between civil activities and religious ones is a function of stipulated definitions of their difference, which have emerged over time. Thus the group segregates itself in ways that go beyond their aversion to the Church. For example, Mazatec church members hold their own *faenas* every Monday, separate from the general (“public”) ones.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Each settlement holds its own communal work projects every Monday, although *municipio*-wide *faenas* are held the first Monday of every year. These are especially well attended every three years at the inauguration of new authorities, when men arrive from ranchos across greater Nda Xo. Then the dark morning hours are filled with scores of blowing conch shells, the afternoon with drunks passed

For their *faena*, the group in Nda Xo always goes to the town spring and clears the area around it of debris. A particularly fateful instance of their self-segregation involved one of the members who was pregnant, a woman in her early 40s whose one other child had a difficult birth. The group as a whole decided to take on the responsibility of guiding her through childbirth when the time came, although none had any experience delivering babies (one member's experience as a pharmacist was the closest any of them came). The baby died in childbirth and after many hours the mother was finally sent to the hospital in Huautla. The narrative of the event told by group members emphasized divine intervention: that God had called the baby back to be with him in order to prevent her further suffering. Many others in town, however, felt that the mother and the group as a whole had taken a great risk by assuming responsibilities beyond their powers, and felt further vindicated when in the following year the woman gave birth in the hospital to a healthy baby boy. In general, however, the most pervasive way in which Mazatec church members segregate themselves is in how they live their daily lives, maintaining a new, marked level of social distance.

In this, as in things such as their financial abstention, Mazatec church members behave much like Mexican Protestants. And like Protestantism's foundational moment, the "Mazatec Reformation" pitches itself full-tilt against the

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out in the grass. A large project taking place during my fieldwork involved replacing the floor of the church in the Nda Xo *cabecera* and repairing broken concrete around its front, which abuts the municipal basketball court in front of the town hall. This is but one example of situations in which the church and civic domains overlap.

enormous power of the Catholic Church.<sup>66</sup> But their ideologies go beyond this, as did those of the early Protestants, by calling for purifying revisions of theology and religious practice, which in turn have profound political and social implications. On his old typewriter (and, more recently, a second-hand computer), Heriberto pounds out his own equivalent of Martin Luther's 95 theses, often enraged writings that cry out for sweeping changes and that touch upon myriad aspects of social life. However, Mazatec church members consider themselves Catholic and adamantly reject categorization as Protestants.<sup>67</sup> And rather than harkening back to the Reformation as a historical point of reference, the Mazatec church looks to the life of Jesus Christ himself. They argue that much as Jesus fought the power and corruption of the Sanhedrin, which had abandoned the "true faith," they, too, claim to be defenders of their faith, and the poor and oppressed who are its true targets, rescuing it from institutionalized powers which would discredit and even assassinate them, much as

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<sup>66</sup> In this respect – as well as the publicness with which his libido was expressed – Heriberto is perhaps as much like Henry VIII as Martin Luther. In addition, both rifts with the Church share a (quasi) nationalistic flavor, and both are at least as much political as ideological, which entail a somewhat different attitude towards reform and break with Church tradition than Luther's. Another relevant religious figure is Joseph Smith. Both he and Heriberto saw their foundational missions as restorationist and holistic, which in both cases produced quite insular movements. Like Smith, Heriberto resembles a prophet: both access divine knowledge through texts and visions. And, of course, both held the view that the original inhabitants of the Americas had prior knowledge of Jesus Christ. I am grateful to Gary Tomlinson and Paul Kockelman for suggesting these analogies.

<sup>67</sup> Many people in Nda Xo themselves see Heriberto and his group more or less as Protestants, referring to them by the Spanish terms (*hermano / hermana*) commonly used to refer to Protestants.

the Sanhedrin did Jesus. “Our concerns are like those that Jesus had, to defend the authenticity of Christianity” (Prado Pereda n.d., 18).

Thus although the actual congregation of the Mazatec Indigenous Church is tiny, its aims are exceedingly ambitious. The target of their endeavors is the entire Mazatec population, the goal being “to convince everyone (people and catechists) about this project” (Prado Pereda n.d., 7). And despite having, at present, very few actual followers, Heriberto makes frequent appeals to “having an entire people behind me,” whose cultural and spiritual interests he is charged with defending. Furthermore, although the most explicitly acknowledged target of their ire, the enemy with which they are engaged in ideological combat, is the Catholic Church, they oppose more indirectly 500 years of *indigenismo* thought generated first by the Spanish colonial empire and then further developed by the Mexican state. Their animating ideology is heavily influenced by the related discourses about indigenous resistance found in liberation theology on the one hand and critiques of *indigenista* agendas on the other, such as that articulated in the famous treatise *Mexico Profundo* (Bonfil Batalla 1987).

The resulting ideology is heavily inflected by liberationist ideas, emphasizing such concepts as “assimilating the worldview” of the people and carrying on Christ’s work of “bringing the Good News to the poor, liberty to the enslaved, light to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed. . .[so] that the cause of the poverty, captivity, and oppression [will] be overcome and Justice [will] reign” (Prado Pereda, n.d., 8,

18). It is ultimately, though, a reading of liberation theology many liberationists would have been uncomfortable with, one radicalized by passage through the discourse of indigenous rights that has become increasingly pervasive in post-EZLN Mexico. By this ideology, the ultimate aim of the Mazatec church is to accomplish what the Catholic Church -- even the liberationist Church -- has not done and, because of its institutional commitments, will never choose: to bring a true "*iglesia autóctona*" into being. This "autochthonous church" is conceived as one in which the church is not only more porous to local influences and customs, as became the case in the Catholic Church after Vatican II. Rather, it is one in which locals are themselves in control of the very character and workings of the church:

The Church as administered from Huautla has not been in its plans indigenous but rather *indigenista*, exactly as has been the government. Much is said of us in their projects, but we are not the protagonists and now we want to be. . . . If the Church truly wants to serve it must take on indigenous projects and renounce its *indigenista* project. . . . It must leave the coordination to the indigenous people. . . . The role of the official Church is to be supportive, leaving in the hands of indigenous people the formation. . . of an autochthonous church. But they want to bring about the autochthonous church without us, without taking into account our values, customs, and traditions.

(Prado Pereda n.d., 3-4)

The programmatic ideology expressed in this passage is reflected in the practices of the Mazatec Indigenous Church, especially those by which its members attempt to make their practices align with their explicit agendas. Perhaps nowhere is

the strain to make ideology and practice coincide more obvious than on the issue of language use. Especially here the anti-Church purism that is a key part of the Mazatec church's normative agenda takes a pro-indigenous, anti-institutional form. Catholic services in the Sierra are always bilingual. This is true even of communities where the people are largely monolingual and services are officiated by native catechists who may themselves be only nominal speakers of Spanish.

In contrast, services in the Mazatec church are rigorously monolingual. Mazatec use is assumed and encouraged in church activities, while the use of Spanish – or, rather, the purging of it – is carefully policed.<sup>68</sup> Canonical texts such as the “Our Father” are recited only in Mazatec. The songs composed by Heriberto are sung in Mazatec, as they would be in Church services; however, rather than using the bilingual versions circulated by the Church, the Mazatec church prints the songs only in Mazatec. This has the effect of making the reading of new or unfamiliar songs difficult for many people, who are accustomed (as we will see in Chapter Six) to reading Mazatec in bilingual editions, where they can use the Spanish to help “decipher” the Mazatec.

Even for Heriberto, the complete exclusion of Spanish from Mazatec church dealings is impossible to maintain; like everyone else, for most things he is more

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<sup>68</sup> As we will see in Chapter Six, this sort of linguistic purism is common among many Mexican indigenous intellectuals, who like Heriberto are particularly vigilant about identifying Spanish loan words and replacing them with neologisms.

comfortable writing in Spanish than in Mazatec and uses Spanish for his writings about the church. Like many other church members, and all of those from Nda Xo proper, his children are only passive speakers of Mazatec: they understand the language but rarely speak it. He and other church members recognize that a critical aspect of the church's mission is not only to educate other adults but also to indoctrinate their own children. As a result, the adults attempt to encourage or even force their children to speak Mazatec, although even within the church's ceremonies these efforts are rarely wholly successful.

Studied egalitarianism and communitarianism are further implications of Mazatec church ideology. Like language use, these agendas likewise run into conflicts in practice. The case with the pregnant woman above and the group's Monday *faenas* illustrate how the church aims to make itself a "full service" institution, co-extensive with the community itself and capable of ministering to church members' every needs. The ideological building block on which this utopia rests is a reconceptualization of the Christian trinity: "The trinity (Father, Mother, and Child) is the first and best generator of communities. Our God is community" (Prado Pereda n.d., 8). In practice, however, many, even most, of the Mazatec church members do not belong to such families. Many are widowed or unmarried, and even in the families that resemble a trinity-like unit the fathers' participation is weak or non-existent. Furthermore, the community Heriberto and his followers envision is one in which figures such as Heriberto and the *misioneras*, who held positions of

authority in the Church, instead function merely as advisors. They “do not make themselves indispensable” so that the work of the church and the direction it takes are responsibilities assumed by all. Yet here, too, the reality is sharply at odds with the ideology: Heriberto is, indeed, completely necessary and irreplaceable, as his vision is the engine driving the church’s prescriptive project. These various discrepancies between ideology and practice place severe limits on the Church’s transformative, corrective agenda, that is, its attempts to build a brighter future by aligning present activities with an essentialized view of the past.

In practice Heriberto’s standing is not a first among equals but rather the very Weberian charismatic leader he claims to eschew. This was exhibited especially clearly by his demand that the group take such a hard, separatist line toward the Catholic Church. Along the same lines, he stipulates that members adopt an evolving set of practices that oppose Catholic practices while recovering ostensibly traditional ones that have been lost. These “recovered” practices emphasize the sacredness of nature and are either opposed by the Church outright or are extensions of customs sanctioned by Church into areas of questionable orthodoxy. Practices in the former category include offering the first bite of every meal to the land, kissing the earth<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Kissing the earth is certainly not foreign to canonical Church practice: no less a symbol of Catholic orthodoxy than Pope John Paul II kissed the earth every time he arrived in a new country, for example. The point here, though, is that such a gesture has become for the Mazatec Indigenous Church a routine part of religious practice, which, I would argue, gives it a different meaning than it did for the late Pope, who, as it were, kissed not so much the earth itself as the particular nation and people to whom it belonged.



every time one concludes a prayer, and building the same kind of arc of flowers and leaves over a corpse that typically crowns altars, especially those for Day of the Dead.

In the latter category, during religious ceremonies Mazatec church members spend a much longer time kneeling than is typical in Catholic mass or other routine religious events. In some cases they literally spend hours on their knees; the ability to withstand this discomfort has become an index of religious piety, of the authenticity of members' position as "defenders of the faith." Also in the latter category is a now formalized cluster of practices that, in its enactment if not its genesis, foregrounds and instantiates the competing ideology, by which the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is leveled and replaced by a more egalitarian model. These pertain to the church's formal Sunday services. In the Mazatec Indigenous Church, *limpias* are performed not only on the priest, as is typical now for masses in the Sierra, but on everyone attending a service, with people "cleansing" each other until all have been thus purified. This occurs not at the beginning of the service, as would be the case with priests during Catholic mass, but towards the end, after a number of songs have been sung that more or less mirror the order of the songs Heriberto wrote for Catholic mass: songs for the entrance procession, the Kyrie, the Gloria, the opening prayer, the profession of faith, etc. After Heriberto has given his "homily" everyone kneels, and at this point each person in attendance utters, individually and aloud, his or her prayer. Once everyone has spoken, people perform *limpias* on each other. Then people join hands and with a slight dancing motion -- stepping alternately towards

and back from the altar -- sing the short offertory “Nguixkuin Nguindso’bai” (lit. “before your eyes, before your mouth”), originally written for one of Heriberto’s masses. The final stanza evokes the communitarian reverence and solidarity to which the service has been building:

<i>nanda tjijinli jos 'in tiyo jin</i>	you well know how we live
<i>jokji kjuan'ini n'ca bitjatojin</i>	that we live in hard times
<i>tisenko na jin naxinandali</i>	we help each other, your people
<i>me bisitjen jin</i>	we want to rise up

While clearly all or most of these practices stem from Heriberto’s normative agenda, they nevertheless have become accepted by other members of the group as standard procedure, in concert with both how they conceptualize their own spirituality and the group’s larger purpose.

Surely the most dramatic and controversial practice through which members of the Mazatec church seek to create an ethnically distinct, “civil-religious *non-hierarchy*” is the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms. They consider the mushrooms to be the Mazatecs’ indigenous Host, replacing the communion wafer of the Catholic Church as the prime vehicle for divine purification and transformation. In one of his writings on the subject, Heriberto expresses explicitly this idea of the mushrooms by first telling how, when the Roman soldiers stabbed Jesus on the cross, water and

blood<sup>70</sup>, which became the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, fell from his side, not only landing there where he died but “like a great arrow of God” permeating all the corners of the earth, including the Mazateca.

For this reason, in every place Christ has made it possible to know him through many different media, according to the culture of every human group. Here the blood of Christ came forth in the form of the mushroom. . . .By this good fortune Christ has been present with us since his death. . . .[T]he mushrooms – the blood of Christ – is [sic] also like a Bible, because every time we take them Christ appears to us through his spirit. . . .The mushrooms are medicine of God, they are advisors, they are light, they are life. . . .He who takes them can find a way to resolve all his problems and receive light for his future life. . . .But he who truly wants to be instructed and wants to be a *sabio*<sup>71</sup>. . . .[in order] to have access to the celestial table<sup>72</sup>. . . .has to seek his formation as “seminarian” by ingesting annually the mushrooms

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<sup>70</sup> María Sabina also used this imagery: “the niños” – the “saint children,” one of the common euphemisms for the mushrooms – “*son la sangre de Cristo*” (Estrada [1977] 1989: 74). The SIL missionary/linguists Eunice Pike and Florence Cowan claim that Mazatecs believe the mushrooms spring up where Christ spat upon the ground during his life (1959: 145), a rather more negative claim that I have not encountered elsewhere. Though this interpretation distances the mushrooms from the act of salvation represented by the Crucifixion (which might appeal to evangelicals like Pike and Cowan), it also echoes the claim Heriberto makes that Christ was present in the Americas during his life.

<sup>71</sup> Although this word is Spanish (“sage” or “wise man”), I do not think it is widely used elsewhere as it is here, i.e., to refer to a shaman. In some ways it echoes the Mazatec word for shaman: *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup> chji<sup>4</sup>ne<sup>4</sup>* (*chota* (person) + *chjine* (master in/of, artisan)). *Chjine* is also used to refer to the broad class of experts: *chjinenajni* (musician), *chjinečhjoa* (tanner), *chjinekicha* (blacksmith), *chjinejao* (mason), *chjineya* (carpenter), *chjine'en* (interpreter), *chjinecki* (doctor), *chjineckixi ni'ño* (dentist). A free translation of *chota chjine*, then, might be something like “master of masters” or “chief expert.”

<sup>72</sup> In the original, Heriberto refers to this table as “*la mesa celestial*” and “*la mesa sagrada*.” The former is the Spanish version he uses in referring to *ya misa xkon* (*ya* (tree, [made of wood]) + *misa* (table) + *xkon* (sacred, heavenly)). This is one of the thirteen tables of the “*cosmovisión de los mazatecos*” in which “it is believed that there are thirteen heavens and in every heaven there is a door beyond which are the respective tables, where one has to place the corresponding offerings” (Prado Pineda 2004: 5). Heriberto has written several poems about these tables, which also figure prominently in drawings on the covers of his books and other booklets, such as the one produced for the consecration of the *misioneras* (Comunidad de Misioneras Indígenas, 1998).

however many times one needs to arrive at this goal. . . .Is this table not that which Peter saw in Acts 10:10-11? There it is said that Peter “was hungry and wanted to eat, but while they prepared him the food he fell into a trance (or was it a hallucination?) and saw the sky open and a strange thing, like an immense tablecloth descended from the sky whose four points lit upon the ground.” . . .The son of God, Jesus Christ, [is] represented in the hallucinogenic mushrooms, the “Blood of Christ,” that instructs, give counsel, gives life, heals, guides. From there our ancestors learned to work, and live together in harmony.

(Prado Pereda, n.d., 14-15, 20).

Of the many ideologies at work in this passage, two are especially relevant to Mazatec church members’ practices as well as to how other people perceive them: their standing as Christians and the role mushroom use plays in it. Mazatecs are presented here essentially as having been Christians even prior to the arrival of the Spanish, an argument about indigenous people made in similar form by such distinguished clergy as Bartolomé de Las Casas and Fray Servando Teresa de Mier. Furthermore, members of the Mazatec church are posited as superior Christians even to those who claim to have brought them the gospel, a quality directly tied to their use of mushrooms.

. . . the host is the same as our hallucinogenic mushrooms, including even that for us they are more sacred because we were born with them and they are our advisors and guides. . . .We believe that our faith is more profound and refined than the faith of Westerners. . . .When we do *veladas* with our mushrooms, God speaks to us directly, he corrects us, he helps us to lift ourselves from our sins, he shows and gives us his grace. He is our teacher, prophet, doctor, counselor, comforter, priest, artist, *sabio*.

(Prado Pereda, n.d., 21-22).

Thus not only are Mazatecs not dependent on outsiders or the institutionalized Church for their faith (and never have been), but the very nature of “authentic Mazatec Christianity,” as practiced by Mazatec church members, gives them special status. They actively evangelize to people living throughout the Sierra, visiting houses of those who have asked about “the project” or those they simply want to discuss it with. They consider themselves missionaries to all those who like them speak Mazatec, discussing the church and its nativist agendas as the birthright of “the people,” offering an ethnically authentic and at the same time Christian religious experience to the entire Mazatec population.

The key to Mazatec church members’ elevated Christian stature is the mushrooms, and more specifically how they use them. Mazatec church members believe that through the mushrooms they are able to communicate with God and Jesus and receive sacred texts that stipulate particular actions they should take. While this much is in keeping with how most Mazatecs view mushroom use, Mazatec church members also believe, departing sharply from commonly held beliefs, that these divine messages not only cure maladies of the physical body but also, as it were, heal the “body politic,” curing communal conflicts and the even more common affliction of lack of clarity and direction. Indeed, the mushrooms are seen as central to Mazatec community itself, at once teaching people how to live in concert with each other and with the ways of the ancestors. In keeping with this ideology, Mazatec church

members regularly hold *veladas* in which they take mushrooms as a group, rarely to heal a sickness but rather to resolve some kind of problem or discord: by consulting with God, they believe, they can come to a consensus about how to proceed.

And yet here, too, the explicit ideas the group has espoused about how they should behave – the metacultural beliefs they have adopted – are at odds with their actual behavior in practice. Very few members of the Mazatec church act individually in accordance with the explicit ideologies about mushrooms. No one but Heriberto takes them with anything approaching the frequency he prescribes, and many of the most dedicated members – including his wife – have never taken them at all.

***“Ska-li” (“He’s Bad in the Head”): Religious Divisions  
and the Stakes in Arguments About Them***

The resistance church members encounter in trying to narrow the gap between ideology and practice coincides with a similar tension that places limits on the Mazatec church’s traction with the community at large. The normative ideologies animating the church’s agenda depart enough from practices most people consider standard that they are seen as wrong, strange, or even unrecognizable. People from Nda Xo who do not belong to the Mazatec church engage in heated disputes about it

and its adherents, above all Heriberto, arguments that represent a sort of continuing referendum on the project's tenability. These ongoing debates constitute a different facet of the Sierra's public sphere than that constructed by the song contest discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas the contest revolved around ideas about what Mazatecs *are*, disputes about the Mazatec church largely focus on what Mazatecs are *not*. The perceived artificiality of practices the Mazatec church advocates throws into relief widespread, assumed customs and the often implicit ideologies motivating them. The image of "being Mazatec" held up by the church violates enough of these norms that most locals ultimately reject it. These arguments all focus, in one form or another, on conceptions of community: what kind of collective do people feel, or want to feel, they belong to? These arguments also, in turn, concern competing notions of authenticity and tradition. In what practices does true "Mazatecness" reside? What are the semantic boundaries around "us" and "them"?

Three specific arguments (or sets of arguments) about the Mazatec church are emblematic of the rift between its members and other locals. The first set took place between the bishop and Heriberto as the Mazatec church was taking shape. In response to Bishop Ramírez's position that Heriberto had no authority to perform Catholic sacraments, Heriberto argued that he was attending the communities in question "not with official sacraments but rather according to rites that are from within my culture" (Prado Pereda, n.d., 5; also Palacios Cházares 1999). The bishop reacted by stating that the sacraments celebrated by Heriberto were valid neither

within the Catholic Church nor within Mazatec culture because in it there is no Christ. In his later writings, Heriberto is at pains to answer this criticism, which he does with difficulty because, like the bishop, he locates authentic Mazatec culture in the pre-Conquest past. As we saw above, he takes the position that the Mazatecs were already Christians long before the Spanish arrived, and so they are not dependent on the Church or any outsiders for their faith. This commits him to the view that the institutionalized Church is the enemy, while Christianity itself remains unscathed. It also commits him to the view that his group's faith is superior to those who have the power of the Church behind them, lending his followers power different from that of those who "*siempre llevan la batuta*"<sup>73</sup> (Prado Pereda n.d., 23), and that members of the Mazatec church are the oppressed but true defenders of the faith. This oppression occurs when the Church adopts the same assimilationist policies that have haunted indigenous-state relations for the whole of Mexican history:

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<sup>73</sup> This figurative expression of leadership also finds, in Nda Xo as in many Mexican communities, literal expression in the "staffs of office" awarded to community officials. Heriberto had one of these on his principal altar that was used, on occasion, in *veladas*, most notably one in which Jesus spoke through him during the ceremony and wielded the staff as he did so.



[T]he bishop has signed many documents in which he speaks of enculturation. It is said that the autochthonous church will not be as long as it cannot rely upon its own priests, bishops, liturgies: the culture of revival. Then what . . . is the distrust that exists that [what we are doing] not be accepted? We come back to the same question: the Church thinks but does not say openly that the indigenous priests are witches or even better they are servants of the devil. To participate in their ceremonies and offer holy communion with the mushrooms is to lend oneself to evil. . . . [Like] indigenous people, . . . the institutional Church also acts as if it were very important to recover the culture (indigenous religion), when in reality that which they aim at is finishing it off. . . . At bottom what the Church wants is to gain indigenous people for Christ. And if they gain their souls they'll leave their religion behind.

(Prado Pereda, n.d., 13, 15-16)

Arguments such as these make it hard to write off the Mazatec church as motivated by a mere vendetta. The personal aspects of the rift are certainly obvious. From both sides, the argument has the character of a love affair gone awry and reads like the aftermath of a betrayal, where the severity of the anger and hurt is directly proportional to the intensity of the prior attachment. Not only the bishop but also other people from Nda Xo -- particularly those like Alberto who have close ties to Mazatec church members -- speak of departure from the Church in strongly emotional terms. Despite the Mazatec church's declaration that "We aren't a closed group" (Prado Pereda n.d., 9), in practice its members act like separatists; a common lament by those outside it is that as a result, "Now we are more divided." Meanwhile, Heriberto and his followers wait in vain for acknowledgment from the Church and the

rest of the community: “Since we separated ourselves. . .neither the bishop nor the priests have sought a dialogue with us and even less have they wanted to resolve this matter; on the contrary, they further stirred up the people against us and our project. . .[and] no other institution will endorse our documents” (Prado Pereda n.d., 23).

And yet, for all the personal feelings involved, many of the criticisms Heriberto makes, and the eloquence with which he makes them, elevate the argument above the level of a mere personal feud. The critique he makes of the Church in the name of indigenous rights is in keeping with (and influenced by) widespread critiques of *indigenismo*, with the somewhat novel twist that it is made far less often about the Church than about the government and is done here by an indigenous intellectual to boot. Heriberto acknowledges that the Church has “given more space to indigenous people for the support of their culture. . .that we can sing [and] pray in our language, we can introduce some of our cultural symbols.” However, equating the Church with a building, he explains that only its external paint is indigenous, such that what from the outside looks entirely indigenous is in fact only “the shell or that which is [merely] folkloric” (Prado Pereda n.d., 13). In writing thus, Heriberto aligns himself with a widespread critique of the direction the Church took under Pope John Paul II,<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Although neither Heriberto nor any other members of the Mazatec church explicitly acknowledge it, they treat the Church under liberationist sway as its moment of authenticity, and the move away under John Paul II as a betrayal of that mission. It is worth noting that this shift put people like Bishop Ramírez in the difficult position of having to accommodate both the now official Church position opposing liberationist ideas and those parishioners and priests – of whom Heriberto could have been the poster child – who had been encouraged by those ideas to rethink radically the role of the Church.

and, less directly, with critiques about the post-*indigenista* (or is it *nuevo-indigenista*?) Mexican nation-state. Both critiques aim to question a move nationalist projects routinely find useful: to valorize aspects of minority groups' culture that are non-threatening while denying others, to simultaneously incorporate and circumscribe diverse, internal populations by championing their "folklore." Thus Heriberto's criticism that indigenous perspectives are excluded from positions of power in the Church -- if not of indigenous people per se (he himself was ordained, after all), then indigenous people *qua* indigenous, serving as true indigenous representatives rather than tokens of ethnic inclusion -- is one that for all its personal implications also transcends them.

Another particular argument highlighted these larger issues posed by the Mazatec church, this one concerning a death that took place in Amatlán, a small settlement in greater Nda Xo. Most of the inhabitants, basically one extended family, had joined Heriberto's group and nominally left the Church. Two middle-aged women from the family were suffering from undiagnosed illnesses; about two months after I began living in Amatlán, one of the women died. Heriberto and other Mazatec church members arrived the next day. "The first death in our little group!" he said. This comment foregrounded how the group was still "feeling its way" with each new life cycle event, seeking through Heriberto's guidance the "authentic indigenous" actions they should take for each occasion, much as they had with the group's first,

ill-fated birth.<sup>75</sup> As other family members and *compadres* began arriving from neighboring *ranchos*, Heriberto went about composing a song for the occasion and teaching it to Amatlán's most dedicated group member, a bachelor who aspired to write enough *muertos* songs in Mazatec to fill a cassette. Outside, the men built the casket, painting it a vibrant sky blue, while inside the women prepared the food, beginning, as was customary, with the sacrifice of a spotted chicken which was first offered to the corpse. Heriberto told the people to construct around the corpse the same arc of flowers and branches usually made for *muertos*, an innovation, people commented later, that surprised them. That evening, Heriberto led prayers and songs for the wake, including his new one. He spent much of the evening kneeling, as did other group members. People not from the group tried to do so as well, although they were visibly uncomfortable spending so much time on their knees. The next day,

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<sup>75</sup> For this death, Heriberto led primarily by example, demonstrating the speech and actions he wanted others to mirror rather than explicitly commenting on it. I think this was because he had a "mixed audience" of people who were in his church and people who were not -- and who therefore might be hostile to his ideas, making it less likely that he would openly discuss his thoughts with them. For other events, though, he and other church members were much more explicit about the emergent nature of their practices. For example, the group's first baptism was for the youngest child of a widow whose husband had been murdered in retaliation for a murder he had allegedly committed. At that time, there was a great deal of discussion about who should perform which part of the ceremony, the relevant social categories being parents, *compadres*, *sabios* (Heriberto, in this case), and elders (Heriberto's mother). This process of reaching a consensus for practice within the ceremony itself was common in the Mazatec church rituals I observed.

The participation of the widow and her children is informative with respect to the Mazatec church's membership and social position in Nda Xo. She had returned to the *cabecera*, where her parents lived, after the death of her husband in one of the *municipio*'s *ranchos*. However, her family was one of Nda Xo's poorest (her mother owned exactly two dresses and no shoes), so initially she and her children lived in a part of Heriberto's house. She was thus more or less obliged to participate in the church. As soon as she managed to have a tiny shack built, just below Heriberto's, she moved out and stopped attending Mazatec church services.

however, one of the *compadres* who was a catechist from a nearby settlement took command of the procession to the graveyard. He sprinkled holy water liberally along the way, and upon arriving at the church, entered and as was common practice conducted a short service there before proceeding to the graveyard. All of this infuriated Heriberto. He and his group stood angrily outside the church, and, discarding his original plan to stay in Amatlán for a week or more, left immediately after the woman had been interred. “They deceived me!” he said later. “They missed their chance to see a real indigenous funeral!” Furthermore, his criticism did not stop with the woman’s family. If she had prayed more, he said, she would have lived,<sup>76</sup> citing as proof the fact that the other sick woman, who was more involved with Heriberto’s group than the one who died, had survived.

This demonstrates some of the concrete social difficulties faced by Heriberto’s followers because of the hard line he takes towards the Church. Even if their closest family members have signed on to the program, they live in a world where most others have not and where many adamantly oppose it. “What is it he calls his group? An indigenous church?” one of Heriberto’s cousins once asked me, with palpable disdain. And in fact, contempt was an extremely widespread attitude towards the

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<sup>76</sup> He made the same argument about another death occurring around that time. Upon returning from the bank in Tehuacán, a rich man from Nda Xo was killed by what turned out to be his own cousin, who also killed the man’s servant, a very poor man. Heriberto’s comment was particularly revealing because it came on the heels of a discussion of how tragic the situation was: the rich man’s wife had never borne children, and the poor man left behind four young children and a wife about to give birth to the fifth. “If they had prayed more, they’d be alive today,” Heriberto said.

Mazatec church; as Laura once commented, “They don’t want to hear anything about anything ‘indigenous.’” Thus Heriberto and his group came to embody, essentially, the social position Gramsci described as a particular class of “organic intellectuals,” who are in the business of exposing the hegemonic tyranny of the dominant – and dominating – ideologies. However, as many locals see it, in this very act they ceded the right to speak as authentic local authorities and representatives.

Ultimately, the rift caused with people from Amatlán was not repaired until after a *velada* could be held. During the *velada*, the group came to an understanding about what had happened at the burial and how, in future, they should handle relations with people who did not belong to the Mazatec church. The consensus – conceived, as always, as a message received from God – seems to have been that, in keeping with the group’s earlier decisions in this regard, the best policy was to continue to separate themselves, both from people who attended the Church and events involving contact with the Church. It is significant that the only person from Amatlán to participate in the *velada* was a bachelor aspiring songwriter who had been the most active in the Mazatec church. Perhaps because only he participated in it, perhaps because of the more general social strain surrounding the burial itself, the group in Amatlán became divided after that, and only the most ardent supporters continued to be affiliated with the Mazatec church.

*Veladas* also played an important role in a conflict between Heriberto and Alberto. The argument came to a head over the administration of that year’s Day of

the Dead song contest. At the time, I was still living in Heriberto's house, and had not yet begun living in Alberto's. I also did not speak Mazatec very well yet, so although I was present at the relevant *veladas* I did not understand their full import until later. Ultimately, though, I came to understand that Heriberto held *veladas* to seek council about the initial disagreement with his brother as well as the deeper rift with his brother the conflict caused. I believe that for Heriberto the *veladas* represented an opportunity to come to an understanding about what was at stake in his argument with Alberto, to make a decision about how to respond, and to reassure himself, through consultation with God, that his views and actions were correct.

Ostensibly, the disagreement erupted when Heriberto refused to continue serving on the contest's commission, as he had done previously. He argued that because the contest relied on Church-affiliated committees for its administration, as had been the case since its founding, he would not participate in it. On a deeper level, however, what was at stake was family and community unity: each brother wanted and expected family and religious affiliations to coincide and religious and civic boundaries to be identical. Thus, when Heriberto lamented to me at one point, the morning after a *velada* that Alberto "did not want that which was most profound," and Alberto said sadly that the Church was Heriberto's "Bin Laden," his number one enemy,<sup>77</sup> their views, while fundamentally opposed on the surface, shared the same

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<sup>77</sup> I think Alberto meant, with this comment, not only that his brother fully opposed the Church but also that Heriberto had adopted the same sort of absolutism that George Bush had in opposing his enemy,

frustration that the other was disrupting social and family unity. Furthermore, their disagreement shared the understanding that what was at stake were competing notions of normative local practice, which is to say competing notions of what, on one hand, it means to act like a (good) Prado, and what, at the other, it means to “act like a (true) Mazatec.”

However, I did not fully understand either what had happened in that event or its fuller implications until after another argument emerged. *Veladas* played a central role there as well, but in this case I was involved directly, not as incidental observer but as active participant. After the initial novelty of having me living with them wore off, some members of Heriberto’s group, including Heriberto himself, began viewing me with some suspicion. There were obvious reasons why I might appear suspect: I was unmarried and childless; I was not only an outsider but an American; my interest in their language was at best bizarre if benign, or at worst a front for more sinister motives. In addition, *envidia* was a pervasive, disruptive threat; at the most concrete level, closeness to me meant (perceived) access to things like my laptop, my camera, my recorder, as well as to people and resources in both Mexico and the United States. Beyond these qualities that might raise people’s suspicion under ordinary circumstances, I also became increasingly suspect as the Mazatec church hardened its position vis-à-vis the Church. Like most people in Nda Xo, I attended mass at the

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expressed in the oft-repeated phrase from his post-9/11 address a few weeks earlier, “You’re either for us or against us.”



very least for special occasions. As Mazatec church members grew increasingly purist with respect to external, “non-Mazatec” influences, their suspicions about me came to a head. One night, after I had returned to Nda Xo after a few days in Oaxaca city, Heriberto and other church members from Nda Xo held a *velada*; although I was staying in Heriberto’s house, they made a point of excluding me from the event. The next morning they informed me that the mushrooms had told them that I should not spend another night under Heriberto’s roof. “You see, Paja, our God is a jealous God,” his cousin told me when she stopped by. I scrambled to find another place to stay by nightfall. Beginning that evening I stayed with a Mazatec church family unrelated to the Prados, who lived in a humble rented house out of town a ways (in fact, this was the family in which the group’s tragic first birth took place). I bounced from house to house for a while before I finally wound up staying permanently with Alberto’s family. For several months thereafter, Heriberto and the members of his family who belonged to the Mazatec church – the people, at the time, that I knew best – would hardly speak to me when our paths crossed. It was many months more before I was invited into their homes again, homes that until then I had visited daily; these invitations were issued, not coincidentally, during *muertos*.

Although it was at the time quite an unhappy experience, these events gave me access to a wealth of discourses about Heriberto and his group that before I had been unaware of. Furthermore, the social aftermath of this event not only yielded a fuller picture of the nature of the religious division, its dominant discourses and the

types of actors involved in it; it also underscored how deep and socially significant the rift was. Because I had in effect “switched sides,” people now talked to me freely, with little or no encouragement, about all the reasons why they disagreed with what Heriberto and his group were doing. These concerned a number of issues, focused explicitly on religious practice and ideology. Other locals, particularly but far from exclusively those who closely identified with the Catholic Church, took exception to the Mazatec church’s contention that the Church is an organ of repression, and that Mazatec religious practices are recuperative acts of resistance. For them, the Church, rather than suppressing authentic Mazatec identity, is central to its expression, given its integral role in civic matters generally and in every major community ritual and life event from birth to death. Even some of the most visible and culturally salient representatives of “traditional” Mazatec practice – *chota chjine: sabios*, or shamans – are also among the most active Catholics in Sierra communities. No less a representative of “Mazatec culture” than María Sabina was herself an active member of the Church (she belonged to the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). In a biography of her written by a Huautla native, the parish priest commented, “The Wise Ones and Curers don’t compete with our religion; . . . All of them are very religious and come to mass” (Estrada 1981, 203). Thus, locals and most Church officials alike see these emblematic representatives of “traditional Mazatec culture” not as “pagan” or somehow opposed to the Church, but rather as complementary to it. Furthermore, they view opposition to the Church as a rejection not only of

community unity but also of the very basis for local sociality itself. The practices Mazatec church members ideologize as lost cultural rituals rescued from the past are in turn seen by most other locals as bizarre innovations that actually violate “tradition” rather than upholding it, that yield to foreign, corrupting ideas imported from outside the community rather than returning to the ways of the ancestors.

Of all such practices, those particularly subject to claims of inauthenticity and even downright abuse are those involving hallucinogenic mushrooms. The serial use of the mushrooms by Heriberto and his group for visionary and divinatory -- rather than medicinal -- purposes is viewed by many as not only sacrilegious but as evidence of mental unsoundness. Hallucinogenic mushrooms have presumably been used by Mazatecs for centuries in healing rituals, and of the various taboos attached to their use the most important is sexual abstinence; failure to observe these and other taboos is said to cause madness.<sup>78</sup> So when people say about Heriberto (and others from his group), “*ska-li*,”<sup>79</sup> “he’s crazy,” they mean that he is crazy in a very specific sense: from “traveling too much,” i.e., from taking mushrooms too often, and from using them improperly.

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<sup>78</sup> This belief is widely attested to in literature on Mazatec mushroom use. See especially Duke 2001.

<sup>79</sup> When a speaker says this in the context of a Spanish utterance, he or she will actually say *e-ska-li*, i.e., they will treat it like a foreign word, on par with /s/-initial loan words from English, such as smoking, sprite, sky, and Spiderman – the latter being literally spelled out as such (*espaider-men*) on any number of bootlegged Spiderman items surfacing in the wake of the most recent Hollywood film.

Both the way he and his group use the mushrooms and their motivation for doing so stand in marked contrast to how the mushrooms are used by the local shamans. Heriberto is, after all, not someone who can be assumed to observe a continuous state of sexual abstinence and therefore to be ritually “clean” for contact with the mushrooms as a divine source; unlike him, most shamans are widowed or have never married. On the contrary, the “crime” at the heart of his rift with the Church was of an explicitly sexual nature, and the open expression of his sexuality contributes mightily towards the ambivalence with which many people in the community regard him. Furthermore, while most shamans also have an ambivalent profile in the community as a whole, the ambivalence with which they are regarded derives less from the kind of moral stain on Heriberto’s persona than from the power shamans have to contact the spirit world, a power shot through with risk as much as promise and exploitable for both good and ill. And while most shamans literally inhabit a marginal place in the community, living at its geographical edges, Heriberto, in addition to his figurative centrality to the community by virtue of birth and vocation, lives “right in town,” his store being on the main road into Nda Xo from the highway.

Heriberto clearly emulates the *sabios* and sees his “calling” as structurally similar to (if more profound than) theirs.<sup>80</sup> He sees himself as a healer in the broadest

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<sup>80</sup> Indeed, when I was first getting to know them, Laura would refer to Heriberto as “like a *sabio*” and “almost a *sabio*,” someone who knew as much about the mushrooms as shamans do. After the *sabio*

possible sense, a healer not only of the physical body but also of the spirit, specifically the *indigenous* spirit that the institution of the Catholic Church has falsely claimed. Many of the *veladas* I attended were concerned not with specific instances of healing, but rather with creating the possibility for doing so by learning how to make possible the vocation of healer. In the very first of these, which took place not long after the *misioneras* had separated from the Church, they and Heriberto were overwhelmingly preoccupied during the event with resources, and with how they might make their dream of becoming healers a reality. They were particularly interested in pursuing alternative medicine as a new source of income. Interest in “*medicina alternativa*”<sup>81</sup> continued to be a concern in *veladas* (and also, strategically, in discussions with me, as someone they felt might know about things like external funding for such projects), not only with the *misioneras* but also with various other women in the Mazatec church, a couple of whom had experience as pharmacists. And a case of confused identity involving Alberto and Heriberto was particularly telling in this respect: a family from out of town showed up at Alberto’s store, asking him to heal their gravely ill son, having heard that he was very gifted in using the mushrooms. Furthermore, Heriberto sees the role of his church and his followers as

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we went to my first day in Nda Xo offered to do a *velada* with me (on the assumption that like most foreigners in the Mazateca I had come for that), she and Heriberto both insisted that I should do one with him instead, since he knew how to do the ceremonies just as well.

<sup>81</sup> Especially in some of Heriberto’s speech and writing, discourses about “alternative medicine” blend with invocations to “reclaim. . .the values of our Mazatec indigenous people,” such as the promotion of “recovery of the sick, medicinal herbs, [and] urine therapy [*urinoterapia*]” (Prado Pereda n.d., 20).

healers of the entire community, the “body politic,” as it were: although he assigns particular blame for systematic oppression to Church authorities, he also holds local, regional, and national authorities responsible for preventing indigenous people from living and expressing their culture. His church, as he sees it, is the antidote for the multiple maladies visited upon Mazatecs by social repression.

Nevertheless, despite their shared reverence for the mushrooms, shamans are among some of Heriberto’s strongest critics. The Mazatec church’s motives and methods in using the mushrooms – which is to say, with frequency and not for medicinal purposes – are ironically seen by many as coming much closer to the behaviors of a particularly salient group of outsiders: “mycotourists.” Since the 60s, these hippies and, now, New Ager neo-hippies have come seasonally to Huautla to trip on the mushrooms. Though they almost never find their way to Nda Xo, everyone in the Mazateca is well aware of them, and they figure prominently in local conversations. Like them, Heriberto and his group’s reasons for taking the mushrooms have less to do with curing than with the desire for guidance and foresight. In the words of María Sabina herself, “Before Wasson<sup>82</sup> nobody took the mushrooms only to find God. They were always taken for the sick to get well” (Estrada 1981, 73).

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<sup>82</sup> R. Gordon Wasson was the American researcher who “discovered” María Sabina and the *veladas* she presided over. His publication of books and articles about her the mushrooms was the (accidental)

In this sense, Heriberto and his followers live “beyond the pale” of the community in a far more marked way than even Protestants. For although Protestants also separate themselves from the rest of the community, they do not in so doing violate norms of what are seen as practices traditionally and distinctly Mazatec. By virtue of his mushroom use, Heriberto is instead transformed from being the consummate insider, a revered representative of the entire community, to one who increasingly resembles an “outsider,” who along with his followers violates basic understandings of what it means to be from Nda Xo, and to behave like a Mazatec.

*Meetings at the Family Crypt:  
Social Faultlines and the Fragility of Community*

These pervasive complaints about mushroom use, which are at the core of so many arguments against the Mazatec church, thus cut to the heart of the matter, as within them are raised some of the most central and divisive concerns for marginalized and minority communities in Mexico and beyond. While the previous chapter might be said to demonstrate some of the opportunities made possible by identity politics and the indigenous rights movement, this chapter has presented some

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catalyst for the mass arrival in the Sierra of hippies in the 1960s. This history and its repercussions is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

of the failures of identity politics, in the form of various paradoxes encountered in navigating tensions between the modern assumptions that make identity politics possible and the notions of tradition on which identity politics relies. At the core, though, these various issues all turn on notions of community itself, its meaning and limits. The questions raised here about the relationship between the Church and the broader community are not so different from the debates currently raging in this country about the separation of church and state, or that being played out in Iraq, as it struggles to balance secularism and religious freedom with the reality of deep-seated, religiously-affiliated ethnic identities.

Certainly there is a contingent nature to these arguments, as they rely in part on the specifics of family and local history. But beyond that, the particular logic of this case operates on a much wider and more general basis. Heriberto's "defection" came to be seen by Alberto and many others in Nda Xo as a kind of fundamental betrayal not only of certain deeply held community values, but also of his own considerable efforts to heighten and strengthen those values. Certainly he didn't invent the extent to which Day of the Dead is ideologized as a time of both explicit and implicit unity. *Muertos* is the one time of the year when people are most likely to come home to visit their families; for two days people hang out cheek-to-jowl at the graveyard with the dead and the living, even those they are for whatever reasons alienated from; and reciprocal invitations to share *mole* are issued across the various fissures of quotidian difference. All of these embodied practices of inclusivity aim to



transcend default factionalism, and they far preceded Heriberto's revitalization projects and his subsequent rejection of the Church. But by doing so much to "revitalize" Day of the Dead as the ur-Mazatec event, Heriberto became a highly salient representative of that inclusive ideology, and a victim of severe judgments when he then failed to uphold it. Heriberto thus, in a sense, became the antithesis of the prodigal son: rather than returning home contritely after a delinquent absence he was the good son who betrayed years of good deeds by turning his back on the family and the larger collective as well.

Nevertheless, in this particular biographical landscape are found the outlines of far more general and pervasive tensions and paradoxes. As we will see in Chapter Six, the broad characteristics of the story of Alberto and Heriberto, the song contest and the Mazatec church, are repeated at a higher level in the conflict between different kinds of indigenous intellectuals and the projects they promote. At the national level, too, we see some of the same problematic ways in which assumptions on which identity politics are based intersect with views of authenticity, with notions of "insider" and "outsider."

When do beliefs and practices adopted outside a community – Catholicism, for example, or assumptions about indigenous identity – become legitimately part of the community's central identity, no longer a "loan" on a par with words like *café* and *hostia*, no longer "ideological borrowing" but rather authentic in their own right? Who is "defending my people and their culture"? Heriberto and his group? Alberto

and the other songwriters of Nda Xo? Both? Neither? From a different angle, the same questions are raised by reading between the lines of Alberto's article in Chapter Three on the genesis of religious songs in Mazatec, and later the Day of the Dead song contest. As noted in the last chapter, that article ends with a comment on the financial difficulties of such revitalization projects, and laments the dearth of funding for such initiatives. Again, however, we return to the fact that the very lack of institutional support is what allows the contest to be perceived as relatively neutral, and not affiliated with institutional or factional interests. While Alberto and others may not be aware of this benefit, Heriberto, as we have seen here in his opposition to the Church, and as we will see in the penultimate chapter with respect to the national indigenous culture establishment, is intensely aware of it and struggles mightily within these double constraints.

These issues are important not only in Nda Xo; they also have something to teach us about hegemony and the limits of resistance. Why did the Mazatec church fail while the song contest thrived? It appears that the church went too far in bucking hegemonic discourses, those issuing from regional and national institutions but also their echoes in the speech of local people. In throwing off the external yoke so radically and completely, Heriberto and his group lost their internal audience. In contrast, the song contest is very successful in part because at a higher level it reinforces some of the very discourses it aspires to subvert. In other words, it does what "folklore" often does: it presents an alternative message, but in a realm

circumscribed, defined, and approved by hegemonic powers and discourses. The contest's participants thereby implicitly accept the limits of its reach while exercising within those limits the right to dissent. Thus these two projects and the different fates they have met illuminate the delicate dance of resistance and the multiple constraints placed on true change effected by minority groups in the pursuit of their own interests.

So to paraphrase the common parable, is it hegemony all the way down? Is there hope for revitalization projects, and for resistance more generally? Certainly this story has a great deal of bad news, manifested in the severe limits placed on change from below and the fragility of the communities trying to effect it. Perhaps, though, if there is some hope to be found, it resides in that self-proclaimed bedrock of collective identity, the locus of "Mazatec-ness": the celebration of Day of the Dead. Beyond Mexico, in the broader world of modern geo-politics, the bloody legacy born of ethnic conflict increasingly driven by the rhetoric of identity politics, a story in which religious difference plays so crucial a role, perhaps no rupture more completely captivates and captures the current moment than the Palestinian-Israeli conflict writ large, as the conflict between Judeo-Christian worldviews and Islamic ones.<sup>83</sup> If that story has a hopeful moment for the future embedded in the past, it is the reconciliation of Isaac and Ishmael over the grave of their father, Abraham. A similar

scene occurs every year in the Sierra Mazateca, when Day of the Dead continues to exercise its inclusive allure. For it is the one time of the year when, like other families throughout the Mazatec Sierra, all the Prados – those of both mothers, those who are Catholic but also those who have left the Church – meet at the graveside of the patriarch, and, if only for a moment, reconcile their differences.

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<sup>83</sup> I am aware that one could read this conflict in other ways: as fundamentalists on both sides battling each other, perhaps, or as advocates of globalization clashing with its opponents. I am more interested, though, in focusing here on possible solutions to intractable conflicts of this sort rather than causes.

## Chapter Five

### Of Mycotourists and Mazatecs<sup>1</sup>: Texts, Beings, and Ethnicity

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#### *Ts'e ndi xitjo*<sup>2</sup>

*Ndi xitjo chjon,  
ndi xitjo x'in,  
ndi xitjo xkuen,  
ndi xitjo yofa. (jo k'an)*

#### About the Little Mushrooms<sup>3</sup>

Female mushroom,  
male mushroom,<sup>4</sup>  
green mushroom,  
translucent mushroom. (twice)

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<sup>1</sup> The famous novel *Of Mice and Men* takes its title from Robert Burns' poem "To a Mouse," in which the author, after inadvertently destroying a mouse's nest, meditates on the fragility of plans, a major theme in Steinbeck's novel. What I find relevant, however, is Burns' notion of the curse of temporal awareness: while the mouse lives only in the present, humans live caught between the future and the past. As we will see, competing ideas about the past and the future – nostalgia on the one hand and the allure of modernity on the other – are central to understanding what drives debates about the mushrooms and their meaning in Mazatec society.

<sup>2</sup> As you will recall from the interview in Chapter Three of various Huautla intellectuals, *ndi<sup>1</sup> xi<sup>3</sup>tjo<sup>3</sup>* is a phrase commonly used to refer to hallucinogenic mushrooms. It is usually translated as "*pequeños que brotan*" or "little ones who spring forth." I never heard (or saw, in print) references to these mushrooms using anything but such euphemistic phrases; others include *ndi<sup>1</sup> xti<sup>3</sup>santo* ("saint children"), *ndi<sup>1</sup>santo* ("little saints"), and *ndi<sup>1</sup>tso<sup>3</sup>jmi<sup>2</sup>* ("little things"). In Spanish, they are usually referred to by similar phrases ("*niños santos*," "*niñitos*," "*las cositas*,") or by "*honguitos*," in which the diminutive distinguishes them from "ordinary" mushrooms. In Mazatec there is a separate word, *tjain<sup>3</sup>*, for non-hallucinogenic edible mushrooms.

<sup>3</sup> A more recent version of this poem was unchanged in the Mazatec, but appeared in the Spanish under the title "*Rezo de los Honguitos*" (Montemayor and Frischmann 2004: 140-141).

<sup>4</sup> These first two lines refer to the pairs in which mushrooms are always taken, said to represent a male/female couple. In my experience, Mazatecs always discussed *veladas* in terms of the number of pairs of mushrooms taken; María Sabina does as well (e.g., Estrada 1981: 46), and scholarly literature on the mushrooms also bears this out (e.g., Munn 1973, 86-87). Oddly enough, though, the first scholarly account of the mushroom rituals describes a shaman eating three mushrooms (J. Johnson 1939a: 130), which casts some doubt on the account. It and another article by the same author claim that a "*brujo*" (shaman) takes at most six mushrooms, otherwise "he would go mad, and his patient would die" (1939b: 144; also 1939a: 134). Actually, this is a relatively small dose in most cases; on one decisive occasion, when María Sabina received the "Book of Wisdom" (described in more detail below), she describes taking thirty *pairs* (Estrada 1981: 46).

*Ndi xitjo bijno,  
ndi xitjo kji'nda,  
ndi xitjo bisen,  
ndi xitjo bijna. (jo k'an)*

Laughing mushroom,  
crying mushroom,  
standing mushroom,  
sitting mushroom. (twice)

*Ndi xitjo tsjin,  
ndi xitjo xoño.  
K'uasín fáyale,  
k'uasín fakole. (jo k'an)*

Mushroom of milk,  
mushroom of dew,  
In this way, I ask you,  
in this way, I speak with you.  
(twice)

*Sanda ndia ntsjae,  
sanda ndia ndsokui,  
sanda ndia xkuin,  
sanda ndia ndsob'ai. (jo k'an)*

From the path of your heels,  
from the path of your feet,  
from the path of your eyes,  
from the path of your mouth.  
(twice)

*Tse nga'ñion t'aena,  
tse ngachja t'aena,  
tse kjuanda t'aena,  
tse kjuabijnachon. (jo k'an)*

Grant me great strength,  
grant me great resolve,  
grant me many blessings,  
grant me a rich life. (twice)

*An en an nd'eibi,  
an en an nd'eibi,  
sikjatejian yofi,  
sikjatejian kjanda. (jo k'an)*

I am myself now,  
I am myself now,  
I resound among the clouds,  
I thunder amidst the thick clouds.  
(twice)

*An en an nd'eibi,  
an en an nd'eibi,  
sikjatejian isen,  
sikjatejian nixjein. (jo k'an)*

I am myself now,  
I am myself now,  
I resound in the light,  
I thunder in the day. (twice)

-- Heriberto Prado Pereda<sup>5</sup> (1993, 25-28)

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<sup>5</sup> Heriberto Prado Pereda served as a Catholic priest for twelve years. He has twice (1992-1993 and 1996-1997) received grants from FONCA (National Fund for Culture and the Arts) for Writers in Indigenous Languages. Much of his work has not yet been published, or has been distributed locally, within the Mazatec Sierra, only in manuscript form.

**Na Sabi**

*Ji xi isien nixtjín naxibuaji.  
Un nguitako chikonanguíji.  
Ts'afjtien isien nixtjín  
nguijín naxi xhaá  
xi ítjiya en nga  
chjun chjinie kamáji.  
Ji xi chjun nguitakóji.  
Ji xi chjun xá katsó chi'un.*

*Ji xi chjun ndiyáji.  
Ji xi chjun ndi'í xuta kamáji.*

*En tjó xi kuichjiajó jó jan  
ndsub'á  
ko chjen nga kuinday'éji:  
nga jé kama x'ian naxi,  
nga jé kis'ijña masien naxó,*

*kóngá jé kji'me to naxó.  
Kui naxó xi ijña xixcháa,*

*kuixi nijmi, kuixi en,  
kuixi só, kuixi kjuakjintakun.  
Kui naxó ni tikon tsije tsjie  
xikó nñána,  
xi tikon chikin chikin xikó  
isien nixtjín.*

*Xi tikon tí ti xikotsa kjuakjintakun.  
Xi tikon xchan xchan xikotsa  
nanguí.*

**To María Sabina**

You are the soul of the Sierra.  
Goddess of the five earth spirits.  
Your spirit soars  
in the impenetrable mountains  
that you sang to sleep  
with your shaman's chants.  
You, revered woman.  
You, woman who commands  
thunder.  
You, woman who guides.  
You, woman who opens a path  
for the muledrivers.<sup>6</sup>  
I speak with you in the language  
of the wind,  
for you must know:  
that the mountain has fallen  
mute,  
that you have left the flower's  
seed an orphan,  
and now the flower has withered.  
That flower, the heirloom of your  
ancestors,  
muse, word,  
song, wisdom.  
That flower, radiant as your soul,  
pure as your spirit,  
wise as your brilliance,  
proud as your land.

<sup>6</sup> Before the Sierra was accessible by road – i.e., for much of María Sabina's life, including the time up until her "discovery" by Wasson – most transport in and out of the region, at least for locals, occurred via mule (or by foot). Outsiders, however – Wasson, and the SIL missionaries – often relied on small airplane.

<i>Kuixi tjijmá taka taka k'ájan ngat'e.</i>	The one that parades now in a barren sky.
<i>Xi nguindie kjín tjijmájin ndachikun 'ñu.</i>	In the wild tide of distant seas.
<i>Kuixi nchja isien nixtjín, nijmi, en, sóo kojó jaín.</i>	The one that invokes your spirit, your prayer, your words, your song, and your name.
<i>¡Nga jí xi chjiniejí Na Sabí!</i>	Wise woman, María Sabina!

-- Juan Gregorio Regino<sup>7</sup> (1992, 18-19)



That first day in Nda Xo, when I was with Heriberto and Laura and the boys in the house of the *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup> chji<sup>4</sup>ne<sup>4</sup>* (shaman), I was the last one to receive a *limpia*. After he finished, the *sabio* told me that if I wanted to come back for “the little things” (i.e., to take mushrooms), he would be happy to do a *velada*, or mushroom ceremony, with me. Such fairly open approaches by *sabios* to foreigners with respect to taking mushrooms are quite common, and speak volumes about some of the most

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<sup>7</sup> Juan Gregorio Regino is the best known Mazatec writer, and also a leading indigenous poet with an international reputation. Born in the Mazatec Baja (Nuevo Paso Nazareno, Chicicazapa, Solyaltepec), he was trained as a bilingual schoolteacher, and holds a *licenciatura* (bachelor's degree) in ethnolinguistics from CIESAS (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Center for Research and Advanced Study in Social Anthropology). He has twice (1994-1995, 1998-1999) been awarded grants for writers in indigenous languages from FONCA. In 1996, he received the Nezahualcóyotl Prize for Literature in Indigenous Languages, Mexico's highest prize for indigenous language writing. He is a founding member and past president of the National Association of Indigenous Language Writers (Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas, A.C., or ELIAC). He is currently the assistant director for indigenous development at the National Office of Popular and Indigenous Cultures (DGCPI), under CONACULTA (National Council for Culture and the Arts).



important social changes that have taken place over the last few decades in the Sierra Mazateca.

As we will see in the next chapter, national post-Revolutionary indigenist policies tied to the spread of the educational system into ever more rural indigenous areas have produced members of the “indigenous middle class.” Its members are among the first in their communities to become educated through the national school system and thus to be not only bilingual but also fully literate in Spanish. Like Heriberto and Alberto, they may be the first generation in their families to have any formal schooling at all, and almost certainly they will be the first members to have any education beyond elementary school. The expanding school system has also become one of the key vectors for the dissemination of ideologies about indigenous identity. Alongside it arrived such things as newspapers and, later, television and radio broadcasts. Particularly important was the growth of INI’s system of rural radio stations, which has proven the mouthpiece par excellence of indigenist precepts while also being selectively permeable to subsequent critiques and moderations of them.

In the Sierra Mazateca, another critical site for the introduction and diffusion for ideas about indigeneity has been tied to a particularly unique aspect of the region’s recent history. The introduction of important ideas about indigenous identity and about the practices through which it is expressed has been intimately linked to the influx of “mycotourists”: my term for hippies and their ideological heirs who come seasonally to the Sierra in search of the hallucinogenic mushrooms that grow there.

Because most mycotourists are also in search of the opportunity to take the mushrooms in the context of an “authentic” indigenous ritual, they seek not only the mushrooms themselves but also essentialized representations of indigeneity; like customers of other goods and services, mycotourists play a not insignificant role in creating and shaping the product they consume.

Extensive contact between Mazatecs and this unusual set of outsiders has been going on for almost fifty years now. Through such cross-cultural interactions, prevailing discourses about indigenous culture and indigenous rights have touched ground in Sierra communities. Clearly, the indigenist and other national discourses discussed in Chapter Two and the chapter to follow have been heavily influenced by larger international ideas, such as the Pan-Indian Movement and multiculturalism. These have indirectly influenced local ideas through institutions such as the Church and the school system. Nevertheless, the mushroom trade in the Mazateca has allowed for the more direct, if selective, influence of both national and international discourses about natives peoples. Mycotourists include both Mexican nationals, particularly from Mexico City, and foreigners, primarily from Europe and the United States, and in their interactions with local people of the Sierra they routinely express stereotypical, globalized views about indigenous peoples and their cultures.

Furthermore, the target of these essentialized views – the mushrooms and the ceremonies in which they are used – are, as we saw in Chapter Four, are not just any segment of Mazatec culture. Rather, *veladas* are seen by locals as a key locus of

ethnically marked practices and ideologies. Like Day of the Dead, the mushroom ceremonies constitute a local institution through which normative ideas about Mazatec identity and Mazatec culture are enacted and disseminated.<sup>8</sup>

As we have seen, the successful language revitalization project in the Sierra – the Day of the Dead Song Contest – has been closely tied to its emphasis on singing and on the production of songs. For this reason, other cultural contexts in which singing and the performance of music routinely occur are related in important ways to the innovations promoted by the revitalization project. Part of the reason why the innovation at the heart of the song contest – the promotion of new songs in Mazatec – was perceived to be not so much an innovation as an extension of tradition might be that it was not “advertised” as an invention. Heriberto, Alberto, and the others who promote the contest have all presented the contest as fundamentally *restorative*. They present the contest as the active recovery of traditions – *singing* for the dead, rather than merely dancing and playing music for them – that were nearly lost in the decades before the contest was founded. Equally if not more important to the success of the contest, however, is the fact that the singing practice on which this “traditionalizing” impulse was based resonates across multiple realms of life that are ethnically marked as distinctly Mazatec.

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<sup>8</sup> Mushroom rituals operate as the locus of “traditional Mazatec culture” in ways that parallel Kroskrity’s discussions of the kiva ceremonies of the Arizona Tewa (e.g., 2000: 329-360). Of course he is making the more specific argument that speech norms – a kind of Tewa standard – originate from kiva rituals, and then go on to become the “yardstick” by which other speech is measured. For my future research, I plan to pursue a similarly detailed analysis of *velada* language, particularly as it relates to singing and chanting.

Among the most important of these arenas are *veladas*, of which singing and chanting form an integral part. *Veladas* thus represent a critical forum for the institutionalization of “traditional” speech and song norms. Furthermore, because of some of the linkages (explored in the previous two chapters) between Mazatec authors/ composers and mushroom use, *veladas* are an important site at which ideologies about texts and creativity are formed. Finally, *veladas* are a site where ideas about Mazatec identity meet one of the Sierra’s most important vectors for the introduction of ideas and forces from outside the community, particularly those having to do with the market economy and ethnic tourism. Thus mushroom ceremonies and the talk about them are loci at which the tension between modernity and tradition is particularly salient, embodying and invoking many of the same conflicts animating the debates surveyed in previous chapters about the meaning of (indigenous) community and Mazatec culture. This same tension, as we will see in the following chapter, thoroughly permeates the opportunities and challenges of indigenous intellectuals. Not least among them are Mazatec intellectuals, for whom writing about the mushrooms and Mazatec shamans is extremely widespread, if not de facto mandatory.

**Cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>xi<sup>1</sup>n and Cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>yo<sup>4</sup>ma<sup>4</sup>: Encounters Between Mazatecs  
and Westerners in the Recent Past<sup>9</sup>**

Two historical episodes from the last half-century demonstrate not only this tension between tradition and modernity but also the extent to which Mazatec notions of texts, and the uses to which they can be put, can differ from those of Westerners. These events demonstrate not only that we cannot take for granted what indigeneity means to local people, but also that we must be careful about the assumptions we bring concerning notions of textuality. In the last two chapters we saw that language revitalization movements, particularly those seeking to promote written texts, may meet very different fates because the ways textual practices are harnessed to ideas about ethnic identity have implications for how such projects are received by local people. But language revitalization initiatives are but one kind of “project” that

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<sup>9</sup> *Cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>xi<sup>1</sup>n* means, essentially, “people who are different” (*chota* (person) + *xi<sup>1</sup>n* (apart, separate); not to be confused with *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>xi<sup>4</sup>n* (hunter)). It was the term I most commonly heard used when referring to outsiders (bearing in mind, again, that Mazatec nouns are not usually marked for number). *Cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>yo<sup>4</sup>ma<sup>4</sup>*, meaning literally “poor people,” is a common autodesignator that Mazatec speakers use (*chota* + *yo<sup>4</sup>ma<sup>4</sup>* (poor, humble); not to be confused with *yo<sup>3</sup>ma<sup>1</sup>* (avocado)). Another is *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>e<sup>1</sup>n i<sup>4</sup>ma<sup>4</sup> na<sup>1</sup>*, meaning “people who speak our language, the language of the poor” (*chota* + *en* (language) + *ima* (poor) + *-na<sup>1</sup>* ([1<sup>st</sup> person plural possessive (incl.)]; not to be confused with *-na<sup>4</sup>* [1<sup>st</sup> person singular possessive])).

In my experience, discourses in the Sierra about Mazatecs being “poor people,” speaking a “little language,” are extremely widespread. Pike and Cowan, for example, offer the following quote from “an informant” along these things: “Jesus Christ himself gave us the mushrooms because we are poor people and have no doctors or medicine to help us” (Pike and Cowan 1959: 146; also included in a 1953 letter from Pike to the Wassons, excerpted in the liner notes of the first *velada* they recorded (Folkways FR-8975)). Discourses about Mazatec poverty are also prevalent among Mazatec intellectuals (e.g., Prado Pereda 1991: vii, Gregorio Regino 1993: 18). Duke (1996: 240-241) offers an interesting discussion about intellectuals’ attempts to “rehabilitate” the term *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup>yo<sup>4</sup>ma<sup>4</sup>* by substituting a similar word without the negative connotations of *yo<sup>4</sup>ma<sup>4</sup>*, which have met with limited success among other locals.

trades on notions of indigeneity and its relation to modernity. Similar issues and pressures are at stake in interactions with outsiders. The terms on which these cultural exchanges unfold thus have a great deal to tell us about how local people negotiate the doubleness – born of allegiance to tradition on the one hand and accommodation to modernity and national development on the other – that is so much a part of “being indigenous” in Mexico in the twenty-first century.

***Texts and Taboos: Mushrooms, Purity, and the Book***

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), closely partnered with the Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT), has been the single most important force worldwide in producing basic descriptive research on minority languages.<sup>10</sup> This includes indigenous languages of the Americas, and Mexico is one of the American countries where the SIL has been particularly active. For much of this century, the SIL has also been a leading promoter of indigenous language literacy

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<sup>10</sup> Although the SIL now refers to itself as SIL International, I will refer to it here as simply the SIL because the name change is recent and my discussion of the organization is primarily historical. Furthermore, although SIL and WBT maintain that they are separate entities, they are extremely closely allied, sharing personnel and the same world headquarters in Dallas, Texas. In the division of labor between WBT and SIL, “Wycliffe is the fund-raising and recruiting arm” and the SIL is “SIL/WBT’s training and operational arm, . . . organized into field branches and area offices” around the world (Stoll 1982: 5-6).

– the ultimate goal being, of course, disseminating the ability to read the Bible in the native language.

The SIL began work in Mexico in 1936 during the Cárdenas administration (1934-1940), a foundational era of *indigenismo* thought and policy. Indeed, the SIL aligned itself fully and enthusiastically with the Mexican state and its indigenist policies. The SIL's founder, William Cameron Townsend, with respect to all the countries where the Institute worked, "instructed his followers to 'obey the government, for God is the one who has put it there'" (Stoll 1982: 4). Mexico was a case in point:

In Mexico, he hitched Wycliffe's star to *indigenismo*. . . .By publicizing the linguistic preliminaries of Bible translation, offering to teach Indians Spanish and integrate them into national life, he fashioned an institute after the very dreams of Mexican indigenists. . . . "Our project fitted into their scheme beautifully," Townsend wrote. . . . He was introducing a novel institution to Mexico, a team of linguists specializing in Indian languages. Moises Saenz and other indigenists were fascinated by the possibility that descriptive linguistics would rescue them from the problem of Indian monolingualism. First teach Indians to read and write in their own languages, Townsend advised (thus creating a public for his translated Bibles); then Indians could make an easy transition to Spanish in the classroom.

(Stoll 1982: 63, 68).

Moisés Sáenz was the undersecretary of education at the time. An anthropologist who had been a disciple of Boas' at Columbia University, he also counted John Dewey as his "principal mentor" (de la Peña 1997: 54). Sáenz became a leading

figure in promoting and instituting post-Revolutionary *indigenismo* policies, particularly in the realm of education. The alliance between Sáenz and Townsend, and hence between Mexican educational institutions and the SIL, meant that the SIL had enormous influence on educational matters in Mexico's indigenous areas.

Until 1979, the SIL was heavily involved in indigenous language literacy in Mexico. During this forty-year period, almost all indigenous people who learned to read and write in their native languages did so, directly or indirectly, through the SIL's linguist-missionaries:

Perhaps the most significant event affecting the future of indigenous literacy in Mexico was the signing of an agreement between the SIL and the Secretariat of Education (SEP) in 1951, in which both agencies agreed to combine efforts to research Mexican Indian languages and to promote the economic development of the Indian regions. The SIL also agreed to work as interpreter for government officials in Indian communities and, more importantly, to prepare literacy materials in the native languages and in Spanish. Indeed, until 1980, virtually all literacy materials for use with Mexican Indians were created under the auspices of the SIL. Materials published by other government agencies were usually written by the linguists working for the SIL.  
(King 1994: 115).

These materials were ostensibly aimed at teaching indigenous people Spanish – a goal that not only served the Mexican state's purposes but also made the SIL's literacy programs attractive to indigenous language speakers. Nevertheless, the SIL missionaries "were actually less concerned with teaching Spanish than with spreading



the gospel in the vernacular languages” (King 1994: 116). In accordance with this, the materials the SIL produced relied on different orthographies for each linguistic variant rather than devising a standard alphabet across multiple dialects.<sup>11</sup> In terms of content, however, the SIL’s materials were firmly in line with national assimilationist goals. Specific ethnic identities were subordinated to a unified national identity, and indigeneity was represented as a shameful condition that could be remedied by learning to speak Spanish and becoming literate (King 1994: 115-121).

However, when *indigenismo* policies aimed at incorporation and assimilation came increasingly under attack in the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter Two), the SIL became the target of pointed criticism. In 1975, at the First National Indian Congress, a few dozen anthropologists – including many of the most prominent INI officials (e.g., Salomón Nahmad) – signed the Pátzcuaro Denunciation. This document “accused SIL of being a pseudo-scientific agent of imperialist penetration fronting for the CIA. It had crippled Mexican linguistics, violated the Constitution and impeded the organization of Indians to defend their rights, by dividing communities and diverting attention from their fundamental problems” (Stoll 1982: 226). In 1979, under “growing pressure from radical anthropologists and nascent Indian organizations worried about the effect that the presence of U.S. missionaries was

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<sup>11</sup>Many indigenous intellectuals actively oppose this tendency by the SIL to downplay similarities across dialects and to emphasize differences among them – and hence, implicitly, also among the groups of people who speak them. As we will see in Chapter Six, the desire to create a standard alphabet that can function for all dialects of a language is a perennial concern of indigenous writers and language activists.

having on traditional forms of social organization” (King 1994: 114), public criticism of the SIL came to a head. According to the 1951 agreement with SEP, the SIL was authorized to produce literacy materials in Mexico until 1990. At that point the organization’s work – documenting Mexico’s many indigenous languages, translating the Bible into those languages, and teaching the Indians how to read and write – was, incredibly, expected to be complete. In 1979 SEP cancelled that contract, and the long-standing formal relationship between the SIL and the Mexican government was officially terminated. Although today the SIL continues to operate in Mexico, it is far less active than it once was. The organization continues to publish work on and in indigenous languages, but its “community outreach” activities are for the most part restricted to workshops and book presentations held in its various regional centers.

The SIL’s broad history in Mexico is echoed in the particular history of the SIL’s influence in the Sierra. 1936, the year that the SIL began operations in Mexico, was the same year that the Institute set up a base in the Sierra, in Huautla. The three core researchers were important members of the SIL/WBT inner circle: George Cowan, future WBT president, his wife Florence Cowan, and Eunice Pike, sister of Kenneth Pike.<sup>12</sup> A student of Edward Sapir’s, Kenneth Pike became a professor of linguistics at the University of Michigan (one of the few SIL linguists ever to secure an academic appointment) and the foremost figure in the history of the SIL,

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to Eunice Pike’s numerous technical or scholarly articles on the Mazatec language (e.g., 1937, 1953, 1956b, 1967, 1968), she also wrote several books for popular Christian audiences. These include narrative accounts of her experiences in the Mazatec region (1956a, 1958, 1971, 1991, 1994) and a biography of her brother (1981).

eventually becoming its first president (1942-1979). Although he never conducted the long-term, “in the trenches” kind of work in the Mazateca that his sister and others did, his research included some pioneering studies on the language, including important works on tonal languages that relied extensively on Mazatec as an example (K. Pike 1943, 1948). Mazatec’s tonal system is probably the aspect of the language that the SIL linguists wrote about most widely; one such item is Cowan’s famous article on Mazatec whistle speech (G. Cowan 1948). Sarah Gudschinsky, another missionary who spent many years in the region, also wrote many articles focusing on Mazatec phonology, including the difficulties that Mazatec’s tonal nature posed for native speakers when learning how the spoken language was represented in writing (e.g., 1958, 1959).

When Eunice Pike and the Cowans arrived, long before the road was completed, the Sierra was a remote area where even the Catholic Church had only a limited presence. In part because of this, Mazatecs had a reputation for having conserved in great measure their pre-Columbian religious traditions. Especially important in attracting the SIL’s attention were practices that to the missionaries seemed markedly “pagan.” These included beliefs, which are still widely held, in myriad earth-based spirits and in the medicinal and divinatory powers of the hallucinogenic mushrooms and other plants that grow wild in the Sierra Mazateca.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The psychedelic mushrooms, of which there are three varieties, are widely considered the most potent. However, because they grow only in the wet season, two “weaker” plants are used at other times of the year. The first of these is a sage-like herb found only in the Sierra Mazateca called *xka*<sup>4</sup>

The missionaries, like the mycotourists who were to follow, knew little or nothing about the cultural context surrounding mushroom use in the Sierra. At least initially, they were unaware of the basic taboos that *serranos* observe when taking the mushrooms, taboos that continue to be almost universally observed by locals (or, at the very least, continue to be presented as normative in discourses about the mushrooms). Mazatecs continue to believe that failure to observe these taboos will cause illness, insanity, or even death. The taboos include a variety of restrictions: about what one can and cannot eat,<sup>14</sup> about giving and receiving presents, about days and times that are good and bad for holding *veladas*. But by far the most important taboos pertain to sexual relations.<sup>15</sup> These sexual prohibitions consist of refraining from sexual contact for four days prior to and four days following *veladas*, which always take place at night. Furthermore, the spiritual contamination that can be caused by engaging in these prohibited sexual relations can be spread from one

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*Pastora*, the “Leaf of the Shepherdess” (i.e., Mary) (*xka*<sup>4</sup> (leaf); not to be confused with *xca*<sup>3</sup> (lizard, crocodile) or *xca*<sup>1</sup> (*calzones*, i.e. men’s traditional white cotton pants)). The other is the seed of the morning glory plant, found throughout Oaxaca and elsewhere in Mexico, known in Spanish as the *semilla de la Virgen* (“seed of the Virgin”) and also by the Nahuatl term *ollolihqui*. In Mazatec, it is called *to*<sup>3</sup> *tjo*<sup>3</sup>*n*, “treasured seed” (*to*<sup>3</sup> (fruit, seed) + *tjo*<sup>3</sup>*n* (treasure, money, coin)).

Kernels of dried corn are also used for healing and divinatory purposes, sometimes in conjunction with the use of hallucinogens (see Johnson 1939a, 1939b). This practice appeared to be falling into disuse by the time I began my fieldwork; only a few *chota chjine* in the Sierra were said to be among the few who still knew how to “read corn” (see Carrera González 2000a and 2000b).

<sup>14</sup> See E. Pike (1949) and Gudschinsky (1959) for discussions of Mazatec texts on “food witchcraft.”

<sup>15</sup> Duke (2001) discusses these taboos as the most important class of ritual sexual abstinence. He also claims that similar sexual taboos – particularly the one to abstain from sexual activity four days prior – pertain to certain other important activities, such as hunting, ritual praying (especially during mourning periods), and key events during the agricultural production cycle. Neiburg (1978) makes the interesting claim that agricultural taboos pertain only to subsistence crops, i.e., foods produced for local consumption – and therefore a part of local social relations – but not to cash crops like coffee.

person to another; many of the non-sexual taboos are ultimately linked to preventing participants as well as the mushrooms themselves from being contaminated by association with someone who has not observed the sexual taboos. For example, because Heriberto and Laura lived in town and ran a store they were not usually able to go out into the countryside and find mushrooms themselves. As a result they usually obtained their mushrooms from others, and were very careful about who they acquired mushrooms from, lest the *veladas* go awry because the mushrooms had become “polluted” by contact with someone who had not observed the taboos. Ultimately, the goal of these taboos is to preserve a state wherein one is *tsje*<sup>43</sup> (clean) when contacting divine sources, which is, of course, the ultimate goal of *veladas*. This guarding of purity is, in addition to being widespread generally, present in other forms in every major Mazatec ritual, and is well-attested in scholarly literature on Mazatec cosmology (e.g., Boege 1988, Incháustegui 1977 and 1994).

For most shamans, who of course cannot know in advance when someone will fall ill and require their services, the sexual taboos necessitate living in a state of “long-term” – and, importantly, *public* – sexual purity. For if they do not maintain a state of ritual celibacy, they run the risk not only of being ineffective but of bringing harm on their clients during the *veladas* they hold. And so, in Duke’s words, shamans and other ritual specialists are “culturally marked as celibate as a social category” (2001: 129). Most shamans are unmarried or widowed, i.e., they are individuals who are presumed not to be engaging in sexual intercourse. María

Sabina, for example, worked as a shaman only during the periods of her life when she was not married:

I never ate the *niños santos* while I lived with Serapio, because according to our beliefs the woman who takes the mushrooms should not have relations with men. Those who are going to stay up<sup>16</sup> shouldn't have sexual relations four days before or four days after the *velada*. . . I didn't take the *niños santos* because I was afraid my man wouldn't understand it. . . .

During my first years of widowhood. . . I decided to take the *niños santos* again. . . I had decided to take them because I was clean [*limpia*]. I didn't have a husband. . . .

Twelve years after I was left a widow, a man named Marcial Carrerra began to woo me. . . [and] in the end I gave in. . . . In the thirteen years that I lived with Marcial. . . I never took the *niños*. I was afraid that he wouldn't understand me and would spoil my *sabia's* bodily cleanliness. . . .

One month after Marcial had died, I began to take the *cositas*. As I've already said, it isn't good to use the *niños* when one has a husband. When one goes to bed with a man, one's cleanliness is spoiled. If a man takes them and two or three days afterwards he uses [*hace uso*] a woman, his testicles rot. If a woman does the same, she goes crazy.

(Estrada [1977] 1989: 40, 46, 62)

And as we saw in Chapter Four, it was precisely on this issue of public sexual purity that many locals indicted Heriberto. Historically, his most egregious violations of social norms (i.e., taking up, while a priest, with a married woman) were of an explicitly sexual nature. And so his frequent, open use of the mushrooms – to say

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<sup>16</sup> In the Spanish original, the word used is *desvelarse* (to stay awake), related to the word *velada* (vigil), which is almost always used in Spanish to refer to mushroom ceremonies. As with mushrooms, in Mazatec the ceremonies are referred to euphemistically, usually with some version of the verb to stay awake, as when one *va<sup>3</sup>ca<sup>3</sup>so<sup>1</sup>n*, “stays awake.”

nothing of his advocacy of innovative, controversial uses for them – flies in the face of local understandings about how people are supposed to behave when interacting with the mushrooms.

When the SIL missionaries began work in the Sierra Mazateca, they taught literacy in Mazatec generally, but their ultimate aim was always teaching people to read the Bible. The pedagogical materials they prepared included stories and the like that were not explicitly religious (the strong Christian morals at the core notwithstanding) as well as other booklets taken directly from the Bible and culminating in the New Testament itself. At the time there were very few people in the Sierra who spoke any Spanish, and even fewer who were literate in it. In fact, the SIL missionaries themselves reported that many people took an interest in Mazatec literacy primarily to help them learn Spanish (Gudschinsky 1951-1952). For this reason, many pedagogical materials were produced in both languages.

But a funny thing happened on the way to literacy.

At the time the SIL missionaries began teaching people to read the Bible excerpts, few people in the Sierra had had any substantive interactions with any written texts, let alone sacred ones. The closest experience most Mazatecs had was interaction with divine sources through hallucinogenic mushrooms, which are conceived of as vehicles through which unseen deities speak and sacred messages are received. Indeed, it is extremely common in discourses about the mushrooms for people to claim “the mushrooms told” them something or “the mushrooms said”

something, or that through the mushrooms one “speaks to God.” My own experience reflects this, scholarly literature often comments on it (e.g., Munn 1973), and transcripts of mushroom ceremonies are full of the word *tso*<sup>2</sup> ([he/she/it] “says”) (e.g., Wasson *et al* 1974), in which the *sabio/sabia* or others voice the words of the mushrooms, or of the divine sources to which the mushrooms are providing access. *Veladas*, then, are events in which people receive divine texts.

It is therefore not surprising – though the SIL missionaries seem, at the time, to have been blindsided by it – that people from the Sierra would place reading the Bible in the same class of activity as *veladas*. As Eunice Pike and Florence Cowan write, “We tend to call the Scriptures ‘God’s Word.’ The Mazatecos have considered the mushrooms a means of getting a message from God, and hence the two things tend to get grouped together in the same category” (1959: 148). Furthermore, many *sabios* even use the trope of “the book” as a symbol of the knowledge that is imparted during *veladas* (e.g., Munn 1973, Feinberg 1997). As we will see in the following section, the most famous Mazatec shaman, María Sabina, spoke of her knowledge of curing with mushrooms as “my Book.”<sup>17</sup> This “Book of Wisdom,” the “Book of Language,”<sup>18</sup> was sacred wisdom she received during a mushroom vision, when she

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<sup>17</sup> Wasson *et al* 1974: 84, 86, 108, 134, 136, 156. Like most Mazatecs, María Sabina uses the Spanish loan word *libro*; only recently derived neologisms exist in Mazatec, and these are not widely used by locals. *Xoʹn* (“paper”) is probably the closest word in common usage, but I never heard it used to refer to an entire book, nor have I seen it used that way in written texts.

<sup>18</sup> Estrada [1977] 1989. In the original, this appears as “*el Libro de la Sabiduría*,” “*el Libro de la Lenguaje*.” I have tried, when using quotes from Estrada’s work, to rely on the Spanish version ([1977] 1989) rather than its subsequent translation into English (1981). Although Estrada, a *Huauteco* whose first language is Mazatec, provided what until then had been the first attempt to “give voice” to



was in a state of ritual purity, and which she drew upon when curing people who came to her for help. Although María Sabina could not read or write, she nevertheless lived in a world where books and written texts were extremely important. Speaking of her first husband, who died at a young age and was followed by an abusive second husband, María Sabina says, “With pride, I can say that he knew how to read and write” (Estrada [1977] 1989, 37). Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter Two, there is a long history in Mesoamerica of written texts playing a crucial role in sacred rituals. Monaghan (2006) discusses this as a broad Mesoamerican metaphor of the book that functions both historically and currently, in which reading is a form of seeing – and, indeed, represents a deeper, more profound type of vision.

Given the Sierra’s cultural and historical background with respect to sacred texts, it is entirely understandable that the missionaries would encounter some unforeseen problems when trying to interest Mazatecs in reading the Bible. As they themselves recount in convincing detail and with multiple examples taken from more than twenty years of fieldwork (E. Pike and F. Cowan 1959, E. Pike 1960), they encountered frequent resistance to the Bible excerpts that they produced. This stood in contrast to the fact that their non-Biblical texts fared far better. And even local people who otherwise showed all the signs of being “good converts” nevertheless seemed to balk at reading “the Scriptures.” The missionaries eventually came to the

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the woman behind the mystique surrounding María Sabina, his account is far from perfect. Estrada does not provide a Mazatec version of the interviews he conducted with María Sabina. Furthermore, some locals have questioned his account, including García Carrera, also a Huautla native and the editor of *La Faena*, who wrote his own book in response (1986).

conclusion, which they subsequently tested successfully in practice, that this resistance was occurring because the taboos associated with mushroom use were being transferred to the act of reading the Bible. Thus people who were married, and therefore presumed to be having sexual relations, would not read the scriptures despite otherwise demonstrating strong adherence to and interest in Protestant Christianity. As Pike writes:

Over a period of years I have gradually become aware of the fact that Mazatecs consider sexual relations to be offensive to “God” and in fact to any spirit. If they have not had intercourse for some time, they are said to be “clean,” otherwise they are “sinful.” For fear of being punished by the spirits, the Mazatecs try to be ceremonially clean whenever they come in contact with them.

When contacting “Christ” by means of the sacred mushroom, they are supposed to refrain from [sexual] intercourse about four days both before and after the mushroom ceremony. If they do not, it is said that the mushrooms may make them crazy. . . .

When I tried to interest Mazatecs in reading the Bible, I told them that it is the Word of God. When they did not respond, I thought they were not convinced. Now I suspect that sometimes they do not respond *because* they are convinced and have applied to the Scriptures the same restrictions that they apply to the mushroom, witchcraft, or a book of magic. Specifically, they are afraid to read Scripture unless they are “clean.”

(E. Pike 1960, 49-50)

The SIL missionaries thus spent two and a half decades in the field trying to get Mazatecs to read the Bible, all the while missing the ways in which the sacred text they were promoting had specific cultural meanings attached to them that thoroughly conditioned how texts and literacy programs alike were received. The missionaries’

earlier works are notably devoid of any mention of either the mushrooms or *veladas* or, indeed, any direct reference to what might be classified by the missionaries as “pagan.” This applies not only to their materials for scholars but also those they generated for Mazatecs themselves, a tendency that continues through the present in the more recent texts they have produced. The only reference at all of this sort that I could find was an entry in a small vocabulary book: *xi<sup>3</sup>tjo<sup>3</sup>* (more commonly referred to as *ndi xitjo*, “the little one that springs forth”), which is glossed simply as “a certain type of mushroom” (Pike [1952] 1957).<sup>19</sup>

In fact, had Wasson not begun writing about María Sabina when he did, they might still have not understood the nature of the problems they faced.<sup>20</sup> Because the missionaries were the only “outsiders” to have studied the language, they offered Wasson unique skills and knowledge that he could not find elsewhere. Wasson began corresponding with Eunice Pike in 1953 (Wasson and Wasson 1957: 242, Duke 1996: 88). Their letters indicate that while the missionaries were aware of Mazatec mushroom use they also rejected it so thoroughly that they had spent little time trying to understand why local people turned to the mushrooms.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the

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<sup>19</sup> The original Spanish gloss reads “*cierta clase de hongo.*”

<sup>20</sup> One explanation that Cowan and Pike offer for why the Mazatecs rely on mushroom use suggests the extent to which the local motivations behind *veladas* continue to elude them: “Perhaps part of the reason for using the mushroom is to have a party-like thing, or some special attention for the sick relative. If that be the case, then the need might be filled by public prayer for the sick one during the Christian service” (1959: 149).

<sup>21</sup> As Pike writes, “I regret the use of the mushroom, for we know of no case in which it has had beneficial results. I wish they’d consult the Bible when they seek out Christ’s wishes, and not be

missionaries did exchange information with Wasson, and the Cowans eventually provided the transcription and translation of the recording Wasson and his group made in 1958 of a famous ceremony led by María Sabina (Wasson *et al* 1974).

Wasson's first articles on the mushroom ceremonies were published a couple of years before the missionaries published their own accounts of the conflicts between the mushrooms and Christianity, and they clearly state that they used Wasson's recordings to test their suspicions (Pike and Cowan 1959, 145-146).

While it is no longer the case that the act of reading the Bible, whether by Protestants or Catholics, is subject to the transfer of mushroom taboos, this story nevertheless says a great deal about local notions of textuality. It is an object lesson in the dangers of taking a modular, "one size fits all" view towards the introduction of literacy skills. As we have seen above, SIL linguists played a central role in formulating and furthering literacy programs in Mexico, and they did so on terms that were thoroughly modular – their basic approach remained consistent across cultural contexts – as well as deeply complicit with state-level efforts to promote modernization and development. Almost the only thing about their method that the linguists routinely adapted to local differences was the use of individualized orthographies. When the missionaries suggest to would-be Mazatec Bible-readers that they "reject the mushroom" by telling them to silence their critical neighbors and "save face by answering 'I'm using [Western] medicine instead'" (1959, 149) they

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deceived by a 'wiseman' and the mushrooms" (Wasson and Wasson 1957: 244; also quoted in Duke 1996: 90).

are adopting precisely this kind of adherence to modernization as a solution to their own version of “the Indian problem.”

Even after the SIL’s official role in national educational policy had come to an end, the organization’s approach continued to be widespread through the institutional precedents it left behind and the generations of intellectuals it trained, both indigenous and not, who dealt in indigenous education. As King writes in her study of indigenous language literacy in Mexico, most empirical research has suggested that literacy is largely a dependent variable, a consequence of development and modernization itself. Nevertheless, she says, “this relation has been largely ignored in the planning of literacy campaigns, and it has unquestionably been assumed that if rural adults were taught to read and write, they would become literate. Literacy, however, requires a cultural context in which to prosper” (1994: 17). In the Mazateca this context was not present, at least for the kind of reading (i.e., Bible reading) that the SIL missionaries sought to cultivate. And while the Mazatec case is perhaps unusual in the particulars on which the missionaries’ efforts floundered, the failures there are symptomatic of a systemic weaknesses in the SIL’s approach. This same approach lives on today in the thoroughly modular approach the Mexican government continues to take towards indigenous language literacy, in which literacy programs and literacy materials are only very selectively permeable to local norms and local understandings of or uses for texts. Like the SIL’s, these materials are indeed individualized at the level of the alphabets they use. They often represent the more

“folkloric” aspects of particular cultural contexts (photos of women in local *huipiles*, stories about the important regional fiestas, discussions of the particular fruits available locally, etc.). But the process and practices through which literacy is taught remain largely unchanged from one area of the country to another.

Furthermore, indigenous writers who promote indigenous language literacy, either by accident or of necessity, often make a less exotic version of the mistake made by the SIL. Indigenous writers are keenly aware that the context in which indigenous language texts are received – i.e., that it is one where most people cannot read in their native languages. These intellectuals are also cognizant that this issue must be addressed if their work is to have any local relevance, which is to say, any relevance in the language which, ostensibly, is the primary language that indigenous intellectuals write in. For this reason, almost to a person indigenous writers are involved in promoting indigenous language literacy. However, as we will see in Chapter Six, indigenous intellectuals, as products of the very national school system that the SIL was instrumental in shaping, often make the same sort of modular, operational assumptions the SIL did – or they are in effect forced to do so, because of the conditions placed on their efforts by the funding they receive.

In addition, these intellectuals are, for a variety of reasons, generally not neutral members of their communities; they play a role in the deep internal divisions that are the rule rather than the exception in Oaxaca’s indigenous communities. Indigenous writers often occupy a highly visible position with respect to such

divisions, whether these rifts are religious (Protestant vs. Catholic – or Catholic vs. Mazatec Church, in Nda Xo), political (along the lines of political parties or other power allegiances), ideological (e.g., differing attitudes towards modernity and tradition), etc. Thus their efforts to promote indigenous language literacy and literatures, while supported by those on the same side of a given social divide, are almost always hampered by their inability in practice to avoid alienating those on the other side of communitarian divisions.

Indigenous intellectuals like Heriberto and others throughout the nation who have met resistance or indifference to their revitalization projects are often in the same boat the SIL was. Like the SIL missionaries, even when indigenous intellectuals are armed with knowledge about the nature of popular disinterest in their projects, such awareness still leaves them a long way away from knowing how to proceed in light of it. “How can one effectively present the message of divine revelation,” the SIL missionaries write (1959: 145), “to a people who already have, according to their belief, a means whereby anyone who so desires may get messages directly from the supernatural world in a more spectacular and immediately satisfying way than Christianity has to offer?”<sup>22</sup> They end their articles on the subject without any clear answer to their question. As we will see in the chapter that follows, that is a

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<sup>22</sup> The missionaries offer one particularly telling quotation from a woman whom they had criticized for continuing to use the mushrooms: “But what else could I do?” she said. “I needed to know God’s will and I don’t know how to read” (Pike and Cowan 1959, 147).

position not unlike the one many indigenous intellectuals are in when it comes to promoting popular literacy in indigenous languages.

Finally, while the missionaries' accounts of literacy in the Sierra resonate with what we will see in the following chapter about indigenous intellectuals nationally, their discussion also mirrors what we have already seen about the relative success and lack thereof in different language revitalization projects in Mazatec.<sup>23</sup> Lurking in the background of the missionaries' accounts is the culturally salient link *veladas* have to on the one hand local notions about creativity<sup>24</sup> and on the other to local views of singing.<sup>25</sup> When one of the missionaries was overheard singing a hymn, some local women commented how lovely the song was, "just like the mushroom"; when the missionary objected, the women insisted: "Emphatically, they broke in to say, 'We

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<sup>23</sup> An inconclusive observation from one of the missionaries' articles perhaps has something to say about the relative lack of success of the Mazatec Church. The authors note the possible epistemic convergence between the Eucharist or Lord's Supper with the mushrooms – a concern voiced to them by *outsiders*. At the time, there had not yet been any observation of the Lord's Supper in the Sierra (itself an indictment of the missionaries' lack of success, since the article was written more than twenty years after they began working in the region), and the authors seem not to have discussed the matter with Catholic priests from the area. I raise this, though I am not sure what it means, simply to point out that perhaps in seeing the Eucharist and the mushrooms as in some ways alike – substitutable, at least – the missionaries' thinking, as on other matters, may more closely resemble that of outsiders than of locals.

<sup>24</sup> It is not coincidental, I think, that ideologies of creativity and ideologies of insanity are both linked to *veladas*. For *veladas* are, fundamentally, vehicles through which one can contact divine sources in all their power, both negative and positive, for harm and benefit alike. The overlap, or the fine line, between insanity and creativity is one that many cultures worldwide have grappled with. This finds expression in Western culture, for example, in the mystique of individual artists like Vincent Van Gogh or, indeed, a propos of the subject of this chapter, much of the initial interest in hallucinogens during the Psychedelic Revolution.

<sup>25</sup> Munn (1973) also stresses the relationship between creativity and *veladas*. In particular, he talks about the ways in which the poetic, esoteric nature of the language that *sabios* use is tied to their ability to affect healing. However Munn's analysis is severely hampered by the fact that he is working entirely through Spanish translations from the Mazatec original provided to him by locals.



mean, wasn't it gracious of the mushroom to teach you that song!" (Pike and Cowan 1959: 147). The missionaries then refer to the hundreds of phonograph records of hymns they had sold in the region. "We now suspect that some of the hymns may have been sung to the mushroom by the shaman," the missionaries write, voicing a suspicion that their informants, when asked, confirmed was indeed widespread (159: 147-148).

Both of these observations mirror some of my own, and further support my argument as to why the Day of the Dead Song Contest met with such widespread popular success. Many of the songwriters I interviewed likewise claimed a linkage between mushroom use and song competition, emphasizing the mushrooms as a vehicle through which divine inspiration, or divine knowledge, was imparted. And as I have already mentioned, discourses about *veladas* being a locus of bedrock Mazatec identity, and about the Mazatec language being fundamentally musical, a "singing language," are widely held. Thus, I argue, by tying literacy and song composition to singing practices with linkages to sacred, ethnically marked knowledge, the promoters of the song contest found a way to introduce innovations that might otherwise be rejected as artificial on terms that cast them instead as an intensification of customary practice.

***A Page from Life: Gordon Wasson,  
María Sabina, and the Psychedelic Revolution***

In 1953, the professional banker and amateur mycologist R. Gordon Wasson arrived for the first time in the Sierra Mazateca. A vice president at J.P. Morgan, Wasson had by then been involved for several years in self-financed research on the worldwide use of hallucinogenic mushrooms. In a story recounted in an article that became a seminal text of the “Psychedelic Revolution,” Wasson claimed that his interest in the subject dated from his 1927 honeymoon. He and his new wife, a Russian woman named Valentina Pavlovna Guercken, chanced upon some wild edible mushrooms. Wasson was struck by the marked cultural differences in the attitudes each of them had towards mushrooms: his wife, “in ecstasy. . .caressed the toadstools, savored their earthy perfume” while he regarded them as “putrid, treacherous excrescences.” Although they were both amateurs (Pavlovna was a pediatrician), the Wassons together began what would become a shared, life-long interest in the relationship between mushrooms and culture and in particular on the relationship between mushrooms and ancient religions.

Eventually, this project led to the publication of several books, culminating with the publication in 1969 of *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. That work discusses cross-cultural mushroom use in support of the thesis, controversial among

scholars, that the famed ritual drink *Soma* that figures so prominently in Vedic scriptures was distilled from the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, commonly known as fly agaric. The volume was also the first in Wasson's series of ten "Ethnomycological Studies," produced with a variety of publishers and named after Wasson's own moniker for his line of inquiry.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps because he was an amateur in search of credibility in scholarly circles, Wasson was prone to grandiloquent claims about his importance. "My wife and I were solely responsible for the present development of what we were the first to call ethnomycology" (Wasson 1980: xvi), a field of inquiry dedicated to understanding the cultural role of mushrooms, especially psychotropic ones. The Wassons classified cultures as "mycophilic" (like the Russians and indigenous Mexicans) and "mycophobic" (like the Anglo-Saxons). They postulated that "entheogens" – a term he and his and his colleagues used to replace the terms "hallucinogenic," "psychedelic" or "drug" that had been used during the 1960s – had played a crucial role worldwide in the origins of religion.

Wasson's studies led him to Mesoamerica, where among other peoples the Aztecs were known to have ingested hallucinogenic mushrooms, calling them *teonanacatl*, "flesh of the gods." The search also brought him to the Mazatec Sierra. In 1955, two years after first arriving with an interest in the "magico-religious use of mushrooms" in the area, he and a man named Allan Richardson participated in two *veladas*. They thus purportedly "became the first outsiders to participate in the

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<sup>26</sup> The eleventh and final in the series was Reidlinger's (1990) edited collection of essays in honor of Wasson, published after his death in 1986.

Mazatec Indians' sacred mushroom rituals”<sup>27</sup> (Pavlovna was not present then but took part in subsequent *veladas*).

It is questionable whether Wasson was actually the first outsider to “participate” in the mushroom ceremonies. Despite his claims, he was not even the first Westerner to write about the Mazatecs’ use of mushrooms, nor was he the first to do so in English.<sup>28</sup> Arguably, he was, however, “the most self-promoting,” researcher to write about Mazatec mushroom use; his writings transformed Huautla’s – and, by extension, the entire Sierra’s – “place in the symbolic economy of Mexico, Europe, and the United States” (Feinberg 2003: 51). Certainly Wasson made some rather extreme claims at the time as to the importance of the event, according it “a singular importance in world history” (Duke 1996: 96):

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<sup>27</sup> From the R. Gordon Wasson Archives of Harvard University Herbaria, Harvard’s botany library, <http://www.huh.harvard.edu/libraries/wasson.html>.

<sup>28</sup> If “participate” means actually ingesting the mushrooms rather than witnessing others do so, he might have been the first, though I am more inclined to believe he was merely the first to make such a (self-aggrandizing) claim in print. Certainly Johnson (1939a, 1939b) “participated” in a mushroom ritual in the sense that he was present for one. The author is non-committal on whether or not he or the other outsiders with him took the mushrooms along with the shaman. However, Johnson was the son-in-law of the well-known anthropologist Roberto Weitlaner, who himself wrote about the Mazatecs and accompanied Wasson on his first trip to the Sierra in 1953. I therefore assume that Wasson was speaking authoritatively when he wrote that on the occasion Johnson describes “the mushrooms were ingested by the shaman alone” (1980: xix). To his credit, Wasson did acknowledge in some ways his debt to Johnson. He dedicated his famous book on María Sabina (1974) “To the Memory of Jean Bassett Johnson, 1915-1944, Pioneer Anthropologist among the Mazatecs, First Outsider with His Party to Attend a Mushroom *Velada*, Killed in North Africa in the Second World War.”

There is no record that any white man had ever attended a session of the kind that we are going to describe, nor that any white men had ever partaken on the sacred mushrooms under any circumstances. For reasons deeply rooted in the mortal conflict of Spaniards and Indians, it is unlikely that any recorded event of the kind had ever taken place. . . . We were attending as participants a mushroomic Supper. . . which was being held pursuant to a tradition of unfathomed age, possibly going back to a time when the remote ancestors of our hosts were living in Asia, back perhaps to the very dawn of man's cultural history, when he was discovering the idea of God.

(Wasson and Wasson 1957: 290;  
also quoted in Duke 1996: 96).

Within the Sierra, however, this event was earth-shaking for different reasons entirely. Momentous changes took place in the Sierra in the wake of Wasson's visit, changes that would touch the lives of Mazatecs in ways small and large for generations to come. This transformation began modestly enough, however, with the publication of a short article. In May of 1957, Wasson published a piece in *Life* magazine entitled "Seeking the Magic Mushroom." *Life* was, at the time, one of the most popular and influential news outlets in the country, with a readership in the tens of millions. The article was sensationalistic, a quality perhaps best captured by its subtitle: "A New York banker goes to Mexico's mountains to participate in the age-old rituals of Indians who chew strange growths that produce visions."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Pavlovna Wasson published a similarly melodramatic article a few days later entitled "I Ate the Sacred Mushrooms." The title foregrounds, as did the text of the *Life* article, the particular importance of the author as guide. These events are news, both articles seemed to be saying, because the Wassons, Westerners with armed with a lust for scientific knowledge, engaged in them. Furthermore, the articles appear to promise that you, the reader, will be able to participate in such events too through the narratives they offer.

The article alluded to the various mushroom rituals Wasson had participated in at that point – “nine in all” – but focused in particular on the *veladas* from 1956 when he and Richardson<sup>30</sup> witnessed “a strange, solemn rite and wonders in the dark”:

We chewed and swallowed these acrid mushrooms, saw visions, and emerged from the experience awestruck. We had come from afar to attend a mushroom rite but had expected nothing so staggering as the virtuosity of the performing *curanderas* and the astonishing effects of the mushrooms. Richardson and I were the first white men in recorded history to eat the divine mushrooms, which for centuries have been a secret of certain Indian peoples living far from the great world in southern Mexico. No anthropologists had ever described the scene that we witnessed.

I am a banker by occupation and Richardson is a New York society photographer. . . . It was, however, no accident that we found ourselves in the lower chamber of that thatch-roofed, adobe-walled Indian home. For both of us this was simply the latest trip to Mexico in quest of the mushroom rite. For me and my wife, who was to join us with our daughter a day later, it was a climax to nearly thirty years of inquiries and research into the strange role of toadstools in the early cultural history of Europe and Asia.

The article created a sensation. Following the accidental discovery in 1943 of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) by Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann, there had been an ongoing search for natural substances that might produce the same psychedelic

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<sup>30</sup> The later *veladas* included a number of other scholars and “experts,” including the chemist James A. Moore, the anthropologist Guy Stresser-Péan, and Roger Heim, “one of the world’s leading mycologists.” Duke (1996: 107) notes that, though Wasson was unaware of it, Moore was actually a CIA operative, acting on the Agency’s interest at the time in hallucinogenic drugs.

effects and in turn be linked to the cause of schizophrenia. Wasson's research provided such evidence; he collaborated with the French mycologist Roger Heim and subsequently Hofmann himself<sup>31</sup> in identifying the mushrooms' active compounds as psilocybin and psilocin, whose chemical structure is very close to that of LSD. Furthermore, the article for the first time exposed a wide audience to knowledge of psychoactive mushrooms, which provided accidental fodder for the nascent counterculture movement. While the article concealed both the exact setting of the *veladas* and the *curandera*'s identity – Wasson referred to her with the pseudonym “Eva Mendez” and to her ethnic group as “mixeteco” – it did not take long for those whose interest had been peaked by the article to discover the hidden location.

The real name of the woman who led the *veladas* was María Sabina Magdalena García; although there were other *serranos* present at the *velada*, she was the lead participant. A *sabia* who thereafter was known by her first two names, María Sabina was made famous, both directly and indirectly, by Wasson's writings on the *veladas*, starting with the *Life* article.

It was her *huipil* that gave her away – the very Sierra *huipil* that she would make famous, as both she and it became symbols not only of Mazatec identity but indeed of indigenous identity more generally. For just as important as the text of the article itself were its photographs – which, of course, were particularly important to a photojournalism magazine like *Life*. Wasson and Richardson wanted to photograph

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<sup>31</sup> See Hofmann's own account (1990) concerning his visit in 1962 to the Sierra, where he participated in *veladas* with Wasson.

the ceremony, and though María Sabina initially resisted she gave in for the second *velada*. However, she requested that they “please refrain from showing them to any but our most trusted friends” for if they showed them widely “it would be a betrayal.”

Wasson and Richardson responded to this request by publishing the photos anyway. In an “absolutely breathtaking example of meta-textual double talk,” Wasson (with his wife) writes, “We are doing as the Señora (María Sabina) asked us, showing these photographs only in those circles where we feel sure that she would be pleased to have them shown. . . . We have withheld the name of the village where she lives, and we have changed the names of the characters in our narrative” (Duke 1996: 99, quoting from Wasson and Wasson 1957: 304). In the photographs published with the article, Wasson is featured prominently; an Indiana Jones-like figure – worldly, learned, intrepid – he is presented as the perfect guide for bringing the story of such an exotic, archaic ritual home to rest on the coffee tables of 1950s America. The ultimate tokens of the distances Wasson traveled to acquire such a story were the images of María Sabina herself, kneeling in front of Wasson in her *huipil* and Indian woman’s braids, her hands pressed to the sky as she invokes the spirits featured in the visions Wasson describes.

Within three months after the publication of the Life article, a photographer from San Francisco, seeing a photo in Oaxaca city with a woman dressed identically to “Eva Mendez,” learned that her *huipil* was from Huautla; “the secret was out” (Feinberg 2003: 130, see also Duke 1996: 106). Of course, anyone who really



wanted to learn the identity of “Eva Mendez” and the mountains where she lived had only to get hold of another work by the Wassons, *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*, published that same year. In it, María Sabina and Huautla are identified by name and a detailed description of the arduous journey into the Sierra is also offered. Wasson even made obtaining the book easy for would-be readers – aside from actual cost itself, which at \$125 was, in 1957, “a very steep price” (Horowitz 1990: 129) – by placing a blurb for it on the first page of the *Life* article, as part of the author’s bio. Thereafter, Huautla saw a dramatic increase in the arrival of outsiders who, like Wasson, came in search of the mushrooms.

Among those who did so was Timothy Leary. After reading Wasson’s article, Leary traveled to Mexico and tried the mushrooms, an experience that was to have a transformative effect on his life and work. Returning to Harvard, where he was a lecturer in psychology, Leary started the Harvard Psylocybin Project in 1960 with his colleague Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass). The project’s experiments with graduate students on the effects of psylocybin and LSD lasted until 1962, when other colleagues questioned the legitimacy and safety of the research. Leary and Alpert were subsequently dismissed from Harvard after an acrimonious and highly publicized dispute between the professors on the one hand and University administrators, parents, and Massachusetts public health officials on the other. Shortly thereafter, Leary published *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, an enormously popular and influential book that

became the Bible of the psychedelic revolution and a key text of the counterculture movement.

Such texts whet the appetite of a variety of anti-establishment seekers of deep religious experience. They began to come to the Sierra in search of the transcendental spiritual encounters that the writings of Wasson, Leary, and others claimed to find in psychedelic substances. Soon Huautla was flooded by hippies seeking visions and communion with primordial knowledge that Wasson's report about *veladas* seemed to promise. The rapid influx of hippies continued throughout the 1960s. By the latter part of the decade, the *jipis* had constructed a permanent camp a few miles out of town by the Puente de Fierro (Feinberg 2003, 52), the bridge over the Petlapa River where the long, winding road to Nda Xo breaks off from the main highway.<sup>32</sup> While most of these "flower children" were unknown young people, some of them were famous: the Beatles John Lennon and Ringo Starr were apparently verifiable visitors. Others less reliably reported to have come to Huautla in search of "the magic mushroom" include Mick Jagger, Bob Marley, Pete Townsend (Duke 1996: 108), Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Jimmy Osmond, Janis Joplin, Led Zeppelin, Pelé, and Donovan (Feinberg 2003: 153). For example, one of the almost routine articles in *La Faena* about Huautla's hippie era (from April-May 2000), was a profile of a baker who sold bread to the Rolling Stones.

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<sup>32</sup> One issue of *La Faena* (1(4, June 2000): 22-23) pictured a near-naked *jipi* woman from the encampment, dousing herself in the waterfall just up the Nda Xo road from the bridge.

Not surprisingly, this incursion of outsiders had a dramatic impact, exposing Huautla and to a lesser extent the entire Sierra to a host of new influences and pressures. Aside from the other disruptions their presence caused as outsiders who did not speak the language (and often did not speak Spanish, either), the hippies flagrantly disregarded the taboos traditionally associated with mushroom use. They streaked through town naked, they took the mushrooms in the middle of the day, they had sex in cornfields, they smoked “dangerous drugs” like marijuana.<sup>33</sup> Such behavior not only desecrated the sacred mushrooms but also constituted brazen, scandalous invitations for divine retribution. In 1968, Huautla’s municipal president asked the government to do something about the situation. The Mexican Army set up military roadblocks in response, and until 1976 the entire region was sealed off to outsiders (Feinberg 2003: 131).

In many ways, however, these actions came too late to head off the social trauma that the hippies left in their wake. Certainly some people in Huautla prospered during this era, but they seem to have been in the minority. Even María Sabina, who had been made famous by Wasson and the hippies, did not fare well. By the late 1960s she was “under near-constant harassment by the authorities, who were convinced she had been selling marijuana to foreigners” (Duke 1996: 108-109). Meanwhile, her neighbors grew increasingly envious of her, and one of them finally burned her house down (Estrada [1977] 1989, 74-75). Perhaps more poignantly,

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<sup>33</sup> However much marijuana and similar mind-altering substances might be lumped together with the mushrooms outside the Sierra, to the locals such drugs were in a different category altogether from the

though, she would talk later about how much her spiritual life changed as a result of that period. In the biography of her by Álvaro Estrada, the Huautla native whose interviews of María Sabina form the basis of her life story, the *sabia* says,

. . .from the moment the foreigners arrived to search for God, the *niños santos* lost their purity. They lost their force; the foreigners ruined them. . . .Before Wasson, I felt that the *niños santos* elevated me. I don't feel that way anymore. The force has diminished. If Cayetano [the town official who first brought Wasson to her] hadn't brought the foreigners. . .the *niños santos* would have kept their power.

(Estrada [1977] 1989: 85-86)

Estrada also interviewed the *Huateco sabio* Apolonio Terán. His comments on the subject echo María Sabina's:

What is terrible, listen, is that the divine mushroom doesn't belong to us anymore. Its sacred Language has been defiled. The Language has been spoiled and it is indecipherable for us. . . .Now the mushrooms speak *nqui<sup>3</sup>le<sup>2</sup>* (English)! Yes, it's the language that the foreigners speak. . . .The mushrooms have a divine spirit; they always had it for us, but the foreigner arrived and frightened it away. . . .

(Estrada [1977] 1989: 87)

Wasson wrote an introductory essay for Estrada's biography of María Sabina. In it, he responds to such charges in characteristically hubristic, self-assured fashion:

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*ndi xitjo*, which are seen as medicinal rather than as recreational drugs.

Here was a religious office. . .that had to be presented to the world in a worthy manner, not sensationalized, not cheapened and coarsened, but soberly and truthfully.

We alone could do justice to it, my wife Valentina Pavlovna and I, in the book that we were writing and in responsible magazines. But given the nether reaches of vulgarity in the journalism of our time, inevitably there would follow all kinds of debased accounts erupting into print around the world. All this we foresaw and all this took place, to a point where the “Federales” had to make a clean sweep of certain Indian villages in the highlands of Mesoamerica in the late 1960s, deporting the assortment of oddballs misbehaving there. . . .

[María Sabina’s] words make me wince: I, Gordon Wasson, am held responsible for the end of a religious practice in Mesoamerica that goes back far, for a millennia [sic]. . . .A practice carried on in secret for centuries has now been aerated and aeration spells the end.

At the time of my first velada with María Sabina, in 1955, I had to make a choice: suppress my experience or resolve to present it worthily to the world. There was never a doubt in my mind. The sacred mushrooms and the religious feeling concentrated in them through the Sierras of Southern Mexico had to be known to the world, and worthily so, at whatever cost to me personally. If I did not do this, “consulting the mushroom” would go on for a few years longer, but its extinction was and is inevitable. The world would know vaguely that such a thing had existed but not the importance of its role. On the other hand, worthily presented, its prestige, María Sabina’s prestige, would endure.

(Estrada 1981: 13-14, 20)

Wasson was right that María Sabina’s prestige did endure, though not in the form he intended. His reputation, on the other hand, has met with a far more ambivalent fate. In the minds of many people who live in the Sierra Mazateca, Wasson’s self-vindications in the name of “the world,” in the name of “science,” are at best irrelevant. And while most *serranos* have probably heard of Wasson, if asked

about his legacy almost none of them would claim, with “never a doubt,” that the decisions he made were the right ones.

***Land of the Magic Mushroom, 2000.1:  
María Sabina Studies, Culture for Sale, and “Mazatecness”***

Ambivalent or not, however, Wasson’s legacy does live on. Thanks largely to the influx of Wasson-inspired outsiders in the 1960s – and to their ideological heirs, a smaller but steady stream of mostly Mexican and foreign “mycotourists” who arrive every summer in the rainy season – debates about the mushrooms are alive and well in the Sierra Mazateca. Furthermore, just as the religious arguments from the last chapter are rarely only about religion, discussions about the mushrooms open out to embrace the full gamut of issues that indigenous communities face. These include questions about the nature and locus of indigenous identity, about the attitude towards “outsiders” that are dictated by different views of indigeneity, and about how societies successfully strike a balance between tradition and modernity. Discussions about mushrooms and their use are one of the places where ideologies and discourses of ethnicity are most common and explicit. Furthermore, the indigenous intellectuals that are the “prime movers” of metacultural ideas and social innovations (see Chapters Three and Four) are very much in dialogue with these debates about

mushrooms. Insofar as the mushrooms are key emblems of local ethnic identity, intellectuals in the business of self-consciously constructing and codifying of ideas about Mazatec ethnicity must turn their essentializing gaze upon the mushrooms and the *veladas* in which they are used.

Discussions about the mushrooms and their relationship to Mazatec identity continue apace in part because Wasson's original article and his subsequent writings<sup>34</sup> after María Sabina's "unmasking" continued to stoke popular interest in the mushrooms as well as in María Sabina herself. She became one of the most famous Mexicans, an icon of indigenous culture and, more specifically, an emblem of the earthy "Neolithic" (Munn 1973) wisdom of indigenous peoples. As the longstanding narrative in the West of the Noble Savage aligned with the particular anti-establishment ethos of the 60s, María Sabina came to represent an antidote to the social ills of Western civilization.

This interest also fueled the creation of myriad texts by and about María Sabina that, by circulating in discourses around the world, continue to reinscribe her

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<sup>34</sup> These included the recording and transcript (prepared by the SIL missionaries Sarah Gudschinsky and Eunice Pike) of one of the 1956 *veladas*, published in 1957 by Folkways Records (FR 8975). Thereafter, due to the negative experience Wasson had from the aftermath of the Life article, "he devoted himself almost exclusively to hardcover monographs priced in the hundreds of dollars when published" (Demarest 1990: 50). One could hardly find a more perfect symbol for Wasson's omnipresent elitism than these "boutique" books. Printed in "expensively-bound, deluxe limited editions. . . [they] became instant collector's items" (Horowitz 1990: 129). *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*, which originally cost \$125, now sells for \$3000-\$7,000. Another important work Wasson published on María Sabina, *María Sabina and her Mazatec Mushroom Velada*, featured the recording and transcript of a full *velada* performed in 1957, as well as a commentary about it. In characteristically humble fashion, Wasson wrote in the prologue "Never before has a shamanic performance in the New World been presented with anything like the completeness of this one" (Wasson et al 1974: ix). The book originally retailed for \$82.50 or \$275 for a the luxury edition, and now sells for \$3000-\$4000.

as a symbol of Mazatecness, indigeneity, and “pure folk wisdom.” There is a small cottage industry in both Mexico and the United States in the publishing writings on María Sabina, “High Priestess of the Magic Mushrooms.”<sup>35</sup> While much of this literature manages to tirelessly plow over the same mystical ground that has long since entered the realm of foundational myth for the psychedelic subculture, “María Sabina Studies” have also had a lasting impact on scholarly research of the Mazatecs and the Mazatec Sierra. Interest in the Mazatec region’s hallucinogens has led to research of varying quality on Mazatec cosmology and shamanism. The two most recent Ph.D. dissertations on the Mazatec region both – of necessity, since each is based on research in Huautla – deal with Wasson, María Sabina, and the mushrooms at length (Duke 1996, Feinburg 1996).

There are literary legacies, too, some of which Mazatec writers are directly engaged with. María Sabina’s chants – mesmerizing cascades of esoteric, poetic, and, importantly, exotic language – were a big hit with the Beats. The post-Beat poet Anne Waldman wrote a famous extended poem, “Fast Speaking Woman,” based on María Sabina’s recorded *veladas*. The *sabia* became a darling of the ethnopoetics movement, culminating in a volume of work by and about her edited by Jerome Rothenberg (2003), the movement’s foremost figure. María Sabina was the subject of

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<sup>35</sup> For a small selection of what “María Sabina Studies” has to offer, see Wasson and Wasson 1957, Wasson 1957, Wasson *et al* 1974, Folkways FR 8975, Estrada 1977 and 1981, Echevaría 1979, Tibón 1983, García Carrera 1986, Rubio Montoya 1992.



a play (1967) by Camilo José Cela, the 1989 Nobel Laureate in Literature, and her words were the basis of a choral work by the composer Libby Larsen (1994). Alice Walker claims that her most recent book of poems (2003), a meditation on the post-9/11 world, takes part of its inspiration from María Sabina's life and words. The list of texts, both musical and written, that have been inspired by María Sabina and her work could go on and on.

María Sabina and the mushrooms she made famous have also had a vibrant afterlife as a visual and linguistic symbol in the Sierra, in Mexico more broadly, and in the international world beyond. In Huautla, María Sabina and the mushrooms are utterly ubiquitous, prominently featured in the names and signs of taxi stands, hotels, restaurants, tortilla shops, and, of course, the Casa de la Cultura. In Oaxaca, such symbols are only somewhat less prevalent than in the Sierra, surfacing on countless T-shirts sold in the *zócalo* and in countless songs by Oaxacan musicians, as well as in the names of two regional rock bands, Santa Sabina and Hijitos de María Sabina. And in Mexico City, María Sabina's chants from Wasson's recording has become the Voice of the Mazatec Nation, a loop of song that echoes hour after hour, day after day, in the upper hall of the National Museum of Anthropology.

This sea of ethnically marked symbols is stirred and augmented by the mycotourists who continue to come to the Sierra each year. Unlike the earlier generation of outsiders, these "neo-hippies" are much more explicitly interested in ethnic tourism. While they, too, are interested in transcendent religious experiences,

they are also in search of authentic experiences of Otherness, and as a result are more self-consciously “culturally aware” and “culturally sensitive” than were their *jipi* ancestors. They are also, if not in fact somewhat better off financially than the earlier generation, nevertheless required by locals to act as if they were, since by now the people who choose to interact with mycotourists are aware that doing so means engaging in fundamentally commercial relationships. An ironic reality of twenty-first century life in the Sierra is that the mushrooms that Eunice Pike’s young man claimed were a gift to the Mazatecs because they are poor have now become a form of spiritual wealth offered to (relatively) rich “refugees” from the industrialized and alienated West.

Interviews with María Sabina and other *sabios* indicate the profound ambivalence that many *serranos* feel towards the commercialization of the mushrooms by outsiders. As such discourses often go, outsiders are complicit in the conversion of mushroom use from a medicinal, spiritual activity to a primarily recreational one. No doubt the arguments about this are even more intense and frequent in Huautla than they are elsewhere in the Sierra; Huautla remains the destination of the vast majority of mycotourists, the only place in the region where such transactions between locals and outsiders approach the level of a “mushroom trade.” However, even in Nda Xo, which is too remote and unknown to receive more than a handful of mycotourists each year, people still have strong attitudes about the mushrooms and outsiders. Some, perhaps like the *sabio* I saw that first day with

Heriberto and Laura, see mycotourism as an opportunity they would like to take advantage of. Others, however, view the *honguistas* of Huautla with deep suspicion if not outright disdain. When I mentioned, for example, that on trips to Huautla people would often try to interest me in doing *veladas* – or, even more scandalously, would try to sell me mushrooms directly – people, while not surprised, generally responded with disgust, as if it were yet further evidence of Huautla’s commercial decadence.

My point is not so much to characterize these debates; discourses about the mushrooms were not the focus of my research and so I cannot discuss them with much authority. Instead, I went to the field intending to stay as far away as possible from the mushrooms. I feared that putting myself in the well-defined category of an outsider who had come to the Sierra in search of the mushrooms – either as a mycotourist or as a less common but likewise identifiable type of person, the mushroom researcher – would typecast me and import ideological and ethical baggage that I preferred to avoid. But in the end it was impossible to avoid the mushrooms; they popped up in conversation all the time anyway. On occasions when Mazatecs were called upon to behave like Mazatecs, such as during the Day of the Dead and the song contest in particular, the mushrooms featured prominently in public practice. And that, in fact, is precisely my point: attitudes and discourses about the mushrooms are everywhere, and almost no one is neutral on the subject. Even if *veladas*, mushrooms, and *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup> chji<sup>4</sup>ne<sup>4</sup>* like María Sabina were not such

highly salient signifiers in local discourse before the age of Wasson, now they are symbols that have become inseparable from representations of Mazatec identity.<sup>36</sup> Even those who reject identification with such symbols, or with the tarnish that commodification has left on the mushrooms, are taking their oppositional stances because everyone is, in essence, required to “weigh in” on the matter of mushroom use, and no one is permitted the luxury of remaining indifferent to the subject.

Indigenous intellectuals, as cultural intermediaries, are more likely than other locals to be exposed to external discourses and to engage with outsiders. Thus for them, taking a stand on these matters is even more thoroughly mandatory. They are thus of necessity very much in dialogue, both in their work and in discussions about it, with symbols like mushrooms, *veladas*, María Sabina and other *cho<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup> chji<sup>4</sup>ne<sup>4</sup>*.

In some ways, Mazatec intellectuals occupy a position similar to that of many minority intellectuals; I offer the parallel of Vietnamese writers in the United States as but one example of many we might consider. A Vietnamese poet and friend of mind once asked, during a reading, “How can we write something that isn’t about the war?” He meant, I think, that the nature of the audience to whom Vietnamese writers in the U.S. direct their work so thoroughly identifies Vietnam with the war, and

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<sup>36</sup> Duke (1996) and Feinberg (1997), based on research in Huautla, both make this point in different ways. Duke argues that Wasson’s vision has had a profound affect on “Mazatec subjectivity.” Feinberg claims that outsiders play a crucial role in the construction of Mazatec identity by creating a situation where Mazatecs highlight the importance of cultural boundaries and the mediators who cross them. Though Feinberg speaks of this as a general trait of “Mazatec identity,” I think he may actually mean a particular category of Mazatecs, i.e., shamans and other culture brokers. These two arguments are, essentially, stronger versions of the one I am making, which no doubt is tied to the fact that the inevitability of discourses about Wasson/ María Sabina/ the mushrooms is greater at the “metropole.”

Vietnamese writers as representatives of a society that was torn apart by it, that it is impossible for such Vietnamese writers to avoid the war in their work. The Mazatec corollary of this would be, “How can we write something that isn’t about mushrooms or María Sabina?”

How one answers such a question, as we will see in more detail in the chapter to follow, has everything to do with which audience a given author chooses to address. The two authors whose work is excerpted at the beginning of this chapter, Heriberto Prado and Juan Gregorio, give a sense both of the divergent rhetorical positionings open to Mazatec authors and the shared constraints under which they labor. The second author, Juan Gregorio Regino, is the best-known and most widely respected Mazatec author; he has a national and even international reputation. He lives in Mexico City (rather than either the town he is from in the Mazateca Baja or one of the nearby regional centers), and is a prominent member of the national indigenous intelligentsia. He has, in essence, no choice about whether or not to write about María Sabina: she is as thoroughly associated with Mazatec identity in the minds of national and international readers of indigenous literature as the Vietnam War is for Vietnamese writers in the minds of American readers.

It is standard for biographical statements introducing indigenous authors to identify their ethnic groups. In Gregorio Regino’s case, this almost always involves – perhaps because the label “Mazatec” is not well known even in Mexico, let alone outside of it – a further explanation in which María Sabina is invoked. A typical

identification of him runs: “He is from the same people as the famous (late) Mazatec Wise Woman, María Sabina, who healed in trance using the sacred mushrooms of their region” (Hernández-Avila 1998, 121). In a recently published anthology (2004, v. 2: 23), Frishmann’s preface takes one sentence to give Gregorio Regino’s and Heriberto’s names and shared ethnic group.<sup>37</sup> He then follows the standard pattern by mentioning María Sabina in the very next sentence, and quoting from one of her chants.

Gregorio Regino’s poem to María Sabina is one of his most well-known and frequently reprinted poems. Its popularity stems from its orientation towards the same kind of audience that Juan García Carrera, the editor of *La Faena*, targets with his magazine. While both he and Gregorio Regino envision their audiences as at least partially local, they are both heavily oriented towards outsiders. Why else would *La Faena* print the odd article, particularly during the rainy season, in English? And why else would writing in Mazatec so consistently take second place, behind Spanish?. In the case of *La Faena*, this means that literally every single issue has at least one article about María Sabina, which is almost always mentioned on the cover. During the commercially important summer/rainy season – when mycotourists come to the Sierra in greatest number -- almost all of each issue will be taken up with articles on María Sabina and the penumbra of symbols she helped to make so much a part of Huautla’s mythic, nostalgic allure: hippies, Wasson, mushrooms, shamanism.

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<sup>37</sup> I use this particular anthology because it is also the only place where Heriberto’s work has appeared in print alongside Gregorio Regino’s.

Heriberto, on the other hand, appears in many ways to have a different answer to the question of how one writes as a Mazatec writer without invoking María Sabina. To my knowledge, he has never written a poem or song about María Sabina. Indeed, the above song-poem about the *ndi xitjo* is the only one that I know of in which he sings about the mushrooms, and it is from an edition (Prado Pereda 1997) that is different from his other volumes. It was funded by a FONCA<sup>38</sup> grant (rather than the Church's Huautla Prelature, backer of most of his other volumes), and was more self-consciously a representation of "Mazatec culture" for outsiders. The bulk of the book was given over to a section entitled "About Mazatec Culture," which featured songs on such emblems of Mazatec ethnicity as the months of the Mazatec calendar and the various tables from the thirteen heavens of Mazatec cosmology (see Chapter Four). Note, however, that while this volume is clearly geared more towards outsiders than most of his other work, it nevertheless maintains a local orientation as well. While most of the song-poems fit into the *genre* of commentaries or representations of the author's indigenous culture that are so prevalent in indigenous language literature primarily read by outsiders, their content is aimed at educating local people about aspects of their own culture that are falling into disuse.

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<sup>38</sup> Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes is roughly the equivalent in Mexico of the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States.

And yet in other ways he, too, is unable to escape the gravitational pull<sup>39</sup> of symbols like María Sabina and the mushrooms, which are such potent proxies for Mazatec identity in the discourses of outsiders. The poem about the mushrooms excerpted above appears in what is, to my knowledge, the only anthology of indigenous Amerindian writing to feature Heriberto's work. Edited by Carlos Montemayor and Donald Frischmann, it is entitled *Words of the True Peoples: Anthology of Contemporary Mexican Indigenous-Language Writers / Palabras de los seres verdaderos: Antología de escritores actuales en lenguas indígenas de México* (2004).<sup>40</sup> This two-volume, trilingual work was published in English, Spanish, and the relevant indigenous language; while hardly the type of luxurious book that Wasson published, it, too, is a "coffee table" book, in hardcover, with large portraits of each author taken by a professional photographer. Heriberto's picture was taken in Teotitlán<sup>41</sup> and he appears in a kind of shirt I never otherwise saw him wear: one made of white *manta* and embroidered with mushrooms.

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<sup>39</sup> Recall the discussion in Chapter Three of Heriberto's ambivalence about tying his work to external financing. Though he was talking at the time specifically about the song contest, it was a sentiment I heard him reiterate many times. After he could no longer rely on the Church to help him publish his work, he considered seeking external funding but for the most part rejected the idea – for fear, I believe, of the ideological strings attached.

<sup>40</sup> In quoting the editors from this work, I will give the English version they provide (rather than relying on my own translation from the Spanish version, as I do elsewhere).

<sup>41</sup> The photo was no doubt taken there because it is so much easier to get to from "civilization" than Nda Xo; Frischmann's introduction mentions that he and the photographer were on a tight schedule when they went around the country taking the authors' photos. To his credit (as he also mentions: Frischmann 2004, v. 2. 24), and to Heriberto's surprised delight, Frischmann did make it all the way to Nda Xo to tell Heriberto the good news about the publication. He and his wife arrived when I was still in the field on a very auspicious day of the year, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, in time to *velar* with all of us at the tomb of the Prado patriarch.



The different approaches taken by these two authors reflect the fact that they are responding to the same issues at stake in the two revitalization projects in Ndo Xo discussed in the previous chapters. Furthermore, their approaches are representative, as we will see in the following chapter, of similar choices made by indigenous authors throughout the country. Which of the two authors is representing an “authentic” version of Mazatec identity? Which author is in a better position to promote normative ideas about what it means to be Mazatec? What role do, or should, outsiders play in that process, and what does the trope of marginality have to do with it? How do we calibrate our responses to such questions knowing that in the post-Wasson Sierra, what may have become codified as traditional Mazatec practice may be linked to modernizing, globalizing discourses via the influence of mycotourists? As we saw in analyzing the song contest, what looks to be traditional or customary from a local perspective might from the outside look very much like it has been “contaminated” by modernity. Or from another perspective, such practices might appear to be evidence that Mazatecs have allowed their culture to be co-opted – as if, as Mazatecs, they have “sold out.” As we saw in Chapter Three, some *Huatecos* expressed dismay that the song contest had turned Day of the Dead into an “*e-show*.” Though they do not mention it directly, the cassette tape industry that the song contest has spawned undoubtedly is part of the commercializing trend that the locals lament. When they do so, they are expressing some of the very same anxieties that people express about the commodification of mushrooms, and, more fundamentally, the

buying and selling of Mazatec culture. Yet the very language in which such complaints are housed – the language of “*e-shows*” and an identifiable, clearly bounded thing called “Mazatec culture” – betrays a pervasive cosmopolitanism and the reality of external contact. I recall vividly that one year during Day of the Dead, after a quartet of tourists – a Mexican couple and a French couple – viewed the fiesta that locals say is “the most Mazatec of them all,” one of them asked me as they were leaving if I knew where they could find some Indians who were “more pure” than the ones in Nda Xo. Authenticity, I was reminded yet again, is in the eyes of the beholder.

Finally, to turn to the indigenous authors who are the subject of the next chapter, if what they are engaging in is “ethnofolklorization” that relies on precisely such an essentializable notion of indigenous culture, does this make them anthropologists of a sort, who analyze their own people? And if it does, who is the audience at which their studies are directed? An ongoing paradox of life in the Sierra Mazateca is that what made the people who live there “authentic” Indians who resisted development and nationalization was the very thing that drew modernity and liberalization to the Sierra in the form of mycotourists. This increasingly means that being indigenous in the Sierra, being Mazatec, means living somewhere between modernity and tradition. It means living inside a kind of parallel modernity in which local versions of indigeneity may look quite modern to those who visit from outside, and in which visions of indigeneity that are marketed to outsiders as authentically

indigenous for their consumption may in fact be little more than mirrors held up to and reflecting the images of Otherness that they seek. Being indigenous, then, is a matter of learning to contemplate the past and the future simultaneously without in so doing destroying the present – of managing the kind of temporal balancing act alluded to in Burns' poem. We will see similar echoes in the next chapter, in some of the difficulties faced by indigenous intellectuals. What their work requires is, perhaps, the acquisition of a very particular kind of literacy – the ability not only to read bilingual texts but also texts arising from a more profound doubling.

## Chapter Six

### The Reading Lesson: Texts, Literacy, and Indigenous Intellectuals; or, The Turncoat Patriot

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#### Toselti matinemican

Quemantica nimachilia  
tehuan timasehualme tichia  
se tlacatl tlen nochi hueli  
ihuan nochi quimati:  
yehuatl huelis tech maquixtis.

Inin tlacatl tlen tlen nochi hueli  
ihuan nochi quimati  
amo queman asis:  
ipampa tohuan itzoc  
tohuaya nemi;  
pehuaya tlachia  
nochua cochtoc.

#### Caminemos solos<sup>1</sup>

A veces siento que los indios  
esperamos que llegue un hombre  
que todo lo puede,  
que todo lo sabe,  
que ayudar a resolver todos nuestros  
problemas.

Pero eso hombre que todo lo puede  
y que todo lo sabe,  
nunca llegará:  
porque vive en nosotros,  
se encuentra en nosotros,  
camina con nosotros;  
empieza a despertar: aún duerme.

-- Natalio Hernández<sup>2</sup> (1994, 24-25)

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<sup>1</sup> Let Us Walk on Our Own

At times I think that we Indians  
hope that a man will come  
who can do everything,  
who knows everything,  
who will resolve all our problems.

But that man who can do everything  
and who knows everything  
will never come:  
because he lives inside us,  
he is found among us,  
he walks alongside us,  
he begins to awake; he sleeps still.

**Tu Laanu, Tu Lanu**

...  
Tu gudixhe ca diidxa' di' lu  
gui'chi'.  
Xiñee rucaa binni lu gui'chi'  
ne cadi lu guidxilayú: . . .  
Xiñee qué ruca'nu' xa guibá'  
. . .  
Xiñee qué ruca'nu' lu  
bandaga yaa,

**¿Quiénes Somos? ¿Cuál es  
Nuestro Nombre?<sup>3</sup>**

...  
¿Quién puso estas palabras sobre  
el papel?  
¿Por qué se escribe sobre el papel  
en vez de escribir sobre la tierra? . . .  
¿Por qué no escribimos bajo la  
superficie del cielo. . .?  
¿Por qué no escribimos sobre  
las verdes hojas,

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<sup>2</sup> Natalio Hernández is a prominent indigenous intellectual who has published numerous books of poetry and essays in bilingual Nahuatl/ Spanish editions. Originally from Veracruz state, he was the assistant director of the Office of Indigenous Education of the Secretariat of Public Education (DGEI-SEP) from 1978 to 1989. In 1997 he received the Nezhualcóyotl Prize for Literature in Indigenous Languages, Mexico's highest prize for indigenous language writing. He currently serves as the director of the National Association of Indigenous Language Writers (Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas, A.C., or ELIAC).

<sup>3</sup> Who Are We? What is Our Name?

. . . Who placed these words on paper?  
Why do we write on paper  
in place of writing upon the land? . . .  
Why do we not write on the underside of the sky. . . ?  
Why do we not write on the green leaves,  
on the clouds, on the water,  
in the palm of the hand?  
Why on paper instead?  
Where was paper born  
that it was born white  
and imprisons our words:  
The words that our ancestors carved upon stone,  
that they sang in the night  
as they danced,  
those with which they adorned their houses,  
the inside of their sanctuaries,  
their royal palaces?  
He who brought the second language  
came to kill us and our words as well,  
came to trample the people of the *pueblo*  
as if we were worms  
fallen from the tress, thrown upon the ground.  
Who are we, what is our name?

lu za, lu nisa,  
ndaani' batananu.  
Xiñee gui'chi',  
paraa biree gui'chi',  
gasti' cá lu,  
gutaguna' diidxa' riree ruaanu,  
diidxa' biruba ca  
    bixhozególanu lu guie,  
ni bí'ndcabe lu geela'  
ra biyaacabe,  
ni bitieecabe guriá lídxicabe,  
ndaani' xhiu' stícabe,  
ra yoo la'hui' stícabe  
Ni bedané diidxa' biropa,  
Bedaguuti stiidxanu ne laanu,  
bedaguxhatañee binni  
    xquídxinu,  
sícasí ñácanu bicuti'  
biaba lu yaga, nexhe'layú.  
Tu laanu, ¿tu lanu?

sobre las nubes, sobre el agua,  
en la palma de la mano?  
¿Por qué sobre el papel?  
¿Dónde nació el papel  
que nació blanco  
y aprisiona la palabra nuestra:  
la palabra que esculpieron nuestros  
    abuelos sobre las piedras,  
la que cantaron en la noche,  
cuando hicieron la danza,  
la que usaron para decorar sus casas  
dentro de sus santuarios,  
en sus palacios reales?.  
Quien trajo la segunda lengua  
vino a matarnos con nuestra palabra,  
vino a pisotear a la gente del pueblo  
como si fuéramos gusanos  
caídos del árbol, tirados en la tierra.  
¿Quiénes somos, cuál es nuestro  
    nombre?

Victor de la Cruz<sup>4</sup> (1999, 94-87)



The poems above, written by two of the most prominent indigenous language writers in Mexico, are among the best-known works by each author. Victor de la Cruz and Natalio Hernández have national, even international, reputations. And

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<sup>4</sup> Victor de la Cruz is a widely known poet, essayist, editor, and historian from Juchitán, Oaxaca. He writes in both Zapotec (Isthmus variant) and Spanish. He holds bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees from UNAM (the National Autonomous University of Mexico). He holds a research position at CIESAS-Oaxaca (Center for Research and Advanced Study in Social Anthropology).

while each man's individual history is unique, the experiences and present circumstances of these two authors, as we will see below, are also largely representative of national trends. Their lives and work are typical of the indigenous intellectuals driving "the continent-wide rise in . . . literatures in the indigenous languages of Latin America" (Franco 2005, 455). Among their publishing practices, the first and foremost, the quality that unifies all indigenous authors who aspire to careers of regional or national prominence, is that they almost always publish their work in the form of the poems above. That is, they publish their works in bilingual editions. There are a few departures from this norm – Heriberto's recent work as part of the Mazatec Indigenous Church, for example, or the set of three poems concluding a thirty-poem volume by the Zapotec poet Javier Castellanos ([1986] 1999).<sup>5</sup> But these exceptions are so rare and the convention of bilingual publication so thoroughly established that publishing monolingual indigenous language texts is a politically charged gesture, one that "makes a statement." The vast majority of modern literary

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<sup>5</sup> As discussed previously, some song texts in Nda Xo constitute one such special case. They are somewhat unique, however, in how the written text intersects with its oral performance. This circumvents part of what bilingual texts are meant to produce, namely, a Spanish version – as the standardized and more familiar of the two scripts – that can assist in interpreting the indigenous language one. There are a few other cases, though, of authors who choose to present their work entirely in the indigenous language (e.g., R. Molina Cruz 1991). In this case, the choice to present the text solely in the indigenous language often carries an additional political message of being "just for us." It may also intimate to indigenous speakers that they should try, insofar as possible, to expunge Spanish from their lives, or at least learn to read without depending on that language. Promoting social solidarity – and at the same time taking advantage of the ability of written texts to cross dialect boundaries more easily than the spoken word – is an agenda explicitly expressed by Castellanos (1994) in his preface to his book of poems. Furthermore, the final poems in the volume appear in Zapotec only, and each is dedicated to the speakers of one of the four main variants of Zapotec. Note, however, that the decision to present a text solely in an indigenous language may purchase a political and social statement at the cost of greatly limiting its audience of speakers and non-speakers alike.

works in indigenous languages appear on the page much as the above poems do. The indigenous language version – the “original” or “true” text – is presented on the left, and the Spanish version<sup>6</sup> – the “translation” – appears on the right.

Thus we have, in the nature of this literature itself, the anticipation of the “double audience” I have discussed in previous chapters. For as we will see, how readers of indigenous language literature *literally* read such texts – beginning with the most basic issue of whether they look at one version or the other, or both – aligns with a host of other tendencies and assumptions. As a result, different audiences have widely divergent needs and desires that span a variety of realms. While indigenous writers are at least ostensibly always addressing two (or even more) audiences simultaneously, they are also required to “see double” as well: to pay attention to the different assumptions that go along with writing to different audiences. The relative success or failure with which authors are able to sustain this kind of double vision has great implications for the type and magnitude of the impact and influence a given author can have.

The doubleness of these double texts also has implications for readers. For the form in which most indigenous readers – as well, of course, as non-indigenous

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<sup>6</sup> Of course in other parts of the Americas bilingual editions are produced in the respective national languages rather than in Spanish. Arguably, however, indigenous authors from Spanish-speaking Latin America – in particular, those from countries like Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, and Guatemala, which have large indigenous populations – are at the forefront of *indigenous language* literary production. Native American authors from the United States and Canada have been critical to the emergence of modern *indigenous* literatures, but the majority of such authors, especially the prominent ones, write almost exclusively in English. Here I refer to “the Spanish version” because in Mexico, as in most of Latin America, Spanish is the national language and hence one “half” of indigenous language works.



readers – will encounter written texts in their native languages is the one used above: readers encounter texts in bilingual form, with the two versions on facing pages. Like the authors who write them, readers of indigenous texts also participate in a peculiar form of double vision. Such readers either inhabit two languages at once, or treat one of the two as largely irrelevant. That version then becomes an emblem representing something about the author's identity, and hence framing the work itself in certain ways, but whose content they do not interact with beyond reading it as a symbol. Readers of indigenous language texts also, however, engage in a more pervasive kind of double reading, as the bilingual nature of the text itself is linked, in ways that shift over different types of readers, to different ideas and discourses about indigeneity, modernity and tradition.

What, then, does this mean about what indigenous language texts are? What are the ramifications of developing a literature based primarily on bilingualism and on a sort of "double text," and perhaps a deeper level of double orientation? The infelicitous attempts by the SIL to promote certain kinds of indigenous language texts and the differential responses by people in Nda Xo to the distinct ideas about texts that are at the heart of the language revitalization initiatives illustrate the real risks associated with making assumptions about local notions of textuality. Because indigenous language literatures are explicitly tied to notions of ethnicity, similar perils attend suppositions about how indigeneity and community are conceived.

The broad characteristics of the stories of Alberto and Heriberto, the Day of the Dead Song Contest, and the Mazatec Indigenous Church mirror the nature of language revitalization at the national level, in the conflict between different kinds of indigenous intellectuals and the projects they promote. Here, too, the problematic assumptions on which identity politics are based intersect with views of authenticity, with notions of “insider” and “outsider.” The flip side, however, of the story of Heriberto and Alberto, as authors with quite different ideas and agendas concerning indigenous identity and linguistic rights, is that seen from a national perspective, the two are more alike than not. The differences between them pale in comparison to the disparity between the kind of locally-oriented intellectuals that they are and intellectuals like the two mentioned above who are far more involved in national and regional cultural politics.

**The Flowering Word<sup>7</sup>: A Comparative Overview  
of Modern Indigenous Language Literary and Literacy Movements**

*Modern Mexico: The Revolution and Its Legacies*

Most modern indigenous language literary and literacy movements date from the last two or three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Their birth is directly related to the emergence of the modern, post-Revolutionary Mexican nation-state. Let me review, in brief, its legacy as it relates to the formation of modern indigenous writers. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) marked the first time since the Conquest when indigenous people were actively, rather than merely symbolically, involved in shaping the future of the nation. Furthermore, as a war fought “for the poor,” the Revolution dramatically changed national policy towards indigenous peoples by making full integration of indigenous people into the nation a priority as it never had been in the past. These changes, though positive in many respects, furthered the demise of indigenous literatures and literacy that had begun towards the end of the colonial period, while setting the stage for indigenous revitalization movements.

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<sup>7</sup> *La Palabra Florida* is a national literary magazine for bilingual Spanish-indigenous language literature, published in Mexico City by the organization Writers in Indigenous Languages (ELIAC). *La Flor Palabra* is also the title of an influential anthology of Zapotec writing edited by Victor de la Cruz ([1983] 1999).

<sup>8</sup> There are some exceptions, such as that of Isthmus Zapotec literatures and literacy, which date from the early part of the twentieth century. However, that movement arose in an indigenous area that was primarily urban, in contradistinction to the vast majority of indigenous communities in Mexico.

The post-Revolutionary era of inclusion was double-edged, for it arrived largely through the vehicle of state programs that actively promoted acculturation. With the rise of the post-Revolutionary state, *indigenismo*, through the mechanism of *mestizaje*,<sup>9</sup> became an official, institutionalized discourse. Under *indigenismo*, Indians were viewed as a distinctive population, recipients by descent of a unique cultural heritage. However, those differences were recognized only to the extent that they could be overcome by *mestizaje*, which would simultaneously convert them into peasants and Mexican citizens. The post-Revolutionary agrarian reforms of the Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) were key in forwarding *indigenismo* policies by co-opting the ruling indigenous elite and the offices from which they operated, inasmuch as access to federal benefits and protections was predicated on continued allegiance to the federal ruling party. One of the most important such programs introduced the *ejido* system, a federally-dependent system of allotting and maintaining communal lands. To this day, the *ejido* system forms the basis of indigenous communities' collective identity and economic and political power (Friedrich 1977, Joseph and Nugent 1994).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In the post-Revolutionary period, *mestizaje* became an institutionalized policy of acculturation. Vasconcelos' valorization of the "cosmic race" elevated the mestizo to the status of ideal Mexican citizen. According to this ideology, the creation of a Mexican populace would be advanced through the production of citizens that culturally if not racially were no longer distinctly indigenous.

<sup>10</sup> Note that many of the differences between Mexican and Guatemalan indigenous language literary and literacy movements stem from the differences in federal programs aimed at the incorporation of indigenous populations. The Guatemalan government is far weaker than Mexico's, and nothing approaching the Mexican post-Revolutionary reforms has ever been instituted in Guatemala. As a result there is generally – for better and for worse – far less penetration of the state into indigenous

This period also saw the expansion of rural education. A program promoting uniform, official, Spanish language instruction, it was linked, as were the agrarian reforms, to a larger project of nationalization through *mestizaje* and acculturation. An especially important milestone took place in 1948 under President Miguel Alemán with the founding of the INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista). This federal agency was designed to “further the integration of the Indian sectors of the Mexican population into the modern life of the nation” (Munn 1981: 204). One of its largest and most important responsibilities, which it retains to this day, is the administration of elementary schools in rural indigenous areas.<sup>11</sup> The penetration of the national educational system into the rural areas where most indigenous peoples live was an immediate precursor to the rise of modern indigenous language revitalization movements in Mexico.

Consolidating a trend that began during late colonialism and continued into Independence, the circulation of indigenous languages continued to be exclusively oral. After the Revolution, this oral transmission starkly contrasted with the circulation of written texts in Spanish. The practices of written text creation and use came to be associated with the Spanish language and, in turn, with *mestizaje* and acculturation. This conferred upon written texts an inherently ambivalent status for

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societies in Guatemala. This gives linguistic revitalization activities in the two countries quite different casts.

<sup>11</sup> These schools are officially bilingual. In theory, children are taught in a mixture of Spanish and the indigenous language until they reach the fifth grade, at which point they are “mainstreamed” into Spanish-only instruction. In practice, however, the reality is often quite different, as will be discussed below.

indigenous peoples that persists, in different form, into the present. Victor de la Cruz's poem above presents the decision to "write on paper" as precisely such a reminder of this ambivalence.

And finally, the increased presence of schools in indigenous communities, and through them national language policies, had an actively negative impact on indigenous language use itself. Aside from cases of outright language loss, of which there are a great many, in the last ten to twenty years there have increasingly emerged in indigenous communities children who are "passive speakers" who understand the language but cannot produce it. In tandem with this has emerged a generation or two of parents whose language ideologies have shifted towards greatly valuing Spanish-language competency as "the language of the future," following a common modernist (and, ironically, immigrant) pattern. Such parents often speak to their children only in Spanish, being themselves at least nominally bilingual thanks to the national school system. This pattern echoes, for example, intergenerational linguistic skills among many immigrants to the United States and other countries. The result of this active promotion of Spanish is often that the children do not learn the indigenous language.

These threats to the vitality of indigenous languages, coupled with the growing momentum nationally and internationally behind multiculturalism and indigenous rights causes,<sup>12</sup> laid the groundwork for indigenous language literary and

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<sup>12</sup> Such trends were well underway before the 1994 Zapatista Rebellion took place; in fact its very existence, and certainly its worldwide fame, is largely a product of antecedent trends. Nevertheless,

literacy projects to emerge. Ironically, the people who would wield such a weapon were themselves equipped to do so as a direct result of the expansion of the national school system into rural indigenous areas. For the educated, literate, bilingual, middle-aged women and men who are the leaders of modern indigenous language literary and literacy movements are among the first generation of indigenous students to go through INI's bilingual schools.

Most of them, having been "mainstreamed" in elementary school, went on to further studies in regular, Spanish-only schools, either in their own communities or, more commonly, in neighboring towns or cities; post-elementary schools in rural areas are mostly recent and still a relative rarity. In the area where most of my fieldwork was based, for example, the secondary schools all date from the last ten years, and only a couple of communities have them. In addition, they are all *telesecundarias* (television secondary schools), which feature taped instructional sessions in Spanish that are created in Mexico City and broadcast nationally. Aside from being an educational disaster – "a Band-Aid," as one disgruntled parent once told me, "that won't even stay on" – such schools have the paradoxical effect of promoting the nationalization of rural areas while also fostering rural insularity. Young people now no longer leave their communities for schooling as they once did, and coming from *telesecundarias* they are less qualified for work or further education outside their communities. In either event, whether students attend schools of this

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that event, and the overwhelming international media attention it seized, has brought issues of indigenous rights dramatically to the forefront of Mexican national life.

sort or leave their communities for schooling in mestizo cities, their exposure to national (and international) discourses and textual practices, as much as fluency and literacy in Spanish itself, has played a critical role in forming the groups of people who have been at the forefront of movements that promote indigenous language literatures and literacy.

*Renaissance: A Comparative Sketch of Modern Language Revitalization Movements in Mexico*

A general sense for the character of language revitalization in Mexico is perhaps best reflected by a glimpse at how it compares to the situation in its southern neighbor, Guatemala. Both countries have sizable indigenous populations. In Mexico, there exists no formal, institutionalized, truly national organization of indigenous writers and educators. In contrast, the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala, or ALMG) is a monumental, even monolithic, presence in national language politics.<sup>13</sup> It is highly institutionalized, with several participant members from each of Guatemala's twenty-one Mayan languages. It has developed a standardized orthography across all these languages (and dialects) and publishes in each language a standard set of texts:

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<sup>13</sup> Kay Warren's (1998) book on the Pan-Mayan Movement is an excellent resource, the authoritative text on the subject.



grammars, dictionaries, neologism vocabularies, pedagogical materials, etc., in addition to a variety of others, such as literary works.

Perhaps the closest equivalent in Mexico is the organization Escritores in Lenguas Indígenas (Writers in Indigenous Languages, or ELIAC<sup>14</sup>), also known as the Asociación Nacional de Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas (National Association of Writers in Indigenous Languages), based in Mexico City. The genesis of the organization began with a series of meetings of indigenous writers and activists held between 1990 and 1993 under the sponsorship of the Indigenous Language and Literature Program of the National Office of Popular Cultures (DGCP), since renamed the Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, or DGCPI, itself a subsidiary of CONACULTA. Sixty-four indigenous writers from many of the country's ethnic groups participated in ELIAC's founding in 1993. The founders also included the renowned non-indigenous Mexican author, critic, and public intellectual Carlos Montemayor (who later became an honorary member); his involvement in modern indigenous literature in Mexico is an issue I will return to below.

ELIAC's mission was and is to support literary creation, language activism, and linguistic investigation in Mexico's indigenous languages. Originally, the organization functioned largely as a resource for its sixty-odd members, who were disproportionately from the ethnic groups closest to the capital. Aside from those who held one of the rotating official positions in the organization, it did not offer

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<sup>14</sup> Initially it was known as CELIAC, Casa de los Escritores in Lenguas Indígenas, and is still occasionally called by that name.

direct financial support to its members. Although it does now host one or two writers-in-residence at a given time, ELIAC still does not support its members directly: as an *asociación civil*, roughly equivalent to a non-profit organization in the United States, it shares with many non-profit organizations the chronic need to raise funds. These come from a variety of federal and private sources, both domestic and international. This alone makes it quite different from the ALMG, which is government-sponsored (Warren 1998: xii). Today, ELIAC houses a library and bookstore of indigenous language texts (particularly written by its member authors), offers translation services and language instruction in the major languages, and hosts or sponsors a variety of literary and other cultural events pertaining to indigenous language writing. Although ELIAC still has members from only about a third of Mexico's states (fourteen out of thirty-one) and a third of its officially recognized ethnic groups (twenty-three out of sixty-two), its membership is now more representative, particularly in the heavily indigenous south. While it still lacks the truly national character of Guatemala's Academy, ELIAC and its members have achieved steady media recognition within Mexico and have had a substantial impact on national discourses about the present and future of the country's indigenous languages. However, though some of its members are involved in the issue, for the most part ELIAC has not been directly involved in indigenous language literacy.

Note that aside from the relative weakness of Guatemala's central government compared to Mexico's, two other differences stand in the way of a similar level of

institutionalization in Mexico. One is the sheer size (and population) difference: the entire country of Guatemala is only slightly larger than Oaxaca. More importantly, though, Guatemala is far less linguistically diverse than Mexico. It has far fewer languages and less dialectal variation, and nearly all of its indigenous languages are from the same family and thus share many basic characteristics. Mexico, on the other hand, has languages from at least eight distinct language families, in addition to some linguistic isolates.

As a result, indigenous language literary and literacy projects in Mexico have strong local and regional characteristics. Nevertheless, such movements are also strongly influenced by national (and international) norms and discourses. The uniformity across such projects nationally stems from the fact that the individuals leading them share strikingly similar backgrounds and often participate in regional and national networks through a variety of organizations and more informal contacts.

Modern indigenous literary movements in Mexico date from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Around this time the Pan-Indian Movement emerged; this and other international indigenous rights movements have heavily influenced Mexico, which has one of the largest indigenous populations in the Western Hemisphere. On the domestic front, as we saw in Chapter Two, assimilationist models of *indigenismo* were coming under attack. Left-leaning intellectuals were espousing new models of nationhood in which indigenous peoples would participate directly in formulating policies that would affect them. The SIL, which more than any other entity had

influenced the fate of Mexico's indigenous language speakers, had been effectively evicted from the country, and the new generation of anthropologists and other scholars heading organizations like INI aimed, above all, to make a break from the "imperialist" tendencies of the SIL and the old indigenist establishment. The following passage by Carlos Montemayor<sup>15</sup> gives a sense for the significance of this cultural shift; as it is written from the perspective of a Mexican intellectual who has been a leading force in championing indigenous literatures, it also suggests some of the political ethos of the Mexican intelligentsia which sought to open the nation to distinctly indigenous perspectives<sup>16</sup>:

At present we are experiencing a reemergence of the literary arts in these languages and analysis of Indigenous cultures by the Indians themselves. The resurgence of Indigenous intellectuals and of writing in Indigenous languages represents one of the most profoundly important cultural events in Mexico at the end of the twentieth century. . . . These writers may be said to represent a dual process: a national

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<sup>15</sup> Montemayor is poet, novelist, essayist, critic, translator, and editor/anthologist of contemporary indigenous literature – one of Mexico's most prolific and acclaimed public intellectuals. More than any other figures, he and Miguel León Portilla (who is also non-indigenous) have been involved in the promotion of Mexico's indigenous literatures. While León-Portilla has worked almost exclusively on literatures in Nahuatl, from the colonial era (and before) through the present, Montemayor has focused almost entirely on the works of modern writers, particularly in the Yucatán and more recently elsewhere. See León Portilla [1962] 1992, 1969, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 2003, León-Portilla and Shorris 2001, Montemayor 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2004, and Montemayor and Frischmann 2004.

<sup>16</sup> León-Portilla, speaking from the same celebratory impulse, voices a similar sentiment: "Something unexpected and quite wonderful happened during the last quarter of the twentieth century: a growing number of Mesoamericans took up pen, typewriter, or computer and produced widely varied literary works. At first they were influenced, perhaps overly so, by what they had read of their own ancient literature. They went back again and again in poetry and narrative to describe the sufferings of their people, and to denounce, with good reason I might add, the injustices that had been committed against them. . . . Through many ups and downs, Mesoamerican literature has not only survived for more than 2000 years but now flourishes once again" (León-Portilla and Shorris 2001, 14).

one, corresponding to ethnic development and empowerment; and a personal one, consisting of their commitment to their bloody histories of oppression, to their individual cultures, and to their own languages that describe our territory in a fresher and more natural way. . .

This important cultural phenomenon – the emergence of writers in several Indigenous languages – began to take place in Mexico during the 1980s. The concurrent appearance of these writers in practically all areas of the country, albeit not coordinated in the beginning, was a result of the evolution of the Indigenous organizations themselves and of the educational programs promoted in Mexico by different and at times contradictory language policies. During the last five hundred years non-Indigenous national and foreign researchers have defined Indigenous groups and explained what they think, how they behave, and in what they believe. With these new writers we have the possibility for the first time of discovering, through the Indigenous groups' own representatives, the natural, intimate, and profound face of a Mexico that is still unknown to us.

(Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vo1. 1, 14)

The 1970s and 1980s also saw the organization and consolidation of many regional organizations aimed at securing indigenous rights, and at demanding that indigenous people be given a larger influence on national affairs. Because the key marker of indigenous identity in Mexico is speaking an indigenous language, at its most basic the core identity that these activists share is that they do not speak the dominant language as their first. The indigenous intellectuals and activists who arose out of this period were not confined to writers; in fact, the single most important contingent was made up of bilingual schoolteachers. Mexico's teachers' union has long been one of the most powerful in the country. In the areas of the country like Oaxaca which are heavily indigenous, the majority of the teachers are bilingual schoolteachers who themselves completed their early education in INI's schools for

indigenous children. Ironically, that very educational system, which under the earlier *indigenista* era had sought so aggressively to assimilate Mexico's Indians, produced the indigenous individuals who have used it as "a means of appropriating discourse" on Indian policy, such that "it is in the sphere of education and language policy that they have presented the greatest challenge" (King 1994, 8-9).<sup>17</sup>

In addition to bilingual schoolteachers, another group of indigenous intellectuals has had a significant impact on national discourses and policies about indigenous peoples and their languages: ethnolinguists. Salomón Nahmad, then the head of INI and one of the leading figures pushing indigenous policy in this new "post-indigenist" direction, would later write of this period that "Starting in 1976, we looked for ways to open new spaces to the indigenous people, not only within bilingual education as schoolteachers, but rather through grants and opportunities to study in universities, above all in order to raise their participation in the destiny of their own people" (1990, 19). The first national program through which many of these ethnolinguists were trained was called the Professional Training Program for Ethnolinguists. It began in 1979 – the same year the SIL's contract was revoked – under the joint initiative of INI (under the leadership of Nahmad) and CIESAS (then called CIS-INAH, under the leadership of Guillermo Bonfil). Two generations of

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<sup>17</sup> During my fieldwork, the teachers' union more or less constantly threatened to go on strike, and most years they actually do so. Such a move not only shuts the schools for weeks or even months on end. Because the unions' membership is so enormous and the organization picks strategically important places to protest en masse – the *zócalos* of Mexico and Oaxaca City, for example – teachers' strikes are also much more broadly disruptive. This year (2006) the teachers' strike, centered in Oaxaca, has been particularly protracted and contentious.

ethnolinguists were produced under this program, the first based in Pátzcuaro (1979-1982) and the second in Tlaxcala (1983-1986). The program's graduates went on to influence another generation of young indigenous men and women through the training programs they themselves initiated, such as CIESAS' Maestría en Lingüística Indoamericana (founded in 1990) and individual language-specific academies.

One of these is the Academy of the Mixtec Language, or *Ve'e Tu'un Savi* (literally, House of the Voices of the Rain). In an introduction to a volume of collected essays by the Mixtec writers who founded *Ve'e Tu'un Savi*, Angeles Romero writes of the history out of which Mixtec linguists, and through them the modern Mixtec writing movement, has emerged. It is a context and history very similar to the one encountered by Mazatec writers and intellectuals, as well as indigenous leaders from other ethnic groups. The difficult work of developing alphabetic writing in their language, she writes,

. . .began a little before 1990. . .the events that preceded the work of the Mixtec writers of the Academy. . .date from the end of the 1970s, an era when Mexican *indigenismo* was heavily critiqued for its goal of integrating the indigenous population of Mexico into the nation at the cost of losing their culture and language. All this began with the ideas of Guillermo Bonfil and other well-known anthropologists, like Salomón Nahmad, who aimed to initiate a novel model of national development that would make possible the cultural advancement of the diverse indigenous peoples of the country. In those days one spoke of the liberation of indigenous peoples, of *etnodesarollo*<sup>18</sup>, bilingual and bicultural education, and of indigenous groups accomplishing their own development. Out of this context arose the initiative to found a

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<sup>18</sup> *Etnodesarollo*, or *desarrollo con identidad* ("development with identity"), refers to the idea that development must address local priorities, including ethnic identity.

program of studies aimed at young indigenous people originating from different communities across the country, in order to train them as professionals who would promote ethnic and linguistic programs in their regions. . . .

. . . [T]he work accomplished in support of writing in Mixtec and other Amerindian languages, in the Academy of the Mixtec Language [and like organizations]. . . can be considered fruit of that experience, because the founders of these academies are ethnolinguists and their training bequeathed the ideal of forming new generations who have respect for cultural diversity.

The eagerness of Mixtecs and other indigenous people of Mexico and Latin America to write their languages is also an important part of the fight for their rights. It has overtaken the simple concern for infrastructural works in their communities and claims the right to their culture and forms of life.

(Romero Frizzi 2003, ix-x)

Institutions in Oaxaca took the lead in this process of carrying on the work begun by the initial ethnolinguistics program. The Oaxaca branch of CIESAS, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s was headed by Nahmad, was particularly instrumental. Through collaboration with other governmental agencies<sup>19</sup> and the University of Florida at Gainesville (especially through the involvement of H. Russell Bernard, a professor of cultural anthropology at the university), CIESAS-Oaxaca began a new project aimed at furthering the model of “*auto-investigación*” and self-determination by indigenous intellectuals. The project had two agendas: the creation

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<sup>19</sup> The Dirección General de Educación Indígena (National Office of Indigenous Education, or DGEI) of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Secretariat of Public Education, or SEP) and the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (the Interamerican Indigenist Institute, or IIA), a subsidiary of the Organization of American States which is based in Mexico City and encompasses sixteen member countries. Its director at the time, the Peruvian anthropologist José Matos Mar, has written about the use of computers to “preserve indigenous languages” (1992).



of Centros de Investigación de las Culturas Indígenas (Research Centers for Indigenous Cultures) and Talleres de Escritura de las Lenguas Indígenas (Workshops for Indigenous Language Writing).<sup>20</sup> The Centers were located within the indigenous areas; were directed and run by indigenous intellectuals, particularly the ethnoinguists who had been through the CIESAS program; and were aimed at cultural research, with an emphasis on revitalizing the language, recovering oral tradition, and supporting indigenous artists and writers. The Workshops were primarily directed at – and, later, staffed by – bilingual schoolteachers, and were aimed at using computers to produce indigenous language texts in a variety of genres, in part as a spur to literacy, such that indigenous people (children especially) who were newly literate in their languages would have texts to read (see Russell 1985, 1992, 1996).

This, then, is the milieu out of which modern indigenous language writers have emerged. As such, despite the fact that they come from many different parts of the country and a wide variety of ethnic groups, they share a striking number of characteristics. Indigenous writers and educators are overwhelmingly male. They tend to be from indigenous communities that for a variety of reasons (size, geographical location, trade history, etc.) are relatively well connected to the urban regional and national centers that are the hubs of literary and literacy activities.

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<sup>20</sup> A special issue of *América Indígena* (50 (2-3), April-September, 1990) was dedicated entirely to essays on this project in Oaxaca. In addition to pieces by well-known Mexican scholars (like Nahmad, who also compiled the issue), it featured essays by prominent Oaxacan indigenous intellectuals, such

Although they speak an indigenous language as a first language, they are fluent in Spanish, if not truly bilingual. And they are for the most part highly educated, finishing the equivalent of a college degree (and sometimes higher).

In addition, most of them have trained for careers that place, either by accident or design, some importance on fluency, though rarely literacy, in an indigenous language. Many indigenous writers, particularly those with training in ethnolinguistics, work as bilingual specialists in regional or national government offices. There they have some influence on national educational and cultural programs, but rarely in any meaningful way on the actual promotion of indigenous language literacy: while such agencies promote linguistic and cultural diversity, they rarely pursue literacy in indigenous languages on anything more than an occasional basis.

What work is done in that arena is left to the nation's bilingual schools. Indeed, the vast majority of indigenous authors work, or did at one time, as bilingual schoolteachers. They have gone through the national training program administered by INI that prepares them to teach in INI's elementary schools, a prerequisite of which is fluency in at least one indigenous language. In theory this means fluency in the language spoken where one will teach. The practical reality, however, is often quite different, especially in places where there is great linguistic diversity. In

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as Juan Julián Caballero and Victor de la Cruz. My discussion of this project is drawn from the articles in that special issue.

Oaxaca, this leads to the absurdly common situation that a bilingual schoolteacher will be assigned to a community that speaks a language he or she does not.

The Mazatec area, however, seems to be anomalous in this regard: upwards of 90% of its bilingual schoolteachers speak Mazatec as a first language. This exception means that in order to find work as a teacher in the Sierra Mazateca, one must have at least basic Mazatec skills. The irony is that the children of many schoolteachers, precisely because their parents are relatively well off (“middle class”) and place importance on Spanish language skills, are among those most likely to be on the leading edge of language shift. In the Mazateca, many such children, desiring to follow in their parents’ careers – and thereby find steady skilled work in their communities, which is hard to come by – are disqualified from doing so because they do not speak Mazatec. If they learn Mazatec at all, they will do so later in life, as a second language. I know of at least one case where a young woman in Nda Xo who wanted to become a schoolteacher but spoke no Mazatec was sent off to “the rancho” by her parents, both bilingual schoolteachers, where the *compadres* she lived with were told to speak to her only in Mazatec.

There is another reason, though, why the children of bilingual schoolteachers in Nda Xo often do not speak Mazatec well (or at all): many if not most bilingual schoolteachers in the Sierra view indigenous language instruction as a tool rather than an end, or even as a kind of necessary evil, something to be engaged in only when utterly unavoidable. In this their parents are representative of bilingual

schoolteachers from elsewhere in the country. As we will see below in examining local resistance to Mazatec intellectuals' efforts to promote Mazatec literacy, local schoolteachers are often strongly opposed to indigenous language literacy. Bilingual schoolteachers who become indigenous language writers and promoters are in the minority on this matter and often meet some of their greatest criticism from fellow teachers. Ironically, then, and despite explicit rhetoric to the contrary, the bilingual school system in actuality does not promote indigenous language literacy.

However, bilingual schoolteachers and other indigenous intellectuals who become promoters of indigenous literatures and literacy are quite unified in their aims. Their similar life trajectories and their participation in the same regional and national organizations bring the writers into contact not only with each other but with national and international discourses about language and identity politics, indigenous rights, literature and literacy. It is for these reasons that Mexico's language revitalization projects have a certain measure of national cohesiveness. Although there are some minor variations, the participants in indigenous language revitalization movements have overwhelmingly comparable overall political agendas, and use markedly similar arguments to forward them, including the strategic use of the past. Their most general aims are to reverse the erosion of indigenous language use that has resulted from the forceful imposition of Spanish language dominance, and in so doing to fight back against five hundred years of cultural, linguistic, and political oppression.

*Writing from “Deep Mexico”: The Realities of Modern Language Revitalization*

While indigenous writers and other intellectuals have much in common in terms of background and aims, they also are united by the problems they face. First and foremost among them is the perennial problem of funding: how to make a living in a way that also provides the time, energy, and resources to write and/or to promote indigenous language literacy. Montemayor writes, “The development of these Indigenous writers and the individual nature of their texts vary widely throughout the country” (Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1, 4-5). I would argue, however, that underneath the fairly superficial differences in their histories and work they actually have a great deal in common, above all due both directly and indirectly to the constraints placed upon them by the relatively few professions available to indigenous intellectuals. The institutional infrastructure by which these ethnoinguists and bilingual schoolteachers carried out their projects of cultural and linguistic revitalization and valorization continued, and continues, to be heavily influenced by state agencies and non-indigenous Mexican intellectuals. And because there are no indigenous writers or intellectuals who have access to trust funds or “family money” (none that I know of, anyway), their work continues to be tied to the vicissitudes of “soft money”: external and usually fleeting funding.

We have already seen above that the training of many indigenous writers is closely tied to governmental institutions and governmental programs, many of which

(e.g., CIESAS' initial ethnolinguistics project) are funded for circumscribed periods of time only. The majority of the indigenous language writers and educators who are the leading forces in their given languages have received at least one (in some cases, two) of the grants offered annually for writers in indigenous languages by FONCA. In addition to these, non-governmental entities have been closely tied to employing/funding the work of indigenous writers. Montemayor himself discusses some of these different vectors of institutional and funding support:

. . .the support of retired military personnel and Juchitec artists was an integral part of the growth of Zapotec literature in the Isthmus; the Harvard University project directed by Evon Z. Vogt, the persistence and goodwill of Robert Laughlin, and the consulting of North American theatre director Ralph Lee were essential in the evolution of the Tzeltal and Tzotzil literature of Chiapas; the University of Florida at Gainesville and Professor H. Russell Bernard provided support to Jesús Salinas Pedraza and his wife, Josefa Leonarda González Ventura; and in the case of Yucatán, my own participation facilitated the formation of an important group of writers. To these four evolutionary processes we must add one more, which predated all the rest: the one promoted by Miguel León-Portilla from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, which has been of importance for the pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary history of literature in the Nahuatl language.

I have worked with Mayas from Yucatán and Campeche; with Tzotzil and Tzeltal groups from Chiapas; with Zapotec poets from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; with Zapotecs, Mixes, and Chinantecs from the Sierra de Oaxaca; with Mixtecs in Guerrero and Purepechas in Michoacán. I have dealt personally with other writers from the Huasteca regions and from the Sierra Tarahumara and collaborated in the organization of the First and Second National Congress of Writers in Indigenous Languages, as well as in the creation of the Association of Indigenous-Language Writers.

(Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1, 4)

This passage is telling in several ways. The first is the most obvious: with the possible exception of the genesis of Zapotec writers in the Isthmus, all the other groups of writers mentioned have been heavily supported and influenced by non-indigenous scholars and intellectuals. This support is, furthermore, fundamentally material: these “outsiders” are essential to the process of securing funding, by applying for grants, soliciting donations, etc., not only in Mexico but also in the United States and beyond.

There are other concerns, though, lurking in the shadows of Montemayor’s statement. The issue that requires the most reading between the lines has to do with where the transactions between indigenous writers and their supporters take place. For the literary movements described above were and are all based in regional centers, cities and large towns like Mexico City, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mérida, Calkini, Oaxaca City, and Juchitán. Most indigenous intellectuals live and work in regional urban cities rather than in the predominantly rural communities they are originally from, primarily because their work opportunities are greater in urban centers than in their pueblos. In this they are not unusual, of course; Mexicans across the country migrate to urban centers and to the United States in search of work not available in rural communities. But because indigenous writers tend overwhelmingly to live in urban centers, taking them away from daily contact with their communities (and hence indigenous language speakers), they are also more likely to be oriented to the concerns and social networks of those urban environments. In a co-determining

process, indigenous writers who live in cities are more likely to be oriented to regional and national networks of indigenous intellectuals and their supporters, while indigenous writers who live in cities are more likely to be recruited to participate in such networks.

The importance of these networks among indigenous writers and their supporters is another issue haunting the margins of Montemayor's passage. Throughout it, and throughout much of his other work, Montemayor stresses his personal connections to the writers he works with and the closeness of his collaboration with them. *Encuentros en Oaxaca* (1998) is, essentially, a book-long testament to his relationships with indigenous writers from the state. Such an emphasis is, of course, part of his own credentialing process; inasmuch as he functions as a kind of "literary ethnographer," an interpreter and intermediary, the close yet professional nature of his relationship with these authors is critical to the authority on which his claims rest – such as, in the case of anthologies, his decision to include particular writers and particular works and not others. But from the perspective of indigenous authors, what this signals and indicates is that such relationships with Montemayor and other patrons of indigenous writing are a critical component of success – and hence, therefore, of access to resources, from funding possibilities to publication opportunities to other benefits that might accrue from being allied with powerful intellectuals and scholars. And as in all relationships, those that indigenous authors build with their supporters come with strings attached.



One such “string,” on which almost all relationships between indigenous intellectuals and their promoters and collaborators depend, is the use of the Spanish language. This is in part because most non-indigenous supporters of indigenous language literatures speak at most one indigenous language, and often do not even do that. In addition, the centers mentioned above where most indigenous writers are based are mestizo-dominated towns and cities where life takes place in Spanish. The difficulties caused by relying so heavily on Spanish are obvious, at the least on a symbolic level: Spanish has variously been the language of the majority of oppression, of acculturation, of discrimination, of disempowerment – in short, the language of empire. It is the very mechanism through which indigenous people have long been excluded from arenas of power and from the nation.

But there is a deeper irony behind the utterly pervasive use that indigenous intellectuals make of the Spanish language. This is that Spanish is also, for indigenous people, a lingua franca. Relationships *among* indigenous intellectuals, most of which cross ethnic and hence linguistic boundaries, also require the use of Spanish. The reason that relationships among indigenous intellectuals so often involve people who are not from the same ethnic group is partially practical – most ethnic groups have no more than a handful of individuals who are actively involved in indigenous writing. But it is also ideological. Almost all entities and individuals who promote indigenous writing do so out of the desire to celebrate and foster diversity and to correct previous eras when ethnic difference was viewed as an obstacle. Such

multicultural agendas require the open expression of inclusivity. With respect to indigenous writers, this means, for example, and at its most pedestrian, that programs and organizations supporting indigenous intellectuals stress the need for representatives from as many different ethnic groups as possible. When indigenous intellectuals communicate with each other, they do so in Spanish; in a place like Oaxaca, with such high levels of dialectal variation, even members of the same ethnic group – for example, a Mazatec intellectual from the highlands and one from the lowlands – would use Spanish as well. And so, paradoxically, the one thing that all indigenous writers have in common – that their *lengua materna* is an indigenous language – means that the only language they share is Spanish, the very language against whose hegemony their work is directed.

Finally, we return to the fact that almost all indigenous language writing appears in bilingual Spanish editions. This is yet another aspect of the important role that Spanish plays in the work that indigenous writers do. Indigenous intellectuals are in the position not only of having to use Spanish to make the creation of their works possible. In addition, Spanish forms an integral part of the very work they produce. At the least, the Spanish versions take up half of the work in a bilingual edition, requiring authors to give careful thought to how their language, ideas, and images are presented in Spanish. Furthermore, some of the most competent readers of their work, and almost all of the most powerful members of their audiences, speak Spanish as a first language and hence will be much better equipped to judge and form

opinions about the Spanish version. As a result, indigenous authors may paradoxically be in the position of paying much more careful attention to the Spanish version than they do the indigenous language one.

The prevalence of these various biasing factors is displayed in discussions Montemayor offers of his work with indigenous writers, particularly when he talks about the translation process:

In regard to the Spanish texts, I have left almost intact the versions of [several authors]. . . .In the other cases I have participated in varying degrees and circumstances in the editing of the material, whether in the actual writing in the Indigenous languages or in the first or final versions in Spanish. During the editing stage of the publication of the *Colección Letras Mayas Contemporáneas*, I translated or revised the final versions of translations for almost all the works. For the present book I have newly revised the texts of the chosen works both in their original languages and in their translations to Spanish to such a degree that readers familiar with both books will find numerous changes” (Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1, 6-7).

I rely here on Montemayor’s discussion because he has been such an important figure in promoting indigenous authors and because, I believe, this fairly specific picture of how he works with such authors is representative of his own approach as well as the approaches of others who are doing similar work. The passage reflects some of the issues discussed above, especially the centrality of the Spanish language and the extent to which the Spanish translation becomes the focus of editorial efforts. In the same essay, Montemayor mentions that for one of Javier Castellanos’s texts the author “did not accept my revisions willingly, as he considered the final version ‘too

Spanish” (Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1, 7). That quote does more than foreground the power discrepancy between Castellanos and Montemayor which, while indeed a reality, is similar to the relationship that many authors have to their editors or translators. It also indicates something of the ambivalent position that indigenous authors inhabit when they engage in the enterprise itself.

Whatever poetic assumptions might be imported alongside these others are impossible for me to judge, being neither a native speaker of an indigenous Mexican language nor knowledgeable of any such languages but one. There are clearly, however, discursive biases that attend the process of promoting indigenous writing, especially in the terms on which indigenous literature is discussed. One of the most prevalent of these concerns the ways indigenous authors are portrayed as links to the past: either to some kind of primordial, purer “human past” (as in the “noble savage” discourse) or to the more specific (but no less assumption-laden) past of ancient Mesoamerica. As I mentioned earlier, Léon-Portilla engages in the latter routinely in his work; for him, emphasizing the continuity between contemporary writers and Mesoamerica’s “high civilizations” is a fundamentally ennobling gesture, one that allows an indigenous writer to be a poet rather than the mere animator of scraps of folklore. But such attitudes go far beyond Léon-Portilla. As Frischmann writes, he has been “guided by the desire to inspire other people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to pay due attention, both critical and human, to the contemporary voices that address us from the depths of time” (Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1,

27). And Montemayor adds a somewhat novel twist to the paradigm, elevating modern indigenous writers by linking them not to the ancient past of the New World but the ancient peoples of the Old: “I have stated on other occasions that the Indigenous peoples of Mexico still conserve an ancient knowledge which was shared by the Greeks and Romans of old: the knowledge that the world is not something inert or inanimate but a living being. Because of this, their relationship to the earth, the mountains, and the rivers is different” (Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1). One example of the many that could be offered demonstrating how indigenous authors might find such views confining is provided by the following quote by Victor de la Cruz, which directly contradicts the sentiment of people like León-Portilla and Montemayor. It was offered in a meeting of Mazatec intellectuals, discussed below, as they worked towards founding a Mazatec research center:

All cultures change; if they don't do so they don't survive. Those that survive will be those that adapt. Today it is much cheaper to use objects made of plastic than those made of clay. Moreover it is not only a matter of recovering but rather of creating anew with new technologies and of developing the capacity for creativity. I think this is more important than cultural restoration. You can't close your eyes to the environment around you. It is important to take into account that everything changes, that everything is in the process of being transformed.

(quoted in Dalton 1990: 83)

I do not at all wish to call into question the history of oppression and the widespread prejudice against indigenous languages – the “far-reaching. . .artistic discrediting of these languages” (Montemayor and Frischmann, vol. 1, 1) – that is the

background against which scholars like Montemayor and León-Portilla are working. They champion and valorize indigenous writers and their languages precisely because ideas about the inferior status of those languages stubbornly survive. Despite the undeniable fact that indigenous difference is embraced far more fully than it once was, acculturating forces persist. Scholars like León-Portilla, Montemayor, and Laughlin are towering figures in the field who have done a great deal to promote the work of indigenous writers, to get their work published, and to allow them to have lives as writers and indigenous intellectuals. I also do not mean to suggest that indigenous intellectuals are entirely at the whims of such figures; like all of us, their lives and work are largely of their own making, and they are responsible for their achievements and limitations as much, and as little, as anyone else. My point, though, is that these biases are systemic. Discursive paradigms that cast indigenous intellectuals in certain ways – as living bearers of the grand past, for example – are, however freeing, also limiting in many ways. The immense goodwill of the many people who have worked, often thanklessly and at personal cost, in the service of promoting indigenous language authors has been unable to change certain sociological realities which place serious limits on the opportunities available to indigenous writers.

In other words, indigenous writers are, in essence, called upon to become representatives of “deep Mexico.” *México profundo*, by the Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (who as we saw above played an instrumental role in

“opening a national space” for indigenous intellectuals), has had a profound impact on discourses in Mexico about indigenous identity and the place of indigenous people in the nation. The basic idea of the book is the tension in Mexican culture between a “deep” or authentic Mexico, “a subordinated civilization that stems from the millenarian agrarian culture of Mesoamerica” (Lomnitz 2001, 263) and an “artificial” one, Western and capitalist, created by the marginalizing engines of globalization and multinational capital. Many scholars have criticized this model, not least Claudio Lomnitz, who points out that “There is a sense in which Bonfil’s civilizational approach is merely a refashioned inversion of the modernist trope of tradition versus modernity,” that “‘deep’ and ‘artificial’ are images that re-create an obsolete and unpromising form of nationalism, while at the same time they are at least successful in indicating and denouncing profound rifts in Mexican society” (Lomnitz 2001: 264). Nevertheless, as Lomnitz himself recognizes, the image of a “deep Mexico” continues to be profoundly alluring, not least – as we saw in Chapter Four, with Heriberto’s dedication to “those writers who promote the literature of *Mexico profundo*” (Prado Pereda 1997) – to indigenous intellectuals and their supporters. Bonfil was not only expressing an interpretation of fissures in Mexican nationalism; he was also voicing a solution to them, and his immensely popular book became the mouthpiece for a new vision of Mexican nationalism which sought to overturn the assimilationist *indigenismo* of old and replace it with activist celebration of that

Mexico of *indigenas* and *campesinos* submerged by the great wave of neoliberal restructuring.

Bonfil's "deep Mexico" characterizes indigenous people as members of a vast, oppressed underclass whose character is fundamentally opposed to Western, capitalist civilization. This has, indeed, become the dominant paradigm under which identity politics in Mexico operates, casting indigenous people in the role of the living bearers of the "millenarian agrarian culture of Mesoamerica." This is true as well of indigenous authors and other indigenous intellectuals, whose authority turns at least in part<sup>21</sup> on their purported representativeness with respect to other members of the community. Presenting a persona in keeping with this paradigm is, then, one of the rules by which the "game" of identity politics is played, and even were it not an untrue representation for the given individuals involved or even for the people they purport to represent, it is nevertheless a stricture placed on what is possible. Ultimately, for all the rhetoric about empowering and "giving voice" to indigenous people that has become so prevalent in Mexico, indigenous writers are *structurally* in precisely the same position indigenous leaders have been in Mexico for years, certainly since the Revolution: they are subject to the whims of a clientalistic system of patronage that ties their power simultaneously to certain kinds of alliances and to the presentation of certain kinds of personae.

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<sup>21</sup> Of course for authors and other artists there is a competing force pushing in the opposite direction: that such individuals are unique precisely because of their *non*-representative talent and abilities. I will return below to the tension between these two forces.



The paradoxical position this places indigenous authors in could be demonstrated by any number of concrete cases; I will point out three here. These will also illustrate some of the general trends discussed above, having to do with the importance of urban settings, the Spanish language, and alliances with powerful patrons – many of whom buy heavily into the notion of a “deep Mexico,” and who promote indigenous writers precisely because they present concrete opportunities to undo Mexico’s domination of that vital segment of the population, the “real” nation.

The most successful Workshop for Indigenous Language Writing produced under CIESAS-Oaxaca’s auspices came to be called CELIAC, the Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, Asociación Civil (Center for Native Language Publishing). Located in Oaxaca City, the organization’s charter is “to promote the preservation of native languages and cultures in Mexico through the publishing of books in those languages” (Bernard 1996). The people directly involved in the center’s operations are all bilingual schoolteachers and native indigenous language speakers from various parts of Oaxaca and Mexico. The leaders are Jesús Salinas Pedraza, who is Ñahñu (Otomí), and Josefa González Ventura, who is Mixtec (both of whom wrote articles for Nahmad’s special journal issue mentioned above); both work for SEP, and neither works for the center full-time. The organization dates from 1987, and until 1993 it was government-supported and attached to CIESAS-Oaxaca. In 1993, it became an independent, non-profit organization, and began to be funded by the Jessie Ball Du Pont Foundation of the University of Florida, which continues to support its activities.

Not coincidentally, a professor at the University of Florida, H. Bernard Russell, has been heavily involved in CELIAC from its founding; part of his university web site<sup>22</sup> is dedicated to CELIAC, where he points out the precarious financial situation of the organization and calls on readers to support it.

The financial situation is, understandably, more insecure for organizations that are not located in large urban centers like Oaxaca. Such has been the case with the Centro Mazateco de Investigaciones (Mazatec Research Center), one of the indigenous research centers CIESAS-Oaxaca set up in the late 1980s. Four Mazatec intellectuals – Florencio Carrera García and Juan Casimiro Nava from the highlands (Huautila), Juan Gregorio Regino and Vicente Aguilar Mata from the lowlands (Soyaltepec) – studied in Tlaxcala as part of the second cohort of indigenous people trained in CIESAS’ ethnolinguistics program. The goal of the program as a whole was for the individuals it trained to become, in essence, “ethnic missionaries” who would return to their communities to promote ethnic self-knowledge and the valorization of indigenous values and practices, particularly those tied to indigenous languages. Founding the center was seen as the next step towards accomplishing that goal in the Mazateca. In 1989 and 1990 several meetings – all of which took place in Spanish – were held on the subject by the four Mazatec intellectuals, assisted by various researchers from CIESAS, particularly Nahmad and Margarita Dalton.<sup>23</sup> Also

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<sup>22</sup> <http://nersp.nerdc.ufl.edu/~ufruss/CELIAC.htm>

<sup>23</sup> While some of the information about the center’s genesis is available elsewhere, much of my discussion here relies on the article Dalton (1990) wrote for Nahmad’s special journal issue. Note that

present for at least one of these meetings were indigenous intellectuals from elsewhere in Oaxaca: Victor de la Cruz, also at CIESAS-Oaxaca at the time, as well as a couple of Chinantec bilingual schoolteachers and various Mazatec bilingual schoolteachers, including Apolonio Bartolo Ronguillo, who is, to my knowledge, the only other Mazatec intellectual to publish a literary work (a book of poetry; 1998). And at a meeting in 1990, Jesus Salinas, of CELIAC, offered a workshop on using computers to produce written texts and to standardize a Mazatec alphabet. Later that year, the core participants – the four Mazatec ethnolinguists and the CIESAS researchers helping them – began the process, ultimately successful, of founding the center as an *asociación civil*.

However, as Dalton's chronicle of the center's founding both hints at and explicitly references, from the very beginning the Mazatec intellectuals involved in the center began to encounter some of the problems discussed above. Obviously, the center's founding was heavily tied to external support, financial and otherwise, particularly from CIESAS. Indigenous intellectuals are certainly well aware of the dilemmas posed by reliance on outsiders; Natalio Hernández's poem at the beginning of this chapter expresses the problem far more eloquently than I could. And no doubt the CIESAS researchers involved in this and related initiatives were keenly aware of the paradoxical situation posed by their involvement. As Nahmad said at one of the meetings,

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another prominent researcher attended one of the meetings: Eckert Boege, who wrote an important ethnography (1988) of the lowlands Mazatec area.

Anthropology should be in the service of the pueblos and not the government. What is the Mazatec project – that which the Mazatec people want for their culture? We know that the project of the Mexican State was to finish off the pueblos and ethnicities and integrate them. But you all, what do you want? You are the organic intellectuals of the Mazatec community and you should know what it is that you want, you are the experts in this area, you are the ones who are shaping the future generations of Mazatecs.

(quoted in Dalton 1990, 80-81).

Dalton herself takes pains to point out that in the planning stages the Mazatec intellectuals often met by themselves, without the CIESAS researchers being present. And certainly the fact that the Mazatecs in the process were making all the decisions about the center and would be responsible for its daily operations, was an enormous improvement over early eras. As was discussed in one of the meetings, of the many examples of “neocolonialism” one might point out to illustrate the misguided policies of the past, a particularly clear one is the fact that in the forty years INI had at the time had a regional office in Temascal, there had yet to be a Mazatec director in charge of it. Nevertheless, the difficulties faced in making the center a self-sufficient, independent reality were immense and have meant that outsiders like the CIESAS researchers continue to play a vital role in preserving the viability of such projects.

The concrete, material problems the center’s members encountered included not only the perennial issue of securing funding beyond the initial funds CIESAS provided, but also the related issue of where the center should be housed – or,

actually, the *centers*, since it was decided to open one office in the highlands (Huautla) and another in the lowlands (Temascal). Ultimately, both were located in formerly abandoned buildings that the owners were convinced to donate, a testament to the shoestring budget on which the organization ran. Equally important was the matter of how those working in the center would earn a living. As several of the participants noted, the Mazateca offered almost no opportunities for employment or funding outside DGEI-SEP (i.e., work as bilingual schoolteachers or local school administrators). The decision was ultimately made to petition SEP for some time off from their regular responsibilities in order to work in the center. In a pattern that is largely uniform for indigenous intellectuals throughout Mexico, the Mazatec writers and intellectuals associated with the center thus were able to work for it only part time, which limited their abilities to enact many of their plans, particularly the labor- and time-intensive goal of teaching and fostering indigenous language literacy.

Finally, one of the greatest problems faced by the Mazatec intellectuals who worked for the center was factionalism and local resistance to their revitalization efforts. As we saw above, many of the center's projects were aimed at bilingual schoolteachers. In particular, the center aspired to teach them a standardized Mazatec alphabet and encourage them in turn to teach it to their students and use it to promote Mazatec literacy. However, many of these teachers were opposed to promoting bilingual education and indigenous language literacy. Aside from their ideological opposition to such activities, these schoolteachers were also motivated by

*envidia*, and by skepticism about the intellectuals' motives because of their ties to outside people and organizations.<sup>24</sup> As Florencio Carrera said, while the center was still in its planning stages:

The problems that we have had in the region since we came back [after completing the ethnolinguistics program in Tlaxcala] are jealousy and selfishness on the part of some people. Others have the impression that we have come to take something away from them. Still others think that we're not going to do anything to help our people.

(quoted in Dalton 1990, 75)

A similar set of problems emerging from internal divisions was precisely the issue that brought Yalálag's cultural and language workshop and communitarian radio to a halt. Despite the fact that Yalálag's intellectuals intended their own cultural center to be seen as "neutral territory" many other members of the community did not see their project that way. As Juan Gregorio said in one of the meetings for the Mazatec center, "We want this work to be by Indians and for Indians" (quoted in Dalton 1990, 82). Instead, many locals viewed the center with skepticism or even outright hostility, assessing it through the lens of longstanding and ongoing civil disputes. Furthermore, many indigenous communities are likewise

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<sup>24</sup> My own experience with Mazatec church members and the skepticism with which some of them came to view me (see Chapter Four) was, I believe, tied to similar concerns. Their doubts about me came to a head shortly after I had gone on a walk with one of the members, the woman who treated me with the most suspicion, during which she asked what my father did for a living that allowed him to support me (at my advanced age, I think she meant). I had no idea that she or any of the others thought that was how I supported myself. And so, anxious to set her straight, I explained that I supported myself through grants I had earned. After the *velada* resulting in the group's decision to tell me to move out of Heriberto's house, he mentioned the grants in passing, with disdain, implying that it was evidence that my agendas competed with theirs.

deeply divided by a factionalism that poses great difficulties for the indigenous intellectuals and the projects they pursue, particularly because their status as well-educated, bilingual cosmopolitans is the very quality that directly implicates them in the community's internal divisions.

As we saw in Chapter Four, this certainly was true of Heriberto in his attempts to promote the Mazatec Church and its own agendas in order to valorize Mazatec culture and revitalize the Mazatec language. In other ways, however, Heriberto's story, when compared to other indigenous intellectuals, is largely unique – and furthermore, its unique qualities are precisely what have allowed his work to have the grassroots relevance that so many indigenous writers lack. He, too, was supported by an external institution – the Catholic Church – which funded his education and positioned him to be an indigenous intellectual. He is the only indigenous writer that I know of whose “credentialing” came through the Church rather than the government. For complicated reasons – some due the Church's history of at times protecting the Indians from the excesses of secular authorities – the Church is seen far less often in indigenous communities as an institution of domination, particularly in the Sierra Mazateca where people are overwhelmingly Catholic. Heriberto's and Alberto's alliance with an “external” entity and “outside” individuals thus did not have the disqualifying baggage attached to it that Huautla's intellectuals encountered. And the nature of the work Heriberto did on behalf of that institution required his focus to be far more local than is possible for most indigenous intellectuals: he had

the kind of steady “funding” that most indigenous intellectuals find in jobs located in urban centers like Oaxaca City and Mexico City. Furthermore, his literary work and the work he did to promote it were at least complementary to if not the very substance itself of his pastoral duties. The success of his earlier revitalization project – the promotion of Mazatec songs for the Church, the Day of the Dead Song Contest, and the level of Mazatec literacy that both made possible – is directly tied to this local orientation. It allowed him to do the labor-intensive work required to teach his orthography and to disseminate Mazatec texts to his own “army” of “bilingual schoolteachers” – the catechists – who then could go on to do the community-wide work that, for example, the intellectuals from the Mazatec research center never found possible. And though Heriberto now has lost the institutional backing he once had, his new profession – that of shopkeeper – allows him to maintain a resolutely local focus, as do people like Alberto and the other songwriters from Nda Xo.

The flip side, however, of Heriberto’s grassroots success is that he has had little or no impact nationally or even regionally – precisely the arena in which most indigenous intellectuals achieve their greatest success. In the one anthology of indigenous writing where his work has appeared, of the nearly thirty authors he is arguably the least well known and, because he has yet to publish a volume with one of the prominent national publishing houses who publish indigenous literature, one of the least published. Though he has received FONCA grants, as have most indigenous writers, he is not a member of ELIAC and was not involved in founding the Mazatec



research center (though he is senior to many of those who were). And though at least part of his low profile nationally and regionally is deliberate, a product of his reticence to subject himself to the conditions that he fears would be placed on his participation in the “professional Indian racket,” the fact remains that his influence is limited. This means that he would be in no position, for example, to affect serious changes in the way the Catholic Church operates – even regionally, and even were he to have more success locally than he has had thus far.

The very thing that made it possible for Heriberto and the people with whom he worked to succeed in promoting Mazatec literacy and writing – namely, that their orientation is fundamentally, even aggressively, local – is precisely what other indigenous intellectuals struggle so mightily to achieve, often with very little success. Indigenous writers have, indeed, found real success nationally. Aside from the hundreds of books authored by indigenous authors and the numerous anthologies in which their work has been collected, there are several national literary and cultural magazines – including regular inserts in national newspapers like *La Jornada* – which publish indigenous language work. Almost every state has one or more such magazines publishing the work of regional indigenous authors. Bilingual textbooks in indigenous languages are available throughout the country, and indigenous intellectuals now occupy positions of power with the government agencies that oversee indigenous education and language policy. However, they have on the whole found it far more difficult to have similar success at the local level and to create local,

literate publics for their indigenous language works. In an interview<sup>25</sup> about his experiences as a writer, Juan Gregorio gives the following poignant sketch of this mixed legacy:

I began to work. . . as a bilingual promoter. It was an educational job, teaching children. What I learned was to be an agent of acculturation, an agent of change, an agent who would take Spanish to the community, who would take the knowledge of the non-Indigenous society [to them] and who would displace everything Indigenous. The politics of those times were purely integrationist. What the government wanted at that time was to homogenize the Mexican people, and we were molded that way. We were supposed to end this difference, no more Indigenous language, in effect. . . [O]ne shouldn't speak to the children in their language, [rather] purely Spanish, one should "Castilianize" them. . . . But then, after having studied with this focus, I pursued a degree in ethnolinguistics. Then I became aware, through the plan of study, through the work of anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, historians, in short, that there was a lot of contradiction between the way I was trained and the reality of the politics that the government was pushing, and there was also a lot of contradiction in history as well.

I began to question the official history that I was teaching the children, the history that was in the books. That's when I began to realize how that history was manipulated. And I began to realize how we were seen in that history. This was an awakening, a discovery. [Especially regarding] the subordination of my language. . . . Because the politics were very clear, to displace Indigenous languages and impose Spanish. . . .

For me, ethnolinguistics was extremely important. . . . I began to see that there was a colonizer and a colonized. In a way what I had done in school was a reflection of this. The government with its politics of integration, of acculturation, was a part of that domination, was a part of colonialism, perhaps internal, but we continue to be colonized. So that's what made me wake up and in a way stop feeling ashamed of my own [background] but instead [I felt] more anger or

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<sup>25</sup> Although this interview was conducted in Spanish, it was published in English translation (only), and my excerpt is taken from that version. Though it was published in 2004, the interview actually took place in June, 1998.

impotence about all that had occurred while we'd been doing nothing, that even we ourselves were agents of the government [helping] to erase our peoples. . . .

This is when I broke with my training, because from that time to now I'm another person. Now I write in my language, I think in my language, I instill in the children and my people our identity, our culture, our language. In spite of the fact that I don't live there [in Oaxaca] and that I'm not with Indigenous people [in Mexico City], I try, from here, to show that an Indigenous person is also capable of being in front of a computer. An indigenous person is capable of directing a national office, an institution, of writing a newspaper, of creating a book. To me that is important, that those who are not Indigenous realize what Indigenous people are capable of and that they not continue reproducing the idea that the Indigenous person is ignorant, illiterate, one who is always in a marginalized situation.

(quoted in Hernández Avila 2004, 125-127)

### **Seeing Double: Bilingual Texts and the Practice of Reading**

#### *The Reading Lesson: Logocentrism and Indigenous Language Writing*

. . .the Nambikwara have no written language. . . .Nevertheless, . . .I handed out sheets of paper and pencils. At first they did nothing with them, then one day I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy, horizontal lines. I wondered what they were trying to do, then it was suddenly borne upon me that they were writing or, to be more accurate, were trying to use their pencils in the same way as I did mine. . . .The majority did this and no more, but the chief had further ambitions. No doubt he was the only one who had grasped the

purpose of writing. So he asked me for a writing-pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. He was half taken in by his own make-believe; each time he completed a line, he examined it anxiously as if expecting the meaning to leap from the page, and the same look of disappointment came over his face. But he never admitted this, and there was a tacit understanding between us to the effect that his unintelligible scribbling had a meaning which I pretended to decipher. . . .

Was he perhaps hoping to delude himself? More probably he wanted to astonish his companions, to convince them that. . . he was in alliance with the white man and shared his secrets. . . . Writing. . . had been borrowed as a symbol, and for a sociological rather than an intellectual purpose, while its reality remained unknown. It had not been a question of acquiring knowledge, of remembering or understanding, but rather of increasing the authority and prestige of one individual – or function – at the expense of the others. A native still living in the Stone Age had guessed that this great means towards understanding, even if he was unable to understand it, could be made to serve other purposes.

(Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1992, 296-298)

In the canon of anthropological literature perhaps no “native writer” has achieved quite so iconic a status as the chief of the Nambikwara. And yet precisely because he has become an icon, an entity of pure representation, his emblematic nature renders him opaque to further penetration of his intentions. As Lévi-Strauss presents him, the chief is a deeply ambivalent figure, the epitome of the wily native, who alone among “his tribe” recognizes the power latent in the art of writing. Yet as he scratches out the ciphers that so confound Lévi-Strauss, who sees in them the dark fate of a man oppressing his own people, the chief himself remains a cipher whose

motives and perspectives on the matter – on the meaning, if you will, of writing – are no more transparent than the unintelligible script he produces.

At its heart, though, Lévi-Strauss's story offers a powerful lesson: his "writing lesson" is an episode of double instruction, in which learning at least appears to operate from both directions. While it may begin, as Lévi-Strauss tells it, with the native mimicking the anthropologist, the anthropologist learns, from watching himself being imitated, about the dangers posed by his own contaminating presence. The geminate character of the lesson, and the multiplication of meaning that goes along with it, suggests more generally the tendency for cross-cultural encounters to spawn semantic gulfs across which widely divergent interpretations of the nature of the interactions become not only possible but routine.

However, the lesson that Lévi-Strauss takes away from the encounter is not, as Derrida shows us (1976), the one that he should have embraced; instead, he mistakes one form of ethnocentrism for another. Derrida's critique illustrates how Lévi-Strauss's distrust of native writing – and, though Derrida makes less of it, of the man deploying it – is the story of a man who misapprehends the image in the mirror the chief held up to him. The corruption the anthropologist saw in the chief's scribbles was in fact the ghost of Western "logocentrism," the habitual European distrust of writing as the debased stepsister of speech. Derrida's deconstruction of the encounter nevertheless preserves the notion that the moment is fundamentally revealing: what

“the native” does tells us a great deal – not, as it turns out, about him but rather about us, those who study him.

But there is another form of ethnocentrism at work in Lévi-Strauss’s “reading” of the chief’s “make-believe.” For while writing may be seen as a poor substitute for speech, it also has a noble or proper purpose which is degraded by the use to which the chief puts it. Writing, in Lévi-Strauss’s thinking, is designed to be an instrument of the objective scientific project, a skill obtained “as a result of a long and laborious training,” to be used for “acquiring knowledge” ([1955] 1992, 296-298). Writing, then, at least when used “properly” – that is, independently of political calculation and the exercise of power – can be not only a corrupting influence but an elevating one as well, raising human beings, it is suggested, above factionalism and recruiting them to participation in knowledge-gathering as a neutral enterprise.

This is, of course, an attitude many people would reject, not least the “native writers” of Mexico; Victor de la Cruz’s poem certainly suggests how thoroughly political the act of writing is. And ultimately that is at least part of Derrida’s point: that what we take to be neutral categories, what we see as the fixed relations among them, are in fact shot through with ethnocentric assumptions. But even so, how much closer does Derrida’s critique bring us to understanding what the Nambikwara chief was up to when he filled the blank page with loops and lines? Would the chief share any of the queasiness about the act of writing that Lévi-Strauss suggests he should, that Victor de la Cruz’s poem alludes to, the notion of writing as enslavement, a form

of colonial exploitation either visited upon him or that he visits upon others? Or would he see things differently, through precisely the kind of modernistic, individualistic “getting ahead” mentality that Lévi-Strauss – and so many indigenous intellectuals – reject? Is the chief any less of a symbol, any more of a person, after Derrida gets hold of him than he was before? How would the chief of the Nambikwara answer a question about what he was doing with his writing, and what would the answer tell us?

For the problem, of course, is that what “the natives” do and say – Derrida would be careful to point that out, that speech is not an inherently privileged form of communication – is no more transparent or direct a reflection of reality than, say, the texts they leave behind, or anything else for that matter. One man’s corruption by the evils of development is another man’s liberation by the advances of modernity. While intellectuals, not least indigenous ones, may worry – as Victor de la Cruz suggested earlier that they do – about the purity of Indian villages being spoiled by the proliferation of plastic, de la Cruz himself sees the matter differently, as a form of resilience and adaptation. Like the enterprising water-sellers in Nda Xo, who fill up plastic barrels at the waterfall on their way into town, to make a little money on the side, to compensate for the rising cost of gasoline, indigenous people who rely on plastics likely see things somewhat differently still. And on the matter closer at hand of indigenous language literacy, as we have seen above with the differences even among bilingual schoolteachers, “the natives” are by no means united on the subject.

And so, what was the native writer doing? What was his text “saying”? And, in Beckett’s words, what matter who’s speaking?

Or perhaps more to the point, what matter who’s listening?

What matter who’s reading?

*Alphabet Souk: Hawking Mazatec Orthographies to the Masses  
(Or, Why X Doesn’t Always Mark the Spot)*

For many indigenous writers, the answer begins with the script itself: the alphabet, colonizing weapon or tool of liberation, whose capricious relationship to the human voice plagues writers and readers alike. If writing is a fundamentally political act, then the script in which it is done likewise becomes a vehicle through which power is exercised. This lesson is certainly not lost on indigenous Mexican writers, for whom the history of colonization has been a history of domination through linguistic subordination. The imposition of prescribed orthographies has played a critical role in this process, from the Spanish friars to the SIL to those bilingual schoolteachers who are Juan Gregorio’s “co-opted” form of organic intellectual, complicit in the dissemination of hegemonic discourses rather than counter-hegemonic ones. It is thus precisely with the letters of the alphabet – humble building blocks that they are, the amino acids of the mighty protein chain of literacy – that



most indigenous intellectuals begin in their quest to revitalize their language by constructing a reading public.

The need to create a “practical alphabet” is so important because very few languages have truly standardized orthographies. Those that do (e.g., Yucatec Maya) generally have very low dialectal variation, which in much of Mexico is the exception rather than the rule. In some cases (e.g., Zapotec), no standardized alphabet exists even within the same broad language variant. For example, in Sierra Norte Zapotec – itself but one of the four main variants of Zapotec – there are at least seven different orthographies in use. The situation for Mazatec is similar; in the Sierra alone there are at least four orthographies that I know of, in addition to the assorted idiosyncratic systems used by individual songwriters. As a result of this pervasive orthographic inconsistency, one of the first goals indigenous writers and educators try to tackle is the development of a practical, cross-dialect alphabet. The process of agreeing on an alphabet is often the first item of business for ethnic organizations, a foundation on which to address (and, for better or worse, institutionalize its responses to) further language revitalization issues.<sup>26</sup> Such a project, however, often involves years of

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<sup>26</sup> Such was the case, for example, with the Academia de las Lenguas Mixtecas Ñuu Savi, which itself followed the example of Guatemala’s Academia de las Lenguas Mayas. Ñuu Savi’s trajectory is also one that many other indigenous groups in Mexico, including Zapotecs and Mazatecs, are in the process of trying to follow, beginning with the long process of devising a standard orthography (see Castellanos 1994, Molina Cruz 1995, Molina Cruz (ed.) 1988, Gregorio Regino 1993, Dalton 1990). The Zapotec case is particularly interesting in the way it harkens back to the “classic” period of indigenous language literatures and literacy: its efforts at a pan-Zapotec orthography have thus far relied heavily on the colonial orthography of Fray Cordoba (1578) and to some extent Zapotec glyphs. Mixtec is another language spoken primarily in Oaxaca that like Zapotec and Mazatec has a great deal of dialectal variation. Ñuu Savi began as a collection of Mixtec writers, activists, and bilingual schoolteachers interested in language revitalization. Its first goal was a pan-Mixtec alphabet, which it

contentious debate. In the mean time, the organization's other goals, such as indigenous language literacy itself, must be held in abeyance until an agreement can be reached. Montemayor offers the following commentary on the importance to indigenous authors of the decisions they make about the alphabets they use:

The development of the Indigenous writer is a more laborious and delayed process than that of the Mexican authors who write in Spanish. Not only is it an individual vocation; it is also a project with collective consequences, influenced by many aspects of an educational and social nature and by the choice of which alphabet to use. Up to now, the definition of these alphabets for Indigenous languages has been done solely by official institutions, based on the opinions of Indigenous specialists who no longer form an integral part of their communities or those of non-native linguists and specialists. The agreements about unifying the use of different alphabets in diverse official publications have doubtless been somewhat useful, but they are not comparable to the real, productive literary use of those alphabets by authors who are neither "official" nor subject to the guidelines laid down by government programs.

Because of these factors, the Indigenous writers are confronted by a cultural commitment that obliges them to rethink almost everything having to do with their language from the very moment that they decide which alphabet to use. Other challenges, such as their formal literary training, come later.

(Montemayor and Frischmann 2004, vol. 1, 5)

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agreed to in 1997 after seven years of discussion, and at which point it became the Academia de las Lenguas Mixtecas, now widely recognized as the "voice" of Mixtec intellectuals. This gives the organization and the individuals associated with it a certain level of state and national prominence and authority that "less organized" indigenous groups do not share. It does so, though, at the expense of marginalizing other Mixtec-language projects and the individuals associated with them. SIL-affiliated Mixtecs, for example, who strongly disagree with Ñuu Savi precisely on the issue of a pan-Mixtec alphabet – which the SIL's linguists who are experts on Mixtec claim is impossible to achieve in a practical orthography – are generally not represented, as is Ñuu Savi, in regional and national debates where Mixtec intellectuals are participants.

One of the issues making these debates so contentious is the wide variety of attitudes, based on both practical and ideological concerns, that indigenous intellectuals take towards previously devised orthographies. Many intellectuals, for example, state as an explicit goal for their literary and literacy efforts the correction of all externally derived alphabets, which they view as directly linked to the larger project of domination and oppression. A not uncommon argument among indigenous intellectuals – especially in Oaxaca, with its overwhelming linguistic diversity – is that one weapon of Spanish colonization was the promotion of dialectal variation in order to foster isolation and division within indigenous groups (e.g., Castellanos 1994). Though this is not borne out by historical linguistic research (which places such divisions much earlier), it is the case that written texts often bridge variations in spoken language with relative facility. Indigenous intellectuals frequently stress this in claiming the importance of literary and literacy projects for promoting internal unity within a language group.

Such arguments also feature prominently in efforts by indigenous intellectuals to devise universal, cross-dialect alphabets. Many such debates, for example, center on the ever-controversial use of the letter “X.” This letter was used to represent the phoneme that in English is written “SH” in a variety of prior orthographies, including the colonial alphabets used by Spanish priests as well as more modern orthographies used by the SIL, INI, and SEP. And so the simple letter X, two lines marking a crossroad, an impasse, often becomes a political football, with those arguing for

keeping it on practical grounds duking it out against those who claim it is a representative of colonial and neocolonial domination.

And, of course, once a practical alphabet has been agreed on, more problems await. Factionalism, particularly among bilingual schoolteachers, directly impedes the ability of indigenous intellectuals to advance the use of their alphabet.

Furthermore, few speakers of indigenous languages will be “untainted” readers of them: most will have some experience, however nominal, of one or more of the existing alphabets that the intellectuals are trying to displace. As a result, even when readers or teachers don’t resist the new orthography for ideological reasons, they often do so for practical ones, either out of a deliberate pursuit of “ease” or out of habituation.

It is only after the obstacles linked to promoting the practical alphabet are largely eliminated that indigenous intellectuals can begin to tackle the even more daunting problem of how to mount successful literacy programs. Because there are no national or state level programs of this sort beyond those used in bilingual schools – and as we have seen above, those almost never promote indigenous language literacy – most such literacy programs are ad hoc, run by individual writers, teachers, or local organizations. The same practical problems – funding, factionalism, etc. – that indigenous intellectuals commonly face apply here, too, and as a result there are very few systematic attempts at indigenous language literacy, either across a language or dialect or even within a given community. The writers heading literacy workshops

are by necessity almost always members at least originally of the indigenous community where the workshop is being held, and for that reason are often situated along any number of social fault lines in the community. As a result, attendance at such workshops is often exclusionary in practice if not in theory, as participation (and non-participation) is linked to a complex system of other social identities.

Reception not only of literacy programs but also of the literatures themselves is highly inflected by local norms and values. As mentioned above, almost all indigenous languages have some individuals involved in language revitalization projects. However, in many cases these activities, despite having regional and national visibility as efforts at linguistic and cultural activism, have very little local impact: the literatures produced go largely unread, and have no ongoing active role in the social life of the community.

Finally, though it is an obvious point, none of these challenges face indigenous authors when they address audiences, whether indigenous or not, who rely exclusively (or nearly so) on the Spanish version. Spanish is fully standardized, the production of literacy thoroughly institutionalized, the publication and dissemination of Spanish-language texts widely supported, and the creation of an audience in the more profound sense of the word – through imparting not only reading skills but also the ability to interpret and appreciate texts in Spanish – heavily promoted through a variety of public and private venues. While in any given text, the indigenous language version and the Spanish one may face each other across the page in an

iconic representation of parity, centuries and worlds of difference and inequality surround the two sides.

*Of Dialects and Armies: Weighted Bilingualism and the Reader of Indigenous Language Texts*

What this means in practice is that in contradistinction to readers of Spanish and other standardized languages with institutionalized scripts most readers come to an indigenous language text with no clear expectation of how speech will be represented graphically. Unless they are fairly familiar and comfortable with the orthography in question, uncovering the relationship between phoneme and grapheme is largely a process of trial and error, an exercise in experimentation, as the reader tests the written symbols against guesses at what spoken words are being represented.

The one exception to this trend is indigenous language authors who, especially if working in “their own” orthography (the one they adhere to and in many cases helped to devise), can read indigenous language texts fluently, and silently, without reference to a Spanish version. Note, though, that in doing so they are often reading texts they themselves have authored, so that their “fluency” might be largely the result of sheer familiarity. Furthermore, once indigenous authors stray outside their orthographies and/or proximal dialects, they read written texts the same way those far less comfortable with them do: by reference to a double text. They, too, compare the

Spanish version to the indigenous one and measure the written indigenous text against the language when spoken.

This process by which native speakers “decipher” indigenous language texts is one reason why indigenous writers hesitate to publish their work in monolingual, indigenous language only editions. Unlike in earlier eras, when the use of Spanish increased such texts’ appeal, today indigenous authors use Spanish versions to piggy-back on the enormous head-start and institutional advantage Spanish has in terms of orthography and literacy. With very few exceptions, people interested in learning how to read and write in an indigenous language are already at least marginally literate in Spanish; or, as with children, they are in the process of becoming so inside a wider social system in which Spanish has a massive advantage. Even those who do not speak Spanish and are illiterate in both languages – such as inhabitants of the smaller communities in the Sierra Mazateca where the majority of the people live – are nevertheless far more familiar with Spanish language texts. The world they live in every day, regardless of how predominant the indigenous language is otherwise, is one where the vast majority of written texts – from newspapers to calendars (the single most common wall decoration in the Sierra) to labels on packages to political posters to graphics on TV – appear exclusively in Spanish.

This disparity between the two languages is reflected in the process most native speakers use in reading native language texts, which in turn strengthens the impetus to produce them in bilingual editions. With the exception of the miniscule

number of speakers in any given indigenous language who read and write in it regularly, for most speakers the process of reading a text in their native language is essentially one of decipherment, a slow and arduous process even for people who are relatively well educated.<sup>27</sup> The method I most commonly observed speakers use in decoding texts is to tack back and forth between the indigenous language version and the Spanish one. Consulting first the Spanish to get a sense of what the indigenous language is “trying to say,” he or she then compares the written version of the indigenous language with his or her guesses as to how one might gloss the Spanish version in the indigenous one. Thus when the indigenous version is understood, finally, it is as a flash of insight, an almost epiphanic recognition of something that moments ago was strange but that has suddenly become very familiar, and which at the same time has been glimpsed anew through the process of alienation.

In what I estimate to be forty or fifty instances of watching indigenous people reading texts in their own languages, I never saw anyone either read a text silently, or without constant reference to the Spanish text. In both cases, reading a text requires, essentially, seeing double, by comparing the written text to, at minimum, the spoken text and often, even preferentially, by relying on the written Spanish text to “decode” the indigenous language version.

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<sup>27</sup> The general point here is that the ability to speak an indigenous language and the ability to read in it are quite separate skills – *perhaps* more so than is the case with highly institutionalized and standardized languages such as the Indo-European ones. Even in the very early stages of learning Mazatec (and Zapotec), I could read and transcribe the language more easily than almost all native speakers, despite the fact that I was still unable to produce or even understand speech in the language that many two-year-olds could handle.



In the cases where only an indigenous language version was available – such as was very often the case with Mazatec songs – the “double vision” persisted, though the source of the second text shifted. If it was a text that had been in use for some time, the second text was the speaker’s or singer’s memory, and the written text served largely as a mnemonic. If the text was a new one, the second text was in some cases the spoken version presented (often) by the author himself in contexts in which the song was being taught. More commonly, though, the new song was being learned in more pragmatic contexts – a religious event, or a night dancing *cha<sup>1</sup>jma<sup>2</sup>* from one house to the next – where singers were “reading” the text in mixed company, as it were, with other singers who were variably familiar with it. In such cases, the second text is that produced by the other singers near the reader, which he or she compares with the written text.<sup>28</sup> In fact, it was often the case that if I happened to be standing near someone who didn’t know a text well, he or she would ask me to help read it, since (especially before I learned much Mazatec) even if I didn’t understand the words, I could be counted on to “translate” the text into speech.

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<sup>28</sup> Most singers learn a song by sheer repetition: many songs – particularly the new ones – are repeated thirty times or more across a given evening. It would be quite unusual for singers to take along written song sheets in this context. Aside from whatever social embarrassment this might cause, it is also not very practical to tote around a text to read under those circumstances. All the musicians have their hands full with the instruments they are playing, and the dancers, were they even able to see the text very well through their masks, would also have to contend with other dancers knocking into them (and the text) repeatedly. People bump into each other so often not only because the vision-obscuring masks but also because in the last few years the *huehuentones* have begun to sprout a unique kind of backhump that even the most stooped *chi<sup>4</sup>ta<sup>4</sup> jchi<sup>1</sup>nga<sup>4</sup>* would have found strange: backpacks, often stamped with bootlegged American logos, that the dancers fill with their loot so they don’t have to gobble, guzzle, or smoke it all up on the spot. This tends to exacerbate the tendency for the dancers to collide, which only gets worse as the night wears on and the rates of intoxication and sheer weariness go up.

The significance of this widespread reading practice is that the text itself is a fundamentally hybrid, doubled thing. It consists not of one language's version or the other as primary but rather of both as they interact within the same integrated, diglossic entity. The "meaning" of the text lies not in one version or the other but rather in both as they work in concert. One of the great contributions of belletrists like León-Portilla is that they work within native languages and from a deep understanding of their semantic and grammatical resources, in contradistinction to many scholars who went before them who relied largely or exclusively on Spanish translations of the indigenous language original. But here such an approach would produce a deep misapprehension of how indigenous language literacy operates, and how indigenous language literatures are received. The textual practices of readers and authors alike fundamentally problematize the notion of what the text itself is, replacing the simple model of the single-language "original" on which so many ideologies of translation are based with one that is much more complex, integrated, and bilingual. Furthermore, accessing the text itself becomes dependent on considering the context, as the text becomes not just the two languages' versions in tandem but the process of how they interact with each other through the medium of a bilingual reader or writer.

In addition, such an approach would generate analogous misunderstandings about how and why indigenous language literatures are produced, as this, too, as we saw above, takes place in a thoroughly diglossic context, which in turn fundamentally

shapes the nature of such texts. Most writers – with some exceptions, such as the songwriters discussed below – aim from the beginning to produce work that will appear in bilingual editions. The national grants for writers in indigenous languages require as much, and furthermore judge the quality of the work – with the possible exception of widely spoken indigenous languages, such as Nahuatl or Yucatec Maya – based on the perceived quality of the Spanish version. At the same time, the indigenous language text is the key to the author’s legitimacy and authority, both for speakers from the same speech community as the author as well as for those from outside of it.

Every indigenous author I interviewed from across the country presents the indigenous language version as the primary, “authentic” text, in keeping with larger national and international discourses and ideologies of indigenous identity politics. To a person, they all claim to write the indigenous language version first, and from it produce the Spanish translation. At the same time, sophisticated readers of the indigenous languages who are themselves highly bilingual in Spanish have on occasion commented to me that the Spanish text “reads better” than the indigenous language one, which has idiomatic “echoes” of the Spanish version. They furthermore suggest either that in fact the Spanish version was written first, or that the two were written within a more fully bilingual process than the explicitly ideologized model of indigenous language texts would suggest. Given what we saw above of the influence of non-indigenous intellectuals, both as readers and supporters, it should not

be surprising that the Spanish version is subjected to more attention than the indigenous language one, however much that might contradict normative metacultural notions of indigenous language texts.

Perhaps it is even the case that – a la Samuel Beckett, whose own translations into English of his French original texts have become the authoritative version – translation becomes the instrument of perfection. But if so, what does such a situation signify? At the least, the entire ideology behind bilingual texts of this sort is turned on its head. The indigenous language text, the privileged “original,” becomes subordinated to the Spanish version, becomes the expendable medium within which the Spanish version thrives, the word flowering on the wrong language.

### **The Singing Lesson: The Revision of Presence**

What does all of this have to say about the songwriters in Nda Xo? Does it signify anything truly unique that each of the most prominent Mazatec writers, even when writing in explicitly literary genres like poetry, label many if not all of their poems as “songs”?<sup>29</sup> What difference does it make that, in the Sierra Mazateca, the reading public is also, and at its more basic, a *listening* public? What kind of thing

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<sup>29</sup> See Prado Pereda 1997, Bartolo Ronquillo 1998, and Gregorio Regino 1992 and 1999. All of these works are made up in whole or in part of texts labeled “*cantos*.”

does an indigenous language text become if it was meant not so much to be read as to be *sung*?

In discussing the poststructural critique of “The Writing Lesson,” Tomlinson points out that most scholars have tended to ignore how Derrida’s unsettling of phonocentrism, though certainly aimed at Lévi-Strauss, was also directed at the work of Rousseau. Derrida’s “central text in analyzing the structures and conundrums of logocentrism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues*, is almost as much a book about singing as it is about speech” (1995: 345-346). Taking that insight as a point of departure, Tomlinson uses a Derridean unsettling of the relationships among speech, writing, and song – and more specifically, the logocentric subordination of the latter two to speech – to examine centuries of (mis-) apprehension by Europeans of Amerindian singing. He then turns that strategy on a specific text in order to open a new space for our understanding of Aztec song: the *Cantares mexicanos*, part of the corpus of ancestral Mesoamerican writing that living indigenous writers hearken back to as their patrimony, the “golden age” of Mesoamerica whose greatness they seek to revive in the present. But of course part of Tomlinson’s point is that the *Cantares* are not items of writing in any straightforward sense, and that we make assumptions about the nature of their textuality at our peril.

This returns us to the question of what the chief of the Nambikwara, the writer in Lévi-Strauss’s parable masquerading as piece of ethnographic objectivity, was

doing when he put pencil to paper. Ultimately, I can't answer that question for Lévi-Strauss's writer, that "native still living in the Stone Age." But I think the question is likewise called for in the case of Mexico's contemporary indigenous writers. What are *they* doing when they put pen to paper?

If we take seriously their own words on the subject, we might revive Lévi-Strauss's anxieties about the corrupting, colonizing power of writing. As Victor de la Cruz's poem suggests, writing is indeed a form of enslavement, of consigning the language of the ancestors to paper, which "was born white/and imprisons our words." And yet this is also a view that most indigenous authors explicitly reject and most indigenous writings, including de la Cruz's poem, implicitly contradict. As Juan Gregorio says in his interview, he conceives of his writing not as an instrument of colonization but as a tool for reversing it. Within such a vision, the chief of the Nambikwara is not, in fact, "mimicking" the anthropologist – if such a label even applies, if the chief was not, in fact, as the title suggests, participating in a lesson – in order to use writing as a weapon against his own people. Rather, he is perhaps practicing the art, learning it, perfecting it, so as to use it in *defense* of his people, as an instrument of resistance and ethnic vindication.

The question then becomes whether it matters if he – and other indigenous writers such as Juan Regino and Heriberto Prado – are able to do so. Again, if we take into account what the indigenous writers we have considered here have to say on the subject, the answer is that it matters a great deal. To Juan Gregorio, for example,

it marks the difference between being “ourselves. . .agents of the government [helping] to erase our peoples” and a writer who can say “I write in my language, I think in my language, I instill in the children and my people our identity, our culture, our language.”

But is that, then, the measure of success? That an author writes in his (or her) native language? Most indigenous intellectuals would, I think, say that is not enough, that it does indeed matter who’s reading, who’s listening – that reaching an audience is as critical to the indigenous author’s work as creating poems or composing songs. But just as the text for indigenous authors and readers is double, so, too, is the audience. And the authors in this chapter demonstrate just how hard it is to reach both audiences, to write for two very different sets of readers-listeners, at once. Hence indigenous writers themselves become double, divided into two broad types: those whose focus, and impact, is national or regional, but who are largely unable to create local readerships; and those whose center of attention, and arena of influence, is local, but who are unable to have much affect on regional and national discourses or policies about indigenous peoples.

If we return for a moment to the Prado brothers as they light candles on their father’s grave, one way we could interpret the division between them is as the story in miniature of indigenous writers’ division into two groups. For a variety of reasons – financial, ideological, social – they were forced to make choices that drove them apart, just as indigenous intellectuals, in choosing one kind of career over another,

one audience over another, make choices that render the other kind of work practically impossible. But if we look further back, to the genesis of the song contest, we see a time when the two brothers worked together successfully, when they were able to strike a balance between creating texts and creating an audience. And perhaps in that there is hope.



## Conclusion

### **Fiesta Of The Spirits, Revisited: On Indigenous Intellectuals, Anthropological Informants, Professional Indians and Other Cultural Criminals**

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#### *Tojesa manguine jin*

#### **Now We Say Goodbye**

*Tojo k'ausakji, tojok'uasachon,  
tojesa manguine jin  
(jo k'an)*

Our world continues on,  
and now we say goodbye.  
(two times)

*li to onsa mana, kitjobison  
na jin  
i naxinanda jña,  
li to basa mana, kitjobison  
na jin  
i naxinanda jña,*

It hurts us very much, but at least  
we walked here  
for our pueblo.  
It makes us very sad, but at least  
we walked here  
for our pueblo

*ali nibatjinguina,  
i tijnakole ñano tsa naina si  
k'uatso  
(jo k'an)*

Don't you all be sad,  
next year, God willing, we'll see  
each other again.  
(two times)

-- Crescencio García, Mazatec songwriter



Since the founding days of anthropology there has existed within the discipline a ribbon of thought treating anthropological informants, for all their utility, with suspicion. As far back as Boas we see injunctions against viewing the “secondary rationalizations” of natives uncritically. Certainly the problematic nature of such notions has become vastly more salient to disciplinary consciousness since the “reflexive turn” in anthropology. Works like the volume *Writing Ethnography* and the critical responses to it have radically altered how we think about the entire ethnographer-informant relationship. They have forced an equally critical consideration of the terms on which the social positioning and epistemological assumptions of researchers and local people alike condition scholarly knowledge.

Such work, taking what it calls the “crisis of representation” as a basic condition of post-modern anthropology, undermines the modernist pretense to objectivity that had dominated the discipline since its inception. We see this very mindset displayed, for example, in Lévi-Strauss’s narrative of the Nambikwara’s encounters with writing. In place of such views, we now have more than a generation of work emphasizing the subjective nature of ethnographic knowledge. Nevertheless, however much these lessons may have shaped how we think about ethnography theoretically, in practice representation and representativeness continue to be an enduring concern on both sides of the cultural boundary posited by ethnography. We as ethnographers may question within the discipline concepts such as “culture,”

“tradition,” “authenticity,” and “modernity” precisely because they bring with them the very modernist assumptions we now find problematic. However, in ethnographic settings – communities like Nda Xo, for example -- such concepts continue to hold enormous power. While essentializations are theoretically problematic, they are also politically useful. Particularly during events like Day of the Dead when corporate identity is foregrounded, people in Nda Xo – and not only “indigenous intellectuals,” either – reflect on aspects of their social lives, codifying them as “our culture,” “our tradition,” “our customs.” They become epistemological objects that can be deployed strategically in a host of ways. Such contradictions between scholarly views and those of the actors in ethnographic settings raise questions as to how we are meant to deal with such contradictions responsibly, in ways that attempt to shed critical light on the nature of social life while at the same time respecting the agendas and perspectives of people who live in the communities we study.



Just before I left for Mexico to begin my fieldwork, I attended a conference required by one of the granting agencies who generously funded my research. Because that particular fellowship program was open to graduate students from across the social sciences, I was one of the few anthropologists present: social scientists on

the “hard” end of the continuum had me surrounded. The keynote address was an exegesis on the pitfalls involved in “selecting on one’s dependent variable.” Perhaps I would have found that and other discussions more useful if I had thought of myself as an ethnographer of the conference itself, but I did not then and do not now know how to translate the language of that talk and others like it into a form that I would find useful.

During the conference, we attended workshops that discussed our dissertation proposals, those leaky boats on which we were about to be sent off into the world to gather Knowledge. Mine happened to be run by the same scholar who gave the keynote address. All I can remember now of the event was a question he asked. These literary movements you want to study, he asked, are they “really just a hothouse phenomenon?” At the time I found the comment offensive, though I could not articulate why. Nevertheless, that question is one that I have heard many times since then, in a variety of guises and with varying degrees of sophistication.

Such sentiments are not uncommon even from people I would consider “knowledgeable outsiders” – i.e., people who know a lot about indigenous Mexico if not about indigenous writers: anthropologists, other academics, people who work with NGOs or with governmental organizations like INI, etc. One day not long after I arrived in Oaxaca, the same attitude was expressed in clarion tones during a conversation I had with a priest over a cup of hot chocolate on the *zócalo*. Referring to the various literary texts being published nationally in indigenous languages, the

priest said, “Oh, that’s all fake.” Unlike the comment by the academic at the conference, this version of the criticism was voiced by someone whose opinion was informed by far more experience than I had at that point. He had spent years of his life living in an indigenous town in the mountains of Oaxaca, and for the most recent of those he had been collaborating with native speakers on a vocabulary of the indigenous language spoken in the town where he lived.

I now think the priest was trying to express the idea that programs to support indigenous writers are little more than window dressing. In other words, he was arguing that the government was merely “paying lip service” to the value of linguistic diversity, that by publishing a few poems and stories in indigenous languages they were getting good P.R. on the cheap. But while such interpretations of the government’s motives are understandable, perhaps even warranted, what troubled me was what they said about the authors participating in such programs. Comments like those seemed to imply that such authors were either pure cynics or pure dupes. In other case, indigenous writers were robbed of all effective agency. Furthermore, such criticisms implied that the whole enterprise was somehow tainted because it was “propped up” by the government and other non-indigenous forms of support. What troubled me was that such ideas seemed to rest on the assumption that the ideological baggage attached to non-indigenous support made it somehow different from the “external funding” received by other kinds of writers and authors. Did the Medicis

create a “hothouse,” too? Are artist colonies like Yaddo “fake”? Is it accurate to claim that Edward Said wasn’t a “real” Palestinian?

As we saw in the last chapter, indigenous intellectuals are regarded with ambivalence not only by observers of indigenous communities but also by people who live in them. Similarly, local people often view with suspicion people from the community whose ties to the government and to rich outsiders are strong and open; one wonders, for example, how other Nambikwara read the chief’s “writing lessons” with Lévi-Strauss. At bottom, though, for both kinds of observers, indigenous and not, local and not, the implication is that participation in such patronage networks constitutes to be some sort of violation of indigenous identity: professional Indians are no longer real Indians. It is the same anxiety, I would argue, that attends the skepticism about anthropological informants, and about any number of cultural intermediaries and “half-breeds,” literal or metaphorical.

This anxiety has far more to say about us than it does about them. Some of the qualities of indigenous intellectuals – that they are knowledgeable, thoughtful, articulate, etc. – make them similar to anthropological informants generally. Both groups have insider knowledge and experience of their societies that we, as outsiders, have differential access to. Furthermore, this inside knowledge and experience often proves invaluable to the ethnographic project. Unlike other informants, however, indigenous intellectuals attain their status as such independently of the ethnographic

process we are engaged in. This foregrounds the extent to which their agendas within the “culture business” stand apart from our own.

It is now commonly understood that the ethnographer-informant relationship, rather than being chosen by the researcher in order to construct objective cultural understandings, is not only fundamentally contingent but also jointly constructed. That is, our informants choose us for their own reasons as much as the other way around. Nevertheless, such relationships fold outward from some sense of a shared agenda, however explicit or inexplicit. We encounter indigenous intellectuals, on the other hand, on very different terms, terms that are in many ways the reverse image of those posed by anthropological informants. Informants’ participation in the ethnographic project may veil the extent to which their own motives may stand at odds with ours. At the same time, the explicit congruence between our agendas and those of indigenous intellectuals – to the extent that we are both engaged in examining and writing about the same society – may mask how deeply those agendas are based on radically different epistemic and methodological assumptions. This issue raises a more general tension in anthropology between insiders’ privileged knowledge on the one hand and outsiders’ privileged perspective about such knowledge on the other.

In short, in such ethnographic settings we do not have well thought-out ways of dealing with indigenous intellectuals and their work. The “hothouse” criticisms I mentioned earlier about indigenous intellectuals reflect this reality. They presuppose

that the activities indigenous intellectuals are engaged in are essentially a result of outside forces, and the ideologies motivating them are an external imposition. This brings us to another variant of this criticism: that such alliances are not only problematic in theory but in practice as well. When indigenous intellectuals are dependent on external support and influenced by non-local discourses, the line of criticism goes, they become alienated from local concerns. And as a result revitalization activities have very little traction within indigenous communities, and are for the most part irrelevant for the majority of its members. I am ultimately grateful for comments like the ones I heard at the outset of my project, because it was largely in response to them that I chose to do my fieldwork where I did. One answer to such criticisms was to find a place where what indigenous intellectuals were up to was not “fake,” was not a forced bloom irrelevant something irrelevant to all but those who had been bought off.

As I have attempted to show, Nda Xo is unusual in having a relatively large grassroots base for its revitalization projects. Although in Mexico modern language revitalization movements are widespread, in the sense that almost every indigenous group has a few people who publish in the language, the vast majority of popular literacy efforts attached to them have failed to stimulate popular interest, and the production of indigenous language texts has remained largely an elite pursuit. Such texts and what they stand for, then, are useful for making political claims in regional and national arenas but largely irrelevant at the local level. By contrast, Nda Xo’s



song contest and the cultural practices attached to it represent that rarest of beasts: a success story. A broad range of speakers have become involved in writing poems, stories, and above all songs in Mazatec. The revitalization project's cardinal initiative – the promotion of Mazatec-language songs in Catholic ceremonies – was and continues to be wildly popular. Thousands of people across the Sierra sing in Mazatec every week when they attend Church, and through the process of learning the songs many people are now at least nominally literate in their language. In addition, musicians from across the region now compete against each other in the annual Day of the Dead Song Contest and in the burgeoning cassette tape industry that the contest has generated. An even wider segment of the population uses these texts, either as consumers or, in the case of songs, as performers. The Mazatec case's success, I have argued, is tied to the culturally specific ways that literacy and writing in Mazatec were introduced, coupling them to quintessentially local, ethnically marked practices and values, especially those expressing homage to the dead and to unseen deities through the vehicle of song.

This situation contrasts sharply with most other revitalization projects, both within the Sierra and throughout the rest of the country. In most cases, the indigenous intellectuals driving indigenous literary movements have produced works that have earned them national and even international reputations, but they have gained very few local readers and have been largely unsuccessful at promoting local indigenous language literacy. I have shown how some indigenous communities have

produced nationally and internationally prominent authors, others have produced vibrant local movements, but essentially no communities have produced both. I explain these differential effects by examining how the various projects – the ones taking place in Nda Xo, and those operated at state and national levels – are linked to emergent notions of ethnic identity and, hence, to social persons who relate in complex ways to social entities, from local communities to multi-ethnic nation-states.

I tried to take an approach to indigenous intellectuals that does not presuppose the nature either of what their representativeness is or what it should be. My impulse for doing so stemmed from resistance to the notion, implicit in the “hothouse” criticism, that indigenous communities are clearly bounded entities, and that “borrowings” of practices and discourses from outside that border are necessarily “inauthentic” and at odds with tradition. However, once in the field I found that those very assumptions about representativeness and purity, while problematic for me intellectually, were nevertheless social “facts on the ground.” That is, they had a great deal of currency for the people I worked with, among local people in general and particularly indigenous intellectuals – at times, as we have seen, to their peril, when, as when Heriberto’s notions of authentic Mazatec behavior faltered on the rocks of popular opinion.

This raises a dilemma about how to consider those assumptions analytically while still taking seriously their social reality for local people. If we reject on theoretical grounds the very essentializations that indigenous intellectuals find so

useful, how do we assess and engage their work? How do we move beyond mere relativism, born of regard for cultural difference, towards a deeper level of collegial respect that requires us to entertain the validity of indigenous intellectuals' views? This dilemma may represent a more general problem for ethnographic practice, but, I would argue, it becomes especially acute in the case of indigenous intellectuals, given the measure of congruence between their agendas and our own. Such agendas range from the satisfaction of basic ethnographic and intellectual curiosity right up to the production of scholarship that aspires to the standards of Western academic practice. Inasmuch as what I have tried to do in this ethnography is understand what makes for successful revitalization and, ultimately, effective social change, I need to arrive at some sort of understanding about how to measure "success" organically, on terms that are not merely an imposition of my, or the academy's, or the West's, standards. This is not something, I believe, that anthropology has yet found a satisfying way to handle.

On what terms, then, do we engage with indigenous intellectuals? Do we enter into dialogue with them as anthropological informants or as colleagues? Do we treat them as essentially different from us, people whose cultural difference deserves our respect however much their cultural ideologies might differ with our own? Or do we treat them as essentially the same as us, as engaged in the same kinds of knowledge-building or interpretive projects that we are?

Alberto Prado was one of the indigenous intellectuals I worked with most closely; as previously mentioned, in addition to being a composer and an advocate for Mazatec literacy and text production, he writes articles that I would describe as “cultural journalism.” He and I talked many times about the lack of trust I frequently encountered with local people, especially those in the smaller villages. Their fears about my presence ranged from my supposed plans to steal everything from children to entire towns to the mountains themselves. However, Alberto said that he did not fully understand such “cultural skepticism” until he began selling copies of *La Faena* in some of the villages and encountered resistance from people who felt he was making money off of their culture. Once he and I began talking about our experiences and what they indicated about how people viewed our respective activities, he claimed he began to see “my own people” in novel ways. In other words, he and I were engaged in conversations about “the culture business” that were very like conversations I had about fieldwork with anthropologists and other scholars.



If I could give any single piece of evidence in support of why I think the song contest is successful in not only this narrow sense but perhaps in the broader one as well, it would be contained in an event that happened not long before I finished my

fieldwork. It took place during the Day of the Dead fiesta, my last one for a while, the last I would attend in Nda Xo before returning to Philadelphia to begin teaching and working on my dissertation. This episode is resonant, I believe, because it confirms my sense that the Day of the Dead Song Contest is doing more than merely reinforcing the status quo and in fact may have the potential for being, albeit in a small way, a case of legitimate resistance.

I also see in it a direction for future research because, at its core, the question it poses is one I still can't answer. Why is Day of the Dead, that one holiday, so important? Why and how has it come to be a repository for "Mazatec tradition," an event during which "Mazatec identity" becomes so salient, a time when practices – especially singing for the ancestors – have become emblematic expressions of that identity? And why was this most Mazatec of holidays, wherein one might expect local people to be most resistant to creative change, nevertheless the site of one of the Sierra's most inventive recent innovations, the song contest?

Answering such questions will take me into a fuller consideration of the social meaning of song, particularly song in another social context which has a uniquely foundational relationship to ideas about "Mazatecness": *veladas*, those nights when people stay awake and listen to the mushrooms sing. As I have tried to outline in this dissertation, ideas about singing are also intimately linked to ideas about *veladas*. Understanding more about the nature of that connection will, I think, shed light on why singing is bound up with Mazatec identity and with mushroom practices, and

how, then, the surrounding complex of values and beliefs feeds into the singing that takes place during the Day of the Dead generally, and in the contest in particular. Such an exploration will also bring a deeper understanding of the nature of Heriberto's violations of widely held views about the mushrooms and about Mazatec identity, which in turn will add to my understanding of why the Mazatec Indigenous Church has largely failed as a popular language revitalization initiative. As it seems ethnography often does, my experience in the field has led me to believe that I should be paying attention to exactly the thing I initially tried so hard to avoid: the mushrooms. Perhaps I should have been listening all along when people in the Sierra tried to tell me that I would never understand the people who live there unless I did a *velada*, unless I listened to the mushrooms, too.

But let me return to the event that occurred during Day of the Dead, a conversation in Nda Xo's cemetery on the last day of the fiesta. The sun was setting, blanketing the mountains, the tombstones, and us alike in a vibrant but fragile orange glow, the same brilliant color of the marigolds adorning the graves. The *chajma* had already broken their piñatas, and various groups of them were playing their last songs in the cemetery, still in disguise, their bodies still surrendered to the ancestors, though once the men were done singing they would take off their masks and go back to their silent homes. The song at the front of this chapter is one of the songs they sang; it was written especially for this part of the fiesta, the last day, when everyone says goodbye to the dead until the following year.

Alberto and I were sitting next to each other, on one of the slabs of concrete that cover many of the tombs. The group of *chajma* near us began to play a song I had heard a few times before. It was a sad song, in the minor mode. I liked it from the first time I heard it, in part because somber music is in keeping with my musical taste but also, I think, because it is different in character than many of the other songs: celebratory and ebullient songs, music for staying up all night and dancing to, songs that people will welcome into their homes as a *kjuanda*, a blessing. This song, though, was slower and more deliberate than most, inclined to foster, at least in me, a moment or two of thoughtful reflection on the easily forgotten truth that we all will die some day.

After they finished the song, I mentioned to Alberto how much I liked it. He smiled. "I wrote that song," he said.

We sat a little longer in silence. And then he said, "They'll play that for me, too, some day."

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