

The Other Word

Women and Violence in Chiapas
Before and After Acteal

On December 22nd 1997, 32 women and 13 men in the Los Naranjos encampment for displaced people in the community of Acteal, municipality of San Pedro Chenalho, Chiapas, Mexico, were assassinated by heavily armed men. The attackers identified by survivors were members of paramilitary groups, which had destroyed their houses and crops a few weeks earlier, obligating them to seek refuge in Acteal. Various human rights organizations elaborated detailed reports of the massacre and different media organizations produced their analysis of it as well. The voices and feelings of women that were lost among the numbers, chronologies, and political analysis of this accumulation of information are dramatically rescued in this book. The authors of the essays and compilers of testimonies are part of a group that for more than ten years has worked with indigenous and mestiza women in Chiapas. Their strategy of action forms part of efforts to halt the profound effects of violent acts, which too frequently occur in Chiapas.



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Before and After Acteal



Edited by Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo

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Feminine

To the murdered, the raped, the beaten
To the pursued.

You are wounded, friend
resounding in your jungle
helicopter and shrapnel
fanning out across your hills
olive and military green

They offer you mutilated
and they mutilate us
they banish us

It enrages them to see us
so brave and feminine
exposed to their weapons

Inside and outside of the fence
we speak with the moon
we wander over streets and gaps
without being able to forget
those wombs split open to the sun

One climbs up the mountain
she gets quiet, cries, laughs, screams
until she almost goes crazy
the wind brings
cries of orphans
the smell of gun powder
and your appeal for peace

As long as Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas
all women
raise up our fists
Who will deny, Chiapas,
That your spirit is a woman's?

Concepción Suárez Aguilar
January 1998

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Displaced women in Xoyep.



Refugees in Polhó.

Prologue to the English Edition

The Other Word was first published in Spanish in May 1998, just five months after the Acteal Massacre in which 32 women and 13 men of the Tzotzil community were brutally assassinated by paramilitary forces linked to the official party [the PRI - Revolutionary Institutional Party].¹ The objective of this book is not only to denounce the effects of paramilitary violence, especially from a gender perspective in order to recuperate the voices and experiences of indigenous women, **Before and After Acteal**. Historical, anthropological, and legal analysis, oral history, poetry and photography are the means by which we document the realities of these women, who represent one of the sectors most affected by the low intensity war currently being lived out in Chiapas. The violent conditions that led us to undertake this collective project three years ago have only intensified since. The militarization and para-militarization of Chiapan society have had a profound impact on the daily lives of indigenous populations, putting at risk their physical and cultural survival.

The presence of more than 60,000 federal military troops and the formation of thirty enormous military centers have necessarily changed the landscape and social dynamics of the countryside in Chiapas. Poverty and marginalization are still rampant, while the annual military budget is calculated to be 200 million dollars (García de Leon, 1996:51). At the same time, national and international organisms have denounced the existence of at least thirty paramilitary groups, which roam freely in various regions of the state.² One result of this unrecognized war is the existence of some 21,000 displaced people in 13 different municipalities in Chiapas: Chenalhó, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Sabanilla, Tila, Salto de Agua, El Bosque, Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, Huitiupán, Venustiano Carranza, La Independencia, Chilón, y Tumbalá.³

In the case of San Pedro Chenalhó, one-third of its inhabitants are displaced and military presence has increased under the pretext of avoiding another massacre. Now there is one military person for every 10 inhabitants. Nevertheless, death threats against the members of the Or-

ganization "Las Abejas" and against all those considered to be sympathetic to the Zapatista movement continue unchecked. The weapons used to assassinate the inhabitants of Acteal in December 1997 are still in possession of paramilitaries.

The political changes produced as a result of the Acteal massacre, more than contributing to political abatement of the state, served to reignite the counterinsurgency campaign established in 1994. The appointment of Roberto Alborez Guillén as interim Governor - substituting Julio César Ruíz Ferro (interim, interim governor) who was forced to step down as a result of charges implicating him in the Acteal massacre - initiated a new anti-Zapatista campaign which has been characterized by the counterinsurgents' use of the law to justify their actions. The new Governor has issued laws to protect the paramilitary groups⁴ and to break up new autonomous municipalities, and has enacted a new indigenous law, which proposes to displace the debate surrounding the San Andrés Accords.⁵

With the objective of asserting himself politically, Roberto Alborez Guillén has lashed out against dissidents, jailing indigenous peoples and backing police initiatives to break up autonomous indigenous projects.

Just weeks after being named to the post of Governor, between April and June of 1998, he undertook various police initiatives in conjunction with military forces, including the incarceration of authorities of three autonomous municipalities - "Flores Mágnon" (*ejido* Taniperla), "Tierra y Libertad" (in the *ejido* Ampara Agua Tinta), and Nicolas Ruíz, "10 de Abril" (in Altamirano) - culminating in another massacre of EZLN indigenous people in the municipality of San Juan de la Libertad, in the communities of Unión Progreso y Chavajeval.

At the same time that he incarcerated the autonomous authorities, accusing them of "usurping functions" and of "sedition," many of those responsible for the Acteal massacre continue to roam free, some fugitives of the law, and many of the high-ranking civil servants involved are protected by the same judicial system. Such is the case of ex-Governor Julio César Ruíz Ferro, ex-Secretary General Homero Tocilla Cristiani, and ex-Sub-secretary General, Uriel Jarquín Gálvez, none of whom was ever detained due to "lack of evidence to indicate penal responsibility."

To date, 57 people have been found guilty of material responsibility in the massacre. All received up to 35 years in prison, but at the same time were absolved of payment of damages, due to the legal criterion of evidence of paid expenses.⁶ This decision implies a lack of knowledge of the existence of damages inflicted by having provoked the deaths [of the victims of Acteal]. It also implies that the conviction of payment of damages is not recognized as a public penalty.

Another legal disappointment of the Acteal sentences - as voiced by human rights organizations - was that since the beginning of the process, the evidence of criminal conspiracy was never acknowledged, a detail which would have contributed significantly to ascertaining the existence of paramilitary groups.⁷

At the same time, these "non-existent" paramilitary groups continue to sow terror among the survivors of Acteal, all of whom have been left unprotected by the state. The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (CDHFC) argues that "the necessary measures to protect the lives and physical integrity of the displaced peoples requires diverse initiatives that the Government has so far side-stepped." (Ibid.)

As an example of the vulnerability of the Chenalhó inhabitants in the face of paramilitary violence, the CDHFC report recounts a case of the members of "Las Abejas" [an organisation of civil society] from the C'anolal community, who reported to the Offices of both the Attorney General of Mexico and the Special Attorney for the Acteal case the names of the armed members of the official party who had made death threats against them. On Oct. 29, 1999 authorities from these two offices informed the Police Force of C'anolal as to the accusations, who in turn informed the authorities in C'anolal. This led to the harassment of the accusers by the PRI authorities, which in turn provoked the displacement of another nine families (45 people in total), who decided to leave C'anolal out of fear of military reprisals.

The displaced families have had to abandon their homes and crops, and live on the humanitarian aid given to them by the state, the Catholic Church, and NGOs. Due to paramilitary threats, members of Las Abejas asked for help from the Red Cross, the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) and the CDHFC in order to form civilian brigades to stand watch so they would be able to harvest their coffee crops. Nonetheless, in the community of Tzanembolón, municipality of Chenalhó, one of these brigades was

attacked by paramilitaries. This environment of terror has curtailed similar initiatives, which try to rescue crops and look for some way out of the economic dependence and extreme poverty experienced by the displaced.⁸

The new political situation in Mexico and the Chiapas region has shed a few rays of light on this dark panorama. The defeat of the official party (PRI) for the first time in 70 years seems to have opened up new spaces of negotiation in the Chiapas conflict. The victory of Vicente Fox in the presidential elections on July 2, 2000 (candidate for the center-right coalition, Alianza por el Cambio) and that of Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía in state elections on Aug. 21, 2000 (candidate for Governor for the Alianza de Chiapas – a coalition comprised of the seven opposition parties) mark the end of a *corporativista* system in which the PRI, the government, and the state were all one-in-the-same.

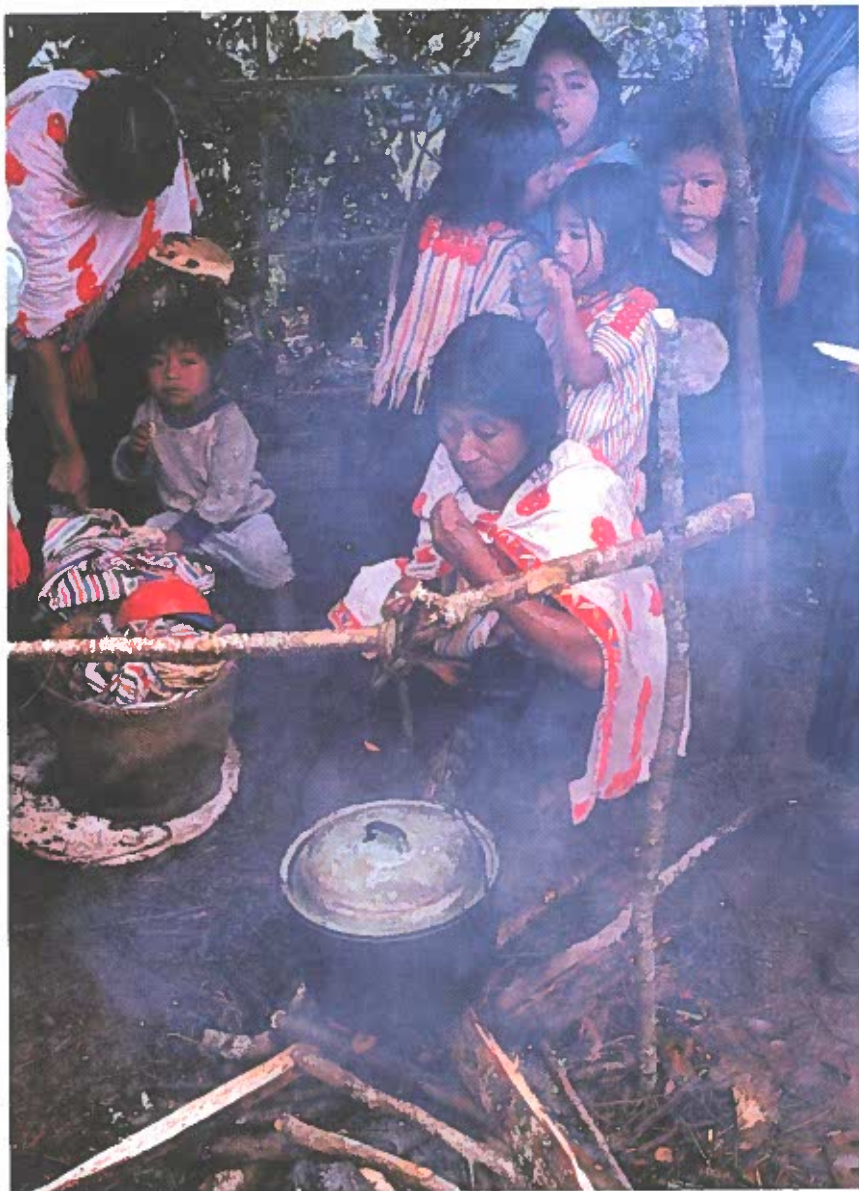
During his electoral campaign, President-elect Vicente Fox committed himself to - on the first day of his new government - taking up the San Andrés Accords as an initiative of Executive Federal Law which would be sent to Congress for discussion and approval. He also promised the disarmament of paramilitary groups and regeneration of conditions which would allow the military to return to their "original positions," thereby demilitarizing the indigenous territories. Fox has reiterated on several occasions that he would look for a peaceful solution to the armed conflict in Chiapas, one based on open, honest and respectful dialogue, which would continue in the tradition of the unfinished San Andrés talks.

Nonetheless, a different political party in power does not necessarily mean a real change; the completion of campaign promises necessarily implies the political will to attack the structural causes, which led to the Zapatista uprising. The new governing authorities have before them the challenge of confronting local *cacicazgos* (Mafia-type bosses), demilitarizing the state and officially recognizing the existence of paramilitary groups, which must be disarmed and brought to trial for their crimes. Civil society has the responsibility to pressure these new authorities to make good on their campaign promises in order to put an end to the violence that has left Chiapas' indigenous population with so many dead and so much suffering.

R. Aída Hernández Castillo
September 2000

Notes

- ¹ Paramilitary groups are armed groups with direct or indirect links to the state, and which perform specific actions to debilitate dissidents who oppose the current regime. Their actions always take place at key political moments and have clear objectives and perpetrators.
- ² For a detailed description of the paramilitary groups in Chiapas, see the Bulletin Chiapas al Día published by the Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria A.C. (CIEPAC – Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action), no. 139, 140, 144, 154.
- ³ Chiapas al Día, no. 168 CIEPAC Chiapas, Mexico, Aug. 29, 1999.
- ⁴ "Ley de Amnistía para el Desarme de los Grupos Civiles del Estado de Chiapas" [Law of Amnesty for the Disarmament of Civil Groups in the State of Chiapas], is the proposal made on Dec. 14, 1998 by Governor Roberto Alborez Guillén with the aim of giving amnesty to the paramilitary groups. Under this law those convicted in the Acteal massacre would be able to use this amnesty to shorten their prison sentences.
- ⁵ The San Andrés Accords were signed by government representatives on Feb. 16, 1996, and were converted into a proposal for a new Law by representatives of the different political parties which make up the Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (COCOPA – Commission for Agreement and Peace). On Dec. 19 of the same year, the President of Mexico, Ernesto Zedillo, rejected the accords that his own representatives had reached with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN – the Zapatista National Liberation Army) in the Roundtables for Peaceful Dialogue, held in San Andrés Larrainzar, Chiapas. Since the President rejected the COCOPA initiative, the threat of war has been present in Southeastern Mexico. The cause of this distancing between the Government and the EZLN has been the irreconcilable differences on both sides regarding indigenous autonomy.
- ⁶ Unlike in the U.S., when suing for damages in Mexico, the plaintiff must base the amount of damages he seeks on the actual expenses he incurred as a result of the defendant's infraction (e.g.: medical bills, etc.). In the Acteal case, the plaintiffs could not supply copies of invoices paid to cover the psychological and physical damages they suffered, so there was no basis for establishing an amount of damages to be paid.
- ⁷ A detailed analysis of the judicial files can be found in CDHFC *Masacre de Acteal. Actualización de Información sobre Procesos Penales y Algo sobre San Pedro Chenalhó* [Acteal Massacre. Informational Update on the Penal Processes and Something about San Pedro Chenalhó], San Cristóbal de las Casas, August, 2000.
- ⁸ For a detailed description of the situation of the displaced, see Hidalgo Onésimo and Gustavo Castro, *Población Desplazada en Chiapas* [Displaced Population in Chiapas], Ed. CIEPAC, Mexico D.F., 1999.



Xoyep. November 30, 1997

Introduction

A few days after the massacre in Acteal, Chiapas, we - a group of women who have collaborated for more than 10 years on projects with indigenous and mestiza women - met to develop strategies for joint action in the aftermath of a bloody crime, which had shaken us all. Our group, which is made up of advisers on production projects, artisans, health promoters, academics, and members of non-governmental organizations, met again, moved by the feelings of indignation and impotence produced by the indiscriminate assassination of men, women and children in Acteal.

At different times, this collective had started as a grassroots movements under such names as Red de Mujeres por la Paz, Convención Estatal de Mujeres, Asamblea Estatal de Mujeres Chiapanecas, y Encuentro de Mujeres por el Diálogo (Network of Women for Peace, State Convention of Women, State Assembly of Chiapanecan Women, Encounter of Women for Dialogue). For lack of a better name, we now began to consider signing the documents we developed, with the irreverent name "the usual suspects." We were some of the usual suspects, joined now by additional collaborators from work groups focused on supporting the women who had been displaced by paramilitary action. Well aware of our own strengths and weaknesses, we were united by the priority of putting an end to the violence in the present context of Chiapas.

The information committee proposed contributing essays from the work of various collaborators who have done research in the San Pedro Chenalhó municipality or explored from an academic viewpoint the complex social processes being lived out there. Each of the participants in this collective project has contributed from within her professional practice - research, law, literature and photography - in order to give a public voice to the thoughts and feelings of indigenous women, one of the sectors most affected by what human rights organizations have characterized as a "low-intensity war."

This collection of essays opens with a poem by Concepción Suárez Aguilar, paying homage to the political involvement of women in the

current context. We begin by chronicling the events based on testimonies collected before and after the massacre from survivors of Acteal and women from surrounding communities. A portion of the testimonies used to sketch the origins of the massacre were collected as part of two research projects: "Maternal Death in the Highlands of Chiapas," co-coordinated by Anna María Garza (IEI-UNACH) and Graciela Freyermuth (CIESAS- Southeast-COLEM) in 1994-1996; and "Legal and Gender Plurality in the Daily Life of San Pedro Chenalhó," developed by Anna Maria Garza in 1997. The testimonies used for the reconstruction of the massacre were presented to the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center, and were collected in part by Martha Figueroa Mier (COLEM). The testimonies of survivors were recorded by Rosalva Aída Hernández (CIESAS-Southeast), Juana María Ruiz Ortiz (IEI-UNACH), Mercedes Olivera (CIAM) and Anna Maria Garza, during visits to refugee camps.

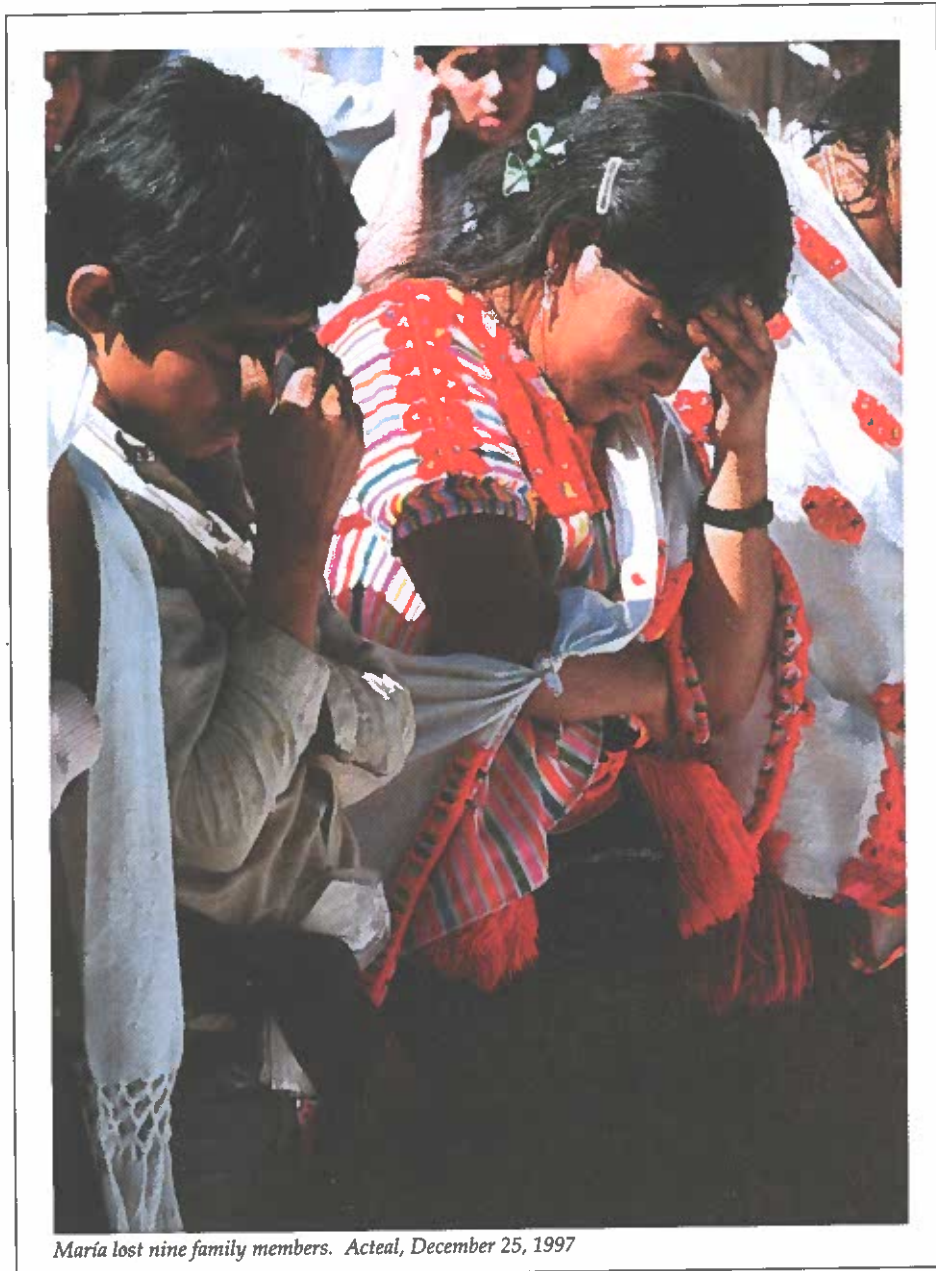
In the second article, Rosalva Aída Hernández and Anna María Garza present a historical overview of political life in Chenalhó, with the aim of situating the recent events in the context of a long relationship of confrontations between the state and indigenous people. In the third essay, Graciela Freyermuth analyses the politics of birth control and maternal death in Chenalhó as direct antecedents of the violence and extermination that victimize the women in this municipality. In the fourth piece, Christine Eber provides a closer look at the political experience of the women of Chenalhó by way of two life-stories: one of a Zapatista woman and the other of a member of another civil society organisation.

The fifth piece was written by Martha Figueroa Mier, who worked on the Acteal case as a legal adviser for the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center. This essay can be considered a source document by which to understand the legal handling of the Acteal massacre. In the sixth article, Mercedes Olivera analyses the impact of militarization and the low intensity war on the daily life of the indigenous peoples of the Chiapanecan Highlands. Rosalva Aída Hernández, in the seventh essay, presents a history of the organizational processes in which indigenous women have participated since the Zapatista uprising; she also analyses the social and personal implications of these new political processes. By way of an epilogue, Diana Damián Palencia presents a testimony in which she explores urban women's feelings about this violence

and militarization. Finally, we close with a series of photographs that provides a glimpse of life in the refugee camps before the massacre, and depict the current situation of survivors.

In these difficult times we are experiencing in Chiapas, we believe that building bridges between academia and communities is a foremost priority. As part of this effort to disseminate research more widely and to understand better the recent events, the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (Center for Research and Higher Learning in Social Anthropology) has supported the publication of this collection of essays. It should suffice to say that the texts presented here are the sole responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institution.

R. Aída Hernández Castillo
February 1998



María lost nine family members. Acteal, December 25, 1997

Before and After Acteal:

Voices, remembrances and experiences from the women of San Pedro Chenalhó*

On the 22nd of December 1997, 32 women and 13 men from the refugee camp "Los Naranjos," in the community of Acteal, municipality of San Pedro Chenalhó, were assassinated by heavily armed men. Later, some of the survivors identified their assailants as members of the PRI-party paramilitary groups which weeks before had destroyed their houses and crops, forcing them to seek refuge in Acteal. The Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center has produced a detailed account of the massacre (1997) and various members of the press have provided diverse analyses of these killings. Nevertheless, in these accumulated accounts the voices and feelings of women involved have been eclipsed by statistics, chronologies and political analysis. In this essay, we propose to reconstruct the experience of the female sector of the population, which has been especially hard hit by what human rights organizations term, the "low intensity war." By way of testimonies collected before and after the massacre from women who survived and from inhabitants of neighboring communities, we weave a history which recovers the spaces of subjectivity and daily life which have been disrupted and violated by the war. Each of the names that appeared in the press - including Verónica Pérez, Pablina Hernández, Roselia Gómez, Manuela Paciencia, María Ruíz Oyalté, etc. - represents a story, a life cut short, a desolate husband or child whose pain often gets lost in-between the lines of journalists' reports. These vignettes are to remind us of the human dimension of the genocide that is currently being lived out in Chiapas.

Being a woman in Chenalhó...

Verónica's eyes fill with tears; she suppresses a cry that chokes her breast and she lets herself fall onto the little chair in front of the cooking fire.

Her father has just told her that her friend Manuela was assassinated in Acteal. She cannot believe it, cannot understand how anyone could so violently attack someone so sweet as Manuela. She understands nothing, memories become confused, the events, the times.... She begins to remember the days when they used to go to catechism meetings together; when they were discovering that they could dream of living differently; when together they became convinced that things had not always been, nor had to be, as they were now.

Verónica tells us that it was together with Manuela that she first heard the catechists say that it was not right that only men should be in charge, that it was not right for husbands to beat their wives. From her memories she reconstructs those days, telling us with pride: "They said that we women also have the right to be taken into account, to be loved. We should be equals, we have to think and decide things together." She remembered the first time she came to hear the word of God; it was good to be with other women, but she was tired; she had already collected wood, ground corn, made tortillas, and battled with the children. At first the speeches made her sleepy, but little by little she began to listen and hear news of things she had never imagined. The word 'right' does not exist in Tzotzil, it had to be borrowed from Spanish or *castilla* as it is called in her community. She especially liked the part about women being able to decide in their hearts if they wanted to get married, and that the parents should ask the girl if she loved the man. Yes, she thought that was good, that was a right that attracted her. But she married at fourteen, and when they came to ask, her parents said "yes" because the man's land was nearby and he had a coffee grove. Nobody asked her anything. Now she was a single woman, her husband had left her, but every now and then he would turn up to annoy her, shout at her and beat her.

Verónica had always been abused by her husband. When he drank she had to leave and hide, going into the mountains with her daughters, or into the cornfield, even in the middle of a downpour. She put up with this relationship for a long time. She used to say that if she went back to her parents she would have no land and therefore no food. She had heard since childhood that women get married and go to live on their husbands' land; where the man is, the woman has to be. But the man

left, he found another woman and abandoned her with their six children. Then Verónica remembered what was discussed so often in the women's meetings: that women also had a right to the land, and why not she thought. "If we have the same father and the same mother as our brothers, we have the same needs. And I have more need". Verónica thought then, "for I have been left by my husband." The next day she went to see her parents. "Are you there, daddy, are you there, mommy?" she called out in the way that all *pedranos*¹ say hello, and tried to make her voice humble and high-pitched, a sign of respect to her elders, as is the custom in Chenalhó. After chatting a bit about the children, the crops and other things, Verónica found the courage to tell them what she was so worried about. Very upset, she told them that she was alone and that her husband was running her off the land. Finally, she dared to ask them for an inheritance. But her father's reply was just as straightforward: "you grew up and got married and that's where you should stay. I don't want you coming back here because you don't have your land. My land has all been divided up among your brothers and you are a woman. You had better get back to your husband and make him content and live happily."

Verónica grew up in Poconichim, very near Acteal, a community situated in the temperate part of Chenalhó, between Polhó and the *Puebla ejido*², from north to south, and between Yabteclum and Los Chorros, from east to west. You approach it from Yabteclum, which is about 47 kilometers from San Cristóbal, very near where the road is now paved. From there you have to take a dirt road that goes through Takihukum. In Poconichim there are Priistas, Zapatistas and civil society³. Verónica belongs to the civil society organisation, Las Abejas. They used to hold meetings, talk about God and their rights; sometimes they went to meetings and demonstrations in San Cristóbal to ask for peace, and that the rights of the indigenous people and women be respected: that there be no forced marriages, no abuse, that there be land for all, men and women alike. In their community assemblies, the men used to talk about what everyone thought but there was never any agreement, and they were not able to get beyond that. Verónica's parents were Priistas and used to say that all the new talk was putting an end to the customs the old people had taught them. The tradition in Chenalhó is that only the men inherit the land, the women have their husbands for that.

Verónica started to cry just remembering what had happened, and what her parents had said to her. "I have no land. How am I going to eat, where will I plant my cornfield, my coffee tree, my orange tree, my lime tree?" she cried. In the end her father understood her. "Well, all right" - her father said -, "there's the little house, it's a bit out of the way, but you can go there." So Verónica went to live in her father's little house, on a tiny patch of borrowed land. It was from there that she was forced to leave when those men came to destroy everything.

It was March 1997 and Verónica was hurrying to feed her children who were sitting around the fire, their eyes red from the smoke that accumulated in that little house without windows. At night during the cold season or the rainy season it was better not to have windows, for there were not enough blankets; what little light there was came in through the door, always open during the day. If good light was needed, then people would go outside and sit near the house, as Verónica used to do to weave or to embroider blouses with the colors typical of *pedrana* clothes in which orange is always predominant. Her children were sitting, almost squatting, in very low chairs, the sort that are in every *pedrana* house, and which those from outside the area find so difficult to get comfortable in. The youngest ones, who shared the same plate of beans, were taking time out to play between mouthfuls. The hot tortillas were stacked up on the little table. Soon the catechist from the group in Yabteclum would arrive and there would be a meeting of the Catholics of the community.⁴ Verónica was hopeful, but fear was also causing butterflies in her stomach, the place where - for the Tzotzils and Tzeltals - the heart is located. The materials for the catechist's house in Yabteclum had already arrived, the site was ready, cleared and leveled. But rumors were going around that the Priistas did not want the house to be built, because it would only cause problems since the catechists were Zapatistas. "What problems can the *compañeros* cause?" she asked herself aloud, and her children stopped and stared at her. God taught us to ask for our rights, but peacefully. That Las Abejas had guns was a big lie. I do not know why they do not like us; they mock us, and some do not even say hello and others make fun of us, even though they are very young and we are adults. Something has happened that is making people lose respect.

The problem begins

Lorenzo, the catechist, arrived and Verónica saw him go by, but she waited a prudent length of time so that the man would have time to get home to eat. Then at about six p.m. she went to the church, a wooden hall with a corrugated iron roof and earthen floor. The *compañeros* were already gathered. They sat on simple wooden benches, men on one side, women on the other. They began to pray and to ask God not to let anything happen. Then Lorenzo spoke. He explained everything little by little, with all the details, just as it should be. They all waited patiently for the important news: that the Priistas in Yabteclum and the municipal authorities had surrounded the land they were going to build on with barbed wire, and that they were not letting them through; and finally, that all the catechists in the region had gotten together to make a written complaint. Lorenzo said they had to wait for the response of the authorities and not allow themselves to be provoked in anger. They were not going to fight, even though the Priistas might make fun of them and say that the Government agreed with them. Of course, the *compañeros* said, the people who control things are or were authorities, which is to say, those who have had positions on the municipal council. They have their contacts, but no matter, we have to wait and trust in God.

Some time after that the response arrived: a recommendation from the CNDH (transl. note: the National Human Rights Commission, a governmental body) to the municipal council that the land be released. Verónica only knew that the government had said that the Priistas were not in the right, and she was happy, but by then, at the beginning of May, it was the least of her worries. The tension in communities was now high, although in Poconichim there still had not been any serious problems. In the municipal capital, seven boys had been assassinated at the end of the previous year and, since then, there had been a permanent public security police post there. Although they had not yet penetrated the rest of the municipality, it was said that the Yabteclum Priistas and the Puebla ejido were arming themselves, and that furthermore they had the support of the government and soldiers were expected at any moment. Arms began to arrive, and the rumor was that the government was providing these weapons to kill the Zapatistas. Even teenage boys

were being taught to use them, training at night with guerillas. That's what people in the area were saying and everyone was frightened. It was Friday, May 23, 1997. Verónica kept going to her cornfield and working at home as though nothing were happening; she had to provide for her family. She could not sit down and think. But a neighbor arrived and Verónica stopped for a while to talk to her in the kitchen where she spent a good part of the day. The children noticed immediately that their mother got very tense. The conversation was short and the woman did not offer the customary corn snack given to visitors.

The neighbor brought very bad news. Verónica already knew that the Priistas wanted to build a road to Puebla, the ejido that Jacinto Arias Cruz, the municipal president, was from. The neighbor had come to tell her that people had been kidnapped in the Puebla ejido. She did not know whom, but she knew it was a serious problem.

On Saturday morning, the people of Poconichim got together. They had heard rumors that the soldiers were going to come, that they were going to finish off all the Zapatistas. So the people, everyone, went far away from the community. They were horribly afraid because they knew that there had already been one death, and they did not know what else could happen. Everyone decided to leave, even if they were not Zapatistas. The Las Abejas group fled as well and even some Priistas left. Verónica was thinking, "I am not a Zapatista, I am not a Priista, but although we are not anything it won't matter to the police or the soldiers, they are going to kill us all." The others thought the same, and so they decided to flee. Verónica, like all the others, left her home in such a hurry that she did not even take any food, or a blanket, nothing. She just managed to take her children. Thanks be to God that José her eldest son was there, so she could share some of her fear. She left her animals, her chickens, her turkeys, all loose there. Verónica went to sleep on the mountain. Her smallest child was sick with diarrhea and was crying, and the compañeros asked her to please make him be quiet, so they could save their lives. The woman made desperate efforts to get the child to stop crying, until finally she covered his mouth so that they would not hear where they were. She spent the whole night crouching there with her children and her compañeros, trembling with fear. On Sunday morning she decided to leave, to go to San Cristóbal, because she had an aunt

there. She could not stay on the mountain with no food, no blankets and a sick child. Then some others began to leave as well, and they made a detour to take another road to Yabteclum, the old municipal capital, which is on the road linking Pantelhó with San Cristóbal and crosses a good part of Chenalhó. They were concerned because they met a lot of Priistas there who did not let them leave. They searched everyone and looked in José's backpack and trouser pockets. They asked for PRI membership cards. They asked the people if they were carrying arms. Verónica sat on the ground waiting to see if they would let them leave, and yes, after several hours they gave them permission to go. Later she found out that people were saying there were many refugees from various communities.

Verónica was not able to stay in San Cristóbal and returned to her home a month later, but the problems continued. By then, the public security police posts were set up in several communities and police were patrolling the roads. This initiative had been taken by the Priistas from Los Chorros. It was said that there were young men paid to kill, that they had uniforms and were well armed. It was rumored that the public security police were selling them their clothes. The most notorious thug was buying them for he had the contacts with the public security police. When they went out to fight against the communities, he sold them arms and uniforms. When the paramilitaries returned, they gave them back. That is what people were saying.

When the problems started, Verónica remembered that a boy who they knew was a soldier came and taught the teenage boys how to use weapons - AK-47s and Galil. They did not want ordinary rifles. Boys as young as 13 and 14 learned to shoot, the older men too, but not the women. A friend of her father told them how he was paid 700 pesos every two weeks for stealing coffee when the paramilitaries forced the boys to go with them (transl. note: a farm laborer in the region might typically earn up to 30 pesos a day). Verónica had heard rumors about this man from his sisters in Las Abejas. They said that he had always been a respectable man, that he joined the paramilitaries only because of threats by a group of Priistas. They said that he had been interested in becoming a member of Las Abejas, but they threatened to kill him. That is why he agreed to work with the violent men. He and many others

were forced to stay in the PRI, but not only that, they also had to pay a fee to buy arms.

The dead began to turn up every now and then in different places. People had been kidnapped in several communities: in Puebla, Los Chorros, and Pechequil. It was rumored that the women - Zapatista supporters, civil society and Priistas - were forced to make tortillas for the paramilitaries. The Priistas' wives did not want to do forced labor either. They were all frightened, but at least they were in their communities. In contrast, the others had had to leave their communities and their husbands were forced to work for the Priistas under threat of their families being killed if they refused.

By now nobody understood what was happening, nor why nothing had been done about the complaints made to the government. Representatives of Las Abejas and the autonomous municipal council of Polhó met every now and then to ask for dialogue. The government claimed that nothing was happening, although they knew that houses had been burned down in Puebla, Los Chorros, and Yaxgemael; that people were fleeing terrified from many communities, from Tzajalhucum, Cacateal, and Majomut, from exactly those places where there were public security posts. In Xoyep, Polhó, Cholomtoj, Acteal, and Xkumumal and even in the capital of the neighboring municipality of Pantelhó there were refugee camps. Verónica did not know how many there were, but there were a lot, perhaps thousands. Las Abejas was asking for peace. It was asking for talks to begin, but Jacinto Arias, the municipal president, never came to the meetings, the representatives said. By now few people in the community were sleeping easily, the men took turns to keep watch. Going to the cornfield was too risky and crops began to rot. Verónica did not harvest her beans, nor did she go to check the tomatoes she was growing on a patch of borrowed land. She did not go to the mountain to collect vegetables, as she had always done. José could not go out to work. They were difficult months, full of hunger and fear. The roads were deserted and few dared to go out.

In December, the news arrived that Tatic Samuel, the Bishop, had been attacked in the Northern zone, and, some days later, that the municipal president in Chenalhó had threatened to kill Father Michael, the town priest. They were blaming him and the Catholics for all the bad

things that happened. Things were very serious, and Verónica used to cry quietly at night, so that her children would not hear her. What was she going to do if the Priistas came. She would have to leave again like that horrendous day in May. Verónica lost weight from so much thinking and worrying. Sitting there in front of someone else's fire, remembering, crying about Manuela's death, she felt that the sadness had made her forget for a moment the fear of so many months.

Days before the massacre

On the 19th of December, María Ruiz Oyalté awoke with terrible bleeding, the blood was running between her legs and she did not know what to do. The smallest of her seven children was looking at her with fear reflected in his eyes. She had been bleeding for several days, since her family had come to take refuge in Acteal, but that day the bleeding was worse. Her husband went to look for Juan the health promoter in Xoyeb, where he was looking after the refugees. It would take him nearly two hours to get there and back. Finally her husband arrived with the promoter; he examined her with great care and, using the language learned in his reproductive health care classes, declared: "prolapse of the uterus." No one understood the term, but it seemed to be something serious, so she would have to be taken to San Cristóbal. The promoter explained to her: "your womb has collapsed from having so many children and working so hard. We will have to take you to the hospital to be operated on." It was a difficult job convincing her to be taken to the city; who would mind the children? Who will make the food? And if the Priistas came when she was away, who would protect the kids? And what if the armies stopped them on the road and she never came back again? There were too many accumulated fears to make such a difficult decision. The promoter spoke to her with the tenderness that had won him so many friends among civil society, the Zapatistas and even among some of the Priistas. His work on health, his solidarity and dedication to community work surrounded him with a halo of trust, which helped him to convince María and overcome her fears.

Juan had to confront the health system once more: hours of waiting

for someone to see her, the nurses' scornful attitude towards María's bloodied garments, the burning in his stomach after a day in the city without eating and worrying about María not having eaten. But, if he went out to look for food, the doctor might come and they would miss the chance to be seen. There was nothing to be done but fill himself with patience and wait. Finally, the doctor arrived, and, after a routine check up, announced that Juan had been right, "prolapse of the uterus." They would have to operate, but at the moment there was no anesthesiologist on duty, and they would have to find a blood donor. They would have to continue waiting, sitting there in the waiting room, because the beds were full. "Don't be so obstinate, I'm telling you we will look for an anesthesiologist. Don't you understand it's the holidays?" the nurse said to him rudely.

María was despairing. She did not understand much of what Juan was discussing with the nurses but from the tone of their voices it did not sound like they were helping. She was hungry and thinking about her children, alone in Acteal, about the bullets which nights before had whistled over the rooftops, about the Priistas' threats that they would finish off everyone, Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas alike. They were neutral, they had put a white flag at the entrance to their village, but that did not count, either you supported the Priistas or they immediately considered you an enemy. She began to remember how Acteal had slowly filled with people, they arrived from various directions, fleeing from the Priistas who were harassing them. She and her family joined another 70 or 75 families who sought refuge in this community. Although the majority came from nearby places, it took them a long time to get there because they had to make many detours. Many left by night, carrying the children, with nothing other than some bedding or just diapers.

The majority of people in Acteal were from Las Abejas, from that part of civil society, which was not with the Zapatistas but also not against them. For months, the Priistas had been hassling them. They wanted them to take up arms and rob, burn houses and kill Zapatistas. But as Catholics they knew that they must not kill their brothers, so it was better to flee because they could see death was near. Some men returned to mind the houses, others went further to hide, for this reason there were more women and children than men in Acteal. The people from

Las Abejas in Acteal had been good to them, giving them blankets. Some of them had family there but the majority did not. They helped them to build roofs of sticks and banana leaves among the coffee trees to protect themselves from the cold and the rain. It was difficult to live huddled up, afraid, waiting ...

She did not understand what was happening. How did the hatred start and why did the neighbors from Los Chorros start arming themselves? Where did they get those gigantic rifles they could hardly carry? How did Agustín, who was hardly a man, come by that black uniform, and become so rude to the old people? All these ideas were going through her mind as she waited with an empty stomach for Juan to find someone who would give her blood for the operation. Filled with nostalgia she thought about the good times when the Priistas, Zapatistas, Cardenistas, Presbyterians and Catholics all lived together with mutual respect, and, of course, with arguments and drunken fights, but without such hatred. She did not really know what was going on, but little by little she had lost faith in almost everyone. She preferred not to talk much, not to speak her mind and instead to ask God to stop the war. In addition to her sadness of leaving her house in Quextic, her cooking pots, her animals and her cornfield, now there was this sickness and this bleeding which never stopped. Juan had never warned her that she would have to spend the night sitting in this cold hall. She was afraid and wanted to go back to Acteal. Juan was losing hope. He had called on various people he knew but the town seemed empty. The doctors on shift came and went and none of them had any answer. The anesthesiologist never appeared. After waiting for two days, at dawn on the 22nd, María decided to go home. Juan had no option but to go with her. The shame and anger were evident in the face of the promoter. The effort it had cost him to convince the women that their health was important, that travelling to the city – despite the risks that this implied – was important in order to get better treatment. How would he tell María's husband that the trip had been for naught, that María was the same or worse. At nine in the morning they arrived in Acteal. The atmosphere was tense, rumors of a Priista attack continued. The women were praying in the church and a catechist was calming them, telling them that God would protect them. The promoter spoke to the family. There were no reproaches. They were

used to being cheated by the *caxlanes*, the white outsiders. Juan was too innocent and persisted in thinking that the doctors were different. María thought: "There is nothing left to do but pray that the blood stops, that which is running from my body and that which is being spilled between brothers, friends, neighbors." She went to the church with the other women.

22nd of December 1997

Micaela is eleven, but she has been helping her mother make tortillas and carry her little brother around for years. She is a big girl now, as they say in the community, meaning that she is becoming a woman. She is very afraid. Since 7 a.m., she has been in the church with her mother, half praying, half playing with her brother and sister so that they do not make a fuss. They do not know what is happening. From time to time they ask for their daddy, who went into hiding the day before because they say that if the Priistas come in they will kill the men or take them away and make them kill Zapatistas. The women stayed; they did not want the children to be on the mountain, cold again. They preferred to pray, asking for the war to stop, and believe that the killers would not touch women and children.

The warning was brought by some people from Las Abejas who had been forced to work for the Priistas in Los Chorros; they had escaped and brought the news. They had arrived just the day before. They told them that the Priistas were planning their attacks and had told them: "You are Las Abejas, if we win tomorrow you will provide the food and the tortillas... when we have finished the fighting with the Zapatistas you will kill two pigs and we will have a feast." That is what the men who arrived the day before had told them. That is why they were fasting, to stop the killing.

At about eleven o'clock they began to hear the shooting; nobody moved, it was not the first time shots had been fired. The catechist tried to calm them; Micaela tried to quiet her brother and sister who had started to cry. Men and women were kneeling, some stopped and began to run, and others were hit by the bullets there in the church. The shots came

from above. Someone shouted that they were being surrounded. Micaela's mother finally decided to run, carrying the two little ones and pulling her along by the hand and running. By now the men were outside the church; Micaela managed to recognize the faces of some men from Los Chorros under their red bandanas. They are Priistas and Cardenistas, her mother said. The only way out was the steep bed of the stream; they ran there and they followed them to the stream. The bullet hit her mother in the back; the children's crying gave her away. First they shot her mother and then the two little ones. She lay under their bodies, which is what saved her; she kept quiet, she could feel the weight of her mother's warm body; she did not know if she was dead. She was afraid, very afraid.

From where she lay, Micaela saw them, recognized Diego, Antonio, Pedro: "There were many of them, more than fifty, from los Chorros, Pequichiquil, la Esperanza, and from Acteal as well. They came dressed in black, with balaclavas, they were real paramilitaries; the others, the leaders, were dressed like soldiers....," she would say later in her testimony to the human rights people. She saw them killing the catechist and shooting women and children in the back.

When the men left, Micaela went to hide on the bank of the stream. From there she saw how they came back with machetes in their hands; the same ones and others with them; they were whooping and laughing and talking among themselves, "we have to get rid of the seed," they were saying. They stripped the dead women and cut off their breasts. They put a stick between the legs of one woman and opened the bellies of the pregnant women and took out their babies and played ball with them tossing them from machete to machete. After that they left.

In the afternoon people began to come out of their hiding places; the public security police were there and took them to a hall. There she met some relatives. Micaela saw her father's brother, but she also realized that many had not appeared. It was there that she found out that her mother, her sister and her little brother were dead. She had thought as much when she had seen them full of blood, but while she had been waiting in hiding she had prayed to God that they might only be wounded. She did not know if they had killed her father and her grandfather too, both of whom had gone to hide in Pantelhó. Her Uncle Antonio took her by the hand and they went to look for her cousins or other

people who might be wounded or alive among the dead, as she had been. "We saved two little ones who were at the side of their dead mother, the boy had one leg totally destroyed; another girl had her head smashed, she was bleeding a lot and tossing around trying to hang on to life. The wounds of the living and the dead were terrifying because the weapons were very high caliber. The police took us away, some of us went to Polhó, others to San Cristóbal. Many people have been displaced, there is a lot of terror everywhere," her uncle told the Interior Ministry officials some days later.

After the burial, Acteal was silent with death. Only the police, the ones who arrived late, were there, apparently in case the murderers came back. Micaela is living with her uncle and aunt, she misses her mother, every night she dreams that her warm body is protecting her and then that stops and she and her brother and sister go to look for her daddy in Pantelhó.

After the massacre

After the massacre nothing is the same now, it is as though death were still floating in the air and could return at any moment. The rumors continue; that they will come back to finish off those still alive, that they were ordered by the government to bury their arms but that, when the protests die down, they will come back for those who denounced them and went to Tuxtla to identify the Priistas who had been detained. The danger is there, watching every stranger who comes into the community to "investigate," journalists, interior ministry, human rights ... Acteal feels invaded and there is nothing everyday about that which some call everyday life.

In Acteal the communal tomb marks the entrance to the refugee camp; a single cross shows where the 45 dead are buried. It is not a mass grave but a communal plot. There are no headstones marking the exact spot where each body lies, nor the names and ages, but nobody fears anonymity or forgetting. In these latitudes the collective memory is more tenacious than the written word. "Harvest Time" reads the sign, which a catechist wrote above the cross. The survivors of

Acteal face many dangers, but forgetting is not one of them.

Since the 23rd the women move in groups; no one dares to go for water or to wash at the stream alone. Work is a refuge from the sadness: grinding the corn, cooking together and sharing the few pots that are left after the pillaging of the community. "It is only when we remember that we get sad and we cry, that is why we do not want to talk about that, it is better that we work," María Ruiz says, through her tears, to one of the young volunteers who has been living in a peace camp in Acteal since the first of January.

The orphans are now the responsibility of the community, though the families closest to them take charge of them. There are women who are looking after up to eight orphans, as well as their own six or seven children. Many single women have had to become mothers before their time, minding the children of their dead sisters or sisters-in-law. But there are those who have not been able to fight off the sadness with work, it has penetrated their bones and locked them into silence. Marcela and Juana have lost their minds. They do not talk any more, and it seems they do not hear anything. They just cry for a time and react with fear, emitting monosyllables, at the sound of the helicopters, which have been flying over the community since the 23rd of January. Rosa is 70, and lost three of her daughters and a grandson; she saved herself by dragging herself up to the riverbed behind the church and flinging herself down the other side; her body is bruised, her clothes torn; she still wears the *nagua* (traditional, hand-woven skirt) she was wearing that day, not wanting to change it for the "outsiders" clothes which arrived on the aid truck. But her torn *nagua* and the bruising under her skin remind her of the fear of that day of death. Since then she has not spoken a word. She is sick with fear.

Juana, on the other hand, lost her mind even earlier; after the first incursions by the Priistas in Tzajalucum, when fear made the child inside her come out too early and she had to give birth in the mountains. When she took refuge in Acteal there was no midwife to take care of her, and it seems that there was something left in her belly. Her body began to rot away from the inside. You have a very nasty infection, the promoter told her when he finally examined her. There were no medicines to cure her, only promises to look for a doctor who would attend to her

and make her better. Between the threats of an attack, the constant cough of her newborn child and the cold nights under the roof of branches, neither she nor her husband mentioned the strange smell coming out of her body again. Some say it was the "infection" which took her mind. Others say it was the accumulated fear of those months. Her husband, her mother, her brothers and sisters have grown accustomed to her silence, to her lost gaze. In the middle of the confusion, she tends to her child, changes her, and feeds her. Her responsibility is stronger than any madness.

It is the 11th of January. Juan is helping the Red Cross personnel to hold a clinic. He sees us and stops immediately, hugs Martha, the lawyer, and begins to cry. All the strength with which he has cheered up his patients, many of them survivors of the massacre in Acteal, breaks down now. He needs to cry, to be weak for a moment in order to go on consoling, advising, trying to heal with the few resources of his new refugee home. Many people are sick with fear but Juan does not know how to cure them. He is a health promoter and did not learn the wisdom of the *iloletik* (a Tzotzil word for the specialists in healthcare who look after the pains of the soul as well as those of the body). He tries to console, to pass on his strength; but there is not much left to pass on. He tells us how the paramilitaries came into Majomut and burned down his house, killed his mule, destroyed everything he had. How the army set up its camp at the water source which served Xoyeb; there was nothing to do but make holes in the ground and look for nearby streams. The new wells were full of muddy water; the diarrhea and the tosferina affect both adults and children, but it takes the little ones away silently in the space of a day. He tells us about the day they confronted the soldiers, about the bravery of the women trying to move them from the water source. The soldiers had riot shields with which they gave the women and children electric shocks; the village rushed the soldiers, wanting them out of the community, far away; there was fear and anger. Juan talks through his tears. He says he does not know what to do with so much sadness. For his friends who died in Acteal, for his patients, he feels a sadness choking his breast. He tells us the story of María Ruiz Oyalté. He tells us that he could have saved her life, if the anesthesiologist had arrived, the doctors and nurses had treated her like a human

being and had given her the attention she needed. He feels a bit guilty. If only he had been able to make them do their job. But how to confront a medical system, which does not have a bed free for María and does not have medicines for Juan, nor enough doctors for those few women who he manages to convince that their health is important. He is powerless before this system just as he is before the soldiers who set up camp on the water source for Xoyeb. What can be done against their guns and their electric riot shields? He does not know if he should blame María's death on the anesthesiologist who never showed up, on the nurses and doctors who did not try to find him, on those men dressed in black who came into Acteal destroying everything, "killing the seed," on the public security police who brought guns and were silent witnesses to the massacre, on the soldiers who militarized the region and sowed terror among the people who live there, or on the state and federal authorities who did not want to do anything despite numerous denunciations. There are so many guilty parties. Are they all the same?

Notes

- * This account is a literary essay that does not attempt to reproduce the testimonies of the women of Acteal word-for-word. All the events described below, however, are true. This is a collective piece of work based on testimonies collected by Anna María Garza, Jéana María Ruiz, R. Aída Hernández, Martha Figueroa and Mercedes Olivera from survivors of Acteal and inhabitants of the neighboring communities. With the exception of the names of the PRI-party municipal president, Jacinto Arias Cruz, and María Ruiz Oyalté, who was assassinated on the 22nd of December 1997, all other names have been changed to protect those interviewed. The account of the massacre was reconstructed from testimonies presented to the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center.
- ¹ *Pedranos* is the name the people of San Pedro Chenalhó call themselves
- ² *Ejidos* are land returned to a community as part of a land reform. The *ejidos* were constituted by communal lands divided in small lots and given to peasants for their individual use. These lots cannot be sold or mortgaged. They can be inherited, but not subdivided. If a peasant moves away, his land remains with the communal governing body.
- ³ The term "civil society" is used by some sectors that sympathize with the EZLN but do not see themselves as support bases and take a neutral position on the armed conflict. In the case of Chenalhó the members of the Las Abejas cooperative call themselves "civil society." In the case of Priistas, some sectors have

direct links with the paramilitary groups, while others, despite belonging to the official party, disapprove of the violent methods of the paramilitaries. For a political history of these party divisions, see Hernández Castillo and Garza Caligaris, in this collection.

- 4 In Chenalhó the Catholic population is divided between followers of liberation theology, who have close links with the Dioceses of San Cristóbal, and traditional Catholics. The high proportion of the population which is Protestant initially supported the Zapatista demands but, when the negotiations between the EZLN and the Government stalled, later distanced itself from these positions, and many of them moved closer to the official party. (See Freyermuth Enciso in this collection.)

Encounters and Conflicts of the Tzotzil People with the Mexican State:

A historical-anthropological perspective for understanding violence in San Pedro Chenalhó, Chipas.

Anna María Garza Caligaris and Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo

If the 1st of December 1994 is called by some the end of the "Salinist Dream,"¹ the 22nd of December 1997 seems to mark the climax of a nightmare. The violent murder of 45 people in the community of Acteal, municipality of Chenalhó, was the bloodiest of a series of aggressions carried out in different regions of the state by paramilitaries.

Many explanations have been offered to explain the degree of cruelty involved in the massacre of women and children, and the fact that several of the perpetrators were identified by the survivors as inhabitants of the municipality. These range from the existence of "family feuds" to the implicit explanation that indigenous communities tend to resolve their conflicts through violence. This naturalization of violence theory has been used to explain much of the so-called "intertribal warfare" in Africa; the notion of "fratricidal warfare" being based on an a-historic vision of peoples. This same premise seems to be behind the arguments of those who see the Zapatista movement as just another of the cyclical rebellions of the Mayan peoples, and some even speak of the start of a "new *Katún*," in reference to a millenarian interpretation of the Mayan calendar.

These perspectives, although they come from distinct political agendas, share a vision of the indigenous peoples as self-contained universes whose social processes are marked by millenarian cultures. To renounce historical and political perspectives is to contribute to the presentation of violence as almost a natural phenomenon and therefore unpredictable and unavoidable. But San Pedro Chenalhó is not frozen in time and space. It is part of a region and of a nation that are undergoing accelerated

changes and redistribution of power, the dynamics of which directly affect the lives of the inhabitants. We cannot understand the manner in which inter-communal differences have been recreated and exacerbated in the Highlands of Chiapas if we do not first analyze the historical relationship between the indigenous peoples and the nation-state.

San Pedro Chenalhó is not an isolated case; instead it appears to be part of a wider strategy that has affected the Chol, Tzotzil, Tojolabal and *mestiza* (mixed indigenous and Spanish bloodlines) populations. Each region would merit a detailed analysis to reconstruct the conditions which allowed the existing intra- and inter-communal differences between social groups to intensify and be used to develop what seems to be a counterinsurgency strategy designed to weaken the Zapatista social base. We suggest here that the reconstruction of the recent political history of Chenalhó can help us to understand some of the questions that arise out of the terrible massacre of Acteal.

If the historical perspective allows us to denaturalize the violence, the gender perspective gives us elements to understand the specific forms this violence takes in the actual context of war. It is no accident that most of those killed on the 22nd of December were women, nor that the paramilitaries constantly use rape to sow terror in communities that sympathize with the EZLN. The participation of women in the political sphere and their important role in the Zapatista resistance have shaken community power structures, at the same time as - from different spaces - they have come to question the hegemonic project of the nation.

The inhabitants of San Pedro Chenalhó: The relationship with the state and the *finca*²

If we abandon simplistic explanations such as the idea that indigenous people are pawns that can be moved at will by the powerful or the idea that simply relates violence to ethnicity, we have to explore how internal dynamic of the communities, local power groups, resistance and conflicts are developed, changed, and transformed through time. How these processes are closely interrelated to a much wider political, economic and cultural reality.

San Pedro, as it is now, encompasses within its territory what from the colonial era until just after the Mexican Revolution were three indig-

enous towns: San Pedro, Santa Marta and Magdalenas. Chamulas and Mitontics, who speak Tzotzil, have settled in the territory that borders on these municipalities; near their eastern border there are also Tzeltals, who originally came from Tenejapa and Cancuc, and some *mestizo* families live in the principal town and in Yabjteclum, the second most important town. Throughout history, the social and political composition of San Pedro Chenalhó, and even its geographical limits, have been molded in an ongoing relationship with the state and federal authorities. The constitution of the local authorities, their practices and customs, the distribution of land and wealth, and the correlation of forces between the diverse groups cannot be understood without taking into account the spaces created by both regional and national government institutions, churches, political parties and other interest groups.

We begin this historical outline at the end of the 19th Century when the redefinition of capitalism in Mexico brought with it the redistribution of economic and political power in Chiapas, and, thereby, had a powerful effect on the political and social realities of the Highland people. This was a time when, following the guidelines imposed from a centralized federal government, the most aggressive agrarian regulations took on vigor, freeing up land and indigenous labor for the market. There were enormous foreign investments in the Soconusco (the Coastal region of Chiapas) and large cash crop plantations were formed, particularly of coffee. At the same time the federal government granted enormous concessions of the rainforest to North American and European timber companies for the exploitation of fine hardwood. Consequently, this process brought with it multiple transformations in the lives of Chiapans. Nevertheless, its effects varied considerably over a territory that was already strongly differentiated due to three centuries of colonial life and the half-century that followed independence.³ If the Porfirio Díaz era managed to set the general direction of politics and economics and limited the powers of local authorities, the regional power groups adapted, negotiated, and managed to profit from the situation. On their part, indigenous peoples also tried to take advantage of the few glimmers of opportunity that opened up for them. At the end of the 19th century, in the Highlands new administrative arrangements created departments controlled by political leaders who represented the executive

powers of the state. These department chiefs could appoint town council clerks and secretaries who controlled tax collection and recruitment and management of labor for the plantations. The history of the *enganche* (down payment), as the trickery that was used to force indigenous peoples to work was called, has been the subject of numerous studies and literary works. These describe in great detail the demand for workers in the plantations and the extra-economic mechanisms used to attract them. The complicity between state government and plantation owners was sealed by the use of the force of public order and private security to hunt down fugitives and return them to their employers. The workers were, and still are, mostly male, but there were cases where the whole family was involved. The work carried out by women on the plantations is among the many themes still waiting to be properly researched.

In spite of their relative marginalization, the ruling classes of San Cristóbal, did not lose all their power, and their influence was felt principally in the Highlands. New haciendas invaded the lands of the Tzotzils and Tzeltals, to such an extent that by 1889 there were 950 plantations in the hands of landowners from San Cristóbal (Favre, 1984:72). This shared history of the Highland peoples had a different impact not only on each municipality but also on the diverse sub-regions that exist within them. The particularities of their processes depended as much on variable internal conditions and resources as on the relations that were established with the surrounding economic and political context. Jan Rus elaborates on this theme in his comparative work on Chamula, Chenalhó and Zinacantán during this period (Rus, 1988). Initially we will distinguish, like Rus, life on the plantation from that which developed in the community of San Pedro Chenalhó.

By the end of the 19th century, just a third of the Chenalhó territory was left in the hands of the indigenous people (Favre, 1984: 72). The other two-thirds – good, fertile land for growing coffee, sugar cane and other high priced crops – had been occupied by haciendas, among them Los Chorros, Tanaté (later the Puebla *ejido*⁴), Ajteal and Chixtetik. Arias, Rus (1988) and more recently Aubry⁵, have done detailed studies of the history of Los Chorros, which was a 'nursery' for plantation laborers and where they suffered some of the worst conditions of control and exploitation (Rus, 1988). These conditions were similar to those in the neigh-

boring town of Chamula, which supplied up to 40% of the required workforce (Favre, 1984: 74). Under these conditions, the differences between male and female work partially disappeared, so that many women did agricultural work on the plantations, alongside men, especially during the coffee harvest. They were subject, as were the men, to tremendous punishments for the least act of disobedience (Arias, no date, 12). At the same time, however, the women had to work in the landlord's house as well as do their own domestic chores (*Ibid.*). In the case of Simojovel it was reported that working in the "Big House" exposed them to harassment and sexual abuse. In this same municipality reigned the dreaded *droit de seigneur* where the landlord claimed the "right" to have sexual relations with indigenous girls before they married (Olivera, 1979). The complexity of the ritual and blood kinship relationships between the indigenous peoples and the landlord, and the loyalties that were thus generated, have also been studied by García de León (1985). Although we lack data on this subject for Chenalhó, it is to be believed that these practices were common during this period. It would be important to explore to what extent the existing ties between the present day political *cacicazgos* of Chenalhó and state power groups can be traced to the *clientelismo* and *compadrazgo* that arose during life on the plantation.⁶

No less profound were the changes in the social and political organization of the indigenous communities that were not absorbed into the plantations. With the establishment of haciendas in Chenalhó, poor mestizos who worked in commerce and various activities that supported the haciendas began to take up permanent residence in Chenalhó. The stories of Jacinto Arias recount that *mestizo* municipal clerks and secretaries allowed the shopkeepers to live in the town, granting them sites on the edge of the town. Soon the traditional town council was completely under the control of the newcomers (1990: 77). The free indigenous peoples often were forced to work for wages in order to pay fines and taxes raised by the town council and repay usurious loans, which they were frequently obliged to take out. For this reason, many women had to take on the agricultural work that traditionally men would have done, although not as intensively as in the vicinity of the haciendas. These women also suffered from sexual violence and harassment inflicted with absolute impunity by the mestizo masculine power (*Ibid.*).

The end of the Porfirio Díaz era gave the landowners of San Cristóbal an opportunity to recuperate their previous pre-eminence, which in turn provides us the chance to analyze how conflicts between regional powers often take advantage of the internal contradictions of communities. The level of effectiveness with which the state and mestizo power groups have been able to use and deepen these community divisions has greatly depended on the historical context. The processes of consolidation or crisis within the state also had repercussions on the type of control strategies that develop around it. It is also important to recognize, however, that the conflicts generated between regional power groups can be used by the communities in pursuit of their own interests. In fact, the conservative groups from San Cristóbal declared themselves for Madero and armed the indigenous peoples from the surrounding areas to attack the state capital in the name of the Revolution. Rus relates how in spite of being rapidly defeated, the Chamulas in particular changed their objectives and took advantage of the situation to avenge themselves of the indigenous authorities who had been corrupted by the recruitment agents (1988: 13). In this way, the Mexican Revolution represented a serious threat to the two power groups in Chiapas and finally provoked an alliance between them. The armed plantation owners took control of virtually the entire state and succeeded in getting the post-revolutionary federal government to accept their political and economic control. The plantation owners kept control of the land and, adapting to the new central power, made a series of dubious compromises that circumvented new federal laws. The free municipality law, for example, applied to localities with a mestizo population, thereby putting indigenous towns under their charge as municipal agencies. In this way, the mestizos kept official control of the town councils and the indigenous workforce.

The rise of the new *cacicazgos*

During the post-revolutionary era, new indigenous *cacicazgos* arose in Chenalhó, as in other municipalities in the Highlands. These signaled the establishment of a new type of relationship between the state and indigenous peoples. A system of control was created, similar to the En-

glish indirect rule of their colonies (Asad, 1973), by which local leaders became representatives of colonial interests. In the case of Chenalhó, the promoters, and later the bilingual teachers, have, since the 1960s, played an important role in this regard. Since the 1920s the leaders of Chenalhó have continually tried to regain control of their town council and their lands, at one point naming Manuel Arias Sojob as town clerk. Arias Sojob was one of the few young, literate indigenous people of that time who also had taken part in the revolution with the Carrancistas. In constant conflict with the town's ladinos⁷, they negotiated with the state government the establishment of the first school run by themselves (Arias 1990:100). Evidently only boys were educated there, and even now that some women have a chance to enter formal education, the percentage of illiteracy is much higher among women than amongst men. A little later, with the help of the federal government which, under President Lázaro Cárdenas, once more tried to limit local power groups, they succeeded in converting the old haciendas into *ejidos*⁸ (Arias, 1990: 103-103); the rest was held for communal use. According to Jan Rus (188: 31), in those years Chenalhó was the municipality with the most highly politicized and least traditional indigenous leadership in the Highlands. However, this was also the era in which a symbiotic relationship between the indigenous elite and the party that was emerging from the revolution was formed. Important land-owners, in repeated negotiations with the federal government, managed to retain control of the agrarian reform in such a way that its application was much more limited in Chiapas than elsewhere in the Republic (Favre, 1984: 89). The creation of *ejidos* had little effect on the plantations; instead they were granted land out of vacant national lands. At the same time, by means of corruption and other mechanisms, they maintained control over the indigenous municipalities.

Thus, in Chiapas the 1950s arrived with the influence of the state policy known as *Indigenismo*.⁹ The National Indigenist Institute (INI) went out of its way to have an effect on so-called backward "intercultural regions" that had not been transformed by Post-Revolutionary Society. San Cristóbal de las Casas and the Highlands could be considered a typical example, and indeed it was here where the first Regional Coordinating Center was created the Tzotzil-Tzeltal. The aim of these centers was to

promote "regional development and integration" for the colonial city as well as for the surrounding rural region. These efforts were to be supported by programs encouraging cultural change and the formation of a single *mestizo* culture: a forced process of acculturation.

Especially interesting for us is the creation of the bilingual promoter. The INI considered that contact between the communities and national society resulted in intergenerational dichotomies. A document written in the 1950s pointed to the rise of a group of culturally intermediate youths who lived on the edge of both cultures and societies without belonging to either, who could be the object of continuous and integrated efforts of education and thus facilitate the Indigenist work of induced cultural change (De la Fuente, 1973: 80-81). The INI, as with all the institutions that preceded it, never thought to include women among its promoters. Excluded as they were from formal education, women were monolingual and certainly, as far as the Institute was concerned, more traditional than the men of their own social group. This implicit argument was based on empirical data, such as levels of formal education, bilingualism, the use of indigenous clothing, etc.

This serves as a context to understand the development of a new power group within Highland communities, that of the promoters, who shortly thereafter were joined by bilingual teachers trained by the Bureau of Indigenous Education of the SEP (Secretary of Education). These promoters of health, justice, education, production, etc., and the bilingual teachers, generally aligned themselves with the interests of the local power groups and gradually took control of internal matters in the communities. Converted into mediators between their communities and governmental powers, they had access to political decisions and soon occupied many posts on the town council. The struggle for the position of municipal mayor thus became a battle between *campesinos* (peasants), who were gathered in an incipient opposition still inside the PRI (the official party), and teachers, more closely allied with the caciques and regional power groups. Since then, Chenalhó has been the Highland municipality that has had the most municipal presidents who were bilingual teachers. (Pineda 1995: 290).

The links between these new authorities with their diverse power bases - intra-community and regional - have been studied particularly

in the case of Chamula, owing to the conflicts there that have resulted in the expulsion of thousands of dissident indigenous peoples from the community. (In Chenalhó, and in other Highland municipalities, there have also been expulsions, although not as massive or so well publicized as those of Chamula). Above all, authorities greatly facilitated the presence of the state and federal government through multiple dependencies, programs and projects, while at the same time they tried to obstruct the creation of independent organizations.

The crisis of the control systems

The indigenous *caciques*, created and consolidated with the aid of official Indigenists, acted with relative autonomy until the 1970s. The control they had managed to establish over the rest of the indigenous population entered into crisis with the rise of the *campesino* movement, forcing the state to rethink its strategy.¹⁰

The federation and the state intervened in Chiapas with various objectives: promoting rural development, containing the rising *campesino* movement and the influence of opposition political parties and organizations, and curbing the evangelical missionaries who were then making inroads in the area. New aid, credit, organization and production agencies entered the scene in Chiapas as in the rest of the Mexican countryside including: INMECAFE, CONASUPO, and BANRURAL, among others. Seeking to counteract organized action, they renewed the Indigenist discourse at the same time as they tried to revitalize the Central Campesina (CNC), the official peasants' organization. In indigenous zones they set up Supreme Councils as the authorized representatives for the culture of each linguistic group.

At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, a local crisis in Chiapas and a general economic crisis in Mexico forced a reconsideration of the development model. At this time, the idea of "appropriate technology" was introduced: a strategy to reclaim and promote local resources in order to resolve the problems of the marginalized population, particularly in rural Mexico. This idea, in combination with the indigenist tradition of the Mexican State, resulted in the deployment of

programs of cultural recovery in the search for local resources. Subsequently, craft co-operatives and organizations, primary health care programs, and self-construction guilds were established. But the government intervention that closed some spaces to the *campesino* movement inadvertently opened up others that, though limited, could on occasions be appropriated by indigenous peoples. It is not surprising, then, that the discussion and the struggle for symbolic control of traditions and customs became an important axis of present conflicts.

By the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, the presence of opposition parties was more definitive; in Chenalhó the Socialist Workers' Party (PST) had a significant influence. Soon traditional power groups linked with the PRI headed a violent persecution against PST militants, without managing to eliminate their presence in the municipality (Martínez, 1995). In fact, members of the PST ardently promoted the development of a self-governing organization of coffee producers that soon became the Majomut Union of Coffee Producers, Ejidos and Communities, whose presence spread through almost half of the municipality (*Ibid.*).

At the end of the 1980s, the national elections provoked important adjustments in many of the opposition parties that were organized within the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction (PFCRN). The PST participated in this reconstruction, and emerged much weakened on national and local levels. In Chenalhó the corruption of one of its leaders, the president of the labor union, took credibility away from the party, causing many sympathizers to jump ship to other organizations and parties such as the *Campesino*-Teacher Solidarity Organization (SOCAMA), linked to the PRI, and the Indigenous Organization of the Highlands of Chiapas (ORIACH), linked to the recently founded Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD – the left-center party). The PST became the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction (PFCRN), which was already very much debilitated. But it was after the Zapatista uprising that the PFCRN lost the majority of its sympathizers. This was apparent in the federal and state elections of 1994 when Amado Avendaño of the PRD won by a large margin in Chenalhó while the number of votes for the PFCRN were insignificant. At the end of the 1970s, state intervention by parties and organizations had been targeted almost ex-

clusively at men. In this context indigenous women were considered the guardians of indigenous traditions, and were valued as such. Then came the first programs specifically directed at women, mainly concentrated in health and crafts. Little by little, some spaces of independently organized action began to open up for women. These, albeit in a limited way, began to have an influence on Chenalhó and other neighboring municipalities. Independent craft organizations arose (Jpas Joloviletik and Jolom Mayaetik) and non-governmental groups and organizations (NGOs) began to address issues of health, violence, and popular education. Some organizations opened up relatively autonomous spaces, allowing women to express themselves and even a faction of the Catholic Church began a process that a few years ago culminated in the creation of the Coordinating Body of Diocesan Women (CODIMUJ). Thus, in spite of their inherent contradictions, there developed a coexistence among the powerful *campesino* movement, Catholic ideas and forms of work inspired by Liberation Theology, and newly emerging gender demands.

The Zapatista impact and the autonomous projects

The Zapatista movement, which went public in 1994, found an echo in the organizational spaces that questioned the new power structures of the *caciques*. One of the first responses of the indigenous and *campesino* movement was to raze town halls (*alcaldías*) and to replace those municipal authorities that represented the interests of the official party and the state's power groups.

Since the beginning of the conflict in 1994, 26 Priista municipal councils in distinct regions of the state were changed and new municipal councils established as a way of disowning a system of government imposed by a centralized federal Government. Starting in 1996, the so-called "autonomous municipalities" were created, and, thus, San Pedro Michoacán, Tierra y Libertad, San Juan de la Libertad, San Juan Cancuc, Zona Autónoma de Tenejapa, Moisés Gandhi, Nuevo Bochil, Santa Catarina, Magdalena de la Paz, Ernesto Ché Guevara, San Andrés Sac'amché de los Pobres, Tzol Choj, Sitalá, Ixtapa, Amatenango de Valle,

Nuevo Venustiano Carranza, Nicolás Ruiz, Socoltenago and Polhó came into being. The majority of these municipalities were established according to the traditional manner of electing authorities independently from the electoral process. It could be argued that in spite of the regulatory law not yet established, modifications to the first paragraph of Article Four of the Constitution created the legal parameters for indigenous towns to organize their own forms of government.

The autonomous municipality of Polhó was established in April 1996, when Javier Ruíz Hernández was elected by 33 communities and neighborhoods of San Pedro Chenalhó as President of the Autonomous Council. The immediate precedent of this election was a ballot in the elections of 1995, where, in the tradition of what could be called the traditional normative system, the community assembly held an internal election to decide on the next municipal president. Since the founding of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) in the 1930s, the candidate of what was then the only party, was elected in assembly, and participation in the electoral process was simply to ratify this decision. With the founding of new political parties in the 1970s, the assembly became the space where those who would occupy municipal posts were chosen, with the participation of representatives of different parties. It was by means of this form of indigenous democracy that in 1995 Javier Ruíz Hernández, representative of the PRD assumed his post before the formal elections had taken place. Precisely for this reason, the government or state electoral council did not recognize him. This battle between the electoral democracy imposed by the federation and the indigenous democracy based on the community assembly lies behind many of the local conflicts, and as such deserves to be studied and analyzed in greater depth.

The reconstruction of the recent history of Chenalhó raises the following questions: What would have happened if, after the elections of 1995, the establishment of an autonomous municipal council elected in the tradition of customary law had been recognized? What would be the present situation if the state government had not supported the official candidate, Manuel Arias Pérez who had been appointed by the PRI rather than the candidate chosen by the community? It is not possible to imagine the later development of what official sources have reduced to "intercommunity conflicts," and whose most violent manifestation has been

the Acteal massacre, without the constant interference of the state and federal powers in local dynamics. The much documented complicity of state government officials in the creation of paramilitary groups is just a continuation of this long history of the creation of local *caciques*. These have been, in the town hall or the Department of Indigenous Affairs, the direct point of contact, and often of action, for the policies of federal and state power groups whose interests have little in common with the discussions and decisions of the community assemblies. The Acteal massacre was one more of a series of aggressions against communities in the autonomous municipality of Polhó. These attacks were simply provocations to get the EZLN support base to break the truce declared in the context of the Law of Dialogue and Conciliation. But they also constituted a direct attack on efforts to establish autonomous regions that demonstrate the viability of a new project of national reorganization.

After the invasion of Acteal, Mexican Army troops entered into the *ejidos* of Amparo Agua Tinta (capital of the autonomous municipality of Tierra y Libertad, in Las Margaritas), Morelia (capital of the autonomous municipality of 17 de Noviembre, in Altamirano), and Galeana (capital of the autonomous municipality of Francisco Gómez, in Ocosingo). Official declarations and those from the more conservative sector of the Chiapan Catholic Church, represented by the bishop of Tapachula, monseñor Felipe Arizmendi, pointed to the autonomous councils as being responsible for the division in the communities and called for the elimination of what they called "parallel governments."

It is not surprising that the federal government took advantage of the opportunity to attack the autonomous projects, especially taking into account that the demand for autonomy was the key point of the government's rejection of the San Andrés Accords. On December 19th, 1996, President Ernesto Zedillo rejected the agreements that his own representatives had reached with the EZLN and which deputies and senators of the COCOPA had converted into a proposal for a legal initiative. In the months that followed, the government launched a strong campaign of misinformation about the dangers that autonomy posed for the nation. The rejection of the demands for autonomy centered on two arguments: on the one hand, the danger of national disintegration and on the other, a total disqualification of indigenous cultures and forms

of organization by governmental legal advisors. The racism that permeates Mexican society became evident in the public debate about autonomy. Attorney Ignacio Burgoa Orihuela spoke of the danger that indigenous peoples "would return to human sacrifice" (*La Jornada Semanal*, Mar. 4, 1997) and anthropologists such as Roger Bartra warned against the seeds of "violence and anti-democracy" that recognition of autonomy would beget (*La Jornada Semanal*, Aug. 31, 1997).

The denials and clarifications made by the national indigenous movement and even the EZLN were useless against the specter of "national disintegration." In response to the official declarations, Adelfo Regino, a representative of the National Indigenous Congress, pointed out that:

There is nothing to fear. There is no reason for distrust and technical confusion; politically the concepts of sovereignty and autonomy are radically distinct. Traditionally it has been held that sovereignty is an attribute of states....On the contrary, autonomy is the faculty that peoples have inside the framework of the state - not outside of it - to determine their general conditions of life.... When Mexican indigenous peoples reclaim their right to free determination through concrete indigenous autonomy, they are not in conflict with sovereignty. (*La Jornada*, Jan. 19, 1997.)

At the national level the political debate centered on the distinct definitions of autonomy on the part of the indigenous movement, between communalists and regionalists, and within the state itself between the so-called 'hard liners' who categorically rejected autonomy and the 'negotiators' who proposed that the government come up with its own definition of autonomy.¹¹ Meanwhile, in the indigenous communities of Chiapas autonomy began to become a reality.

To place blame now on the autonomous municipality of Polhó for the deepening of the internal divisions in Chenalhó is to have an a-historic perspective of the conflict and deny the multiple factors that have intervened in the formation of local power groups. Of these, the most influential is the promotion of a military escalation that has little or nothing in common with the way in which the Tzotzil communities have resolved their internal conflicts, even in the most violent cases of

recent history. The ferocity with which the autonomous projects have been attacked, from academic and political discourse to the more frontal aggressions, which could be classified as ethnocide, raises many questions about the challenge these represent for the state. It is not the same to recognize multiculturalism as a function of "tolerance of difference" and touristic use of the same, as it is to envision a distinct national project in which multiculturalism implies free determination for indigenous peoples, decentralized power and the recognition of their right to build their own future.

An attack on the organization of civil society

Although the media have represented the massacred population of Acteal as belonging to the support base of the Zapatistas, in reality the majority of the inhabitants belonged to an organization called Las Abejas, which since its foundation has defined itself as an organization of civil society that works for peace and justice. In spite of their sympathies with the political and social demands of the EZLN, Las Abejas has maintained autonomy from the Zapatista leadership and their settlements have been defined as neutral territory.

Founded in November 1992 in the community of Tzanembolom, municipality of Chenalhó, the organization now includes 24 communities within the municipality among its members. From the very beginning, Las Abejas established close ties with the Dioceses of San Cristóbal and with the Fray Bartolomé Human Rights Center, which advised them on the defense of several of their members who were arbitrarily detained. A founding reason for this civil group was to defend the agrarian rights of two sisters, Catarina and María Hernández López, who were deprived of their inheritance by their brother, Agustín Hernández López.¹² This set the tone for Las Abejas' later organizational work in which women have played a fundamental role. Through the work of the Coordinating Body of Diocesan Women (CODIMUJ), the social pastoral work of the dioceses and their contacts with diverse NGOs, the members of Las Abejas found their own space for reflection and began to question many of the "traditional" practices that excluded them from political participation.

After the Zapatista uprising of 1994, Las Abejas played an important role in peaceful civilian resistance and participated in several of the new political arenas, such as the National Democratic Convention, the State Democratic Assembly of the Chiapan People and the National Indigenous Congress. Without abandoning a pacifistic stance, their membership responded to many of the EZLN calls for mobilization. As the relations between Priistas and Zapatistas polarized, Las Abejas was pressed to take one side or the other. Having rejected the use of arms, but identified by the Priistas as Zapatistas, Las Abejas became one of the groups most vulnerable to paramilitary attacks. Moreover, their proximity to the Dioceses of San Cristóbal made them an indirect means of attacking Bishop Samuel Ruíz and his pastoral team.

Women's participation in the political arena and the rise of new organizational spaces for them have become a symbol of the threats to "traditional power structures" that they must confront if the autonomous regions consolidate and the Zapatista struggle advances. In many communities women's meetings are now a synonym for the influence of the Zapatistas. For the same reason, these groups are frequently subjected to paramilitary aggression. The immediate reaction to the foundation of Las Abejas was the gang rape, in December 1992, of three of the wives of the founding members, one of whom was seven months pregnant. From then until now, violence against women has been the order of the day. In 1997 several of the members were kidnapped and forced to cook for the paramilitary groups under threat that their children would be killed if they escaped or refused. The massacre at Acteal was the most violent of this series of aggressions; killing these women was an attempt to destroy a symbol of Zapatista resistance. "Kill the seed," shouted the paramilitaries on the 22nd of December, and that was what they hoped to do.

What happened on the 22nd of December, 1997 in Acteal is neither a product of locally generated violence nor of personal vendetta. The responsibility of power groups within the state of Chiapas and of the federal government itself needs to be recognized if future tragedies are to be avoided. The authors hope that this reconstruction of historical events helps to unravel the tangle of contradictory and sometimes tendentious information that surrounds the violence in Chenalhó.

Notes

- ¹ "Salinist Dream" refers to the government and policies of Carlos Salinas de Gotari, PRI party President of Mexico from 1988 to 1994.
- ² Throughout, we will use the words *finca* and *finquero* for coffee plantations and large landowners, respectively, because of their special meaning in the historical memory of Chiapas' peasants.
- ³ Juan Pedro Viquiera, "Why are there indigenous people in Chiapas?", etcetera, 130:19.
- ⁴ *Ejid*os are lands returned to a community as part of a land reform. The *ejido* is a communal divided in small lots and given to peasants for their individual use. These lots cannot be sold or mortgaged. They can be inherited, but not subdivided. If a peasant moves away, his land remains with the communal governing body.
- ⁵ "El pueblo paramilitar de Los Chorros," (The paramilitary town of Los Chorros), *Masiosare*, Jan. 18, 1998.
- ⁶ *Cacicazgos* refers to the consolidated bases of economic and political power presided over by *caciques* (Mafia-style bosses). *Clientelismo* is the practice of giving preferential treatment to a particular interest group in exchange for its political support. *Compadrazgo* is the blood-brother bond between *compadres* or best friends.
- ⁷ Non-indigenous population.
- ⁸ *Haciendas* were privately owned ranches.
- ⁹ *Indigenismo* refers to state policies - designed for indigenous peoples by non-indigenous people - that promoted integration.
- ¹⁰ These structural crises of community power have been analyzed from various points of view. George Collier (1994) and Frank Cancian (1992) posit that these power struggles are strictly tied to crises in the national economic model. Others emphasize instead the importance of political and campesino organizations, which were gaining momentum in the region (Leyva and Ascencio, 1997). We consider both explanations to be intimately interrelated.
- ¹¹ At the Roundtable for Indigenous Rights and Culture, the hard-line was held by representatives of the Secretary of State and the conciliatory viewpoint, by representatives of the National Indigenous Institute. For a description of this even see Díaz Polanco, 1997.
- ¹² For a detailed history of the origins of Las Abejas, see "El vuelo de las Abejas," (The Flight of the Bees), in *Masiosare*, no. 6, Dec. 28, 1997.



Daily life in Xoyep. November 30, 1997



The Background to Acteal: Maternal mortality and birth control, silent genocide?

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The events that occurred at Acteal on the 22nd of December, 1997, caused public outrage not only in Mexico but also around the world. This massacre and the exodus undergone by thousands of people from Chenalhó reveal to us once again the miserable conditions under which the indigenous people of this region live. In this essay, I propose to analyze maternal mortality in the municipality of Chenalhó and will present the Acteal massacre as the culmination of the discrimination suffered by indigenous people in this country, particularly by women. Ultimately, I call for the state to assume responsibility for this discrimination. The question we should ask ourselves is if there exists any correlation between maternal mortality, aggressive campaigns for birth control, and the policy of extermination, which we have witnessed in Chiapas.

In the last four years, in spite of official claims that the causes that led to the 1994 uprising¹ had been resolved (based on the amount of official investment in the state), the living conditions and the level of marginalization in the Highland municipalities have not improved in the slightest. Paradoxically, the range of services offered by the health sector has been "broadened," while at the same time the sector has suffered one of its worst crises², which is manifest in the deteriorating quality of medical attention and the disparagement of the very population it should be serving.

There are different ways of exterminating a group: in the case of the people of Chenalhó and the rest of the Highlands this extermination began many years ago by way of neglect. In Acteal, four pregnant women died. Some of the survivors bore testimony to the way in which the bodies were slaughtered and treated with a ferocity previously unheard of in Mexico, in the manner of the Guatemalan *kailbiles*,³ by opening their bellies and ripping out their fetus. This symbolic violence synthesizes the policy of extermination towards these groups - marginalized and excluded from national progress⁴ - which has been sustained silently, unnoticed by many.

The context

In 1995 IEI-UNACH (Instituto de Estudios Indígenas de la Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas - Institute of Indigenous Studies of the Autonomous University of Chiapas) and COLEM (a women's NGO) carried out an investigation into the conditions and the context behind maternal mortality in the region. The initial plan was for the research to be carried out in two indigenous municipalities in the Chiapas Highlands: Chamula and Huixtán. However, local events during the second half of 1994 and the first half of 1995 led us to believe that these communities were not ideal for field work; political and religious polarization made the viability of the project doubtful. In reconsidering the place in which the study should be carried out, a decision was finally reached in favor of Chenalhó, since in this municipality the investigators had a greater number of personal contacts. Additionally, in spite of the fact that here, too, there existed a myriad of different groups - in political and religious terms - polarization in these communities seemed less evident, at least to the outside observer, because the processes of negotiation had been more successful. Moreover, there was no military presence.

Chenalhó shares borders to the north with Chalchihuitán and Pantelhó, to the east with Pantlehó, San Juan Cancuc and Tenejapa, to the south with Mitontic and Chamula, and to the west with Chamula and Larráinzar (INEGI, 1991).

The municipality of Chenalhó is the third most populous in the region and has one of the highest rates of population growth, with a total of 30,868 inhabitants and an average age of 14. Families possess an average of between one and two hectares of land. Only 43% of the population has access to municipal water, 22% have electricity and a scarce 6% have indoor plumbing. Houses mostly consist of one or two rooms with a beaten earth floor and walls of wood, reeds or mud.

Chenalhó is one of five municipalities with two or more ecosystems, with cold, warm and temperate lands. The increase in population and the subsequently greater demand for means of subsistence has forced inhabitants to have lands in different geographical locations, often many hours journey from their homes. Mobility both inside and outside the municipality is very high. The same family may have two or three houses

in different places and in the city. This has led to commercial interchange between the inhabitants of different areas and the *ladino* (non-indigenous) population of San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

In 1995, during the investigation, the negotiating capacity of the inhabitants was recognized. In spite of the diversity of religions, ethnicities and party loyalties, being from Chenalhó was considered a privilege which dominated other differences, and this was reflected in the commercial organization. Three different areas of work - maize, coffee and transport - had brought the people of Chenalhó together independently of their belonging to a particular party or religion, and indigenous people from other municipalities had been included in these organizations. Such was the case of the Tzotzil people from Chalchihuitán and Pantelhó who joined the coffee co-operative, and of the transport of fruit and vegetables, which has allowed the incorporation of carriers from other municipalities.

In recent years, the Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches have made major inroads in the municipality. According to the 1990 census, 20% of inhabitants professed these religions.⁵

Competency in Spanish and relations with the *mestizo* world contribute to the creation of inequalities in society. Municipal employees, teachers, health workers, traders, carriers and those who have studied beyond primary school level have different lifestyles than the rest of the population. Some of them acquired status based above all on their capacity to deal with *mestizos* and became leaders, dealers or local bosses.

Until recently, the inhabitants of Chenalhó were predominantly PRI supporters. Lately, however, there has been a proliferation of followers of other political parties, such as the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction (PCFRN), National Action (PAN), the Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the Labor Party (PT). In the most recent municipal elections the PRD won 20% of the vote, making it the second strongest electoral force in the municipality, and in the 1994 Federal elections it obtained 62% of the vote.⁶

Zapatismo in Chenalhó was consolidated after the 1994 uprising and during the course of the study it was clear that part of the population, independently of their religious, political or ethnic affiliation, sympathized with this movement. The demand for a dignified life for indigenous people was an element of social cohesion. Catholic, Presbyterian

and traditionalist communities joined this movement, which opened up the possibility of improving their living conditions in the short term, due to the encouragement of the San Andrés dialogue as proof that Zapatismo was a valid form of negotiating with the state. As time passed and the peace process stagnated, some communities abandoned the Zapatista option. However a respectful coexistence was maintained between sympathizers of the Zapatista movement and those who were not.⁷

Over the course of 1996 and 1997, some ominous signs revealed the mistrust and social polarization that existed in Chenalhó - such as the lynching of three indigenous people on the outskirts of Yibeljoj⁸; the murder of several youths who were found abandoned in a cavern near Chojolhó (according to testimony given to the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center); and rumors of the presence of "head cutters"⁹ in Poconichim.¹⁰

What is certain is that since 1994 the living standards of the indigenous people of the Highlands, including the people of Chenalhó, have not improved, and are as deplorable as those of the Guatemalan refugees during the first few years of their stay in the country (Freyermuth and Godfrey, 1993).

Health conditions

The following facts illustrate this situation: the principal causes of adult death in Chenalhó are the same as for pre-school children in Mexico as a whole (SSA, 1991). 39% of deaths among men and women of reproductive age are due to infectious respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases which along with pulmonary tuberculosis, are the three primary causes of death in the municipality. This profile differs greatly from that observed in the rest of the country, since for the country as a whole the principal causes of death for the 15 - 64 age group are accidents, malignant tumors and cardiovascular illnesses. Moreover, in Chenalhó four of the ten most common causes of death are not sufficiently specific, corresponding instead to local nosology.¹¹

Maternal death,¹² along with infant mortality, is a useful indicator in

evaluating the quality of medical attention, since the problems related to maternity and infancy are 90% curable. Maternal mortality acquires relevance in our country and in the world because there is evidence that the well-being of children under 5 years of age depends directly on the health and power which women possess both in the family and society (Banco Mundial, 1993). Maternal mortality in Mexico has not been a priority for the health sector for at least two decades, instead the focus has been on birth control programs euphemistically dubbed "family planning" or more recently "reproductive health."

In a study carried out in the offices of the civil register for the Chiapas Highlands it was observed that in some municipalities maternal death was six times higher than the national figure. While warning of the problems in collecting information (Freyermuth and Fernandez, 1997), it was considered necessary to recognize that not all cases were registered. In 1995 the cases of 40 women of reproductive age (15 - 49 years old) were followed up in Chenalhó, and it was found that there was an underestimation of 45% for the period 1988 - 1993. This means that for each case registered as a maternal death there exists another, unregistered one (Freyermuth and Garza, 1996).

The problems related with pregnancy, childbirth and its after-effects far from diminishing in the region, have actually increased.¹³ Nevertheless, according to the new plan recently made public by the Department of Health, maternal health is not a priority. Most likely this is the result of births in indigenous regions not being attended to either in clinics or in hospitals, and therefore the health sector lacks reliable figures.

Furthermore, recently the sale and indiscriminate use of Oxytocin¹⁴ - by practically anyone - have increased the risk of death and disability among women. The sheer frequency of ruptured uteruses and fetal deaths in the hospitals of San Cristóbal bear testimony to this.¹⁵

If the Department of Health truly wishes to solve the population's health problems, it faces two very complex sets of problems: the way in which indigenous people perceive and respond to its programs and strategies, and the way in which officials and workers in the health sector interpret and implement health policies aimed at the indigenous population.

Relationship with the population

For the health sector to make a positive impact, it must use the targeted social group itself as an immediate and daily reference when treating illnesses or injuries. Only in this way will it be accepted and will its actions have the desired effect. In general, health units in a poor, indigenous municipality such as Chenalhó are few and without sufficient resources. Despite the fact that in Chenalhó about 90% of the population could receive primary medical attention, there is a lack of trust in doctors and the health system. The population recognizes the efficacy of modern medicines, but values them more when they are prescribed by indigenous health workers. Moreover, the type of medical attention offered clashes with the local culture, especially in the case of non-Spanish speaking women, whose vision of life, health and illness is very different from the Western one.

Doctors and staff are not trained to understand the needs and expectations of indigenous women, for whom the methods of examination are very shameful. The treatment is often derogatory and explanations are not clear. This lack of trust does not only arise from the already unequal relationship between doctor and patient, but also from the relationship which has existed for many years between *mestizos* and indigenous people.

Women find themselves at an even greater disadvantage, since almost without exception they have no control over family resources; they have less knowledge of the language and culture of the *mestizos*; and they must obey men (father, spouse, brother, son, father-in-law and other male relatives). This situation of dependency is justified culturally as a form of "protection" with respect to other indigenous men and the *mestizo* world.

The lack of trust towards health institutions among the indigenous population is an obstacle to healthcare. The deaths of two women due to complications during birth illustrate this fact. The first woman, who was not even registered as a patient, sought help from the emergency room in the state hospital in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, but refused to be operated on and so died without receiving medical attention. Her family was originally from Chenalhó, and they had turned to the hospi-

tal on their own initiative. The second case was in Las Limas¹⁶ where the doctors identified a woman experiencing complications who needed to be brought to the hospital urgently. She and her relatives refused out of fear that the "armies" would hurt her, a few hours later the woman died.

But many sick women do not even have the option of medical intervention in an emergency situation. Of the forty situations registered during the study in only four did the relatives consider the health service as a way of resolving the problem. Three of the women, despite having been taken into hospital, died less than five days after they were let out.

The following testimony has been selected because, like others, it reveals the strategies to which the inhabitants of Chenalhó resort, since they are faced with such a high incidence of maternal death:

My first wife is dead, she died giving birth. My second wife as well, and now that I have my third wife she is pregnant. Now I'm on my third wife. We'll see what God says, I don't know if she, too, won't die on me.

With my first wife we had been together nearly three years, because we were going to have our second child. My first daughter was born all right. The second one was the one that died: the placenta never came out. That's how my Margarita died when she was barely 18, the placenta didn't come out and so she died. She lasted about half an hour and became very weak, then she fainted and died. First of all I fetched my parents-in-law who live very nearby, just down there, and then we sent for three midwives. We were all looking on when my wife passed away.

I didn't send for a midwife because in the old days the women hardly ever used a midwife. They could have their babies on their own, they could look after themselves. My mother was like that. So that's why I didn't bother to look for a midwife and when that happened to her she was very sick. It was my mother who went to look for the midwife. She just went to get her, and nobody asked her opinion. We didn't know anything then because we were both young and also because at the time my wife looked strong and healthy, as though she wasn't sick at all. That's why I wasn't worried.

I went to tell my mother and father-in-law, and her brothers and sisters. We all got together in our house and looked on. She writhed in pain and then relief came and she had her baby. It was born all right but the placenta just didn't come. We saw how she got weaker and weaker. She had no strength left and we didn't know what to do: I didn't know what to do. I felt as if I were lost.

It took about half an hour, or maybe fifteen minutes, that's how long she lasted. She couldn't speak any longer. She was very weak. When they heard that the placenta wouldn't come out, several women tried to see where it was, but not even that worked. Nobody could help her and she died. There I was holding her waist and the women were holding her as well, and she faded away in my arms, in the midwives' hands - the women who know how to look for the placenta.

Agustín's second wife died due to the misuse of Oxytocin, which led to a ruptured uterus. She survived for almost 72 hours after the birth and could have been brought to hospital, but neither her husband, brothers nor sisters, parents or in-laws considered that this would resolve the situation.

The truth is we lost the capacity to think. She asked for medicine. She asked for things but we didn't know what to do. She said to me - since we're sisters-in-law - 'Give me medicine, give me plants, I still want to recover.' (Sister-in-law, 30 years old)

If one analyses each of the 40 cases of women dying it is clear that institutional medicine is not recognized by the people of Chenalhó as an option, and so they do not turn to it in times of emergency.

Difficulties in communication, lack of trust and a scarcity of human and material resources are the problems which, according to the people of Chenalhó, prevent them from relying on health services.

In the health center, beyond in Yabteclum, when we go, what do they give us? There is nothing. They give you a few little medi-

cines. They aren't effective or else when you want more medicine there is no more to be had. It isn't like in the town, I think that even if there is a cure they can't get the medicine here. (Pentecostal pastor, 40 years old)

If there was a doctor we would get him to give us an injection, but there isn't one. As there isn't a doctor, they tell people to pray or to cure themselves with *Ilol* (traditional healers). (Male, 30 years old)

They wouldn't let me in. The one who went in was the driver. I thought I would go in but they wouldn't let me. 'You can't come in here,' they said. Then my wife went in. When we arrived they took down the name of my late wife, after that they only asked for my name and got me to sign. My wife didn't want to be operated on but as the child was already dead they had to operate. I thought that if they were going to operate they should do it once and for all so that there would be no more children. That's what I wanted but they wouldn't let me speak. They pushed me out and only asked for my signature. But my late wife didn't want them to operate on her. 'Go on, they won't operate,' that's what I said, that's all I said to her. (Male, 28 years old)

A lot of women don't want to go, because they have heard they are made to take their clothes off. That's what the women don't want. That's why my wife doesn't want to go. She prefers to be here. (Male, 27 years old)

There are also inter-community problems which are generated as a result of the rules which were established for the functioning of the state clinics, like those of the Mexican Institute for Social Insurance (IMSS). People who go to these clinics face the following reaction:

At times we go to Takiukum. It's far and they don't give you medicine there. Because we didn't work on the clinic in Takiukum, and when we go to ask for medicine the woman there tells us 'I can't give you any medicine because you didn't do any work.' But I did

help to build the fence around the clinic. We went about three times to the clinic and they told us that now our work had been paid for, and that if my wife wanted attention then she had to go and wash laundry for the clinic. Because my wife didn't go to wash for them they didn't give medicine to her, only to the local people. (Male, 45 years old)

Well, who knows, I guess they don't dispense medicine to us because my husband is from Yaxgemel. He's from a different community. But they say that's not it, that they don't give it to people whose names aren't written down. (Woman, 60 years old)

The health sector

According to data from the Department of Health, in 1977 44 communities in the municipality of Chenalhó had access to SSA (Secretaria de Salubridad y Asistencia - Department of Health) services which could attend to a population of approximately 14,000. The SSA employs paramedics, TAPS (Técnicos en Atención Primaria de Salud - trained primarily to give only first aid- translator note) who practice in 13 communities with a total population of 4572 people. Additionally, the TAPS cover 2542 inhabitants in 21 communities through the Program of Increased Coverage (PAC). In 22 communities, the Social Security Department (IMSS) could attend to 13,097 people. In total, 90% of the population of Chenalhó could benefit from medical coverage. Nonetheless, as reflected in the perception of the inhabitants of these communities, the TAPS are faced with skepticism and mistrust, lack of medical supplies, communication problems and inconsistencies between what the SSA says and what it actually does. The result is a drastic reduction of healthcare coverage and impact:

Well, it's a very different experience. Despite the fact that I more or less understood the circumstances...it's very gratifying to work with people who really need the medical attention, and to be able to give all I can. Still, doing this is very, very difficult, because we

see everything here, everything. At the very beginning of my residency, we had many problems here just like in all of Chiapas. Especially in the Highlands, people look at you as if you come from the government, and this makes the situation difficult. Unfortunately, some government representatives have made huge promises: a new clinic, that is just being built; tons of medicine...and lots of other things. So now the people come to ask us, 'Where is the medicine and the new treatments? Where is the new clinic? The doctors take all the medicine for themselves, which is why there isn't any for us!' We also had lots of problems because...well, now I more or less understand, but at first I didn't know any of the native language, Tzotzil. And we didn't even have good translators at that time. They got everything mixed up. It was a big problem (una bronca). They [the people from the village] were even coming to kill us at night, because everything was mixed up, seriously, the translators said things that the patients did not say. (Medical Intern, 25 years old)

More or less you come to understand the way of thinking and decision-making. Due to the conflict, everyone here does whatever they want and it's impossible to work. In some communities, where the IMSS used to vaccinate children, now the inhabitants don't want any contact with outside healthcare workers. (Volunteer Doctor, 35 years old)

Health care institutions have not been able to provide maternal care during and after birth, and doctors have no way of resolving problems in this area of medical care. The maternal health situation is largely unknown in the region, since deaths of women of childbearing age are often registered as something other than related to birth complications.

As a strategy to improve health and living conditions, the health sector has given priority to birth control through methods of family planning instead of promoting and offering opportune and quality medical attention to high-risk pregnancies. This strategy has had the opposite effect, however, especially in communities where the program has been most aggressively promoted, for example, in the mainly Evangelical and

Pentecostal areas. There has been outright rejection of the programs, and some communities have spoken out against any form of family planning (even though some women desire it) due to the process of promotion and the way in which the procedures are pushed upon women.¹⁷ Because women associate complete sterilization – the birth control method most commonly promoted in indigenous communities – with hospitals, women are hesitant to seek medical attention even in extreme cases because they fear that once they are in the hospital, they will be sterilized or have to undergo other procedures that may put their lives at risk. In this way, the family planning program that was designed to improve the health of women has instead dissuaded mothers from seeking hospital care for complications with their pregnancies and births.

For those women who request to have their “tubes tied” (elective tubal ligation surgery) there is transportation available to and from the hospital, whereas no transportation is available for women with birth-related complications. In the new “reproductive health” program, birth control is the preferred form of reducing maternal death. The guiding principle behind this policy is that of eliminating the circumstances which cause the risk; in other words, minimize reproductive risks by eliminating reproduction altogether:

It seems to me that this “Chiapas Mission”¹⁸ was really genocidal because the aim was for women to have no more children. Government health officials showed up here to swamp us with contraception devices and pills. The people want to be cured, cured of diarrhea, bronchitis, pneumonia, and you have to tell them, “You know what? Well, we don’t have penicillin, nor do we have anything to take away diarrhea, but we do have something so that you don’t have any more children.” It seems absurd to me, but this is the reality here in Chenalhó, in Chiapas. It’s tough...I mean, there are no cures, nothing to save you, but there’s a ton of birth control. You ask for it and they give you whatever you want...even condoms....I can’t take it anymore. It is my obligation to offer contraceptives to every woman who walks through this door, and if I convince all of

them, even better. Personally, I find the situation to be quite unnerving. Here I am offering these contraception options to a 16-year-old girl. For me it is logical that if you lower mortality rates, birth rates will automatically come down as well [sic.]...but if you lower birth rates and mortality rates stay high, you’re going to end up without a population. (Medical Intern, 25 years old)

The study conducted in Chiapas suggests that maternal death continues to be a problem in the region, and above all, that healthcare institutions and community authorities both misunderstand and underestimate the problem. For the people of Chenalhó, maternal death is a fact of life and as such, it is perceived as a problem without solution.

For this reason it is necessary to rethink the reproductive health programs for indigenous populations, with the aim of having them more closely reflect social rather than demographic interests.

The health sector now faces the problem of defining priority programs on a national level. These should be developed in light of regional conditions, and should answer to particular necessities of the communities they are designed to reach. It goes without saying that they also need to be backed by funds sufficient for their effective implementation.

A program aimed at reducing maternal mortality in the region should take at least three points into consideration: 1) the intra- and inter-family dynamics that prevent women from seeking professional medical care, 2) the difficulty in transporting patients from remote places, including obstacles created by the military presence, and 3) the analysis and implementation of strategies which foment better understanding between healthcare professionals and the indigenous population. In the current context in Chiapas, one in which societal differences have become even more evident, it is necessary to design doable strategies that eliminate institutional racism. This racism¹⁹ characterizes and mars the relationships between healthcare professionals and the indigenous population, and has caused the most needy population to be excluded from medical care.

Notes

- ¹ The information in this article is the result of the "Maternal Death in Chenalhó" project, which was carried out in the municipality of Chenalhó and co-directed by Anna María Garza.
- ² Based on statements made on the radio in 1997 by Julio César Ruiz Ferro, ex-governor of Chiapas, and by Dr. Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León on the 1st of October when on an official visit to Chiapas (see *La Jornada*, November 2, 1997).
- ³ During 1996 and 1997 the SSA Hospital in San Cristóbal de Las Casas suffered a serious shortage of medicines and syringes, among other supplies. The lack of resources is also demonstrated by the fact that indigenous women from Los Altos have to go to San Cristóbal an average of 16 times for one case of elective surgery. Tracking of female patients sent to the SSA Hospital from communities in Chamula and Chenalhó was performed by Sebastiana Vázquez, Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal (COLEM)
- ⁴ See Falla, 1992.
- ⁵ See Díaz Polanco, 1997; Bonfil Batalla, 1987.
- ⁶ The census data must be treated with caution, since it does not separate traditional Catholics from institutional Catholics, which results in an overestimation of Catholics.
- ⁷ Alianza Cívica de San Cristóbal.
- ⁸ Fieldwork in 20 communities in Chenalhó.
- ⁹ Source: personal communication from two informants who live in two different communities in the present conflict zone.
- ¹⁰ The myth of the head cutters arose in Chiapas during the construction of the Pan-American Highway. In this period it was believed that the road and transport workers captured indigenous people and even mestizos in order to get their heads and hang them up during the construction of bridges or at the side of the road. This was to prevent setbacks to the work. This activity was considered to be economically viable and well paid. In 1996, I first heard that the head cutters could also be indigenous people
- ¹¹ Interview in a Chenalhó community in June 1995.
- ¹² Data obtained from death certificates. Local nosology (nosology being the classification of diseases) consists of naming a particular set of symptoms well identified by a particular group of people, and yet which do not necessarily correspond to the theories of homeopathic medicine. In the Chiapas Highlands one finds *potzloom*, *chulelal*, irregularity of the pulse, temperature, and swelling among other nosologies.
- ¹³ Maternal death is that resulting from causes directly or indirectly attributable to pregnancy, birth or the forty day period after birth.
- ¹⁴ In the municipality of Chenalhó there were eleven maternal deaths in the period 1988-1993 and seven in the years 1994-95

- ¹⁵ Oxytocin is a drug requiring very careful use to stimulate the elasticity of the uterus. It can be used, in hospitals, for the induction and conduction of births in special circumstances, and is sometimes administered after the placenta has been expelled to avoid post-natal bleeding. In Highland communities, Oxytocin is routinely being used before the placenta is expelled, "to speed up the birth."
- ¹⁶ In 1997, COLEM started a campaign against maternal death, which included the founding of a multidisciplinary and inter-institutional working group to discuss the topic (Fernández, ed., 1997).
- ¹⁷ On the 11th of December 1997, Las Limas was the site of talks between the parties involved in the current conflict. They took place in this community because it was considered neutral.
- ¹⁸ There are testimonies saying that doctors ask permission to sterilize a woman during her cesarean section, a situation that obviously generates incredible anxiety for pregnant women.
- ¹⁹ The "Chiapas Mission" was an intensive campaign to promote birth control in Chiapas in 1995.
- ²⁰ We use the term racism because healthcare strategies sometimes involve withholding medical attention from indigenous people, for example, by not speaking in Tzotzil even though there are translators contracted specifically to speak this language; or, by not being clear about the paperwork needed to gain access to medical attention; or, by refusing to give medical attention for various other reasons. Source: interviews with medical professionals (doctors and nurses) who work in the sector, 1997.

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Servicios Coordinados de Salud Pública del Estado de Chiapas

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The burial. Acteal, December 25, 1997

Displaced in San Cristóbal de las Casas.



Women and the Democracy Movement in San Pedro Chenalhó

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Introduction

Indigenous women's ways of surviving and dreams for the future illustrate the commonalities that unite indigenous people and that have brought women together in new ways over the past decades in highland Chiapas. The widespread democracy movement in San Pedro Chenalhó is one expression of this unity.

Yet women's stories also provide a sense of the differences in indigenous communities that have not received as much attention in discussions of the democracy movement. The victims of the massacre in Acteal, Chenalhó did not identify themselves as Zapatistas. However, they were sympathetic to the Zapatista movement. They belonged to *Sociedad Civil Las Abejas* (a largely Catholic group committed to non-violent resistance). Today, in Chenalhó "Civil Society" is an umbrella term to refer to the three major sectors of the democracy movement - *Las Abejas*, Zapatista support bases (groups of people who openly identify themselves as Zapatista supporters), and "independents" (people who support democracy but do not wish to join a formal organization).

In this essay, I describe differences within Civil Society in Chenalhó. I do so by comparing the lives of two women - a Zapatista supporter and an independent. I describe how these two women have experienced divisions within the democracy movement and the more important difference between those in this movement and supporters of the PRI, the political party that has controlled Pedranos' affairs throughout most of the 20th century. Through the two women's stories, I also draw attention to the ways Pedranos have struggled with deepening poverty and discrimination both before and after the democracy movement.

Antonia, forty years old and the mother of six, embraces the Zapatista democracy movement as her own. Since the mid 1980s, her involvement in the Catholic church and a weaving cooperative helped prepare her to be able to take a more active role in shaping democracy in her township. In the three social movements in which she is involved, Antonia has gained leadership skills and knowledge of the world outside her region as well as a sense of belonging to a community of fellow strugglers who understand her needs and dreams.

Mónica, also forty and the mother of seven, has been only marginally involved in the Catholic church and does not know how to weave well enough to join a cooperative. Although Mónica supports democracy, she finds the Zapatista movement too radical for her liking. She has chosen to focus on her children's education and on raising her family's standard of living through operating a store in her house and through supporting her husband in his work as a primary school teacher in their hamlet.¹

The differences that are most problematic for women and men in Chenalhó are religious and political. Before Protestant and Catholic missionaries began proselytizing in highland Chiapas in mid-century, a category of religious experience had no specific meaning for indigenous people, making spiritual matters indistinguishable from other matters. Today, Pedranos still don't separate spiritual concerns from other concerns, but they now divide themselves into three quite distinct groups: Traditionalists, who still follow the folk Catholicism that has evolved out of almost five centuries of contact with the Catholic church; Protestants of diverse denominations; and followers of "The Word of God," the term Pedranos give to the "Preferential Option for the Poor," that the Catholic Church in Chiapas has taken under the direction of Bishop Samuel Ruíz García. Membership in the above groups has become an important source of identity for Pedranos. In the late 1980s, Protestants in Chenalhó also showed a strong desire to stay united with their non-Protestant neighbors. Hence, they decided to nominally cooperate (pay a small amount of money three times a year for communal ceremonies) so as not to divide their township or risk massive expulsions. For their part, Traditionalists agreed not to force Protestants to serve communal cargos, roles of service that people fill without pay and that they often

receive callings to perform in dreams (Eber 1995: 230). Since the Zapatista rebellion, some Protestants in Chenalhó have also joined Zapatista support bases despite the focus in most Protestant groups on preparing for justice in heaven, rather than struggling for it on earth.

In addition to religious distinctions, Pedranos have also differentiated along political lines. The primary distinction that has gained importance since the rebellion is between members of the democracy movement and supporters of PRI. However, another difference, which PRI supporters have used to destabilize the movement, is between members of Zapatista support bases and the other two sectors of civil society.

Leading up to the rebellion, the PRD created a wide base of support for democratic change in Chenalhó. Its members came from all sectors of civil society. However, the alliance between the major sectors of PRD was short lived. In the Spring of 1995, PRD supporters staged an unusual pre-election for township president in which their candidate won over the incumbent president who was a member of PRI aligned with powerful men in the township and region and state government officials. But rather than wait until fall, the Zapatista sympathizer group within PRD forced the PRI president out of office and instated the PRD president. In retaliation PRI supporters called in the state and federal police who dislodged the PRD president and reinstated the PRI president on January 8, 1996. The Zapatista sympathizers, of which Antonia was a part, responded to this action by separating from the formal political structure and creating an autonomous township government on April 13, 1996. The seat of this new government is in the hamlet of Polhó, not far from Acteal.

Until recently differences based on economics have been minimal in San Pedro Chenalhó; opportunities to acquire large amounts of cash have been few and core values have kept a cap on rampant individualism. Becoming a teacher or aligning oneself with the PRI-backed township presidency have been the principal ways to acquire cash and political power. Nevertheless, everyone in Chenalhó is dependent on earning some cash to buy what he or she cannot produce or make. Differences are salient in the ways people seek to acquire cash - privately or through cooperatives. Indigenous women have been leaders in cooperative endeavors through their participation in artisan work. Although

a relatively small number of women have organized into artisan cooperatives, such groups ameliorate the worst effects of economic exploitation and maintain communal values. Nevertheless, women in cooperatives continue to bear untenable economic and political risks. For stepping out of traditional roles many cooperative leaders have been physically assaulted and have suffered extensive psychological stress. In addition to the recent escalation in violence toward cooperatives, the number of cooperatives has grown and supply outstrips demand. Even when weavers are able to sell their work they often wait as many as eight months to receive pay from fair trade companies that struggle to keep afloat in the competitive global marketplace (Eber 2000 (a); Eber and Rosenbaum, 1993; Nash, 1993; Rovira 1987: 179-198). Cooperatives are poignant reminders of alternatives to a cash economy that indigenous people used before capitalism forced them to abandon these.

Antonia

I've carried the government on my back, since I was born. It's time to throw this burden off.

Antonia spoke these words to me bending over the fire tending a pot of beans while her toddler slept on her back. Since I've known Antonia, the back of her elaborately brocaded blouse has often been covered by a sleeping baby, a jug of water, or a net bag of produce. Antonia carries her burdens with grace and rarely complains. Only now, almost two years after the conflict began in Chiapas, I hear her complaining about a load that has become too heavy to carry any more.

In 1987, when I lived with Antonia and her husband, Domingo, I spent many hours talking with them about how the state of Chiapas and the Mexican government disregards the needs and rights of indigenous people. I could see the disregard with my own eyes - the lack of electricity and sanitation facilities, the scarcity of schools, health clinics, and wells or other sources of clean water. But Antonia and Domingo did not just sit back and watch as their world turned upside down. In the 1980s as the debt crisis deepened, Domingo made routine trips to Villahermosa

and other distant cities when wage labor was available or to buy merchandise to resell back home. In her own and adjacent hamlets, Antonia helped organize women into a weaving cooperative to take advantage of sales to tourists who come to the nearby city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Together Antonia and Domingo planted coffee in hopes that when their trees matured the price of coffee would be high. They also began to read the Bible and relate it to their lives under the direction of Catholic priests, nuns, and catechists who were part of The Word of God.

In meetings and workshops of The Word of God, Antonia learned to connect her personal troubles to social issues by relating understandings from the Bible to her own experiences and ancestral teachings. She co-facilitated discussions with a man, not her husband, when it came her turn, and spoke up in services and public meetings when she had something to say. During this process, Antonia developed a more assertive and independent style, which threatened some people in her community who felt that this way of being was inappropriate for young women. Antonia faced much criticism for her progressive ideas and participation in the public arena. Summing up the conflict she faced during this time, Antonia said,

For example, if I want to put behind me something that's not so good about our traditions, the Traditionalists say, 'What she's doing is no good.' But if I want to act on something good in the traditions the religious ones will say, 'Ah, she's still doing things according to the traditions. She doesn't believe in the Word of God.' This way the two ways collide.

When I visited Antonia in 1993, I found her only minimally involved in The Word of God. She explained that increasing childcare and co-op demands were taking all her time and energy. In addition to her increasing workload, the personal risks involved in individuating herself from the community had become too much for Antonia. Antonia told me that she felt alone in her struggle for justice. Although her mother, sisters and some other women agreed with her, they did not speak up. Only she had the courage to speak.

Antonia continued her leadership of the weaving cooperative, but it had become a burden as well as a risk. The only reason she did not give it up was the commitment she had made to the other women in her group. During this time, Antonia seemed despondent over the challenge of providing for five children and another on the way.

On January 3, 1994, three days after the Zapatistas rekindled a spirit of resistance, Antonia gave birth to her sixth child. Despite another mouth to feed and political and religious conflicts, hope seemed to come back into Antonia's life with the birth of a second daughter and new possibilities for indigenous people. During this time Antonia wrote me a letter offering her thoughts on the uprising. In one part she said:

I am very content that there are people called Zapatistas. I didn't know how we could struggle to make the government hear us. For years only the Catholics went to San Cristóbal or Tuxtla [the state capitol] to march. And the government didn't pay any attention to us. ...It's been two years since I went to Tuxtla to march with thousands of people. We came together in Chiapa de Corzo. Walking by foot from there we arrived in Tuxtla. It was really hot and I was carrying my Zenaida [her two year-old daughter]. But it [the government] only treated us like animals, like flies that fill up the streets...I don't want to complain to the government any more It doesn't understand anything....It treats us like animals. But it is often more animal than we are....

Antonia told me that when she and Domingo first heard that a group of indigenous rebels calling themselves Zapatistas had seized several towns, they did not know what to think. Although they reported being afraid, they also said they felt excited to think that some indigenous people, not much different from themselves, had found a way to be heard. As the year progressed Antonia and Domingo and others from The Word of God as well as Traditionalists and Protestants came together to talk about problems in their community. Eventually, Zapatista representatives traveled from their bases to help them organize themselves into support bases. Antonia quickly saw the similarity between these bases and the groups she had helped form through The

Word of God. In the latter groups, which meet in chapels or in homes, people discuss their community's problems, how people are experiencing poverty, and how they can orient their actions toward Jesus' teachings in the Bible.

Like priests and nuns, representatives of the EZLN spoke of the importance of hearing everyone's views on community problems and of the need for equality between men and women. EZLN representatives urged support bases to elect women leaders and stressed that women should be involved in the public affairs of their communities, not just cooking, weaving, and taking care of children.

When the split between the two factions of PRD occurred, Antonia joined supporters of the autonomous government. This decision drove a further wedge between her and her extended family. No one in her family beside Domingo was a member of a base of support, and they disagreed with the decision to form an autonomous government. Antonia's family members and the other women in the weaving co-op became fearful that Antonia and the other base members were putting the whole township at risk. Eventually, one of Antonia's brothers-in-law became active in Civil Society as a representative of Las Abejas. Because Las Abejas does not have formal leadership positions for women, Antonia's sister could not participate on a par with her husband. Antonia, in contrast, held a leadership position in her base as president of the bakery cooperative that women members of the base formed. Antonia defended the autonomous government with her relatives arguing that no other option existed to go on living with any measure of dignity. She explained:

... We want to be clean. It's necessary to be separate, well separated. It's necessary to break away in order to be free to form ourselves, to offer opinions that come from within our groups. That's what we are thinking. We don't want to be a part of it [the formal government] anymore.

To help me understand how she and other Zapatista sympathizers felt trying to form a new government, Antonia made the analogy to a new baby who comes into the world without resources or knowledge, but little

by little gains strength and experience and is able to stand on its own feet:

Here in the autonomous township, well, we have been like babies, like a newborn who doesn't know how to survive yet. A baby doesn't have money yet. It doesn't have a milpa or clothes. It doesn't have anything. Then, it's like us.... It's that we don't know how to work well yet. But later, when we are mature, let's say, perhaps if God wants it, we will have economic resources.

Fearing that people might think she means that her people are like baby birds waiting for their mother or God to drop food in their mouths, Antonia added:

It's not that we stay like a baby, waiting for his food. No, we can look for our own food. We know how to seek it. We are searching. We have our mind, struggle, and imagination. We know what to do.

Since Antonia spoke these words to me in 1996, she and the other approximately eighty women in the base of support have found many creative ways to express their imaginations. In their collective work in the base the women seem to have found ways to both remain faithful to the traditions they value and yet obtain rights for themselves as women. Bases are a new avenue for women to reshape their people's cultural traditions into new forms that give them a greater public role. Zapatista bases bear many similarities to the Christian Base Communities in which Antonia participated during the 1980s as a member of The Word of God. In July 1996 during conversations with Antoni about her involvement in the Zapatista base, she explained that this work is an outgrowth of her work in The Word of God:

Well, the struggle in which we are now in.... we call it a "holy struggle".... For example,... one can't give up The Word of God when one gets involved in the struggle. One can continue with the two, because the struggle is connected with the Word of God. Because I know when I entered in The Word of God I always talked about injustice, about the government's exploitation. We talked about this before The Struggle came. That's why when The Struggle

arrived, well, then we compared it to when we were in The Word of God. Because the Word was like our flashlight it's my flashlight to see my way, where I can walk with my struggles.

Antonia explained that although The Word of God lit the path for her and others seeking justice, a big log lay across their path. The log was the rich people and the government who exploited poor people. Poor people could only go so far, because they had no way to cut the log until the Zapatistas showed them how.

In the context of their holy struggle, men and women in Antonia's base and in the Word of God are discussing how to bring their lives in line with how their ancestors lived, how The Word of God says good Christians should live, and how the Zapatistas say indigenous people can bring about peace with justice. During the course of their discussions, base members have been articulating a code for a cultural revitalization movement. Evidence for this code can be found in the efforts of bases to restore balance in social relations, a requirement for health and well being in indigenous communities. Base members began their work by tackling one of the most pressing imbalances - alcohol abuse. A related concern is women's rights.

Incorporating women more fully into political life involved first finding women to fill leadership roles in the base. This step proved to be a painful one. While base members say they must have equal numbers of men and women representatives - four men and four women - among the approximately eighty women benging to the base only three woman could be found who were able to serve. Representing a Zapatista base of support requires women to leave their homes for frequent meetings, often in distant hamlets. Most women with children face many obstacles to attending meetings, even those in their local communities. Obstacles range from providing for child care, paying for transportation to meetings, exhaustion from adding organizing work to housework, childcare, fieldwork, and weaving or other craft production, and a gender ideology that associates women with proximity to households.

Antonia was a logical choice for one of the four women representatives. But with six children she had to decline the nomination. Antonia reported that base members were loath to accept her decision, and she

felt sad not to be able to serve the base in this way. She had no choice. In contrast to her position in the weaving cooperative, which was integrated into traditional ideas of women's roles and did not require her to leave home often, the position for the base would require her to attend many local and regional meetings. Being away from home so much would not allow her to fulfill her roles as mother, wife, and weaver.

The three current women base representatives are two single women and one divorced woman with older children. The women base members decided that only single women should serve as representatives, because it is too difficult for married women to fulfill their responsibilities to both their households and the base. In the case of the representative who is divorced with older children, base members help her and her children at times so she can fulfill her duties for the base, for example by repairing her house or working in her milpa. When I asked Antonia why a man in the base couldn't take over more of his wife's work so that she could be a representative, she replied that it would be good if a man would do this, but so far the women had not been talking about pushing for such a major change.

At this time, the rhetoric and organizational structure of bases that has come from Zapatista directives does not mesh well with the realities of indigenous women's lives. However, women in Antonia's base are building bridges to the Zapatistas' agenda by working from within their household-based roles and traditional gender ideology to create group projects that empower them. One such project, *Mujeres Marginadas* is a bakery cooperative in which base members divide the labor by gender but women have the overall leadership. For example, men collect firewood and assist in whatever other ways are needed while women bake and serve as co-op officers. The bakery project illustrates women's desire to perpetuate their people's complementary division of labor, while drawing attention to their economic marginalization both as women and as indigenous people. Antonia is president of this group. In this group, she is able to serve her base in ways that support her ongoing roles and definitions of herself, while working together with other women to strengthen their positions in their communities. Working from their valued identities and local knowledge, women in cooperatives like *Mujeres Marginadas* have increased options for autonomy in Chenalhó (Eber, 1999).

Mónica

I met Mónica when I was conducting a household survey in her hamlet, about five kilometers from Antonia's hamlet. It seemed that in every house I entered conversations eventually came around to Mónica, a woman who could tell me "anything I needed to know." I soon found that Mónica was worldlier than her neighbors, having lived in San Cristóbal when her husband, Bernabé, was training to be a teacher. But Mónica prefers living in the hamlet where she can grow her own corn, raise chickens, and run a small store out of her house. Unlike Bernabé, Mónica did not attend school past 6th grade. Still she speaks and writes Spanish well and keeps her mind sharp through conversations with her husband about his studies and through her curiosity about the world. Mónica speaks more Spanish than Tzotzil with her children, but only Tzotzil with Bernabé. By speaking Spanish, Mónica says she is trying to prepare her children to live in the Mestizo world. Following the example of Mestizos, Mónica and Bernabé have constructed a cement block-house with a gas stove where their wattle and daub house with an open fire once stood. Mónica pays a great deal of attention to her children's cleanliness and dresses them in clothes made of synthetic fabrics, although she continues to wear indigenous clothes of hand-woven cotton. She also gives her children ample instructions about how to behave, especially when they are among Mestizos. Mónica has a tendency to see Mestizo society as "superior" to her own, but she remains respectful of customs she considers strengthening and meaningful in her native culture. For example, Mónica lives in the same compound with her in-laws who are both shamans. When they are not abusing alcohol she maintains that her in-laws' prayers and herbal remedies work.

When I met Mónica, Bernabé was teaching in a distant hamlet where he lived during the week. Mónica maintained their house, children, animals and fields until he returned on weekends to help her. In 1994, Bernabé was transferred to the school in their hamlet, to the couple's relief. Bernabé takes his job seriously and doesn't disrespect his students or their parents. This makes him stand out from many indigenous teachers who regard their village-based traditions as backward and consider their jobs a sort of exile. When I was conducting research in

the late 1980s, parents described to me the countless times teachers did not show up for work, came to school drunk, or abused children. I discovered that some men take wives in hamlets, then abandon them when their tenure in the hamlet is over. Others have affairs with married women (Eber 2000 (b): 200-202).

Mónica and Bernabé place a high value on education as the way for their children to succeed. Because schools do not go beyond sixth grade in hamlets, the couple have made the sacrifice to build a house on the outskirts of San Cristóbal and divide their time between both homes so their eldest daughter can go to secondary school. Their decision did not come easily. Both Mónica and Bernabé prefer living in the hamlet where Bernabé is close to his work and parents. Mónica says she feels as if her body is in San Cristóbal while her soul stays in the hamlet with the plants and animals. After much discussion and tears on the part of Lucia, their daughter, the couple agreed to let her continue her education. Mónica explains:

I didn't want her to study because I felt very alone. I wanted to have her in the house....[I told her] "Give up your studies, stay in the house. We have to do something, raise chickens, have turkeys and pigs to live." But she didn't want this. She began to cry to the point where she didn't eat for two days because of sadness, because my daughter doesn't want to give up her studies...."Well," her father said, "It's better for you to study. We'll find the money. You are going to study." That's how we came here for her to study. Right now it's necessary to be here, so she can advance in her studies.

Finding the money for children to study is not easy, even for a father with a salary. Parents must pay for books, supplies, uniforms, and shoes. For children living in hamlets parents must either pay the child's room and board or rent a room or build a separate house where their children attend school. Most parents, including Bernabé and Mónica, must borrow money to pay these expenses. Although Mónica wants to respect Lucia's desire to study, she explains that her daughter needs to take responsibility for her progress:

The only thing I want is for her to behave herself, be well behaved, and not just spend money. Right now my husband and I are thinking that she should continue, now that she's already started. Well, she should follow it as far as she can go. But if she no longer wants to, it's not our problem any more. It's her problem. Right now we are giving our children freedom to study, now that we have a little house here. That is, if they still feel like it.

One day when I was visiting Mónica and her family, Lucia was preparing to attend a registration session at her prospective school. I watched as Mónica instructed Lucia how to sit modestly in her short Mestiza skirt. Mónica even felt it necessary to tell Lucia how she should behave so as not to invite male teachers to touch her breasts or other parts of her body. Mónica's instructions to her daughter in Spanish about how to deal with Mestizo men was a poignant reminder of the risks Lucia and her parents are taking.

Despite the strange and sometimes abusive world indigenous children must negotiate to go to school, Mónica is concerned that without education her children will have very difficult lives. She encourages other women in her hamlet to send their daughters to school as she is doing. Mónica describes the fate of the girls in her hamlet who do not go to school:

I see young women out there [the hamlet] begin to cry. Really. They would also like [to study]. "I would like to study, like your daughter," they say. "If only you could study," I say. But sadly there's no money. We [our people] can't study. That's how it is right now....That's why the boys and girls stay [at home]. They marry there. Well, they are poor, poor things. If her [a girl's] husband doesn't have money then they are without clothes. Or if he goes to drink rum or look for another woman, then the young wife is left abandoned. That's the way it is. That's sad, no? It's the sadness of poverty.

Mónica seems reluctant to join a religious movement to confront injustice, as Antonia has. Nevertheless, she and Bernabé participated for a

while in meetings of The Word of God and have called upon catechists in their hamlet to pray for their children when they were sick. Neither Mónica nor Bernabé have turned to any of the Protestant religions that have been gaining converts in their township, even though they share with many Protestants a focus on private capital accumulation. With an Evangelical temple across the road from her house, Mónica has had ample opportunity to learn about one Protestant religion. She says that she does not want to join this group because she sees that they only help their own people, and she wants to help everyone, irrespective of their religion.

Before the uprising Mónica organized meetings of women in her hamlet to discuss their concerns and problems, particularly around reproductive issues, health and childcare. Mónica took the initiative to get women together after talking with her neighbors about their desire to have fewer children and after a visit from a public health nurse. In their meetings women talked about how difficult it is to care for a lot of children. Mónica has seven children. Although she has taken birth control pills for periods of time, Mónica understands women's fear of birth control methods that come from outside of their people's traditional herbal methods. Some women fear that government representatives who promote sterilization want to limit indigenous people's families in order to dominate them. Women also fear botched abortions by inexperienced doctors who resent having to work with indigenous people in rural outposts. In light of these fears, I was startled to hear Mónica say she knew of many women in her hamlet who were sterilized between 1995 and 1996. Mónica attributed their decision to the failed corn crop that year. According to Mónica, watching their children suffer from hunger drove these women to seek a procedure they feared.

Unlike Mónica, whose husband's salary can buy corn, most women have nowhere to turn when their crops fail. Many women already work in the fields alongside their husbands or work for periods of time in wage labor on plantations, when such work is available. Some women who weave well enough to sell their blouses to other women can compensate for not working in the milpa by bringing in cash to buy corn or by paying others to work in the fields for them. Often mothers who have to work in the milpa must leave small children in the care of only

slightly older children. Mónica admits that she can feed her children, keep them clean, and not depend on their labor beyond household chores because her husband earns a salary and they can buy food, if they cannot grow enough, as well as soap and other household items. Mónica describes the suffering poverty brings to women and their children:

At five or seven years of age children have already begun to work with little spades. Yes, girls and boys all have to work. Yes, the children die from lack of food. They [mothers] feel bad for their children. The children see other children walking with sandals or shoes, or a new skirt or blouse. They also want to have these things. But, sadly, the mothers can't buy them. And yes, the mothers or the children begin to cry. They all begin to get sad. That's how we are.

The year after the uprising Mónica and Bernabé joined others members of civil society in their township in backing PRD's efforts to seat a more responsive candidate in the township presidency. Like Antonia and Domingo, they were distrustful of past municipal presidents who aligned themselves with PRI. Monica goes along with the Zapatistas' overall goal of greater social justice and unity among poor peasants, but she does not agree with the actions of the Zapatista sympathizer group to which Antonia belongs, which forced the PRD candidate into office early; nor does she agree with the alternative government in her township which this group established. Mónica repeated many rumors she heard about the radical social changes that the alternative government would make, e.g. demanding that everyone contribute some of their harvest to help support the leaders; that those with more land give to those with less so that everyone has the same amount of land; that teachers, like Bernabé work without pay; and lastly, that people with a lot of children give one or more of their children to those who don't have any or only a few. Even though Mónica found the last rumor far-fetched, she feared that by separating their township into two parts, the Zapatista sympathizers would destroy the chances for PRD to win future elections and be officially supported by government funds. She feared that divisions could eventually lead PRI, which she equates with the government, to withdraw the material aid (e.g. free food and aluminum sheeting for

roofs) that people had come to rely upon, proving their dependence on PRI and encouraging people to leave PRD for PRI.

Rumors about the Zapatistas have fueled fear and discord in Antonia's and Mónica's communities leading to a demonology resulting in witchcraft accusations and assassinations. Although people in Chenalhó have struggled with their differences, their enemies have been fairly clear - corrupt PRI politicians and oppressive Mestizos. But in the spring of 1996 an enemy began to emerge from within hamlets of Chenalhó. In July 1996 during my visit to Chenalhó, I was assailed by stories of indigenous men in black hoods who stalked people on trails and cut off their heads, which they were supposed to have sold for enormous sums. Although no headless corpse was ever brought to the authorities, the rumors occurred at a time when many Pedranos were being threatened or attacked by men trained by paramilitary groups that had come from outside their township. Attacks and threats from these men along with the stories of faceless assassins, fed into the tragic murders of seven young men by an angry mob in the central town of Chenalhó in August, 1996. The boys' bodies were thrown into a deep crevice several kilometers from the central town. At least some of the impetus for murdering the young men seems to have been shouts from the mob accusing them of being Zapatistas.

The escalating violence in 1997

In July 1997 when I visited Chenalhó, I was fortunate to spend many days with Antonia. She told me about the changes that had occurred in her township in the first half of 1997 and shared her concerns about what the violence might be leading up to. On one of our walks to visit her mother, Antonia pointed out to me in the distance a man on a horse who was reported to be stockpiling guns in his house to use to kill Zapatistas. Antonia's eldest son, Felipe, had taken on the position of sentry for the hamlet. Each night when I stayed with his family Felipe would climb the mountain to guard his community from intruders or a paramilitary invasion. Although the position is a dangerous one, Antonia was relieved when her son took this position because for some time he

had been hanging out with young men in the central town who were not respecting the elders nor serving their communities.

Another of Antonia's boys, Sebastian, took on new work, usually identified with women, in response to the low-intensity war. When I was back in the states during the fall, I received a shipment of weavings from the weaving cooperative that contained some by Sebastian. I marveled at the beauty of his work, but was saddened to find out that Sebastian is now weaving because of the dire need for cash and because it is too dangerous to work in the fields. I know Sebastian to be a passionate farmer who worries about the welfare of his crops when he is not close by to tend them. Hunger due to lost crops is a major problem associated with the low-intensity war in Chiapas.

In June 1998, when I visited highland Chiapas, I did not attempt to enter Chenalhó for fear of being deported or of bringing reprisals against my friends there.² However, I was fortunate to be able to visit Mónica in her home in San Cristóbal and talk with Antonia when she came to the city. Antonia's and Mónica's lives and the lives of their families were dramatically transformed by the escalating violence and the massacre in Acteal on December 22, 1997. Apart from the grief that the two women say they still feel over the loss of so many fellow Pedranos, the women live in fear of further violence. In 1997, Mónica's in-laws were driven out of their hamlet by paramilitaries and sought refuge for a few months in Polhó. Mónica and her family now live permanently in San Cristóbal, while Bernabé spends precious cash commuting daily to the school in their hamlet. Some days he and the other teachers have to close the school out of fear for their own and the children's safety. Every day Mónica wonders if Bernabé will return. In response to the large numbers of refugees in Chenalhó, Antonia has taken on a new position to help hundreds of women refugees in Polhó organize a cooperative through which to sell their weavings. She often travels to Polhó, all the while fearing that the paramilitaries and PRI supporters will carry out their threat to "finish off" the Zapatistas.

I don't know if Antonia or Mónica learned what the attackers at Acteal said while they massacred the 45 men, women, and children, and fetuses of unborn children. They shouted, "We must destroy the seed!" As a representative of the seed that these opponents of democracy want

to destroy, Antonia places herself at risk of violence to herself and her children. But I know that she will not stop struggling for justice because of this. Her efforts show the determination and sacrifice that many indigenous women in Chenalhó are making to plant democracy firmly in their township as well as to expand rights for themselves and their daughters. Her life, as well as Mónica's, is testament to the strength and resilience of the seed.

Notes

1. For an in-depth discussion of Antonia's and Mónica's lives with a focus on marriage and education, see Eber, 1998. I am grateful to Antonia and Mónica (not their real names) for their continued friendship and generosity in allowing me to share their stories with others.
2. The climate of militarization and repression of research and human rights work in Chiapas has increased the risks to all those involved in this work.

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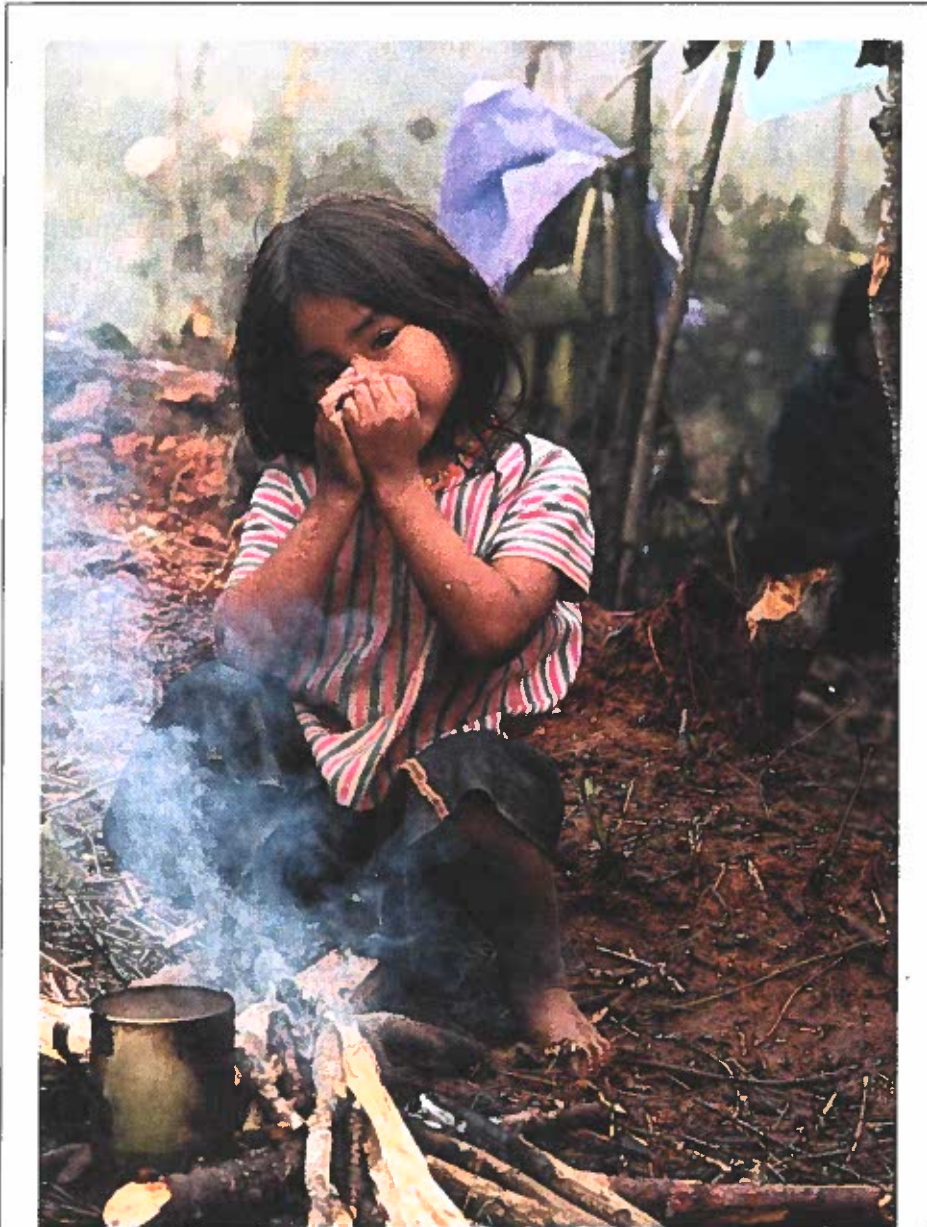
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Displaced girl in Xoyep. November 30, 1997

From Aggravated Homicide to Genocide: Legal questions surrounding the Acteal massacre

Martha Figueroa Mier

In this article, I propose to lay out the legal premises which have been developed in conjunction with the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center to arrive at a new categorization, and therefore a new penal action, in the case of the Acteal massacre: from aggravated homicide, as it has been treated up to now, to genocide. The arguments presented here are part of a series of questions which arise out of the violent events of Acteal and other incidents that have occurred in San Pedro Chenalhó and the rest of Chiapas which were part of what human rights organizations have called the "low intensity war."

In only a few cases have these denunciations received a reply in the legal arena. In fact, we could count on one hand the number of times that the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 has been applied in judicial cases of any kind in Mexico.

The above generates acute inexactitude in "administering and receiving justice," as occurred in the case of the Acteal massacre. Those of us who work as lawyers in defense of human rights never cease to be surprised and indignant at the lukewarm declarations made by ex-magistrate Mireille Roccatti (Chair of the governmental National Committee on Human Rights - translator note) about what could be legally classified as genocide. For his part, the Attorney General of the Republic, Jorge Madrazo, has only requested prosecutions for "aggravated murder, causing injury, criminal association, and for the use of arms reserved for exclusive use by the army" but not for the crimes of genocide and organized crime.

The questions multiply: Why, in the investigation of the actions perpetrated in the municipality of Chenalhó, did the survivors - with no apparent serious wounds, but with visible emotional trauma - give their statements as witnesses, and not as victims? Are they not the passive

subjects in what is termed the crime of attempted aggravated murder? This serious omission limits their rights and the application of justice. The survivors of the Acteal massacre will not have the right to be co-plaintiffs with the Ministry of Justice, nor will they be entitled to any reparations for harm suffered.

Why does responsibility for "accrediting themselves," "pressing charges" and "finding a translator" fall on the victims, the most vulnerable, those who still do not know what it means to live in a "state of law and order"? Why do those in charge of the investigation not use their authority to "make up for the lack of complaint" (the legal term used to refer to deficiencies in an attempt to prosecute)? Why must the victims bear the weight of the investigation and the responsibility for supplying evidence on top of the social, economic and emotional costs, which this implies? Why pay such a high price to demand justice?

As students, we were taught that justice is a higher principle than the law; that the law is but an instrument of the former. Why then is what happened being minimized? Were the victims not liquidated in cold blood, after their physical and mental integrity was repeatedly attacked?

Do the survivors of Acteal -like many of the indigenous people of Chenalhó, the Highlands, the jungle, and of all Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero - not find themselves living under conditions which manifest their material and cultural devastation?

The International Convention on Genocide - ratified by Mexico and incorporated into the Federal Penal Code, recognizing genocide as a crime - declares that anyone who collaborates with the intent to commit genocide or who publicly and directly incites others to commit it should be punished, as well as those who actually commit the crime and their co-conspirators. Why then was the only "recommendation" that the officials involved in this crime step down? Why were they not put on political and penal trial?

Article II of the Convention on Genocide passed in 1948 reads:

Any of the following acts committed with the intent of destroying in whole or in part, as such, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group is to be understood as genocide: a] killing members of the group; b] inflicting serious physical or mental harm on members

of the group; c] deliberately inflicting on the group living conditions calculated to produce in whole or in part their physical destruction; d] imposing measures directed at preventing births within the group, and e] forcing the transfer of children from one group to another.

Mexico ratified and fulfilled its obligations to the Convention by incorporating this definition into its legislation. Thus:

Those who commit crimes of genocide are those who, with the intention of destroying, in whole or part one or more of the national groups of ethnic, racial or religious character, perpetrate by whatever means crimes against the life of members of that group or impose mass sterilization with the aim of impeding the reproduction of the group.

In other articles one finds the definition of the living conditions, which lead to the physical or partial destruction of the group, carrying a prison sentence of a minimum of 20 years and maximum of 40 years.

Starting from these definitions, it is worth thinking about what happened on the 22nd of December, about the events leading to the armed uprising of 1994, and about responses of state and federal governments in an effort to "pacify" the insurgents by implementing counter-insurgency plans and militarizing the entire country and clearly initiating a low intensity war, not only in the "conflict" zone but in all zones, regions and entities where there is a significant presence of indigenous peoples. It is valid to affirm that there exists at a high level in the government hierarchy a "coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of the essential basis of the life of national groups" and that therefore the government itself is guilty of the crime of genocide.

Despite the fact that the aggressors belong to the same ethnic group as those they attacked, if we position the massacre in the wider historical context (Garza and Hernández, in this collection), we will see that the state and power groups have used the local *caciques* (Mafia-style bosses) for the control and, in cases of resistance, repression of the indigenous

population. It is important to connect the events of Acteal with the violence of the state in other indigenous regions of the country.

Are the dead of Acteal not the latest and most visible victims of efforts to kill members of ethnic groups? At least 45 members of the Tzotzils were killed. What is the present count of indigenous murder victims during the conflict in Chenalhó and others in the Highlands, and Northern and jungle zones of Chiapas? And in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, and all the way up to Chihuahua? ... deaths which have been officially attributed to political, economic and even interfamily conflicts.

Are the dead of Acteal not victims of efforts to inflict serious physical or mental harm on the members of the group? Are they not victims of serious attacks on their physical and mental integrity during the massacre, just like the many other indigenous people in all parts of Mexico (referred to in the above paragraph)? Now they find themselves in living conditions which imply their partial or total physical destruction. They are being destroyed almost daily by actions derived from the "social work" of the Ministry of Defense (SEDENA), federal and state judicial police, federal public security police and others. These actions have left them wounded, dead, imprisoned, raped and victims of other crimes recorded before the conflict of 1994 in Chiapas and which have since escalated. Or perhaps there are people whose health has improved thanks to the "therapy" of fly-overs, checkpoints, threats and rumors of massive attacks, persecution, and uneasiness which stops them from sowing or harvesting, and is a constant death threat to their children?

Are the dead of Acteal not victims of the criminal action of deliberately inflicting on the group living conditions calculated to produce in whole or in part their physical destruction? It is enough to see the living conditions of not only the majority of the survivors of the massacre but also the rest of the indigenous people. These are the conditions of "extreme marginalization" officially reported by the State. Another practice categorized as genocide is that of imposing measures directed at preventing births within the group. The killing and kidnapping mainly of women and minors, the mutilation of the bellies of dead indigenous women (expelling them from their communities) the violent evictions, and miscarriages caused by flight from their communities do not seem to be coincidental actions arising from the "extreme violence" of the

moment. It would be important to explore the relationship between these events, the high level of maternal death, and aggressive birth control campaigns in this municipality (Freyermuth Enciso, in this collection).

Finally, to add to the above reflections on the conditions and elements of the crime of genocide, are the dead of Acteal not the latest and most visible victims of the criminal action of forcing the transfer of children from one group to another? Now the surviving minors and orphans of Acteal, in a "charitable and efficient" action by the state DIF (Family and Infant Welfare Service traditionally headed by the Governor's wife - translator), will be channeled into the care and support of the Chenalhó municipal DIF, in accordance with the words of the state guardian of the rights of children. In addition, this condition for genocide is evidenced by the cases of those women and minors who have been kidnapped, forced to work for the paramilitary groups, and obliged to rob and plunder their neighbors, thereby converting them into paramilitaries. Equally responsible is the SEDENA, which has a practice of using minors as a source of information in the course of their "social work" or interrogating and torturing minors, as occurred in the case of the community of Morelia. Identifying and publicly "denouncing" their representatives causes grave problems for all the indigenous population and minors, who suffer a great feeling of guilt, which causes them to be "self-expelled" or excluded from their community.

Because of all the above it is valid to conclude that the criminal acts of Acteal add up to "genocide," and not simply to "aggravated murder," the perpetrators of which are not only the material but also the intellectual authors of the crime. It is also the duty of the prosecutor of the Republic to investigate the uppermost hierarchies of the state and federal government because of their potential complicity in this crime of genocide.

But Acteal is only the most recent act in a crime foretold, denounced and continued in Chiapas, and once again the indigenous women are the object and objective of war. To whom can these women complain and demand justice? What chance have they that the politician, civil servant or health sector employee who has put their most basic human rights at risk will be tried and punished? They know and suffer constantly the possibility that they can be raped at any time with no consequences

whatsoever for their attackers. All this has been publicly denounced for many years. The violations against indigenous women and men are numerous; some have been reported and many have ended up in abandoned or unfinished trials.

The murders in Acteal were not accidental. This is obvious due to the training of the material authors as instruments of extermination. This brings us once again to question the charges of "criminal association." Why was it not presented as "organized crime" if the witnesses' statements, confessions and other evidence speaks of organization, levels, hierarchy, plotting, and administration of material and human resources, just like in the drug cartels? Many of these terms - those related to organized crime - were used by the prosecutor when he informed the mass media of "progress in the investigation." Why, then, were they not taken up in the trials?

At this level, we repeatedly see the common practices of ordinary prosecutors when they receive reports of crimes against women. The prosecutors scold the victims, make them guilty for the crimes suffered, and often play down the crimes because of gender empathy with the aggressors. In this way, hardly any crime reported by a woman who suffered various blows and has marks of violence on her neck or head will be considered attempted homicide or wounds worsened by accumulation, no matter the seriousness of the wounds. If the woman is lucky, her attacker will be charged with inflicting wounds and released within a few days, while she will have to recover from wounds which will take many months to disappear.

As always in this type of case, the women and their children who were victims of the Acteal massacre have no possibility of seeing justice served; the aggression is played down, despite the weight of evidence. Official declarations about the case, like the legal investigations and prosecutions, seem to point to impunity once again winning out over the serving of justice.

Epilogue¹

Almost three years after the Acteal massacre, fifty-seven people have been convicted of complicity in the event.² The material authors (48 Tzotzil men) received sentences of 30 to 35 years in prison for the crimes of

aggravated homicide, aggravated assault, and illegal possession of weapons designated exclusively for military use. None were required to make amends for damages due to a court ruling that there was a lack of evidence of expenses paid.³

Nine ex-public security policemen were convicted of aiding and abetting armed civilians,⁴ and like the material authors above, were not sued for payment of damages. The Mexican government argued that because society itself was the victim of these types of crimes, the payment of damages had no relevance. The nine ex-public servants were sentenced to 3 years and 9 months in prison, a sentence completely out-of-proportion with the events resulting from the information that they had concealed.

Nevertheless, penal action has been limited to the very lowest socioeconomic circles; those who financed, trained, and concealed the paramilitary prisoners are still free. From the beginning of these trials, the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Commission alleged that the legal investigation of and sanctions against those that tolerated and/or concealed the actions of the aggressors have never been satisfactory. Ex-Governor, Julio César Ruiz Ferro; ex-Secretary General, Homero Tocilla Cristiani, and ex-Sub-secretary General, Uriel Jarquín Gálvez, have been exonerated of all charges against them, while ex-Director of the public security police, José Luis Rodríguez Orozco, and ex-Coordinator of State Public Security, Gen. Jorge Gamboa Solís, are currently fugitives of the law.

The punitive hypothesis proposed in this essay and sustained also by members of the Center for Justice and International Law and Human Rights Watch (*La Jornada*, Feb. 26, 1998:8) could not be legally substantiated after reviewing the Acteal files. In spite of the fact that politically, the paramilitarization of Chiapas and the impact of the low intensity war on the indigenous population (Olvera, 1998) can be characterized as genocidal strategies that put at risk the physical and cultural survival of the Mayan inhabitants of this state, as an isolated action, the Acteal case cannot legally be construed as a crime of genocide.

After a drawn-out analysis of the case, the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center legal team, on which I participated as external legal counsel, recognized in a written report that "there does not

exist reliable data that in the Acteal case the material or intellectual intent has been to partially or totally destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group [As established by the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in Article II, which was signed by Mexico on Dec.14, 1948.]. It is clear that certain penal elements are missing in the Acteal Massacre. This massacre did not intend to destroy a racial, religious, ethnic or national group. Instead, the *animus occipendi* was directed at the [victims'] political opinion."⁵

This legal conclusion causes us to reflect on the necessity of widening the definition of genocide to include mass murders of political groups. In the general resolution of the United Nations that gave way to the drafting of the Convention on Genocide, persecution and elimination of political dissidents was mentioned, although in the final text of the Convention, these groups were excluded. In spite of the limitations and loopholes in the Convention, in order to establish a case of genocide, we should look to the current legal definition of genocide as recognized by international law.

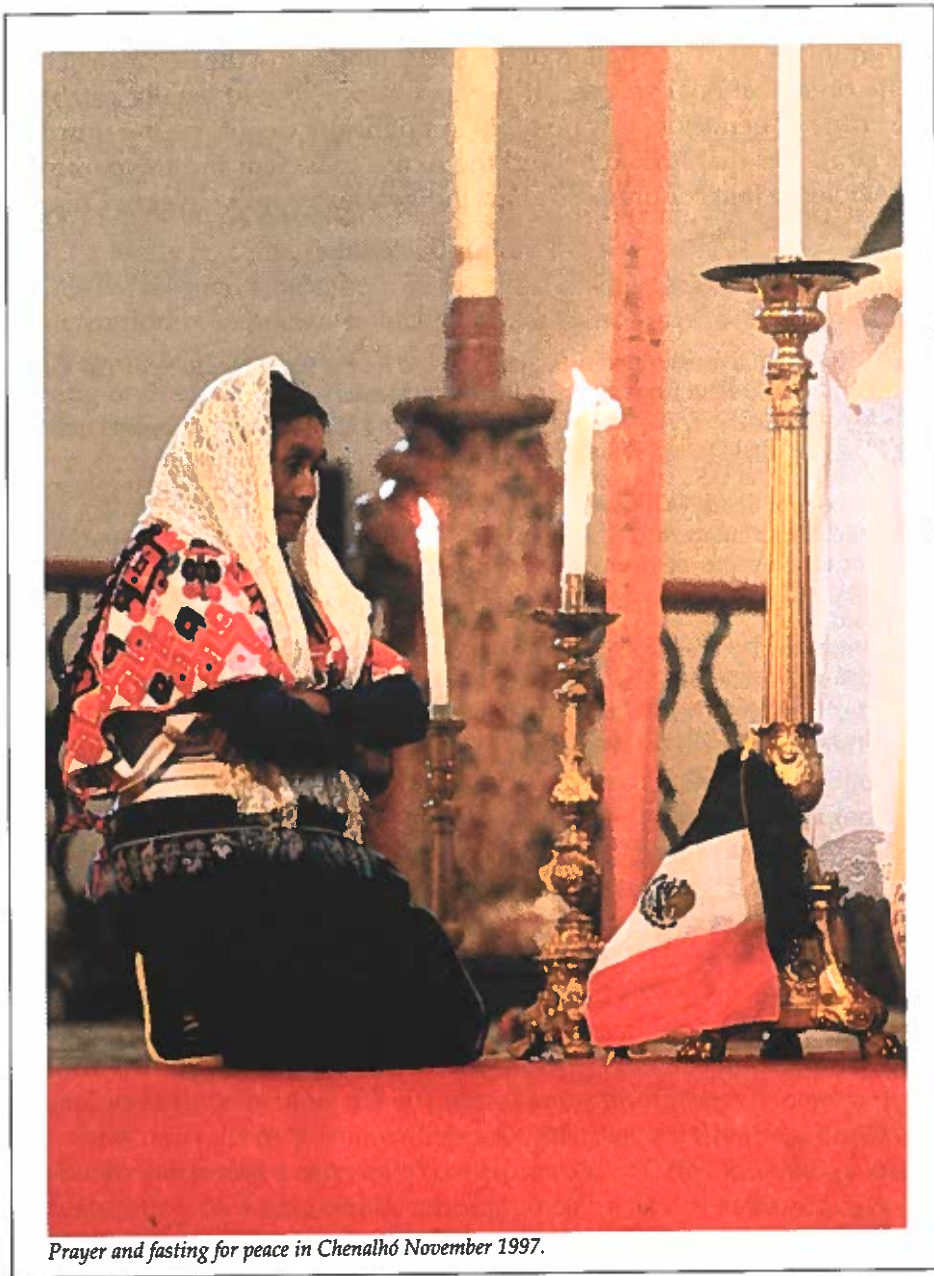
Another legal disappointment of the Acteal sentences was that since the beginning of the process, the evidence of criminal conspiracy was never acknowledged, a detail, which would have contributed significantly to ascertaining the existence of paramilitary groups. State compensation of the relatives of the Acteal victims was much less than that paid by the government of the state of Guerrero in the Aguas Blancas massacre. Thirty-three of the victims' relatives were compensated for the loss of family members, each receiving 35,000 pesos per death, while the injured received 10, 15 or 25,000 pesos depending on the level of injury (in 1996 the Government of Guerrero paid a compensation of 45,000 pesos per death in the Aguas Blancas massacre). These compensations have not even minimally compensated the survivors for the pain and psychological damage they suffered in the Acteal violence.

From within our legal work it was not possible to demonstrate the political intentions behind the structural and paramilitary violence that affects the daily lives of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, but it is possible to value and analyze its consequences. While "the total or partial destruction of a national or ethnic group" was not achieved, grave damage has been inflicted both physically and culturally. The low in-

tensity war has generated several consequences: the internal division of communities, the destruction of the social fabric, and the deconstruction of its organizational spaces. If it was not possible to legally establish the crime of genocide, it is possible to politically denounce the murderous strategies that lurked behind the Acteal massacre and the paramilitary violence that continues to affect indigenous peoples' lives in Chiapas

Notes

- ¹ This epilogue was written in September 2000 for the English edition of *The Other Word*, 2 years and 9 months after the Acteal Massacre.
- ² Penal files 201/97, 223/i97, 224/97 of the Second District Court and penal trial 15/98 of the First District Court of Tuxtla-Gutiérrez.
- ³ Unlike in the U.S., when suing for damages in Mexico, the plaintiff must base the amount of damages he seeks on the actual expenses he incurred as a result of the defendant's infraction (e.g.: medical bills, etc.). In the Acteal case, the plaintiffs could not supply copies of invoices paid to cover the psychological and physical damages they suffered, so there was no basis for establishing an amount of damages to be paid.
- ⁴ Penal files 03/98 and 18/98 jointly, of the Second District Court with headquarters in Tuxtla-Gutiérrez.
- ⁵ Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center, *Acteal: Between the Duel and the Fight*, Ed. CDHFC, 1998:100.



Prayer and fasting for peace in Chenalhó November 1997.

Acteal: Effects of the Low Intensity War

Mercedes Olivera Bustamante

Amid a scenario of merely cosmetic changes in the government's policy towards the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), it is difficult for those of us who have lived the war in Chiapas close-up to overcome the anger and pain caused by the massive murder in Acteal. However, in this article we will try to reflect on the significance of the counter-insurgency in Chiapas and, more specifically, on the effects that the low intensity war (LIW) has had on the life of the community and on the identity of indigenous people who live in the war zones.

The government's proposal to return to the San Andrés peace talks after the genocide seems not to have much credibility within or outside of Mexico.¹ What happened months before and weeks after the 22nd of December 1997 makes quite clear that the counter-insurgency strategy launched against the Zapatistas remains intact.

The government has demonstrated how far it is prepared to take its Neo-liberal regime. Its objective is to prevent the indigenous people from constructing their autonomies and exercising their cultural rights as recognized by article four of the Mexican Political Constitution and the ILO Convention 169, ratified by Mexico in 1990.²

The testimonies³ of the survivors leave no doubt that the Acteal massacre formed part of the war against the Zapatista project. The local power crisis eradicates all credibility from the functionality of governmental institutions, revealing that the origin of and support for its vertical and authoritarian power comes from within the official party. The official indigenous authorities became a link in the chain of the counter-insurgency strategy directed from the state capital and, together with the public security police force, collaborated on the implementation and justification of the disproportionate repression of the Zapatista support bases and sympathizers, killing or imprisoning the leaders and protecting the aggressors with impunity.⁴ Ruiz Ferro, the ousted

Governor, publicly institutionalized government aid to the paramilitaries by forming the Coordinating Body for State Security with the 117 municipal presidents of the state of Chiapas. The state government, with the consent, financing and military support of the federal government (since the failure of its 1995 offensive) tested strategies of low intensity war in those indigenous regions identified with Zapatismo. This included the use of paramilitaries to set one section of the population against another in an attempt to deflect responsibility for the conflict from the state, and redirect it as inter-communal or inter-familial in origin. As in Central America, the initial objective was to politically isolate the insurgency, disorganizing or eliminating the social base that supports it and, by extension, terrorizing the population and squelching the institutions considered to be sympathetic to its demands. They also tried to create political and legal justifications to lower the political cost of implementing the final stage of the plan: a military strike that would annihilate armed insurgent forces. The official party's fear of losing its hegemony in the face of a growing Zapatista support base and the political advances which seemed to become concrete in the San Andrés negotiations, were elements which doubtlessly weighed heavily in the government's decision to launch a low intensity war. The appearance of paramilitary groups represented a qualitative change in the life of communities.

From the point of view of culture and emotions, the LIW changes daily life, traditional customs (i.e. people's attachment to the place where they were born, where their ancestors and protective deities live) and the cyclical hopes of having food to eat. This strategy affects physical health, emotions and feelings; it tries to plant seeds of doubt about the political project; it demobilizes; and in the end it disrupts all aspects of life and culture, thereby profoundly affecting indigenous and gender identities.

Breakdowns have occurred in the chain of socio-political relations, tearing apart the social fabric. In many places the weakening and the crisis of authority have begun to manifest themselves in the disorganization of institutional life embodied by the official party. This crisis is reflected in all aspects of society: within families there are many cases of some members being Zapatistas or Prdistas (members or supporters of the PRD) while others are Priistas and still others try to remain neutral, but the political differences are also felt in a wider

dimension at the level of community groups and organizations.

Terror has been sown in indigenous communities in various ways: the paramilitaries armed by the government threaten the leaders, create a climate of mistrust, impose their power with the help of local authorities, oblige the local population to take the side of one band or the other by bribing the leaders, and by granting them tithes and privileges for signing up with the PRI or one of its agencies.⁵ Capitalizing on local differences and conflicts, the paramilitaries (Chinchulines, Justicia y Paz, Máscara Roja, etc.) supplied arms to the local village bosses, the *caciques* and their henchmen; the army and the state security forces take charge of military training and drawing up the plans for each offensive. They attack Zapatista villages, families and individuals. They kidnap them, burn their houses, steal their crops and animals, murder the leaders and everyone else who resists their orders to kill and rob the Zapatista support base. They are in cahoots with the justice system, and, when they do not kill the leaders, they imprison them and keep them as political hostages.⁶

The 'low intensity' counter-insurgency actions had been increasing in potential since mid-1996, trying to provoke a military response from the EZLN in order to lure them outside of the Law of Dialogue (Ley del Diálogo), which provided them temporary protection on the condition that they did not use their weapons. Any military response by the Zapatistas would justify and accelerate their annihilation. Acteal was a provocation of irresistible dimensions (Petrich, 1997: 14).

The LIW includes special treatment for women and children, considered the most sensitive and vulnerable part of the communities. It uses them as objectives and objects of war in order to terrorize, to demonstrate and to renew the ubiquity and symbols of its power in the face of the enemy. The sexual, verbal and physical abuse of women by the army and public security forces have been a permanent weapon in the war against the Zapatistas, although it has only occasionally been denounced. The proliferation of prostitution and the use of sex workers to obtain information and spy on the population are common in the countryside and the city. Death threats against the indigenous peasant women and taking them hostage to force their husbands to carry out offensives against the Zapatistas or to join the paramilitary groups turns

the women into objects and enormously damages their dignity. Selective beating, wounding or assassination of women who have shown their repudiation of the army have become more frequent this year [1998].

From the accounts and testimonies, we know that because the attack took them by surprise, many of the women who were praying in the church in Acteal were not able to flee. Right up to the moment of death they obeyed the historical mandate of their maternal role, and instead of trying to save their own lives, tried to save their children, covering them with their bodies. After being killed, they were defiled.⁷

Motherhood, which in daily life locks indigenous women into interminable bondage and is their only and inescapable destiny, is used perversely in the war. Its significance as life is turned into a symbol of death, with the intention of paralyzing the resistance movements and provoking the rebels to commit unplanned acts out of fear. The cruelty shown to the women of Acteal reflects the pure patriarchal character of the system and the government's need to reconstruct its position of force and power over the indigenous people, which is made plain through violence. But for the rebels the massacre of defenseless women with such viciousness, as in Acteal, symbolizes the announcement of generalized death. The act of destroying mothers, children, and lives in the womb foreshadows the total annihilation of the people, their ideas and the future of the indigenous people who support the Zapatistas but above all of indigenous women who have added to the insurgent political force by exercising their civil rights.

Fortunately, the Zapatistas - insurgents (transl. note: the soldiers of the Zapatista army in the jungle), members of the militia and support bases - did not respond to the provocation, which would have given the green light for their annihilation. Instead they demonstrated maturity and a peaceful vocation. Nevertheless, although the events did not reach the dimensions calculated by the counter-insurgency, the effects of the war and the terror among the indigenous population are enormous. It has twisted the lives of people and communities and generated within them a contradictory dynamic which swings between rebellion and submission; between sadness and hope; between impotence in the face of criminal power and the demand for justice; between fear and insecurity on the one hand, and the certainty that their process of autonomy will persevere, on the other.

The deaths, assassinations and kidnappings committed with impunity - apart from the human and economic costs - gave rise to an abrupt break in values and norms, a climate of fear and distrust, and great displacements of people. In the Chol region these displacements have changed the area's political map. Large migrations have resulted in the concentration of Priistas from different places in certain communities, and supporters of the Zapatistas in others, which, far from reducing it, increases the paramilitaries' possibilities for better organizing their forces.

These displacements profoundly affect women, who, in addition to the terror and urgency of escaping to save their lives, have to endure the pain of deaths and separations, family break-ups, abandoning their homes, their pots and pans, their cooking fires, and the spaces which are the fundamental environment of their existence and the fundamental component of their identity as women.

Another central element of the counter-insurgency has been the dislocation of the family production unit. The paramilitaries destroy recently planted crops, burn harvests, steal animals, and prevent the displaced from reaching their corn and coffee fields. The last few years have been difficult and hunger and disease have been relentlessly hounding the indigenous people. The families and communities who have given shelter to the displaced have to share the hardship of their poverty with them. Their extreme neediness leaves the people very open to the influence of official 'aid.' For many people, the limit of resistance is marked by the hunger of their children, and for this reason the alternative economic program proposed by the Zapatistas includes increasing production of subsistence farming and creating solidarity among peasants.

Together with anxiety and forced changes, poverty has affected the health of the displaced. After every displacement the number of child and elderly deaths rises. Fear of death prevents many mothers from breastfeeding their little ones. One case of a woman in labor needing hospital treatment but being too afraid of the army to leave her community follows on the heels of another.

In the area of social relations, it is important to mention that at least two distinct political projects are confronting each other and impacting cultural identity in different ways. On the one hand, the Zapatistas defend

the importance of cultural traditions, but nevertheless question some of the communities' power structures, particularly where gender relations are concerned. For its part, the official political project, although it defends the right to cultural difference through its indigenist discourse, is developing a parallel strategy based on terror, hunger and the destruction of life, culture and identities. This is a structural element of the counter-insurgency, which in Chiapas seems to have reached its genocidal and ethnocidal climax. Are they trying to finish off the indigenous people by whatever means before the Mexican State recognizes the ethnic plurality of the country and acts accordingly? Is that the greatest fear of the Zedillo regime? Is the real fear not that the struggle for true democracy - with economic, political and social participation for all men and women - might spread from the indigenous autonomies to the entire country? Or is it about eliminating those indigenous and non-indigenous Zapatistas and other groups who hinder the re-establishment in Mexico of the climate of "peace" demanded by the transnational powers of neo-liberal modernity? The problem is complex, but the direction of the government's 'solutions' is very clear.

At the socio-historical level, it is important to point out that the terrorist, ethnocidal and genocidal army of the powerful in Chiapas may be considered an axis of the dominant hierarchical system. Unequal and subordinate relationships between indigenous and *ladino* (non-indigenous) people, and the subordinate position of women within their families and communities, are being reproduced. This process of domination has been repeated an infinite number of times since the implantation of the colonial regime, when the Tzeltales, Tzotziles, Choles, Tojolabales and all the pre-Hispanic peoples of Latin America had to accept the fusion of their ethnic condition and their position as subordinate indigenous peoples and tribute-payers to the powerful Spanish empire. Then, violence was also used to crush indigenous rebellions and to maintain the system of ethnic and gender-based oppression and discrimination. Then, the Christian religion provided an adequate ideology for acceptance of submission. Governmental and religious institutions were used to convert the indigenous people into faithful servants of their Spanish masters and thereafter into Creoles and Mestizos (Zavala and Miranda, 1994; García de León, 1997).

The system of subordination/domination has permanently regenerated itself throughout the history of indigenous peoples. Ranchers, speculators, traders and authorities have taken on the task of reissuing the servile subordination within indigenous families and communities. They have renewed the hegemonic groups' systematic oppression of indigenous people and women in such a way that for a long time ethnic culture and a subordinate position were assumed to be the natural condition of existence of indigenous people (García de León, 1998). So long as their subordinate position is re-accommodated within the new power structures, the institutions and policies of development, like the political parties, churches and organizations, have promoted changes in the traditional culture of indigenous people of Chiapas without caring if they lose their identities.

At this point in time, the system is trying to make them accept (without rebellions), submitting themselves to the homogenizing dynamic of the Mexican state, which is being hindered by ethnic identity, claims of autonomy and peace with justice and dignity. Nor is it convenient that women should change their roles and identities, which were subordinate to the traditional authorities. It is dangerous when women attempt to become more powerful in their communities and have more political participation, as promoted by the revolutionary laws of the Zapatista insurgents. These attempts bring them into the counter-insurgency's line of sight. As in Acteal they are in danger of the government, the army and the paramilitaries using them as objects and objectives of the war.

But the situation now is not the same as it was. Now there are hopes of change, the indigenous women and men of Chiapas are constructing new identities. They no longer accept the designs of governmental power. Their rebellion is hope.⁸

Notes

- ¹ Cfr., for example, the press release of the International Federation of Human Rights (Brussels, Jan.15, 1998), demanding that the material and intellectual authors be punished, and Resolution B4-0056-00598 of the European Parliament (Strasbourg) in which the negligence of the forces of law and order in the Acteal massacre is indicated.
- ² Cfr., CLAM, 1997.
- ³ The testimonies referenced here were collected by the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center and by different groups of volunteers and women. The decla-

rations of Priista indigenous people accused of being implicated in the massacre, and of authorities who are charged with either authorship or omission in the case are on file in the State Prosecutor's Office (PJE).

- 4 Cfr., Antonio García de León, "La nueva ofensiva" (The New Offensive), *La Jornada*, Jan. 4, 1998.
- 5 Cfr., Coordinating Body of NGOs for Peace [CONPAZ] and The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center, 1996, *Militarización y violencia en Chiapas, México*; The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center, 1996, *Ni paz ni justicia. Informe general acerca de la guerra civil que sufren los choles en la zona norte de Chiapas, San Cristóbal de las Casas* (Neither peace nor justice. General Report on the Civil War suffered by the Chol people in Northern Chiapas); Center for Information and Analysis of Chiapas, 1996 and 1997, *La Palabra* (numbers 1 to 29), San Cristóbal de las Casas; Jesús Ramírez, "Mapa de la contrainsurgencia" (Counter-insurgency Map) in *Masiosare*, Jan. 13, 1997.
- 6 LIW was first put into practice in the Chol region, in Northern Chiapas. It then appeared in the municipality of El Bosque, towards the east of the indigenous Highland region, and from there it spread to the municipalities of Larráinzar and Chenalhó, creating an encirclement in a half-moon shape around the four municipalities which are considered the conflict zone. In El Bosque it was clear that the counter-insurgency began as a small local problem and then extended to diverse parts of the autonomous region whose capital is Oventic.
- 7 For a description of the massacre, see the account in this collection.
- 8 Cfr., "Rechazo indígena a incursiones militares" ("Indigenous People Reject Military Offensives"), *La Jornada*, Jan. 4, 1998; "Váyanse, no los queremos y las balas fueron la respuesta" ("Go Away, We Don't Want You Here and Bullets were the Reply"), *La Jornada*, Jan. 13, 1998).

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Building a Utopia:

The hopes and challenges of the women of Chiapas¹

Rosalva Aída Hernández-Castillo

This paper provides an analysis of the advances and setbacks of politically organized women in Chiapas, as manifest in the Zapatista uprising and the subsequent militarization of the region.

In 1994, the Zapatista's Revolutionary Women's Law was issued, expressing specific gender-related concerns. This Law created many expectations among organized women in Chiapas. The demands included the right to freely choose one's partner, to hold public office, and to make decisions about one's own sexuality. New times seemed to have arrived for indigenous and mestiza women. Reality, however, has proven to be harder than what was envisioned during the optimism of the first days of the Zapatista uprising.²

Intensive participation by indigenous and mestiza women in public spaces has been met with violence from a militarized state and, in many cases, from the women's own partners. Sexual violence has become a weapon of political repression used by official security forces and by paramilitary groups, which are known as *guardias blancas* (white guards).³

Violence, exercised by the state or by the spouse, has become a method of controlling a women's movement that has begun to question official state nationalism and the ethnic essentialism of some sectors of the indigenous movement.

I will use case studies of the experience of indigenous organized women in Chiapas to develop these points. First, I will briefly discuss the work produced by feminist anthropologists in the Mesoamerican area, who developed a new kind of ethnographic writing marked by their gender perspective. Second, I will refer to the literature on new social movements that proposes new ways to understand politics, resistance and identity.

In the late 1970s, anthropological studies about indigenous women

and indigenous communities in Mesoamerica that used a gender perspective emerged. Some of the pioneer works – such as those of Beverly Chiñas (1975), Margarita Dalton, and Guadalupe Musalem (1979) - assumed the “universal oppression of women” and wanted to confront the “myth” about matriarchal societies in the Zapotec and Huave communities of Oaxaca. In the 1980s, this concern with the “universals of women’s oppression” was displaced by a focus on the impact of modernization and development on the gender relations of indigenous peoples. Under the influence of a political economy approach, several ethnographies on Mazahuas and Otomies (Arizpe, 1980), Mam (Bossen, 1983; Ehlers, 1990), Tzotzil (Flood, 1994; Nash, 1993; Rus, 1990) and Zapotec women (Stephen, 1991), have argued that the introduction of capitalist relations in indigenous communities has changed the patterns of gender relations. The complementary roles that characterized self-subsistence economies were displaced by more unequal relations. In this new economic context, indigenous women lost autonomy and began to depend on the salaries of their husbands or suffered a marginalized insertion into capitalist market.

Although some authors consider the possibility of resisting the powerful forces of capitalism (Ehler, 1990; Nash, 1993; Stephen, 1991), the agency of indigenous women almost disappears as these arguments emphasize the structures of domination that mark women’s lives. Even the latest works that are concerned with the “hidden transcripts” of resistance (Scott, 1990) including Eber (1995) and Rosenbaum (1993), do not address the new strategies and collective organizations that indigenous women in Mesoamerica are using to confront capitalist development and challenge those “customs and traditions” that they consider to be against their dignity.⁴

Perhaps because indigenous women have not been considered to be political actors, very few works have analyzed their collective efforts in the Mexican context. Some studies of urban contexts in Mexico (Freyermuth and Fernández, 1995; Stephen, 1997; Tuñón, 1997) or other areas of Latin America (Jelin, 1987, 1990; Blondet, 1990; Conger Lind, 1992) have contributed to an understanding of the dynamic of identity formation that takes place during collective mobilization and its impact in the daily life of women.

My paper will contribute to this body of literature by presenting the challenges that indigenous women confront when they organize for social and cultural change. I recognize, however, that women face limitations when they decide to act collectively. As Joe Foweraker (1995) has pointed out, it is not possible to understand social movements in Latin America without considering their relations with the nation-state. This is especially true in the context of the low intensity war in Chiapas.

This paper, then, moves away from an emphasis on structure, characteristic of earlier feminist ethnographies. It considers advances made in the study of new social movements, which have introduced the possibilities of social agency. The most optimistic perspectives have emphasized the social movements’ actual or potential contributions to radical change.⁵

My account of the efforts of indigenous women of Chiapas emphasizes their roles as political and social actors, not just as silent victims of patriarchal cultures or capitalist forces. I look at their efforts to organize against the Mexican State, and pressure for changes in the culture and internal organization of their own communities. I recognize that indigenous women not only organize collectively for land distribution, legal reforms or credits for production. Through their collective organization they also challenge traditional roles within the domestic unit as well as cultural conceptions that justify inequality (Rosembaum, 1993). As Conger Lind points out “poor women do not only fight for ‘survival,’ in their struggle over needs, they also shift prevailing understandings of gender and development as they collectively resist the forms of power that are present in patriarchy and the development establishment.” (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992:11).

The material that I present here, however, maintains a tension between structure and agency by exploring the new spaces of resistance that have been constructed by organized women in Chiapas, while at the same time presenting the limitations and challenges faced by the movement.

Situating my knowledge

As an anthropologist and member of an NGO involved in the fight against sexual and domestic violence towards women, I have observed and participated in the history that I relate here. Both more optimistic (Olivera, 1995) and more pessimistic versions (Bonilla, 1996; Rojas 1995) exist of the women's struggle in Chiapas. My analysis is a situated knowledge⁶, framed by my experience as an urban, mestiza woman who has worked for ten years in rural areas. I have tried to understand the way that indigenous men and women in various regions and eras have confronted the Mexican state.

As an anthropologist trained in the Mexican Marxist tradition for many years, I considered feminism to be a bourgeois ideology that "divided the people." Women's specific problems were not considered very different from those of marginalized groups as a whole. It was not until April 1989, when I was confronted with the darkest side of patriarchal violence, that I began to consider the importance of gender analysis for understanding structures of domination. My best friend and roommate, who was working with a popular education project and was connected to the Diocese of San Cristóbal, was kidnapped and raped by unknown men who were believed to be part of the judicial police. It was then that I began to understand the specifics of governmental violence against women. I accompanied her when she presented a denunciation and I witnessed the disrespectful way she was received by the legal doctor and the district attorney's office. It was then that I understood what feminists were referring to when they talked about the patriarchal structure of the state.⁷

This initiated a long journey. The first effort was to bring justice to her case. The next was to modify the structures and practices that reproduce and justify inequality between genders. We are still journeying together; together with 11 other women, we make up the of San Cristóbal de las Casas Women's Group, AC (COLEM).⁸

Domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, torture and even death are the price that many women have had to pay for daring to participate openly in the political struggle.

Some gender analyses carried out in other militarized zones, such as

those of Carol Smith (1989) and Diane Nelson (1995) in Guatemala, Davida Wood in Palestine (1995) or Detta Denich in Sarajevo (1995), have argued that feminine sexuality tends to be converted into a symbolic space of political struggle in the context of political-military conflicts, and that rape is utilized to demonstrate power and domination over the enemy. Chiapas has not been an exception. In spite of the spaces of resistance won by indigenous women, the militarization has affected them, increasing their vulnerability in the face of an undeclared dirty war.

Women's bodies, literally and metaphorically, have long been drawn into political activity in at least three ways: 1) they have been the primary material for an official nationalism based on the myth of a homogenous and mestizo Mexico; 2) an indigenous movement that bases its discourse on the vindication of millenarian traditions and that considers women as "cultural transmitters;" and 3) in a low intensity war that considers rape to be an acceptable strategy for demobilizing people.

Along with their political struggle for demilitarization and for "peace with justice and dignity," indigenous women of Chiapas have had to fight to construct a women's movement broad enough to overcome political and cultural differences, and to inspire a democratic indigenous movement that does not idealize traditions but does recognize the importance of gender demands.

This paper proposes to analyze the achievements of women in these struggles, without losing sight of the high cost that hundreds of women have had to pay for daring to confront the state, their organizations and even their own spouses.

Trying to walk together

After the disenchantment that came with the failure of Socialism in the Soviet bloc and the symbolic crumbling of the Berlin Wall, Zapatismo brought new hope to a large sector of Mexican civil society. It renewed the possibilities of creating a new and distinct Mexican society. Organized women have not been an exception. The "Revolutionary Women's Law" raised those hopes. Women began to organize forums,

workshops and encounters to discuss the participation of women in the resistance movement of civil society in Chiapas.

The emergence of this new women's movement was the expression of a long process of organization and reflection in which both Zapatista and non-Zapatista women have been involved. Liberation Theology, indigenous and campesino organizations, production projects, and health workshops have reached the women of the *Selva* (Eastern lowlands), the Highlands and the Sierra. These women have begun to question the way they have been historically excluded from political spaces. They have begun to put forward the necessity of constructing democracy from within the space of the family (Hernández Castillo, 1995).

These issues were given a wider audience during the National Democratic Convention (CND). This convention was held in August 1994 in the heart of the Lacandon rainforest, in a community re-baptized as Aguascalientes. The objective was to form a broad-based civil movement that would work to democratize Mexican society. Before the convention, women from NGOs, production cooperatives and *campesino* organizations called a preparatory meeting to write a document that would list the specific demands of the women of Chiapas. This was the seed for what would become the Chiapas Women's State Convention in September 1994. It created a culturally, politically and ideologically heterogeneous space.

Urban mestiza women who had come from NGOs, feminists and non-feminists, and Ecclesiastic Base Communities had to break linguistic barriers in order to communicate with the monolingual women of the Highlands. Very few of the Tzeltal and Tzotzil women who had come from artisan cooperatives and organizations of midwives spoke Spanish. The linguistic challenge was less of a problem for the women of the *Selva*, the Tojolabals, Chols and Tzeltals. The majority of these women are bilingual since Spanish has become the *lingua franca* of the rainforest where indigenous people from all over the state have mixed. Indigenous and mestiza women also arrived from the agro-ecological cooperatives of the Sierra and the coastal region.

Catholics, traditionalists, Protestants, atheists, feminists, ecologists, illiterates and professionals all came together. Each one brought her own

specific vision of the struggle, produced from her own experience of what it means to be a woman. The *campesinas* of the Emiliano Zapata Campesino Organization (OCEZ), the Independent Center for Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC), the Proletarian Organization of Emiliano Zapata (OPEZ) and the Plan de Ayala National Coordinating Body (CNPA) were principally interested in the fight for land - not just for the men but also for themselves and their daughters.⁹ The women of the Sierra brought to the debate the importance of looking for forms of sustainable development and shared their experiences with organic agriculture. The theme of domestic violence was present in the testimonies of indigenous and mestiza women. Even with all these differences, a common platform was achieved. Both the state and local customs were criticized, as is shown in one of the documents prepared by the participants:

We want to participate in the making of laws, which relate to us and our people. We want to participate in the meetings in order to be able to be elected and respected as having authority. We want men listen to us because as women we can think and make decisions, and we are equal in body and blood. We want to discuss and analyze among ourselves the importance of being a women and, together with other women, evaluate our condition as women and indigenous people. We demand recognition and respect for our campesino and indigenous women's organizations in all governmental bodies and programs. "¹⁰

Three regular and one special meeting took place. After this an important sector of the convention decided to integrate with the State Assembly of the People of Chiapas (ADEPECH), to support the Amado Avendaño government in resistance. Others, including my organization, chose not to become part of the "new government in resistance" as we wanted to continue to be NGOs, regardless of which government they were dealing with. Those who decided to join the ADEPECH then had disagreements over whether to sit and negotiate with the state government or to reject any type of dialogue. After a few months, even those who believed in dialogue realized its uselessness when faced with

the mere crumbs offered by the government. These political differences resulted in the dissolution of the State Women's Convention. However, the dialogue initiated in this heterogeneous space has continued within the framework of negotiations between the EZLN and the government.

Many of the women involved in the Convention were invited by the EZLN as advisors or participants in the first workshop of the negotiations, which discussed "Indigenous Rights and Culture." There was a special workshop created about the "Situation, Rights and Culture of Indigenous Women." In this workshop, the mestiza advisors who had come from the center of the country criticized Neo-Liberalism. Indigenous women described the difficulties of their daily lives, both the economic difficulties and the violence and discrimination they suffer at many levels. Without using grand theoretical models, these voices brought the questions of gender, by now impossible to ignore, to the national debate. The National Assembly for the Autonomy of Indigenous People (ANIPA) was forced to include the voices of women in its proposals of autonomy, and in December 1995, the First National Encounter of Women of ANIPA was held.

Even though it can be difficult to walk together, the moments of confluence have allowed us to share our experiences. We have grown as a result of these reflections. Those who asked for corn mills or agricultural credits in the first meetings, now speak of bigger projects that will promote economic autonomy, alternative development, and a life free from violence. This change in their demands and their perspectives as women is explained by a Tzeltal woman from Ocosingo:

Now we are beginning to understand that we women also have worth and rights, that we women also ought to organize ourselves. Now, thanks be to God, we are getting used to the gossip and the criticism and women are very happy to participate [in the Peace Talks and in the political debate in general]. Although there are many problems, we are taking a step forward...¹¹

By "getting used to the gossip" organized women from Chiapas are challenging traditional roles and opening new spaces of political participation for the other indigenous women.

Voices of women from the indigenous movement

Some of the new demands of indigenous women are directed at the state. Women are demanding the right to be considered in agrarian distributions, to get loans and to receive support for commercialization. They demand respectful treatment from state medical institutions and reject forced birth control. Many of their demands, however, are directed at their own communities, families and organizations. These include the right to choose whom to marry, to inherit land, to hold positions within the community and to live a life free from sexual and domestic violence. These voices were heard in workshops and public demonstrations before being legitimized by the voices of the Zapatista women. They have now been included in the national political debate concerning a new social pact between the state and indigenous peoples. This inclusion in the national debate has represented a change in the political strategies used by organized women - traditionally marches and local and regional encounters were used to place political pressure on the state. Now they are also participating in the legal struggle by discussing constitutional changes. Since January 1992, government consultations about the Bylaws of Article 4 of the Constitution have addressed the multicultural character of the nation. Women have expressed their opinions about the right to culture, and about respect for their rights as women within the framework of "local customs":

There should be documents in which we indigenous women note that there are customs which do not respect us and which we want to have changed. We are against violence, attacks, and rape. It is not right that we are sold for money. These were our customs before but we also have to change. It is also unfair that due to tradition we cannot be community authorities or have the right to own land.¹²

The official indigenous movement and, to a certain extent, the independent movement have operated under a tradition/modernity dichotomy. Within this discourse, there are only two options: preserve the status quo by maintaining traditions or change through modernization. These new voices put this dichotomy to the test.

Indigenous women asserted their rights to maintain cultural differences, while at the same time demanding the right to change those traditions that oppress or exclude them:

We also have to think about what has to be changed in our customs. The law should only protect the customs and traditions that the women, communities and organizations deem as good. The customs that we have should not cause harm to anyone. (Ibid.)

Rather than reject traditional customs, the indigenous women of Chiapas propose to reinvent them under new terms. Their demands address and question the homogenizing nationalism that exalts a mestizo Mexico resulting from the necessary fusion of two cultures, and the indigenous essentialism that calls for an unquestioning defense of cultural traditions.

The women of Chiapas have not been mere victims of patriarchal ideologies that try to utilize their bodies to construct a mestizo nation or to perpetuate indigenous tradition. They do not completely reject either Mexican nationalism or autonomous indigenous discourse. Instead, they assert themselves simultaneously as Mexicans and indigenous people. These new voices propose to modify the characteristics of the "imaginary communities" to which they belong. People who have analyzed the ties between nationalism and sexuality present women as objects of nationalist ideologies that are based on the control of their sexuality. These ideologies consider women as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation (Parker, Russo, Sommer and Yaeger, 1992; Sutton, 1995). However, women have also adopted some of these ideologies, answering them and reformulating them from their own gendered experiences. Aihwa Ong has analyzed the way that Malaysian women have gone through a process of "re-traditionalization" as a way to assert their presence in the new Islamic nation. In her assertion of the social agency of nationalist Malaysian women, Ong rejects the victimization that some analysts have attribute to them:

This approach allows no place for a consideration that women, in accepting a vision of society in which they play secondary roles, are very much more than simply victims. Representations of

women in nationalist myths as both mothers and traitors are seen as mainly detrimental to women's interests and desires. However, if we look at many Third World nationalisms, they represent more than masculine dreams of domination - the social imagination of cultural and political autonomy also resonate with women's desires for cultural belonging and strengthening (Ong 1995:45).

The indigenous women of Chiapas have also asserted their rights of national citizenship and have taken up the national indigenous movement's the demand of to maintain and recuperate their traditions. Yet they have done so from within a discourse that plants the possibility of "change while remaining the same, and remaining the same while changing." In a document of proposals presented to the National Indigenous Congress in October 1996 by Indian women from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrerro, Queretaro, Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, the State of Mexico, Mexico City and Puebla, these women state:

We, indigenous women, have the right to live in a society based on relations of respect, cooperation, equality, and equity between the diverse cultures that make up the nation. This is to say, the right not to be discriminated against for being indigenous women, not to be subordinated for being indigenous women, not to be excluded for being indigenous women, and not to be violated - physically, psychologically, sexually and economically - for being indigenous women.¹³

In this same document, the authors adopt the demand for autonomy expressed by the EZLN and by diverse indigenous and *campesino* organizations. This demand proposes the establishment of a new political order on a national level, which gives indigenous peoples control over their territories and resources. However, the indigenous women extend the definition of the concept of autonomy and interpret it from their gendered perspectives. They refer to economic autonomy defined as women's right to have access to and control over modes of production; political autonomy, meaning basic political rights; physical autonomy, the right to make decisions concerning their own bodies and the right to

a life without violence; and socio-cultural autonomy, the right to assert their specific identities as indigenous women.

This new definition of autonomy was present in all of the workshops of the National Indigenous Congress. Mixtec, Otomí, Zapoteca, Nahuatl, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, and Chol women, who had been meeting for six months in the "Reforms to Article 4 of the Constitution" Seminar, participated actively in the four workshops of the Congress. They were the ones who had to remind the participants that indigenous peoples are not essentially democratic, as some indigenous leaders claimed. Instead democracy must be constructed, beginning within the home. Their criticisms were perceived by some as overly aggressive, and people even accused them of being "destabilizing" factors. Others, however, recognized the importance of their points, and in the end their gender demands and their proposals to widen the concept of autonomy were included in the resolutions of the Congress.

In fact they were "provoking" and their objective was to "destabilize," but they were "destabilizing" a masculine power structure that excluded them, and "provoking" an critical reflection to inspire the construction of a more democratic indigenous movement.

They are participating in the political debate, and this participation is changing their identities as women and their perspectives on the future. Cedema, a Mam leader, from an organic farming cooperative describes this change:

Now I have learned to analyze, to see things that are wrong, because my consciousness tells me it is not right, that I was born for a purpose, to do something for our future. God gives us life to do something; we did not come to the world simply to take up space; we must do something to have a better life... I think that if we contribute in some way our daughters' lives will be better, more respected, with more rights and not like us. We are working for their future, so that they can have a better future, and also so that our country can have women who know how to fight and defend our rights. If I stay all-alone in my corner I can do nothing, because I will be busy only with my housework and will not think of other women; it is very important to think about others...¹⁴

Reality has demonstrated, however, that it is not easy to destabilize a power rooted in centuries of patriarchal culture and political and economic structure controlled by men. These *provocateurs* have had to pay a very high price for their audacity.

Between family and governmental repression

Rosa Gómez and Julieta Flores are two of the many Chiapan women who have paid a high price for daring to come out of their homes and demand their rights. Their stories have been reduced to a small note in the local paper. Cases such as the three Tzeltal women raped at a military checkpoint in July 1994, the three nurses from Public Health who were raped and beaten in San Andres Larrainzar in October, 1995, and Cecilia Rodriguez, an international representative of the EZLN raped by masked men the same month, were denounced on an international level. The information about Rosa and Julieta's cases, on the other hand, has circulated more through local rumors than through national newspapers. Their stories, however, clearly exemplify the way that violence has been converted into a weapon of repression and control in the public and private spheres.

Rosa Gómez, a Tzotzil from the village of Jitotol, had participated along with her husband in the Independent Council of Agrarian Workers and Campesinos (CIOAC), since before the Zapatista rebellion. It was within that organization that Rosa, along with other women from the community and a few young agronomists and sociologists, began to think about women's rights. When, in July 1994, various organizations held a women's meeting prior to the National Democratic Convention called by the EZLN, Rosa attended representing her community. For her, this was the beginning of a process of intense political participation in the new women's spaces formed after the Zapatista rebellion. From then on, Rosa stood out among her peers for her participation in the State Women's Convention. Her many trips made her husband, who also participated in civil resistance movements through CIOAC, jealous and distrustful. Without any support from the leaders of her local organization or the municipal president in resistance,¹⁵ Rosa had to face

domestic violence on various occasions until August 28, 1995 when, after returning from a meeting of the organization, she was killed by her husband. After her murder, many of the women from Jitotol stopped participating in meetings and women's marches, limiting their actions to accompanying their husbands in general mobilizations.

Julieta Flores had to face the other side of the coin, governmental violence. A member of the Francisco Villa Popular *Campesino* Union, in the municipality of Angel Albino Corzo, Julieta had been going with her father to *campesino* mobilizations since she was a little girl. On December 15, 1995, after a series of land takeovers and mobilizations demanding the installation of a plural municipal government, a group of judicial police accompanied by the local police detained Julieta along with others from her group. They took her to a military base where she was tortured and raped various times. Her testimony describes in detail the painful sexual tortures to which she was submitted, and how she was forced to watch the torture of Reyes Penagos Martínez, a leader of her organization, who was found dead a few days later. After four days of torture, Julieta was freed. No charges were ever filed against her, and there was no record of her detention.

From the perspective of a patriarchal ideology that continues to consider women as sexual objects and as depositories of family honor, the rape and sexual torture of Julieta was an attack on her father and all the men of her organization. Similar to Serbian soldiers, Mexican officials "appropriated women simultaneously as objects of sexual violence and as symbols in a contest with rival males that replicated the traditional forms of patriarchy, in which men's inability to protect 'their' women and to control their sexuality and procreative powers is perceived as a critical symptom of weakness." (Denich, 1974).

The "Revolutionary Women's Law" has had great symbolic importance for legitimizing the gendered demands that hundreds of women had been expressing in their *campesino*, production or religious organizations. Its existence, however, cannot change by decree practices and ideologies that justify the exclusion of and violence towards women. Members of NGOs have noted the persistence of these practices in areas under influence of the EZLN and have strongly questioned the tolerance of these attitudes by the Zapatistas (Rojas, 1995; Bonilla 1996). It is

difficult to know how the leaders of the EZLN are addressing the contradictions between the new revolutionary laws and the prevalent customs in many of the Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal and Chol communities. However, we cannot hope that one revolutionary law can change social practices that have been maintained and followed for centuries in a few years. Creating a community where Zapatista men share power within the family is a challenge that the Zapatista women have to face along with the militarization of their region, the scarcity of food and other difficulties of daily life.

Since the beginning of the armed conflict, the San Cristobal Women's Group (COLEM) has documented fifty cases of sexual and domestic violence related to political struggles. These cases are from the Highlands, the Selva and border regions. This desolate panorama and the tepid response that the EZLN has given to women's charges, has provoked the disenchantment of some feminists who had originally expressed solidarity with the Zapatistas. Adela Bonilla, member of the women's commission of CONPAZ, who has worked supporting indigenous women's organizations in Chiapas for more than twenty years, states:

Our initial enthusiasm has declined with the reality of the situation. Military checkpoints on both sides, hostile looks and actions also from both sides, barriers between us and them are getting more difficult to cross and then...the rapes of the Tzeltal women: adjusting the accounts of men, the war in the battlefield of our bodies and our hearts and... to whom does it matter? Soldiers denied, threatened, ridiculed, humiliated and then took "the case" to their archives. Who dares to touch the untouchable soldiers? The other soldiers kept quiet. There were no communiqués, no postscripts. Who will dare to criticize them? (Bonilla, 1996:57)

This legitimate disenchantment is shared by many women who believed that the Revolutionary Law of Women made the Zapatista uprising a feminist rebellion. That law, like all laws, is an ideal to reach more than a living reality. The gender sensibility that the Zapatista demands have expressed is only the seed of a new culture that still has to be constructed.

Indigenous women, Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas are working

towards this. Accustomed to the agrarian cycles, they have developed more patience than us, the urban, mestiza women. For many of them it is difficult to understand how the first disillusionments make us abandon the spaces that took so much work to gain. In spite of the indifference, silence, and violence, the "provokers" continue within and outside of their communities.

The anthropological accounts of Chiapas' indigenous peoples cannot continue to ignore these new political actors who are changing not only the cultural dynamic of their own communities but also the political arena of the state and nation. The efficacy of their political strategies can not be measured solely by their ability to influence constitutional changes or state policies. The changes in family roles, children's education and their own identities as women are also an important part of this struggle. As one indigenous activist stated:

Much is said about women's dignity, but for our partners it is still difficult to support their wives' participation. We are working to make them conscious, talking more with them, organizing workshops, so they understand that we are people too, so that we can progress more together... That is why I have my children help me from an early age. I will never say this task is not for them because they are male. They are all the same... Many of the ancient things are worth rescuing, but bad habits must also be changed.¹⁶

The impact of this political participation in the daily life of indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica needs to be studied more in-depth. The importance of this struggle to the contemporary history of popular movements in Mexico and for the study of the indigenous cultures in Mesoamerica has to be recognized in order to begin to change the representations of indigenous women as victims of systems of domination or mere reproducers of ancestral cultures. The voices and experiences of these new political actors are fundamental for the construction of a new democratic Mexico. Let them be heard.

Notes

- ¹ A previous version of this article was published under the title *Between Hope and Despair: The Struggle of Organized Women in Chiapas Since the Zapatista Uprising* in the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, Vol.3 No.1, 1997: pp.103-119.
- ² This law was publicized through the EZLN newsletter *El Despertador Mexicano* on the 1st of January, 1994. According to an EZLN communiqué it is the result of consultation with women in Zapatista communities (see *La Jornada*, Jan. 30, 1994). For an analysis of the Women's Law see Hernández Castillo (1994).
- ³ The *guardias blancas* are anonymous groups of thugs, henchmen of powerful land owners who kidnap, assassinate, and torture popular grassroots leaders and activists.
- ⁴ Since the Zapatista uprising, several scholars are starting to work on the topic, but we are still waiting for the results of their research. For an analysis and general information on indigenous women's organization in Chiapas, see Garza Caligaris, 1999; Hernández Castillo, 1996; Millán 1996, 1997; Rojas, 1994; Stephen, 1998.
- ⁵ For a review of the different perspectives on the analysis of social movements in Latin America see Foweraker, 1995 and Escobar and Alvarez, 1992.
- ⁶ Here, I take up the concept of "situated knowledge" coined by feminist anthropologist Donna Haraway (1989), who uses the term to call into question the scientific truth of patriarchal science. Our descriptions of reality will always be influenced by the manner in which we are situated in the world. Class, gender and ethnicity influence the way that we make reality our own, and how we understand this reality.
- ⁷ Five years later, in April 1994, as civil society was mobilizing to support dialogues between the Zapatistas and state representatives, violence came knocking at our door again, this time in a more subtle way. An "unknown group" entered our house and went through all of our things, taking only computer disks, videocassettes and pictures from our family photo albums. Along with almost forty hours of videotape, which included part of my doctoral thesis. This "unknown" also took what was left of my sense of personal security. This intimidation helped me understand the importance of fear as a demobilizing instrument. Feeling violated, watched, controlled, and vulnerable, made me think about the ways in which women experience the low intensity war in Chiapas.
- ⁸ From 1989 to 1999, I belonged to the Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal las Casas A.C., known since 1996 as COLEM (which means "free" in the Tzotzil language), a Non-Governmental organization that runs a Women's Center that gives medical, legal, and psychological support to women and children victims of sexual and domestic violence. For a description of the work and origin of this organization see Freyermuth and Fernández, Op. Cit.
- ⁹ For a description and analysis of Campesino organization in Chiapas see Harvey, 1994.
- ¹⁰ This is part of a long document prepared by indigenous women of the Convención Estatal de Mujeres with the title of "Demandas de las Mujeres: Demandas, Propuestas y Estrategias" April 29th 1995.
- ¹¹ Public speech of a Tzeltal leader in the Central plaza of San Cristóbal de las Casas,

- Chiapas. May 9, 1995.
- ¹² Memories of the Encounter Workshop "Women's Rights in our Customs and Traditions" May 19-20, 1994.
- ¹³ Proposals of Indigenous Women to the National Indigenous Congress. From the Seminar "Reforms to the Fourth Article of the Constitution" October 8-12, 1996, Mexico City.
- ¹⁴ Interview with C.M. Sept. 5, 1995. San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.
- ¹⁵ The community of Jitotol, like many in Chiapas, has two governments – the government in resistance, including the Mayor-in-Resistance, and an "official" government, usually composed of officials aligned with the official party (PRI).
- ¹⁶ Interview with L.H. March 8, 1995 Motozintla, Chiapas.

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A Sort of Epilogue: A Women's Testimony

Fears and challenges from the urban experience *

Diana Damián Palencia

We would like to dedicate this last essay to sharing our thoughts on some of the challenges, which we face as organized urban women. In our desire to contribute to making people aware of the difficult reality of indigenous and peasant women, we often forget to write about what we - those moving between the city and countryside who are also social actors in the complex processes which are being lived out now in Chiapas - feel and think.

We are women with different perspectives, visions, customs and jobs. Many of us are, and some of us have decided not to be, mothers. Some of us are from Chiapas and others have made Chiapas their second "motherland." We "the usual suspects" and others who have joined us recently are connected by the common claim to our identity as women as a space for political organization and social change.

We the women of Chiapas are not just data. We are not just statistics. We are not only just a little more than 50% of the population; we are women who work, who triumph, who love, who struggle, who laugh a lot and who also cry. Recovering the space of subjectivity in itself is an important task in the current political context.

This article refers to what we do and what we have, and proposes to reflect the way in which an awareness of gender also makes us coincide in our feelings. Our intention is to speak for ourselves and about what this war has provoked us to do ... to unite ourselves even more.

Every day we have to live out this so-called "low-intensity" war, trying to handle the military and police presence in as disguised a way as possible, acting as though we did not see them, wanting to forget about their threatening presence. This is how we get up every day, thinking how best to get past the military checkpoints, to avoid being verbally

attacked in the streets by men in olive green or navy blue uniforms. Nevertheless, we get up with a smile that says "nothing is happening here" or rather ... probably nothing will happen. Those of us who have sons or daughters make another effort to "disguise," so that they can live their childhood or adolescence as "normally" as possible. Nevertheless, the most difficult thing is making ourselves believe that today nothing will happen to harm us, and so, whether it is in the countryside or in the towns, we step out into the street to go to work or about the day's business.

The women who work in rural communities have a close relationship with indigenous and peasant women, and one day, during a health workshop in the sugarcane growing region of the state, I mentioned to my comrades what I was thinking of writing. One of them said to me:

If you are writing some words, remember that many of us do not know how to write our words on paper, but we do feel and suffer a lot. Although the armies try to make us afraid, the majority of women are very brave and are not afraid of them. So, we are going to keep on in the struggle, with even more strength. I have been in the struggle for 28 years and no one ever asked me if sometimes I cry, if I'm sad. But I recommend you write that I was in jail, at my age, and I am not afraid. I want to go on with the struggle. But of course sometimes I get sad because of the situation we are living in, the injustice, the death of so many comrades, men and women, whose names nobody will know. I get even sadder not because we are struggling to have more, but because we have nothing. My head gets tired and I ask myself: how are we going to get more women and men to join us so that we are all in one struggle? Have you not thought about that?

I am silent because I do not know the answer either. Perhaps this is because we share the same gender.

I thought about how to reflect in this essay what my comrade from the sugarcane region, I and others think. We are agreed on struggle by peaceful means. We desire it. We are here with our heads and our hearts,

and in whatever way each of us can and is willing. But we also have many doubts about the effectiveness of our struggles. When I discover that men from the army have raped indigenous women, I know that we cannot be silent; the word is our only weapon. They have not just raped one or two women; by injuring one woman, they have injured all of us. The violence against women is not limited to injuring us physically and psychologically. They have also killed us and our children, as in Acteal.

Once again women and children are at the center of the violence, as they have been in other wars at other latitudes. The form the violence takes, and the symbolic use made of the bodies of women in order to sow terror makes us think about how gender marks the specific way in which one lives and dies in this context of war.

The massacre at Acteal made many of us take to the streets once again to take part in marches for peace organized all around the world supporting the agreements signed in San Andrés and protesting against the massacre at Acteal. We came together on the 12th of January. We united once again - "the usual suspects", as they say here - after many attempts to work together. The pain, the indignation and the awareness of gender united us one more time.

In San Cristóbal, women headed the march; beneath the sadness and indignation of the moment we were happy we could be together, to see and hug each other. Differences and distances were forgotten in the face of the need to denounce the genocide. This is something which men at times do not understand very well: how can it be that women, though we have our differences and disagreements, forgive and love each other.

The march arrived at the cathedral square. Afterwards, we held a meeting to plan how to continue denouncing the massacre at Acteal and the violence unleashed by paramilitary groups. The march was ending when the meeting was told of the aggression suffered by the demonstrators in the peaceful march in Ocosingo. There they were talking of the death of a woman which hours later we would see as televised images. We left the meeting; nobody knew what to say. The silence reflected the impotence and pain we were feeling: another death, and once again a woman. We would meet again. At that moment, we were devastated. We talked of the work of finishing this document and thought about a possible contribution to understanding and reflecting on the

way in which women are living this war. I proposed that this collection of essays should not just reflect our work, although it is very important, but also express how we were feeling and what low intensity war and militarization meant for each one of us. This testimony arose out of those voices and feelings.

The words of others like us have surely been heard in many wars, but it is certain that we are either here alone or with our children. Maternity becomes a contradictory condition in contexts like this. When we go out to demonstrate in favor of or against something, some of us take our sons and daughters, because we believe they must begin to become aware. However, events like Ocosingo remind us of the danger to which we are exposing ourselves and them by taking part in marches. Awareness, then, is mixed with feelings of guilt:

We fight to head the marches. We enter into the same mentality. What we are living is a war, and we have not recognized it. I fill myself with courage. I believe that is why I continue and why I push myself forward. Thinking about the dead children, I start to think that they could have been and could be my children, and that cannot be avoided even if I drop out of this or I continue doing it or not. Nevertheless, today I felt irresponsible putting my children in front of the military garrison, but I did not realize this until they took photos of me.

Our conscience tells us that we have to teach our children to say freely what they think, to express themselves if something has hurt them, and to know that there do exist possibilities of building a more just life. But the fear always returns because we know that they are continually exposed in this war, in the street, going to school, when we demonstrate together. Then we are filled with a feeling of guilt and confusion.

Some of us think that because of their age our children should get involved, that they are involved simply because we live in a militarized state. We know that we cannot ignore the possibility that they might get hurt. It is important, then, that they have information and the resources to understand what is happening. What sort of information,

how to manage it, and in which spaces they can participate are questions we ask ourselves all the time.

For others, their children have ceased to be a dilemma in the current context. Their children have grown up and gone their own ways. With years of experience and militancy, these women's contradictions and fears are more linked to the limitations and challenges that confront the political organization and, in particular, the broader women's movement:

I am not afraid of death; I have died many times already, that is not what I worry about, nor am I worried about my children. They are all grown up and have their own lives....What worries me is that my life is running out, and I have not been able to make the existing political forces, the parties I have been active in, include women, include our proposals and positions. We keep on fighting to have our rights recognized and every time I hear of the death of a woman I feel so useless. I feel I have been so incapable of communicating with other women. Once again the need arises to look for other ways of working, the need to root out the personality clashes, the distrust, to move on together. I do not want them to see us as only united by the violence against women, but as a real political force. How can we reunite everything we have inside us? We have many things, everyone has something. How can we unite all this and the possibility of making proposals. At moments like this my worst fear is that we will paralyze ourselves, that we will remain silent and not be able to continue working together. That is my greatest fear.

For those who move in the academic world, the war and the violence have caused them to question the projects they have built their lives around. Many doubts arise, such as the why and wherefore of scientific knowledge. Does what is done in academia serve any purpose?

Suddenly you realize you write and you believe that what you write and research is important. Nevertheless, you realize that we are small fries compared to the powers that stand over us. Suddenly,

I get a feeling of impotence and guilt at building my life around an academic question that was of so little use to the people I was working with. When Acteal happened, I was away from San Cristóbal and I called a comrade here. For me it was really important to talk to her because I was not able to communicate with other people in the same way as I was with her. That is when you realize what you have, that during the years of activism we have been forming links, and I knew I had to be here. I felt impotence and the sensation of vulnerability. One very concrete idea I had after Acteal was that I have to make changes to my academic project. I have to think about how to materialize it in other things. I know that it will continue to be very limited. I know that what we write is not going to change anything, but it is what I know how to do.

For others the violence in Acteal stirred up fears that many of us have lived with throughout these years of unrecognized war. The feeling of vulnerability invaded us again; incidents we normally would not give any importance took on a new dimension in the current context:

Towards the end of last year, I was getting telephone calls, and one night at about one in the morning they rang me up and said 'we are going to come in and rape you.' When Acteal happened, I thought 'it could be me.' I have not thought about fear of death, but about the violence, yes, it frightens me a lot. The question of rape terrifies me, that is what I feel I always think more about rape than about death.

For those of us living in towns and working in the rural communities, our personal stories have been marked by these encounters. Becoming emotionally involved with the women and children has left imprints. We have learned from these exchanges of experiences. We have developed together with them. With those women and men, and children, who, having nothing more than life, live it with such intensity. We have learned to see our own lives through different eyes. Over time, on these comings and goings from the communities to our homes and vice-versa, the words and the faces have been working their way little by little into

our hearts. For many of us the data and figures quoted by the newspapers are not anonymous people, they are women and men with names and personal stories, many of whom we have watched grow up. This marks the specific way in which we are living this history:

My heart is in Chenalhó, I feel that it was there that my life changed completely, as if I was reborn, and it was on those roads from Acteal, Tzajalhucum, from Majomut ... I was very young, 24-years-old, when I arrived in Chenalhó for the first time. I had lead a very protected life and for me it was a shock getting to know that reality. I remember the first time I went to Los Chorros, and now, with what happened, I thought of those women, the craftswomen. I asked myself how old those boys (the paramilitaries in Los Chorros) were and if I had seen them before. I thought about real people and faces, and I was really afraid. More than anything else, I felt total desolation. I felt an enormous sadness thinking that there had been so many warnings. But how ever many times I turn things over in my mind. I do not know what more we could have done. It makes me mad that now that all those people, all those women, have died. The whole world arrived. When we went there it was full of people. Why do we have to wait for there to be deaths before doing something? The whole of Chenalhó is militarized. The women receive a thousand and one threats. They told them they were going to rape the Zapatistas and kill their daughters. They have just beaten the women in Altamirano. The army went in today. All this goes unnoticed, and we do not take notice until someone dies.

Despite recognizing our powerlessness against the powers that stand over us, we always have the sensation that we could have done something to prevent it. The feeling of guilt, perhaps a legacy of our Judeo-Christian education, overcomes us in the face of our impotence. The feeling of not having been there at that precise moment, of having been able to do something to prevent a death or suffering, creates for some of us an irrational guilt which we know we should not bear, but which buries itself in some hearts. We know that a possible "antidote" to this feeling is working together:

I was in Ocosingo today. I left earlier, since they were going to put up barricades. I decided to leave earlier, and afterwards I heard here that a woman had died. This has happened to me a thousand and one times. I am somewhere and I leave and something happens after I have left. I feel a bit guilty. I feel I could have done something to prevent it, and I was not there.

Collecting all these testimonies, transcribing them and summarizing them, I started to think about our abilities, about how much we do have, about the importance of searching for that inner strength which allows us to pull ourselves together and continue making new proposals and supporting those which have already been made.

We recognize that we are women with differences, but we go on trying. We go on believing in the possibilities of social change, in the possibilities of building a better society for our children. Where they can live and smile. It is not important how many attempts it takes. What matters is achieving a better life for us and for those who come after us. Several of the testimonies collected reflect this need to continue looking for spaces in which to come together and for more effective strategies for our struggle:

I have felt, with some, an enormous generational gap and with others, an academic gap. It's the same with the indigenous women, although suddenly when I hear them I say to me, 'there's another side to them that is the same as me,' I think it's also the self-deprecation and the ridiculousness of thinking that someone else is better than you. When women talk about being women and how we feel, we need to think of how we can break this cycle, it's so important to go beyond everything else, to have spaces for the interchanges of experiences and the thoughts of each one of us.

Since women always have so much work both at home and at work, I keep thinking in our space for action and the creation of our own proposals. Just like we have to feed our children, we need make space for ourselves a priority as well. From here on we need to make a commitment to thinking seriously about this possibility.

I ask myself where to get the energy to keep on when I feel so much pain. It's from there, from the indignation that I get the energy. But I ask myself how to make them listen to us, and sometimes, how to get us to listen to ourselves. We must organize ourselves and do many things from within ourselves to stop this war. But beware, never go back to being what you were before. The proposal is to defend our rights. I fight so that one day my daughter will live better than I do.

What I see clearly at this moment is that now, more than ever, it is urgent that women's groups get together to produce a strategy for collective action. We need to combine our efforts instead of stressing our differences. My impression is that we can play an important role in stopping this war, in influencing 'emergency' projects for displaced women and their families, in planning long-term projects with them, and in designing actions related to the San Andrés talks. The last roundtable discussion concerns women's rights, so in addition to pushing for the fulfillment of the accords signed in February 1996, and for the talks to restart, we should also think and act strategically, with an eye on our participation in that final discussion.

We finished the meeting with plans for the future and commitments to continue the dialogue we had started. Some had tears in their eyes and others a smile of relief at knowing that we are not alone. We know that this struggle gives meaning to our lives, although we also know that within the broader movement of civil society in Chiapas there does not yet exist an awareness of gender. We said goodbye to each other, everyone going home well into the night. I left with the recordings, the ideas, and many feelings I had discovered, to prepare this material.

Notes

The names of the women interviewed have been omitted for reasons of security and also because we consider their experiences to reflect the feelings of many other women in Chiapas.



Displaced in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Photographic Testimony

Like words, images are tools to reflect and analyze reality. The photos we present here are a visual testimony of the lives of indigenous women of San Pedro Chenalhó. The faces, tears, looks, all speak to us of the pain of being displaced, of the fear of paramilitary violence, and the deep sadness and indignation which cripple the survivors of the Acteal massacre.

The photographs shown here were taken on the 30th of November and 1st of December 1997, by members of the National and International Mission of Observation for Peace as they traveled around the municipality of Chenalhó, days after the Acteal massacre and during a collective wake and visit to refugee communities. The collection was generously provided to us by the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center.

The images offer the reader a faithful representation of the situation in Chenalhó a few days after the massacre. This collection is one of many testimonies which confirm the displacement of thousands of families fleeing from the constant attacks on the civilian population. They warn of the impunity with which the paramilitary groups operate and show the environment of dangerous tension which was dominant. Like many others which appeared in the press, these graphic witnesses announced the imminent possibility of an unprecedented escalation of violence.

We see the little plastic roofs under which nearly a thousand refugees, the majority of them women and children, took shelter from the rain in precarious camps in the mountains of the now notorious communities of Xoyep and Cholomtoj. After witnessing what was happening in San Pedro Chenalhó through the photographs, we will ask ourselves about the chain of complicity which allowed the Acteal massacre to happen.

The photographs of the burial and of daily life in the days following the massacre speak to us of the pain and fear which mark the lives of the Tzotziles of Chenalhó. We cannot yet predict the consequences that the violence and destruction of the social fabric will have on the lives of the

boys and girls in these photographs. This photographic testimony attempts to attract the attention of the consciences of all Mexicans, men and women, who have been silent witnesses of this genocide.

About the Authors

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Glossary to the English Edition

ADEPECH: Asamblea Estatal del Pueblo Chiapaneco. State Assembly of the People of Chiapas.

ANIPA: Asamblea Nacional Indígena por la Autonomía. National Indigenous Assembly for Autonomy.

BANRURAL: Banco Nacional de Crédito Rural. National Bank of Agrarian Credit

Campesino: Peasant

Cacicazgos: Refers to the consolidated bases of economic and political power presided over by *caciques* (Mafia-style bosses).

Clientelismo: Is the practice of giving preferential treatment to a particular interest group in exchange for its political support.

Compadrazgo: Is the blood-brother bond between *compadres* or best friends.

Cardenista: Member of the Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional (FCRN) Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction.

CDHFC: Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center.

CIAM: Centro de Investigación y Acción para la Mujer Latinoamericana. Research and Action Center for Latin American Women.

CIESAS-Sureste: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social Center for Research and Higher Learning in Social Anthropology in the Southeast

CIOAC: Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos. Independent Council of Agrarian Workers and Campesinos.

CNC: Confederación Nacional Campesina. National Peasant Confederation.

CNDH: Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos - National Human Rights Commission.

Chol: One of the twelve indigenous groups in Chiapas.

COCOPA: Comisión de Conciliación y Pacificación.

Conciliation and Pacification Commission.
CODIMUJ: Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres.
Coordinating Body of Diocesan Women.
COLEM: Colectivo de Encuentro entre Mujeres-Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal de las Casas. Women's Group of San Cristóbal las Casas.
CONASUPO: Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares. National Company for Popular Subsistence.
DIF: Desarrollo Integral de la Familia. Family and Infant Welfare Service.
Ejido: Lands returned to a community as part of a land reform. The *ejido* is a communal divided in small lots and given to peasants for their individual use. These lots cannot be sold or mortgaged. They can be inherited, but not subdivided. If a peasant moves away, his land remains with the communal governing body.
Ejidatario: A person who has usufruct right over ejido lands.
EZLN : Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. National Zapatista Liberation Army (Zapatista comes from Emiliano Zapata – Mexican Revolution Hero)
Finca: A large farm, in Chiapas usually a commercial plantation growing coffee for sale in the international market.
Finquero: The owner of a finca.
FOCA: Formación y Capacitación, A.C. Formation and Training, a non-profit association.
IMSS : Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social. Mexican Institute for Social Insurance.
INI: Instituto Nacional Indigenista. National Indigenist Institute.
Indigenismo: State policies designed for indigenous peoples by non-Indians who promoted integration.
INMECAFE: Instituto Mexicano del Café. Mexican Institute of Coffee.
IEI- UNACH : Instituto de Estudios Indígenas, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas. Institute for Indigenous Studies at the Autonomous University of Chiapas.
Kaibiles: Special counterinsurgency corps of the Guatemalan Army.
Ladino: non-indigenous
Mam: One of the twelve ethnic groups in Chiapas.
Mestizo/a: Term used to designate a descendant of a mixed Indian-

white parentage, used more generally to refer to the Mexican population, which culturally does not identify itself as Indian.
Mixtec: An ethnic group from the state of Oaxaca.
Nagua: Piece of cotton cloth woven in a foot loom that is wrapped around women's waists and tied by a hand woven belt.
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
Official party: Due to its 70 straight years in power, the PRI – Revolutionary Institutional Party - was often referred to as the *official party*
ORIACH: Organización Indígena de los Altos de Chiapas. Indigenous Organization of the Highlands of Chiapas.
PAN: Partido Acción Nacional. Party of National Action.
PFCRN: Partido del Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional. Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction Party.
PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Institutional Revolutionary Party
PRD: Partido de la Revolución Democrática. Party of the Democratic Revolution.
PST: Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores. Socialist Workers' Party.
PT: Partido del Trabajo. Labor Party.
PRIísta: Member of the PRI
PRDista: Member of the PRD
SEDENA: Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional. Ministry of Defense.
SEP: Secretaría de Educación Pública. Ministry of Public Education.
SOCAMA: Solidaridad Campesino Magisterial. *Campesino*-Teacher Solidarity Organization.
Tojolabal: One of the twelve ethnic groups in Chiapas.
Tzeltal: One of the twelve ethnic groups in Chiapas.
Tzotzil: One of the twelve ethnic groups in Chiapas.
Zapoteca: An ethnic group from the state in Oaxaca.

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