

# On the Pathways Of Indigenous Chiapas

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To say “Chiapas” is above all to invoke indigenous or Indian Mexico. The Mexico which has fortunately not completely abandoned us despite continual governmental and ideological efforts to forget it. The Indian-ness, outmoded for some, creaky with age for others, is at the root of a large part of everything we might consider our own. However, it does not reside only at the very base of today’s Mexico, but continues to flourish, bearing fruit in different ways, since “what is Indian” is not a mere anchor in the past, but at the same time a program for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Chiapas is the voice that breaks into innumerable voices and has expressed itself in numerous ways. Despite the frequency with which the first peoples of the state tend to be homogenized into a single entity, each of them has been the artifice of specific forms of expression and a subject capable of forging personal and community pathways through their history.

The region is an ecological cornucopia that includes everything from cold mountain high lands to high tropical jungle landscapes, from valleys sandwiched between mountains, cloud forests and warm depressions along the Grijalva Basin, to broad temperate plains, lake and swamp

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regions or coastal salt estuaries. Since ancient times, it has been inhabited by representatives of at least four well differentiated Mesoamerican groups: the Zoques (of the Mixe-Zoque-Popoluca linguistic group); the Chiapanecs (of the Oto-Mangue family); the Nahuas (of the Yuto-Aztec branch); and a multi-hued variety of peoples and languages from the Mayan family.

We know that when the Spaniards arrived they found the Chiapanecs in the very heart of the territory they would later call the “higher mayoralty of Chiapa,” the Zoques in the mid-Northwest, the Nahuas on the Soconusco coast

the Chiapanecs intermingled physically and culturally; and there were also those who, like the coastal Nahuas, disappeared because of the exploitation they suffered at the hands of their new overlords (the area was rich in cacao). Those who lived in the jungle had to endure the Spaniards’ new population policies. Thus, the Pochutlas were gathered around Ocosingo and the original Lacandons ended their days in the area of Escuintenango, near Comitán, or in Retalulheu, Guatemala. It would not be until the eighteenth century that that area would be populated again, first by people from Petenecté on the shores of

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and the Mayans in the entire eastern half. Of the Mayans, the Ch’ols were located in the northern mountains, bordering on Tabasco; the Central Highlands were populated by Tzotzils and Tzeltals, both extending to the central depression; the Tojolab’als, gathered around Balún Canán (or Comitán), were lords of the low mountains, hills and intermediate valleys that open up onto the jungle region; the Pochutlas and Lacandons lived in the jungle bordering on what is today the Guatemalan Petén; the Mochós and Cabil were settled on the skirts of the Sierra Madre mountain range; and some towns where the Mam language was spoken were neighbors to the Nahuas on the eastern-most coast.

With the passage of time, things changed. Some groups left their original location; others, like the Cabils and

the Usumacinta, then by settlers from around Palenque and, finally, by Yucatecans from San José de Gracia.<sup>2</sup>

Small groups of Spaniards and Africans and later the mestizos born of the different mixes were added to the native populations during the colonial period. After independence, new groups would appear in Chiapas, and others would increase their numbers temporarily or definitively, like the Cakchiquels, the Kanjobals and the Jacaltecs, who year after year emigrated from Guatemala to pick the coffee planted by Germans in the Sierra Madre mountains, or the Chujs who came down from the mountain to settle in the border region of La Trinitaria and Guatemala. And we must not forget the families of Arab descent settled in Tuxtla and environs, or the Japanese who arrived in Soconusco more than a century ago.

At the end of the twentieth century, the ethnic variety broadened out even more when thousands of Mayans and mestizos from Guatemala took refuge in Chiapas fleeing the civil war plaguing their country. Many of them are still there.

But not only did new groups appear and others vanish. Over the almost five centuries since the violent encounter with the Spanish conquistadors, Chiapas inhabitants’ mobility has prompted a profound rearrangement of territorial patterns. It is impossible here to go into all of the processes that brought about these changes, but we can say that, regardless of the endogenous or exogenous causes of these phenomena, the indigenous peoples have been flexible and strong enough to survive them as specific social and cultural entities when they have put their minds to it (since it should not be denied that on occasion, they have freely opted to assimilate into the hegemonic culture, abandoning their primary ethnic ties).

It is clear that if anything can be called a constant in Chiapas indigenous daily lives, it is the diversity of their historic experiences and the changing ways in which they have lived them. This diversity can be seen first as a reaction to the Spanish conquest, and goes from a more or less bellicose confrontation (the Chamula Chiapanecs and Tzotzils in the sixteenth century and the Lacandons in the seventeenth), to collaboration with the recent arrivals, even accompanying them on their incursions into Central America (the Tzotzils from Zinacantan in the sixteenth century).

The Spaniards implemented a new form of organization in the land they conquered to facilitate religious indoctrination and the collection of tribute from the indigenous as the new “vas-

sals” of the king. Once “congregated”, they instituted the new political-legal division of the population into the so-called two republics: that of the “Indians” and that of the Spaniards.<sup>3</sup> It would not be too long before the authorities realized that they had not foreseen the emergence of “a third republic” fed by all kinds of racial mixtures: that of the mestizos (indigenous mixed with Spaniard), *pardos* or “dusky ones” (indigenous mixed with black), mulattos (Spaniard and black) and those who worked in Spanish houses or ranches (*naboríos* and *laboríos*, respectively), whose historical importance has not yet been duly weighed.

In old or new settlements, the indigenous were ferociously controlled under the *encomienda* system, which sought to ensure punctual payment of tribute, whether in cash or kind depending on market price variations, money owed the Catholic Church, obligatory service to the Spaniards and a variety of community services (called *tequio*), in addition to being subject to the voracity of uncounted officials who through the system called “forced distribution” obliged them to acquire unnecessary tools or advanced them money that they had not requested but had to pay back with interest.

After the initial missionary fervor had passed, some religious joined the group of exploiters, charging unscrupulously for saying mass or administering the sacraments, inventing new forms of alms (like having to pay to kiss the priest’s maniple or for the “privilege” of helping a bishop get off his horse, called the “stirrup right”), and, especially, exacting payment for presiding over communal or private devotions.

If we add up this rosary of day-to-day exploitation, we should not be sur-

prised at the outbreaks of armed resistance, much more numerous than traditional history leads us to believe. I would just point to some of the more bloody uprisings: the Zoque riot in Tuxtla in May 1693 (when two prominent Indians and the mayor of the province, a voracious Spanish “distributor”, were stoned to death),<sup>4</sup> the revolt of the inhabitants of Soconusco and Provincia de Los Llanos (Comitán) in the early eighteenth century<sup>5</sup> and the rebellion by numerous towns in the highlands, particularly Tzeltals and Tzotzils, in 1712, considered the most important in the Guatemala Audience.<sup>6</sup> They were

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all put down by the sword and drowned in blood.

We should not believe, however, that armed rebellions were the only forms of resistance. Perhaps even more important were the many tactics used in all spheres of daily life: both individually and collectively running away temporarily or definitively; retreating into communal systems or their ancient beliefs or imagining a thousand and one strategies to escape oppression, like, for example, hiding young couples in extended families at the same time that the young people did not marry in the church to avoid being put on the list of “entire” tribute-payers, which meant paying double the tribute and contributing fully to communal labor. Others resisted leaving behind their indigenous first and last names and using the ones they were baptized with by the Westerners, some-

thing the Spaniards tried to avert arguing that it was a sign of paganism. This resistance was linked to another indigenous strategy of using the scribes’ difficulties in writing their original names to argue that they were not the ones registered on the lists of tribute-payers and refusing to pay.

They also used legal mechanisms found in Spanish law itself. Many documents testify to indigenous persistence in denouncing aggressions against them, hiring defenders, taking up collections (*derramas*) to finance trips by their authorities to Guatemala to make complaints before the Audience. As

their demographic recovery made it imperative, the peoples resorted more and more frequently to legal measures, with better or worse results depending on their size and the economic resources at their disposal, resources that they sometimes used to buy land for their children and at the same time block the entry of the Spaniards.

Christianity was a different story altogether, as the indigenous adopted it enthusiastically. However, parallel to the continual and growing adherence to Catholic liturgy and para-liturgical, re-signified time and again, they openly or, usually, clandestinely, maintained ancient cults based on a centuries-old world view. Many of these practices disappeared fairly rapidly, like those carried out in honor of Nandadá, the god of water; Nombobí, the Sun; Mohotove, the patron of fertility; or Nemí, who

helped people to die well.<sup>7</sup> But many lasted down through the years, in caves and mountains, or in the shadow of institutions created by the new religion, such as the case of the brotherhoods, benevolent associations whose rituals were adopted enthusiastically by the indigenous who saw in the worship of saints a way to maintain the intense ritual life they had had in the pre-Hispanic era.<sup>8</sup>

Under the aegis of the brotherhoods, curious pairs of saints and pre-Hispanic deities even appeared (Chawuk/Saint Barbara; Kisim/Saint Pascual Bailón; Owner of the Mountain/Saint Anthony Abad; Ixchel/Saint Anne); images on straw mats were paraded about and fed with copal and flowers, if not animals' blood, just as had been done with the ancient gods. And some iconographic emblems were even taken as familiars or *nahuales* of the saints (Saint Inés's sheep; Saint Domingo's dog; Santiago's horse; Juan's eagle; Mark's lion and so many others), which made them be considered more powerful.

The variety of strategies used to survive in the new situation and at the same time remain faithful to the old ways was enormous. So, at the same time that Biblical writings were adapted to incorporate them into the indigenous historical vision,<sup>9</sup> towns like Ocozocuatla rioted when the priest announced his intention of cutting down the sacred *ceiba* or silk cotton tree (1722). Others like the Tzeltals from Copanaguastla and Oxchuc hid their ancient gods in the churches themselves, walled up behind the saints, and certain Chol and Tzeltal communities went *en masse* to worship the hills, considered deities linked to the fertility of their surroundings, to atmospheric phenomena like the rain, which fed



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the crops, and to the life's breath of plants and animals.

Others opted to become culturally mixed to escape the heavy work that went along with being considered indigenous. They sought out jobs on sugar plantations, grain farms or cattle ranches to avoid the communal workload, forced distribution of goods and the urgency of paying tribute, since these payments were made by their landlords.

In exchange, they met with other forms of exploitation and the loss of their communities, but they trusted that in the long run they would be able to shirk off the mantle of being indigenous, since once they were far away, they mixed with the other castes, improved their Spanish and adopted Hispanic habits, all of which made it difficult to identify them biologically and culturally. Thanks to this, the second generation managed to avoid being classified as "tribute-paying indigenous".

As may well be imagined, this had a number of consequences for those who continued living in the towns since the absence of many community members made its existence even more precarious than it already was because of the exploitation of their labor, natural disasters and the growing appetite of non-indigenous for indigenous lands.

Almost all the indigenous efforts to keep, recover and even increase their lands were shown to be fruitless after independence with the passage of the Reform Laws, which, underhandedly classifying them as goods "in the hands of the dead," placed the communities' and brotherhoods' lands in the sly hands of the Chiapas liberals.<sup>10</sup> Later, the "surveying companies" commissioned by the government to legalize title to the lands, launched an offensive against what little the Liberals had left behind, even the land that had already been "denounced". In particular, they turned their eyes to the jungles, rich in tropical



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woods like cedar and mahogany and in products like chicle and caucho.

In 1897 alone, the Chiapas Land and Colonization Company managed to legalize title to 1,807,369 hectares.<sup>11</sup> By 1903, "around 6,794 farms and ranches had been registered as haciendas or ranches and 1,571 as unclassified properties, covering more or less 3 million hectares, or 44 percent of the total area of the state."<sup>12</sup> Eleven years later "only 3.67 percent of the places registered maintained the category of towns, while 87.84 percent were registered as farms or property."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, their land stolen from them, the indigenous joined the ranks of the "freed" labor market. The Chiapas government itself reported in 1885 that of the 472,694 inhabitants of the state, only 8,125 lived in a hundred towns, while 236,347 lived on farms and hamlets and the rest concentrated in the few cities and *villas*. And to those trapped by hereditary debt was added at times the work force liberated by the 12 *villas*, 102 towns, and 17 river-bank communities: another 166,607. Three years before the dawn of the twentieth century, the 36,512 servants living in 5,858 rustic farms owed their bosses no less than 3,017,012 pesos. If we take into account that a day's pay was no more than 30 cents, every peon owed 276 days' work.

Without a doubt, the century began well for property owners. So well, in fact, that the outbreak of the Mexican

Revolution did not trouble them overly much. In the region, the revolution consisted of clashes between the inhabitants of Tuxtla and San Cristóbal, who mobilized the Chamulas in their support, promising to free them of taxes, and between the different groups that emerged from the conflict (Carrancistas, Villistas, Pinedistas and Mapaches), who fought a veritable civil war.<sup>14</sup> It would not be until 1936 to 1940 under President Lázaro Cárdenas that the indigenous peoples would recover part of their lands and be freed from the oppressive debts they owed the hacienda owners.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the galloping population growth and the depletion of the land after so much exploitation caused new migration, spurred by people's moving into the jungle areas encouraged by the government (a disjointed colonization effort with a brutal environmental cost); religious and political conflicts leading to the expulsion from their communities of not a few indigenous converted to Protestant or para-Protestant faiths; the attraction of the urban areas (Tuxtla, Villahermosa, Cancún); the possibility of obtaining land in neighboring states (Tabasco, Campeche and Quintana Roo); and the 1994 Zapatista uprising.

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the messages from outside to their own day-to-day lives—whether they be political, legislative, economic and even religious—and turn them into a renewed struggle to endure as peoples, singular and always contemporary. They have offered us an unceasing lesson of the modernity of their traditions, which are perpetually changing in order to endure. For this reason, though it may seem paradoxical, few things in Chiapas are as modern as its indigenous, those supposedly "traditional" indigenous. **NM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Using data from the 2000 National Census, the Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples reported that in 2002, of the total population of Chiapas of 3,920,412 inhabitants, 1,117,597 considered themselves indigenous (this figure does not include children under five). Of that figure, 843,966 speak one of the state's indigenous languages: 37.5 percent are monolingual in the indigenous language and 62.5 percent are bilingual (their native language and Spanish). [http://cdi.gob.mx/index.php?id\\_seccion=91](http://cdi.gob.mx/index.php?id_seccion=91)

<sup>2</sup> The people today known as Lacandons are the descendants of Yucatecan Mayas who settled in the ancient Lacandon territory, becoming confused in people's minds with the original inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup> About the first century of the "Indian Republic" see Gudrun Lenkersdorf, *Repúblicas de indios. Pueblos mayas en Chiapas, siglo XVI* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Mayas-IIFL-UNAM, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Murdo J. MacLeod, "Motines y cambios en las formas de control económico y político. Los acontecimientos de Tuxtla, 1693," J.P. Viqueira and M.H. Ruz, eds., *Chiapas: Los rumbos de otra historia* (Mexico City: UNAM-CIESAS-CEMCA-UdeG, 1996), pp. 87-102.

<sup>5</sup> María Carmen León, *Un levantamiento en nombre del rey nuestro señor* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Mayas-IIFL-UNAM, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> The most complete and intriguing study about this is by Juan Pedro Viqueira, *Indios rebeldes e idólatras. Dos ensayos históricos sobre la rebelión india de Cancuc, Chiapas, acaecida en el año de 1712* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> About the first two, see Mario Humberto Ruz, "Amarrando juntos: la religiosidad maya en la época colonial," M. de la Garza and M.I. Nájera, eds., *Religión maya* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2002), pp. 247-282. About the last two, undoubtedly the best source, though limited to the case of the Zoque peoples, is Dolores Aramoni's *Los refugios de lo sagrado* (Mexico City: CNCA, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> There were even some illegal brotherhoods, such as the one in which the Suchiapas parodied the Twelve Apostles and "went out at night, going from hill to hill and from cave to cave, holding their meetings and consultations under the cover of religion, practicing their rites and the cult of the Devil." (Pedro de Feria, "Carta de fray ... obispo de Chiapa al rey don Felipe II, remitiéndole un memorial de lo que en aquella provincia pasaba. 26 de enero de 1579," *Cartas de Indias I* [Guadalajara: Aviña Levy, 1970], pp. 451-459.), while some Tzeltals pretended to be the

incarnation of the Holy Trinity and charged a fee in the towns for "facilitating" miracles.

<sup>9</sup> Francisco Núñez de la Vega, *Constituciones diocesanas del obispado de Chiapa (1702)*, critical edition by M.C. León and M.H. Ruz (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Mayas-IIFL-UNAM, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> The law was designed to confiscate the Catholic Church's excessive land holdings and those of the indigenous peoples: to do so, it refused to recognize any legal standing of either the church or the municipal governments that owned the land that had been received as "royal grants" or "viceregal grants" during the colonial period. They were called "goods in the hands of the dead" because they could neither be sold nor given away, so they were outside the circuits of trade or the market. To bring them back into the market, the *denuncio*, or denunciation, was instituted, whereby those who knew of the existence of these kinds of goods denounced them and the government auctioned them off to the highest bidder, paying the denouncer a commission based on the value of the goods. Although the law authorized share-croppers and rural renters to pur-

chase the land they worked with the supposed aim of fostering small holdings, in practice the land was concentrated among the few with enough money to buy it.

<sup>11</sup> Alicia Hernández Chávez, "La defensa de los finqueros en Chiapas," *Historia mexicana* XXVIII (3) 1979, p. 349.

<sup>12</sup> Carlos Tello, *La tenencia de la tierra en México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1968), p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Tannenbaum, quoted in Jean Meyer, "Haciendas y ranchos, peones y campesinos en el Porfiriato. Algunas falacias estadísticas," *Historia mexicana* XXXV (3) 1986, p. 495; and Hernández Chávez, op. cit., pp. 342-343.

<sup>14</sup> See the excellent analysis of the period in three classic texts: Antonio García de León, *Resistencia y utopía* (Mexico City: ERA, 1985); Thomas Benjamin, *El camino a Leviatán, Chiapas y el Estado mexicano, 1891-1947* (Mexico City: CNCA, 1990); and "¡Primero viva Chiapas! La revolución mexicana y las rebeliones locales," J.P. Viqueira and M.H. Ruz, eds., *Chiapas los rumbos de otra historia* (Mexico City: UNAM-CIESAS-CEMCA-UdeG, 1995).

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