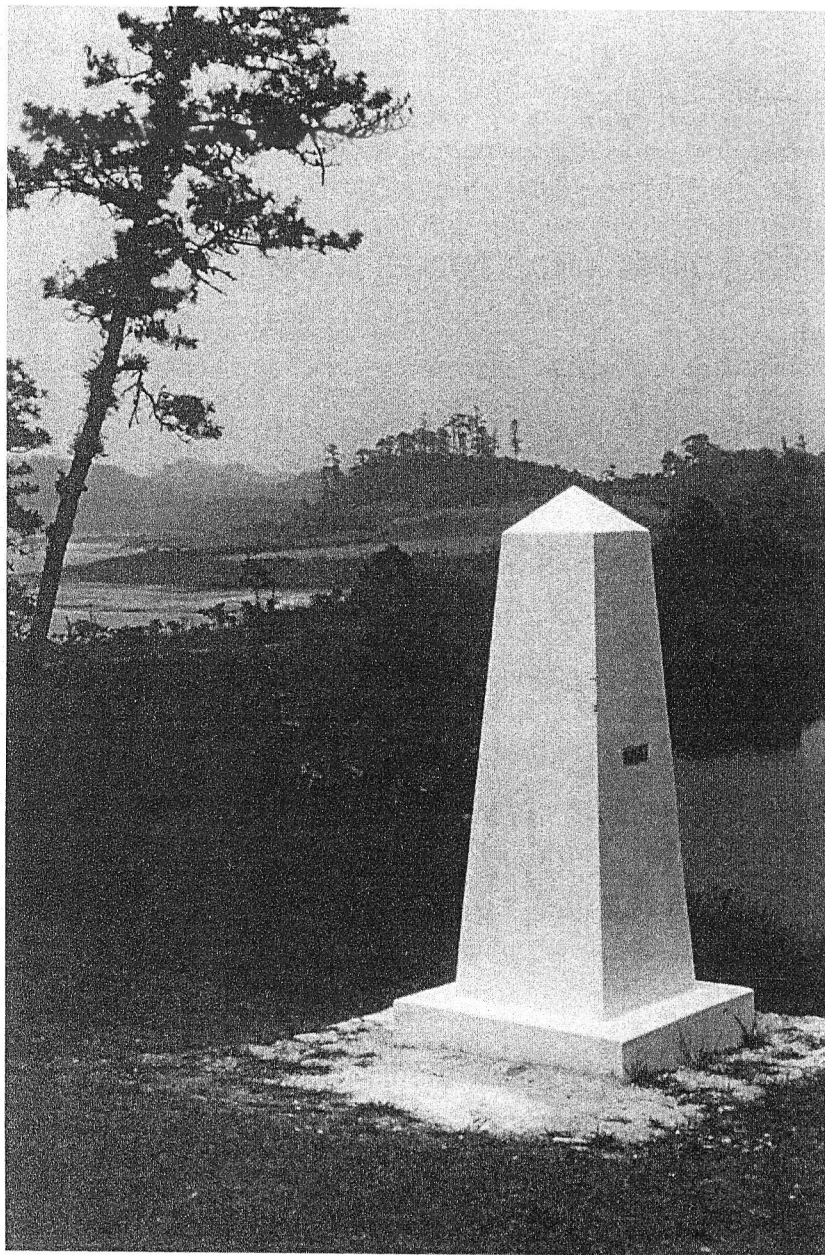


Histories and Stories from Chiapas

Border Identities in Southern Mexico



R. Aída Hernández Castillo
Foreword by Renato Rosaldo



HISTORIES AND STORIES FROM CHIAPAS
BORDER IDENTITIES IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

BY R. AÍDA HERNÁNDEZ CASTILLO

Translated by Martha Pou

Foreword by Renato Rosaldo



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Frontispiece: Monument at the Mexico-Guatemala border
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*Para Alejandro y Rodrigo
Por el nuevo sentido que le han dado a mi vida*

CONTENTS

Foreword by Renato Rosaldo ix

Preface xiii

Acknowledgments xvii

Introduction 1

First Border Crossing.

Don Roberto: Working for Change in the Sierra 12

1. The Postrevolutionary National Project
and the Mexicanization of the Mam People 18

Forced Integration into the Nation 21 *Mam Women and the Myth of
Mestizaje* 26 *Federal and Local Indigenismos* 30 *From the Finca
to the Ejido: Economic Integration* 33 *Presbyterianism and a New Mam
Identity* 42

2. The Modernizing Project:
Between the Museum and the Diaspora 49

The "Stabilizing Development" 51 *Anthropologists in the Sierra: The
Mam People as Health Problem and as National Heritage* 54 *Diaspora
to the Rain Forest* 72

Second Border Crossing. Pedro:

Searching for Paradise on Earth 76

3. Mam Jehovah's Witnesses:
New Religious Identities and Rejection of the Nation 81
In Search of Paradise 83 *Everyday Life at Las Ceibas* 87 *The Strength of Utopia and Antinational Discourse* 90 *Different Contexts, Different Identities* 95
4. From Mestizo Mexico to Multicultural Mexico:
Indigenismo in the Sierra Madre 100
Two Struggling Perspectives 102 *From San Cristóbal to Pátzcuaro* 105 *Participative Indigenismo* 110 *The CCI Mam-Mochó-Cakchiquel* 114
Third Border Crossing. Don Eugenio: "Rescuing" Mam Culture 122
5. Mam Dance Groups:
New Cultural Identities and the Performance of the Past 129
The Mam Supreme Council 130 *Mam Dances* 133 *Memory and Performance of Everyday Life* 137 *Dispute in the Construction of Mam Traditions* 151
Fourth Border Crossing. Doña Luz: Organizing for Women's Rights 156
6. Organic Growers:
Agro-ecological Catholicism and the Invention of Traditions 161
The Foranía de la Sierra: The New Social Ministry 163 *Globalization and Organic Markets: Mam Identity and Agro-ecological Discourses* 169
New Cultural Discourses and the Reinvention of Mam Utopia 174
Collective Reflection and New Spaces of Organization 178 *Mam Women and Gender Demands* 181
7. From PRONASOL to the Zapatista Uprising 187
Salinismo: The Administration's Two-faced Policy 188 *PRONASOL Indigenismo* 194 *The Impact of the Zapatista Rebellion on the Life of Mam Peasants* 203 *Claiming the Power to Name: The Struggle for Autonomy* 214 *The Voices of Women* 219 *Again a Two-faced Policy: Economic Aid and Paramilitarization* 224
Conclusion 233
Notes 243
Glossary 257
Bibliography 261
Index 279

FOREWORD

BY RENATO ROSALDO

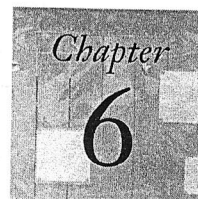
R. Aída Hernández Castillo's *Histories and Stories from Chiapas* traces the historical vicissitudes of Mexican Mam identity, showing how these people have both disappeared from official view and continued to exist as a self-conscious group. In other words, her innovative study explores the dilemmas of an ethnic group whose very existence has been called into question. The Mexican Mam disappeared from view because of the changes that they underwent in language, dress, religion, and subsistence. These changes made them appear to have vanished as an indigenous minority and to have assimilated into the mestizo majority, thereby losing their collective identity. Official discourse used a rather quaint and folkloric schema to determine whether or not people belonged to an indigenous ethnic group; it made judgments as to the existence or nonexistence of indigenous groups in accord with such criteria as speaking an indigenous language, wearing distinctive costumes, practicing an indigenous or folk Catholic form of religion, and doing subsistence agriculture (preferably cultivating maize, beans, and squash) in a well-defined territory.

The Mexican Mames fell outside official definitions of the indigenous when most of them became monolingual speakers of Spanish, stopped wearing their "native" dress, became members of the National Presbyterian Church (and later became Jehovah's Witnesses), and worked for wages on coffee plantations. Each of the above changes would have seemed a sign of absorption into the national mestizo identity, a process which was regarded a one-way street and irreversible. Hernández herself once

Mam, that we are indigenous from this Sierra. And much is talked about [concerning] woman's dignity. But for our partners, it is still difficult for them to support their wives' participation. We have to make them conscious—talk more with them, organize workshops—so they understand we are persons too, so that we can progress more together. But you have seen that woman here at Tonaque, [how] her husband beat her because she absolutely wanted to go to a workshop at Motozintla. That is why we want to organize in Nan Choch workshops, so that we can think together how to do it, how to change. 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 males. They are all the same.

Many of the ancients' things are worth rescuing, but bad habits must also be changed. [The] women's situation was very hard—they were married by force. It was customary that in the ceremony, when they [suitors] asked for the bride's hand, the father would beat his wife in front of the guests for not having taken proper care of the girl, for if the young man had been able to court her, it was because the mother had not taken care of her. It was only a custom, even if the father agreed to his daughter's marriage. [And] the mother had to be beaten for people to see that the man made himself respected—just imagine.

Life is very difficult there in the Sierra, especially in colonies where coffee does not grow. The few vegetables we grow do not last long, so we cannot do like ISMAM members who sell their coffee abroad. We can only take them down here to Motozintla. We have opened a stand in the market, on Thursdays, but people do not very well understand about organic crops. If they see a larger vegetable somewhere else, well they go and buy it, even if it has pesticides. That is why I believe that if we women also get organized and start to work on wool it might help. Nowadays we do not know very well how to card and weave it—that knowledge has been lost, but we can learn from our Tzotzil sisters from the Highlands. We can help each other. We taught them how to grow healthier sheep and to make compost, and they [can] teach us how to weave. It looks difficult, but I think it can be done. Don't you think so?



ORGANIC GROWERS

AGRO-ECOLOGICAL CATHOLICISM AND THE INVENTION OF TRADITIONS

We are the guardians of the earth, and not poor little bastards used by rulers to justify their budgets and their speeches.

EDUARDO MORALES, MAM MEMBER OF NAN CHOCH

In the last two decades we have witnessed the emergence of a number of social spaces in the Sierra, some complementary and others contradictory, within which there have been efforts to recover, re-create, and thereby reinvent Mam cultural traditions. Several organic growers' cooperative societies,¹ like the Mam dance groups, have been formed whose organizing principle is the "rescuing" of their cultural roots. They constitute a minority of the Mam population that to a certain extent has fared a little better in the economic crisis caused by the neoliberal policies of recent administrations. Of course, the activities of these cooperative societies—such as ISMAM, with 1,878 members, and Nan Choch, with 266 members—cannot be thoroughly representative of the Sierra Madre population; yet their various strategies for economic and cultural survival have had an important impact on the way other sectors of the Mam population are imagining their identity. In this chapter I explore the way in which a particular sector of the Mam population has appropriated agro-ecological ideology in the reconstruction of ethnic identity. With the support of Catholic priests and nuns, these peasants have found in agro-ecological cooperative societies, not only an economic option, but also a space for organization and political learning, from which they have started

to reconstruct their collective identities. This new organic growers' movement, which has also taken place in other regions of Mexico, has expanded its struggle beyond land demands, pointing out the need to appropriate the production process as well as commercialization. The formation of these organizations has been interpreted by several researchers as the emergence of "a new peasant movement." Many of these researchers, however, in an attempt to underline the importance of community values of reciprocity recovered by peasant agro-ecology, have concluded that this "strategy of resistance" is based on an indigenous worldview, without sufficiently analyzing the diverse social forces that have converged to make it possible (Hernández Navarro 1991; Toledo 1994). The specific case of the organic growers' movement in the Chiapas Sierra Madre, for one, cannot be understood without taking into account the encounter of Mam peasants with a socially committed Catholic church.

The history of Mam agro-ecological cooperative societies begins with an encounter between poor peasants in search of options and a group of priests and nuns influenced by the teachings of liberation theology. These Mam peasants, accustomed to working from dawn to dusk on coffee plantations in the coastal region of Chiapas, have had long experience in struggling for a better life; the nuns and priests, who wanted to go beyond grand theories of macroeconomic problems, were seeking possible solutions to local problems. Hence in this encounter we find that influence has been reciprocal. Mam peasants have taken the methodology of popular education promoted by liberation theology and applied to it their own meaning. They have reinvented a "Mam utopia" by taking elements from agro-ecological ideology, thus recovering a past that had been denied to them; and, at the same time, they have found economic options that are less predatory and that have allowed them greater political independence. The clergy, starting from their analysis of the problems of Sierra indigenous peoples, have widened their views from the critique of the state to a critical examination of a whole pattern of development; they have learned from elder Mam a sense of *communalidad*² that goes well beyond cooperative systems and have called into question the role of a committed church facing new processes of economic globalization.

Yet it has been an unequal encounter, colored by power relations. Marginalized peasants have had to negotiate with a clergy that, although critical and committed, is backed by an institution with political and economic power. Being part of a hierarchical and authoritarian institution, the clergy's zeal has been tempered, even restrained, by relations between the Catholic church and the state. Indeed, when analyzing the endeavors

of the Foranía de la Sierra,³ we should keep in mind the words of Daniel Levine:

Although analysis must go beyond the formal limits of institutions, the continued impact of institutions cannot be ignored. Institutions are more than just machines for grinding out documents or allocating roles and statuses in a formalized way. They are vital, changing structures that help form the contexts in which experience is lived and judged. They provide identity, continuity, and nets of solidarity that are much valued by members, despite possible rejection by group members of specific institutional leaders or positions. (1992:15)

My analysis here takes into account this tension between institutions, as producers of meaning, constructors of spaces, and possessors of forms of control, and Mam peasants, as social subjects who retake, bargain, or reject meanings and practices promoted by institutions.

The Foranía de la Sierra: The New Social Ministry

The state's acceptance of the right to cultural difference coincided with Chiapas Catholic church's calling into question of evangelical methods used among the indigenous population. Starting from a process of self-critique, the need arose to develop social pastoral work that would take into consideration the cultural traditions of Chiapas peasants. The influence of the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1965 and of the Medellín Episcopal Conference in 1968 was felt throughout Mexico, but it had a special impact on the southern Pacific region, formed by the dioceses of Oaxaca, Tehuantepec, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Tapachula, Tuxtepec, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and in the Mixe and Huautla de Jiménez prelacies, which have a high concentration of indigenous people.⁴ The so-called preferential option for the poor, promoted by the liberation theologians, had particular influence on the work of the Diocese of San Cristóbal, headed by Msgr. Samuel Ruiz; that of Oaxaca, under Msgr. Bartolomé Carrasco; and that of Tehuantepec, under Msgr. Arturo Lona. The so-called Indigenous Congress of 1974, held in San Cristóbal de las Casas (see Chapter 4), marked the beginning of a new pastoral ministry serving indigenous peoples, which promoted a new reading of the Bible in the light of everyday experience but at the same time rejected acculturation strategies of the state and of the traditional church, while suggesting the use of indigenous languages in evangelization. Bibles that had been translated into

local indigenous languages by linguists from the Summer Linguistic Institute in the 1940s began to be used by Catholic priests, who also produced new translations to use in their work among indigenous peoples.

The Mam region is under the jurisdiction of the Foranía de la Sierra, which is directly dependent on the Diocese of Tapachula. Although in this diocese, Catholic hierarchs used to view (and still do) the new pastoral line with indifference, and sometimes even rejected it outright, many of the priests and nuns were influenced by the new Latin American theological debate. The direct influence of liberation theology came via the Diocese of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, geographically closer than that of San Cristóbal, in which Maryknoll church members had begun promoting a holistic program encompassing the social, spiritual, and economic spheres among Mam, K'anjobal, Chuj, and Jacalteco peasants, which included concern for their social situation and a search for options.

From 1950 until 1970 the Sierra region had been the responsibility of three itinerant priests, who were barely able to minister to the more than three hundred communities scattered throughout an area of 2,200 square kilometers. These priests offered the sacraments to the peasants but paid no heed to the conditions in which they lived. Indeed, at the time, because of the government's acculturation campaigns, the local people were not even recognized as Mam.

The arrival of Father Antonio Stefan at the parish of Motozintla, center of the Foranía de la Sierra in the early 1970s, marked a shift in the church's mission in the region. With the support of Franciscan missionaries, he prompted the construction of a catechist school to create secular agents of the church, natural leaders who might return to their communities to encourage biblical and social reflection.

At that stage came a priest to the Foranía who had been educated with the spirit of a new religious consciousness; he was a biblicist who was in charge of training courses, Father Antonio Stefan. Such training courses started to change things, not only to satisfy the intellectual need for knowledge, but also one of the criteria for Bible studies stressing the search for justice; then comes all about the Exodus, the New Testament, in accord with liberation movements in Latin America.⁵

During this time more than forty cooperative societies were established, which failed in the long run because of a lack of organization, but also because they were not able to compete with CONASUPO, state-subsidized stores.

Many of the secular agents trained in the Foranía became members of independent peasant organizations, such as the Organización Campesina Emiliano Zapata (OCEZ) and the Organización Proletaria Emiliano Zapata (OPEZ), which employed land invasions, seizures of municipal presidencies, and closing of roads to demand fairer land distribution and the democratization of municipal power structures. The state government responded by repressing their demonstrations, and under Gov. Absalón Castellanos Domínguez (1982-1988), several local peasants were murdered by government forces. In 1985, in Amatenango de la Frontera, three secular agents who were involved in the peasant movement were murdered by the police after they tried to seize the municipal presidency. Such experiences led Foranía's clergy to rethink their promotion of social awareness; although it had succeeded in creating a new consciousness, it had not been accompanied by a comprehensive search for solutions to local problems.

The clergy decided to form working commissions that could address specific problems. Thus were established the Evangelization Commission (Comisión de Evangelización), in charge of promoting biblical study; the Health Commission (Comisión de Salud), whose aim was to place illness in its social context; the Human Rights Commission (Comisión de Derechos Humanos), to denounce human rights abuses and to educate peasants about defending their rights; the Women's Support Commission (Comisión de Promoción de la Mujer), whose aim was to reappraise women's role in the family and the community and to promote greater social participation; and, finally, the Cooperative Societies Commission (Comisión de Cooperativas). The Cooperative Societies Commission was supported by the Center for Community Promotion of the Tehuantepec Diocese, whose goal was to find new economic options in the face of the coffee-growing crisis and the failure of the government's development policies.

This new structuring of the Foranía's work coincided with the development among followers of liberation theology of a critical stance toward the Marxist perspective, which centered its analyses on the capitalist state and on its overthrow as the strategy for social change.

Socialism and capitalism share the same modernizing perspective, which sees technological development as an option. Within liberation theology, critical thinking had been limited to the social structure, the analysis of the state, its repressive policies and its impoverishment policies, but the new agro-ecological Catholic think-

ing goes well beyond these; it is the same critical point of view, but not only with respect to the state, but also to modes of production. . . . It is said that the eighties were the decade of great reflections on macroeconomic problems: economic blocs, the United States, the Soviet Union, capitalism, colonialism, transnational corporations, market economies, and so on. The decade of the nineties is marked by attempts to solve local problems without losing the global perspective. Then agroecology emerges as a response which tries to provide options for local problems; agroecology is a criticism of the technological path, of modernization understood as all those technological programs which come, are imposed and produce poverty, indigence, indebtedness, and destruction of the land.⁶

This testimony is a reflection of the new religious ideology in the Foranía; it reformulates a philosophy promoted by liberation theology between the 1960s and the 1980s, critiques a development pattern based on predatory technology, and brings its analysis up-to-date by including the local impact of transnational capitalism.

In 1985 the Cooperative Societies Commission held a meeting to discuss the problems of the region's small producers. It evaluated the failure of the forty consumption cooperative societies (community organizations that collectively buy basic products) and proposed the creation of new cooperative societies for production that would not depend on government credit or subsidies. The first local problem to be faced was the decline in the price of coffee on the international market and the future of the region's small-scale producers.⁷ It was estimated that coffee production by hectare using agrochemical products took more than 50 percent of the growers' total income and that, in spite of fertilizers and pesticides, average production by hectare was thirteen sixty-kilogram bags of parchment coffee, whose value was well below production costs (Sánchez 1990). Furthermore, it was determined that agrochemical products had caused a series of skin and lung ailments, which had already led some small producers to stop using them.

In an effort to promote the rescue of traditional agricultural practices among younger Mames, Foranía's priests sought the wisdom of elder Mames. For Mam peasants, who for decades had been denied a voice, this new strategy indicated a reappraisal of traditional knowledge and the creation of spaces in which their opinion took on legitimacy.

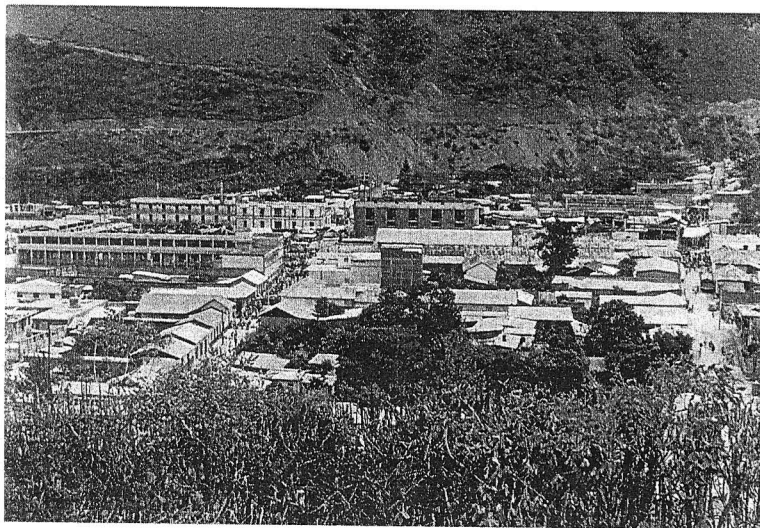
All workshops turned often to the testimony of elders, to see how it was done before. In fact, many of the written notes always contain

old people's testimony; how crops were produced in old times, why this method of production was abandoned, the impact of fertilizers, how it changed many habits in communities. For example, the question of sheep, because sheep provided fertilizers, manure, they were placed in pens, and by rotating them it was a self-sustaining system. For a time a pen was in a certain place, it fertilized the land, you only had to water it. Let us say that they were put together little by little and small experiments were explored which would later provide a guideline to be followed.⁸

Through these workshops the clergy became aware of the historical plundering of the Mam population and of their incorporation into the Mexican nation by violent means. Cultural rescue became an integral part of the planning process, not only from the culturalist point of view of indigenism, but also as a way to relate to nature and to recover a collective history so as to strengthen group identity. The participants agreed to complement coffee crops with corn and beans, so as to avoid the negative consequences of monoculture. They also agreed to halt the use of all agrochemical products and to study techniques of organic agriculture, including how to protect the land, compost, and build terraces and nurseries. This event coincided with the fortunate arrival of several agricultural technicians from Chimaltenango, Guatemala, who had fled their country to escape the violence. These men had experience in the management of organic agriculture and joined the team advising the Cooperative Societies Commission.

Thus several experiences converged in the creation of organic growers' cooperative societies. Advice was sought from the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Istmo Region (Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo [UCIRI]), formed by Oaxacan Zapotec peasants who had been involved in the organic culture of coffee since 1981; and a visit was made to the Irlanda plantation, Chiapas's pioneer in organic agriculture, which had been developing the biodynamic culture of coffee since 1964.⁹ Drawing on the knowledge of elder Mam, of other indigenous groups in Mexico, of Guatemalan technicians, and even of Chiapas's plantation owners, one hundred sixty peasants of the municipalities of Siltepec, Motozintla, Chicomuselo, Amatenango de la Frontera, and Bellavista founded the first agro-ecological cooperative society in the Sierra in 1986, thus beginning what would be one of the country's most successful cooperative endeavors.¹⁰

The cooperative society started to export its coffee first to alternative



Municipal head town of Motozintla. This is where the agro-ecological movement of the Mam region originated. PHOTO BY RICHARD CISNEROS LÓPEZ.

and organic coffee markets that were not subject to the fluctuations of the traditional market and that paid well above New York prices, giving growers incomes that were between 50 and 100 percent higher. By 1991 IS-MAM was exporting its coffee at an average price of 115 cents a pound, in contrast to the New York price of 60 cents. This comparative advantage, together with the low production costs realized by eliminating chemicals, led many small regional producers to turn to organic agriculture.

But both organic and alternative markets have a limited number of consumers and distribution centers and thus are rapidly saturated. Still, IS-MAM's entry into the international market coincided with the emergence of a movement that questioned some of the premises of the alternative market, giving priority to the search for new sales strategies and new markets, and, instead of rejecting capitalism, sought to use it more equitably.¹¹

Contrary to the alternative market that rejected commercial networks, the equitable market saw the need to go to large distribution centers and use mass communication to promote products. Thus ISMAM came into the market at the right time, with a solidarity network that supported its conquest of new markets but demanded a number of conditions, not only for production, but also for its functioning and organization.

From the very beginning, discourses and practices born in the peasant

agro-ecological movement have been constructed in a constant dialogue with other global discourses, to which we now turn.

Globalization and Organic Markets: Mam Identity and Agro-ecological Discourses¹²

We have seen that Mexican nationalist discourse and agrarian policies have had an important impact on the social construction of Mam identity. Still, direct access of the Mam to a global market and their contact with other cultural discourses and organizational experiences have also had an influence on these processes of social construction. With Roland Robertson (1990), I hold that the present globalization process is only one more step in a long process, which acquires new characteristics with new technological developments. In the first chapter we saw how Mam peasants of the Sierra Madre have been linked through coffee production to a global economy since the beginning of the twentieth century. Thanks to Mam laborers in Soconusco, between 1927 and 1928 plantation owners were able to export 227,040 quintals of coffee to Germany, the United States, England, France, Spain, and Switzerland (information from the German Consulate, 1930, cited in Waibel 1946). We also saw how their everyday lives were strongly affected by an international decline in coffee prices, the recession of the 1930s, and the forfeiture of German plantations during World War II.

In this new stage of capital reorganization (Harvey 1990), we can see that technological change and further developments in communication, the fluidity of information, the deregulation of national markets, and more capital flexibility have had a direct impact on the daily life of the Mam peasant. The Mam have been part of the global market for centuries. What is new about this stage of globalization is that they now have more direct contact with the global community through participation in information and communication structures, such as the organic coffee market and the fair trade solidarity movement. Through promotional trips of the Commercialization Commission, through the telephone, and recently even through electronic mail, the Mam have overcome isolation imposed by traditional, regional, and national political structures. What Jean-François Lyotard (1984) and David Harvey (1990) have called the space-time compression characteristic of globalization has allowed the Mam to establish contact with other indigenous peoples in the world, with European and American ecologists, and with Japanese businessmen. These experiences have, of course, influenced their worldview and the way

they have shaped their cultural discourse. Spaces of confluence have been created, where they have been able to share their experience.

I went through Holland, Germany, and Switzerland; I got to know these countries. . . . [W]e exchanged, well, experiences, about how they did things over there and how we do them here; and they liked the project we have here very much. Then we are thinking that they buy from us a healthy product and it is well worth it for them; they pay at a slightly higher price, but they are buying a good thing. For them it is an advantage, because this uneasiness has emerged in them, they are also in favor of the environment, in favor of development through land; then they tell me, if we buy your product, we are also sharing your effort, not only for you but for the environment, and this way you can develop a project for people to live.¹³

This encounter with European alternative markets has represented an important effort for peasants who have never been out of the Sierra. ISMAM's secretary, who has only three years of primary school education, pointed out:

To commercialize we went in search of markets; we went to lose the fear of going into new countries to find other possibilities to sell our product to just markets, to fair markets. Possibly we are now exporting our product to alternative markets, at a price above that of the New York exchange; we are selling to these markets. . . . We are exporting to several countries, such as Holland, Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, the United States, and Japan. . . . It was difficult for me to stand up in front of my peasant brothers and to go abroad; there was also the fear of going out; many things we suffered on the way; suffering but also tomorrow [there will be] a benefit.¹⁴

Some who have theorized the consequences for cultural identities of this new stage of globalization have proposed that the homogenizing force of the capitalist market will overcome the power of resistance and reconstruction of local cultures, thus creating a worldwide "postmodern condition," which would tend to erase cultural specificities (e.g., Jameson 1989, 1990). Others have analyzed resistance strategies developed to face global capitalism, which include the reinforcement of ethnic identities (Kearney 1991; Rouse 1991). Although many of these authors have focused on diasporas to the "first world," or on so-called migratory circuits (Gilroy

1987; Rouse 1991; Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992), they still help us to understand the new hybrid cultures emerging among those who did not choose to migrate.

Cultural hybridization has occurred through historical appropriation. For example, ISMAM members brought back from one of their trips to the United States what they called the "Chief Seattle Manifesto," written in 1854 "by the head of a native North American tribe to the President of the United States."¹⁵ The document, with drawings added by the members of ISMAM, was mimeographed and now circulates in Sierra communities. The mimeographed document begins with the question, "What is the relation between what American Indians thought and the destruction the Motozintla Sierra is suffering today?" and then describes the defense of nature made more than one hundred years ago in distant lands by a Native American: "How can the sky be bought or sold, or even the heat of the earth? Such an idea is unknown to us. If you do not own the freshness of the air, or the sparkle of waters, how could you then buy them? Each parcel of this land is sacred to my people" (mimeograph n.d.). The members of the cooperatives have not only adopted some elements of the worldviews of Canadian and North American native people, but they have also learned from new Native American businesspeople about commercialization, production, and the formulation of a corporate image, among other things. The Indigenous Free Trade Agreement is about to be signed, which will allow North American Indians to invest in an ecotourism and fishing project ISMAM is planning to develop in Chiapas's coastal region (Nigh 1997). Other spheres of communication have enabled contact with other social groups—North American Indians, European cooperativist groups, American organic farmers, certification agencies, and so on—that constitute global information structures in which they now participate (Lash and Urry 1994:64). Aspects of these structures have been appropriated and integrated into a new Mam identity that is then projected back as an image, both corporate and ethnic, through the same global information structures.

Although defense of the earth, nature, and culture is central to ISMAM and Nan Choch discourse and practice, their ideology and practices have been shaped by the demands of the alternative and equitable markets. A clear example of this is the certification that is a prerequisite for entering the equitable trade market. ISMAM sells 57 percent of its coffee through Max Havelaar-Trans Fair, an association that supports the sale of products in equitable markets and certifies "socially responsible" production and distribution (Renard 1999). The Max Havelaar label is not



Alternative and equitable markets are a very important commercial niche for ISMAM. PHOTO BY ANA ALVAREZ VELASCO.

a trademark; it is added to brands that buy their products from cooperative societies of democratically organized small producers, at a price fixed by the association that guarantees a fair return to the peasants. The Max Havelaar label justifies the high prices of its products by adding the symbolic value of justice and solidarity. To have access to this market niche, ISMAM partners agreed to use only family labor and not paid workers, to work in solidarity with members, and to organize its cooperative society on democratic principles, guaranteeing participation to all members, including women; political independence; no political, religious, or gender discrimination; crop diversification; and an administrative and control structure that minimizes the risk of embezzlement (Renard 1999:199). If any of these conditions is not fulfilled, the equitable market will be closed to the cooperative society.

The cooperative society is governed by a general assembly composed of all its members. Representatives of the twenty-eight member regions meet once a month to discuss problems specific to each region and to make decisions on the use of the common fund, special courses, infrastructure acquisition, and so on. The organization has become even stronger through its agreements with the equitable market. Similarly, women's participation has been the result not only of Mam women's activism in the cooperative society but also of the demands of the new market niche.

If the Max Havelaar label adds symbolic value to ISMAM coffee by alluding to its democratic structure and its philosophy of solidarity, the use of a corporate image claiming the Maya roots of its producers makes Café Mam a product with meaning that goes well beyond its quality and organic origin. Thus reinvention of a utopian past of harmony with nature has been used by members of ISMAM as cultural capital on the global market. The use of historical narratives to give "authenticity" to a product in a competitive market has been analyzed by Robert C. Ulin (1995) for the case of Bordeaux wines, illustrating the dialectical connection between commodity production and invention of tradition. Similar to Bordeaux wine producers, who by inventing a particular historical narrative created the *grand crus* (elite wines) for an elite market and enhanced their competitiveness, ISMAM invented an advertising image to meet the demands of a select organic market. The past has become symbolic capital in their effort to enhance the international marketability of their product.

Equitable and organic markets in Europe, the United States, and Japan are now particularly interested in supporting and buying products from "authentically indigenous" cultivators. Consequently, the cultural task of rescuing Mam identity now coincides with a marketing effort to construct a corporate image that can respond to the symbolic demand of "first world" ecologists and "Greens." Thus ISMAM has responded to



Café Mam destined for the international market. PHOTO BY ANA ALVAREZ VELASCO.

the demand for organic coffee produced by “genuine indigenous people” with “Mam Coffee: Organically Grown and Socially Responsible”; and the international market is told that “Mam organic coffee is cultivated and produced by the last descendants of the Mayan people.” Perhaps, together with an expanded ecological consciousness, these alternative and equitable markets have been influenced by what some researchers have called “imperialist nostalgia” (e.g., Rosaldo 1989), that is, the desire to renew contact with “the noble savage” once ravaged by colonialism. The consumption of Café Mam becomes one way to support “the last descendants of the Mayan people.”

New Cultural Discourses and the Reinvention of Mam Utopia

The cultural discourses that Mam organic producers have constructed in the framework of global information and communication structures are not only market strategies to reach a certain type of selected consumers, they have also given new meaning to their lives and new structure to their everyday dynamics. The cooperative has become a very important space of productive organization for many Mam peasants and at the same time has allowed the construction of a new sense of identity that is expressed in a new discourse claiming not only their rights as peasants, but also as indigenous peoples. For cooperative members, being Mam did not necessarily mean speaking the Mam language or using the costumes financed by the INI but rather recovering a common history and trying to relate harmoniously with Mother Earth.

This claim for ethnic identity is reflected in the names of the two main organic growers' cooperative societies. Lowland coffee producers named their organization *Indígenas de la Sierra Madre de Motozintla*, or *Motozintla Sierra Madre Indigenous People*, and highland potato and vegetable producers called themselves *Nan Choch*, meaning “Our Mother Earth” in the Mam language. The need to revalue Mam identity was integral to the need to recover respect for the earth.

We saw the need to begin organizing ourselves and recovering our culture. We had to know who we were, to find out where we wanted to go. Then we got organized to recover the culture, recover the traditions, recover the earth, recover the life of animals. Thus *Nan Choch* was born, to recover the culture, the traditions and nature.¹⁶

The need to recover their own history led to the construction of a discourse on a mythical past of abundance and harmony with nature. Fiction

and reality were mixed in the construction of this “Mam Utopia,” where the land was fertile, where Mother Earth was respected and provided for every need, where there was equality and work was available, and where laws were not necessary and everybody respected elders' advice (FOCIES 1994:12–16).

This mythically constructed past of respect for nature contrasts sharply with the reality discovered in 1925 by the German geographer Leo Waibel, who described the highland region of the Sierra, inhabited by “Indians of Guatemalan origin foreign to the region”:

The forest is cut down by men with axes, but they seldom cut trees uniformly, although in general they leave standing the largest trees, or at least part of their trunk and always all stumps. Then they burn everything, whether to get rid of all the wood, or to prevent undergrowth. This superficial clearing system is easy to achieve and this is the only explanation for the fact that those beautiful Sierra Madre mountain trees which existed long ago have disappeared completely over large areas in just a few decades. Indigenous peoples are destructive of forests, and their unplanned clearing represents great danger for Sierra hydrology, especially for the future of coffee plantations. (1946: 203)

Although Waibel's testimony may be weakened by racist descriptions of indigenous populations, it is important to note that depredation in the Sierra predates the use of agrochemical substances, as pointed out by many of the documents of the local agro-ecological cooperative societies. Supported by their adviser, Father Jorge Aguilar, these Mam have been able to invite historians who specialize in Chiapas pre-Hispanic and colonial history to help in the collective reconstruction of this forgotten history. Concrete data have little importance, however, as the aim is to reconstruct a common past that will give them strength and help them build a future. Descriptions of a mythical past continue to mix historical times of the recent past, as remembered by old people, with the remote past, often reconstructed on the basis of information from mass media. Thus we find references to life in caves, where people slept on straw and skins, where “tribes” communicated with smoke and horns, wrote in signs, and counted with pebbles (FOCIES 1994:12–16).

Not all ISMAM and *Nan Choch* members have the same attitude toward this “rescue of the past.” For some, it is only the beginning of an “introductory discourse” that is very useful when dealing with international clients but that has little to do with everyday life in their commu-

nities. Others have substantially altered their way of life on joining cooperative societies. Such is the case for members of the new community Unión Fuerza Liberadora (Liberating Force Union), an agro-ecological village founded in 1988 in the municipality of Motozintla whose organizing principle is “cultural rescue.”

Coming originally from Colonia Zaragoza, in the highlands of the municipality of Motozintla, just a few steps from the Guatemalan border, founders of this “utopian community” were landless people who had received several organic agriculture courses from Maderas del Pueblo (Woods of the People), an NGO linked to the Catholic church. In 1988, after purchasing twelve hectares of land from indebted peasants in the lowlands near Colonia Belisario Domínguez, sixty-five persons formed this new community, started to collectively grow organic coffee, and became members of ISMAM. But Liberating Force Union’s project went beyond organic farming, and, without leaving ISMAM, they decided to constitute themselves as a Society of Social Solidarity (SSS) in order to obtain legal recognition that would allow them to promote their own cultural rescue projects.

After deciding that the curriculum did not serve the needs of peasant children, the community expelled teachers sent by the Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública). They then founded their own “agro-ecological” school, so that all children could learn to relate with nature in a different manner, recover their Mam language, and practice handicraft techniques used by “the elders.”

For pottery we still do not have a teacher. This has been women’s preoccupation, a person comes, but just like that gives a few clues. But for weaving we do have a person who gave training for several days; most people are already involved in this course. We are also trying to recover the Mam language for our children. . . . [I]t is part of a new future we are trying to recover, together with the organic technique, and we want to carry everything on in a parallel development to stop what comes from outside.¹⁷

Commissions have been established to teach organic agriculture, traditional medicine, cooperative societies (which also address administrative and organizational issues), pottery, waist-loom weaving, and the Mam language. These commissions are made up of five persons, each of whom teaches one day a month. This system of taking turns has remedied the lack of teachers and involved the whole community in educational projects.



In the new agro-ecological schools, parents are involved in teaching children organic agriculture. PHOTO BY RICHARD CISNEROS LÓPEZ.

For waist-loom weaving, a refugee Mam woman was invited to train community women.

All members of the community talk about the need to end their foreign dependency and achieve a truly self-sustaining community through the production of food, clothing, and tools, yet their coffee, like that of other ISMAM members, is being sold in the United States, Europe, and Canada. The construction of a building for the agro-ecological school has been financed by the Interamerican Foundation through a Mexican nonprofit organization whose aim is to support "native cultures."

Liberating Force Union members see "cultural rescue" as a means of survival and oppose agrarian development based on agrochemical products, which has so far benefited them little. There is a clear awareness of the need to rescue their culture, which has been denied by integrationist policies.

We must not lose what is ours; it is our duty to recover our native language; it is the conception that our forefathers had in them. . . . [W]ith courage we must take it seriously; we must not only recover the language, but everything integrated, to return to what was before.¹⁸

This discourse is considered too extreme even by other ISMAM members, although it is not secessionist or fundamentalist but reflects a new hybrid identity, in which historical memory and ecological ideology serve as the foundation for the construction of new traditions. For Liberating Force Union members, the rescue of traditions goes hand in hand with training courses to improve cattle handling, knowledge of new potential markets, and even trips to Europe when commercialization demands it.

By pointing out the hybrid character of Mam ecologists, I do not want to delegitimize it for other "more authentic" identities. Rather, I hold that the Mam case illustrates with particular clarity the process by which all ethnic identities are constructed, as changing, situational, historical products and not as millenarian identities that have survived internal or external colonialism.

Collective Reflection and New Spaces of Organization

Agro-ecological cooperative societies have meant for these indigenous peasants not only the possibility of recovering a denied identity while attaining better living conditions but also new spaces for political learning. Both cooperative societies have provided a special place for the ongoing

education of their members, with two axes for reflection: on the one hand, the importance of collective work, with its advantages and problems, and, on the other, the peasant-ecological path as an alternative for sustainable development.

Among the requirements for joining the cooperative societies is a workshop called Organized Communal Work (*Trabajo Común Organizado* [TCO]), which, while analyzing the capitalist system, emphasizes the capacity of peasants themselves to change their circumstances through collective work. This workshop, designed by the Center for Community Production (*Centro de Producción Comunitaria* [CEPROCUM]), linked to the Diocese of Tehuantepec, has become a significant political learning experience. Beyond the workshop's educational content, which is centered on the relationship between local problems and global causes, participants experience the possibility of sharing opinions, discussing, reflecting, and being listened to, which results in a reappraisal of their own knowledge and enhances their capacity for analysis. Such learning dynamics as psychodrama, used in the TCO, have been used by Mam peasants in their communities as a form of social critique and analysis. This educational influence has reached "cultural rescue" groups linked to official indigenism, which are starting to include in their publications scenes representing plantation labor and the consequences of the use of agrochemicals.

Through discussion, reflection, and consensus developed in cooperative societies, Mam peasants have acquired access to a new language that has enriched other organizational spaces. On this point, Levine (1992:13), in his analysis of *comunidades eclesiales de base* (ecclesial base communities) in Venezuela and Colombia, points out that "apart from the achievement of proximate objectives like building a school, laying a water line, or founding a cooperative, experience in groups also furthers the construction of languages, universes of discourse, and expectation."

Yet the experience of collective reflection has not necessarily produced ideological homogenization. For some, political struggle takes place only through the control of processes of production and commercialization, by achieving self-sufficiency and engaging in development based on agrochemical products; while for others, political struggle includes wresting municipal power from the authorities and resisting the official government party. Such ideological differences have become evident in the new political conjuncture created in Chiapas since January 1, 1994, with the armed uprising of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*.

From the beginning, clergy who have supported the formation of agro-ecological cooperative societies have supported organic agriculture not

only as a technological option but also as a political alternative. From their perspective, the resulting dependency of the producer on conventional agricultural techniques exacerbates authoritarian structures and *caciquismo* (rule by political bosses). Dependency on external inputs and nonlocal markets makes peasants more vulnerable to strategies of control by the state. From this perspective, their regional priority should not be conventional political struggle but rather the development of an economy of self-subsistence. Father Aguilar Reina points out:

For us, the priority is food self-sufficiency; we cannot build political independence if we have not solved the problem of our stomachs, and solving it without falling into dependency or becoming slaves. This question about the technological package proposed by the state, which many organizations have taken as workable, is nothing but technological pseudoslavery; whoever has the fertilizer holds the power, for there is the power to produce corn, and corn is the basis of life sustenance. The point is to find a way to produce food without falling into this type of dependency, then it will benefit us in the long run as stronger political independence.¹⁹

What was once merely a political rift over means became a chasm in the context of war. In support of the EZLN and in rejection of an election process considered to be fraudulent, the Peaceful Civil Resistance (Resistencia Civil Pacífica) emerged in August 1995. This movement included invading several plantations, taking municipal presidencies, closing roads, and establishing a parallel government "in resistance," headed by the leftist candidate Amado Avendaño, from the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). In their official discourse, both Nan Choch and ISMAM remained outside the Civil Resistance movement. However, many of their members independently supported the struggle, causing frequent friction with other members but especially with authorities of the Catholic church. The bishop of Tapachula, Felipe Arzimendi, urged all catechists and members of the congregation to stay out of the Civil Resistance and publicly supported the legitimacy of the electoral process, thus denying the legitimacy of claims of fraud made by a large segment of society. ISMAM and Nan Choch advisers seem to have decided to align themselves with the bishop and have dissociated themselves from PRD's political demands.

Conflicting political perspectives during this present conjuncture have prevented the formation of a common front, a situation that I analyze in the next chapter.

Mam Women and Gender Demands

Women have played a key role in ISMAM and Nan Choch cooperative societies, not only as laborers but also as active and participating members in general assemblies. In contrast to the Mam women who participate in the dance groups, the women members of ISMAM and Nan Choch have struggled to have active participation in their organizations. This is in part the result of their critical reflection in TCO workshops. Although gender inequality is not discussed in the TCO workshops, discussions of other inequalities has helped them to question the limits of the democratic patriarchy.

However, many Mam women have been forced to leave the domestic sphere and undertake agricultural labor or look for economic support elsewhere, in part because male migration to urban regions during the last two decades has been much greater in the Sierra than in other regions of the state. This has left many women as heads of households and in charge of coffee production, sales, and so on. Managing these new responsibilities, together with the high level of bilingualism resulting from the aggressive Hispanicizing campaigns of the 1930s, has given Sierra women more experience with dealing with state representatives. This change in women's roles contrasts sharply with the situation of Tzotzil and Tzeltal women in the highlands, who until very recently have had very little participation in the political sphere (Garza Caligaris and Ruíz Ortíz 1992; Rosenbaum 1993; Eber 1995).

The right of fathers to decide whom their daughters must marry, which has been denounced very recently by some indigenous women of the highlands as forced marriage and a violation of their rights, was already being questioned by many Mam women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although this practice still exists among some families, more and more women are questioning their parents' authority to make decisions about their lives. Old women's testimonies tell us that already as girls they had won the right to decide whom and when to marry.

I had left the corte for about a year when he spoke to me. Let him continue speaking if he is patient. . . . When he asked me to marry him I told him: You want to sleep with a woman, but I do not know how to work, I do not know. And who knows how they are in your house. Perhaps they are evil, perhaps you drink and are mad in your house, who knows how you are. If you are a good man you have to show it to me, have patience. . . . He spoke with my father and I accepted in the third year. But I never married, only open union.²⁰

Open unions were formalized through the "hand petition," or formal engagement. Today this petition usually takes place after the young couple has reached an agreement.

With greater control over domestic decision making, women have moved toward greater public participation since the peasant mobilizations of the 1970s. Particularly in the lowlands of Motozintla, Mazapa de Madero, Amatenango de la Frontera, and Frontera Comalapa, women have been active in the peasant movement. Hundreds of Mam and mestizo women mobilized with men to demand, among other things, more just land distribution. Land has been one of the main demands of peasant organizations such as OCEZ or OPEZ, but in several historic moments, local peasants have also mobilized against labor conditions akin to serfdom, in favor of better conditions for the commercialization of their products, and against an extremely discriminatory judicial system. In all of these mobilizations, peasant women have been present to support the political and economic demands of their communities.

What is absolutely new in the present participation of local indigenous women, particularly within the agro-ecological movement, is the fact that they have become more vocal, not only in supporting the demands of their companions or in representing their communities, but also in demanding respect for their specific rights as women. Mam indigenous women have begun demanding more significant participation in decision making in their communities and organizations. In conjunction with their participation in agro-ecological cooperative societies and in promoting respect for earth and nature, large numbers of Mam women have insisted on more democratic relations within the family, the community, and the social organization. The Proposals of Mam and Mochó Peoples (*Propuestas de los Pueblos Mam y Mochós*), written by men and women of Nan Choch, ISMAM, and the Grupos de Trabajo Común of the Sierra Foranía, included a point on women's rights, signaling the need to

respect women's dignity in the different aspects; participate with the same rights in meetings; take into consideration women's voices in all aspects of community life; establish relations with other women's organizations in ejidal juntas; promote encounters with other organizations and exchange experiences.

The inclusion of these demands in the documents of agro-ecological organizations is the result of many years of struggle by Mam women to have their needs recognized as priorities. It is worth noting that in the forum where these demands were discussed, the greatest opposition did not come from Mam peasants but from several agronomist advisers, who

found them irrelevant, compared to the ecological problems facing the region.

In spite of the patriarchal character of the Catholic church, the new social ministry promoted by liberation theologians has endorsed greater participation of women in community development and has supported their service as pastoral agents. The reflection promoted by liberation theology is colored by a class perspective, which does not usually include a critique of gender inequality. Yet their training in organic agriculture and resource administration, as well as the new spaces for participation, has allowed many women to consider anew their place in their communities. Doña Cedema, one of the leaders of Nan Choch, exemplifies this "new consciousness":

I like to analyze, to see things that are wrong, because my conscience 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 something our daughters will be better, more respected, with more rights in life 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, defend our rights. If I stay all alone in my corner I can do nothing, because I would be busy only with my housework and would not think of others; it is very good to think about others.²¹

This wish to "do something" led Doña Cedema to promote a women's project, as part of Nan Choch, called A New Dawn in the Sierra (*Nuevo Amanecer en la Sierra*). She and forty other women of Zaragoza, Tonincaque, Berriozábal, Belem, Granados Tacanque, Tonischihuán, and Aquiles Serdán, in the municipality of Motozintla, have begun to meet to discuss "women's dignity." They have planned collective poultry and cattle farms managed by women using agro-ecological techniques. For this purpose, they made contact with the Belisario Domínguez Women's Group (*Grupo de Mujeres Campesinas de Belisario Domínguez*), the Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal de las Casas, and the Women's Commission of NGO Coordination for Peace (*Comisión de Mujeres de la Coordinadora de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales por la Paz [CONPAZ]*). The collective farms are not yet operating, but with the support of the above organizations, they have developed several workshops on women's rights, reproductive rights and sexuality, and democracy and political participation. As a result of these workshops, women of

A New Dawn in the Sierra have developed a proposal and sent it to several international funding agencies that are interested in supporting peasant women.

After receiving this training [training in organic agriculture provided by Nan Choch] we started to carry out small collective jobs in horticulture, growing corn, wheat, and beans. To do this, at the beginning about sixty men and women from thirteen communities got together. Our achievement at that time was to have a common fund, from the sale of half of our crop, since the other half was for self-consumption; we also gained knowledge in organic horticulture. . . . Then there was a split, and forty of us remained in the organization, all women, and our present objective is to find possible solutions for our economic problems through productive projects, and to obtain training in resource administration. We think that it is important to find alternatives for our situation as women. That is why we have also received support to reflect on our situation and propose actions as women to achieve a change in our lives, in the family as well as in the community. We want our capacity and dignity as women to be valued.²²

Acknowledging as unfair social relations that had been accepted as "normal" or even "natural," and verbalizing what had been silent by making the doxa into a discourse (Bourdieu 1977), has represented an important step in confronting the patriarchal discourse, used by official sectors as well as by cooperative societies themselves. These new discourses are starting to influence everyday practice and to modify, however slightly, gender relations.

As for me, the organization has given me much. For example, at home inequality has been prevented; for I have seen many couples in which husbands oppress women very much. Here there are small talks, and men are beginning to understand that we are all human, that we have the same dignity, and this is already shared at home, at work and all that. That is what the struggle has given, this has been achieved and has helped me to be happy.²³

At present executive positions in the cooperative societies are held exclusively by men, and domestic violence is still a problem in the region, even among members of the organic growers' movement. Nevertheless, the fact that gender demands are included in the platforms of cooperative societies and are always present in assemblies, forums, workshops, and

regional encounters is a new phenomenon in the peasant movement in Chiapas.

One cannot generalize about the success of ISMAM as an organic cooperative society, because several unique elements contributed to its growth into the coffee firm it is today. Its success as a cooperative society was partially determined by the historical moment of its birth. In the mid-1980s European Social Democrats, in an effort to counteract political-military movements in Latin America, channeled much of their development resources into countries of the ill-defined "third world." Agro-ecological societies such as UCIRI and ISMAM benefited from competition between North American and European agencies for influence in Latin America. German financing through the German Environmental Protection Agency (GEPA) and American financing through the Agency for International Development and the Interamerican Foundation supported and promoted local organic agriculture. Coincidentally, the birth of the equitable market, with its new commercialization strategies that use mass media and have access to large trade groups, allowed ISMAM coffee producers to leave the restricted niche of the alternative market and widen their trade networks.

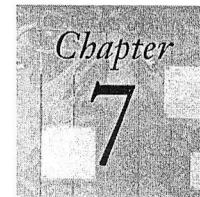
Such conditions, together with the efforts of its members, have made ISMAM one of the most successful organic coffee cooperative societies in all of Latin America. The cooperative is exporting organic coffee to Japan, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, France, Spain, and the United States, with profits now up to \$7 million a year. Its area of influence has extended beyond the Mam region, including Tojolabal, Tzeltal, and Mochó indigenous peoples, from approximately one hundred communities distributed in twenty municipalities in Chiapas. In 1995 ISMAM members cultivated five thousand hectares of organic coffee, bought their own processing plant in the town of Tapachula, and established eighteen rural laboratories for biological pest control (Ramos Solórzano 1995).

Still, in the last few years ISMAM has had to face two main problems. First, the political and ideological differences between its members increased after the Zapatista uprising and drove some producers of the rain forest region out of the cooperative, thus preventing the formation of a unified organization of organic producers. Second, because of the rise in the international price of coffee, the solidarity network has stopped offering a bonus, or the bonus has become very small, so that the price difference between regular and organic coffee has decreased. This has led several members to place their own economic interests above their agro-

ecological principles, and they have formed another association that markets nonorganic as well as organic coffee.

In spite of the present political and production problems faced by ISMAM, the important role that the agro-ecological movement has played in the emergence of new cultural discourses, the creation of spaces for organization, and the improvement of living standards for an important sector of Mam population cannot be denied.

The political choices of Mam organic growers in the near future will depend not only on ideology and organizational structure; they will be mediated by class and gender differences, by regional situation—whether inside or outside the conflict zone, in coffee-growing zones or in the highlands—by specific histories, and by relations with the state and previous political experience, among many other factors. For the moment, the voices of the agro-ecological Mam have begun to be heard by the peasant movement in Chiapas, and their experience has had an impact, still unpredictable, on the contemporary history of Chiapas indigenous peoples. Almost ten years after the birth of the agro-ecological movement, we can say that it has achieved one of its main aims: improving the living conditions of an important sector of Sierra Madre inhabitants. This economic success does not imply the absence of internal problems. The history of Nan Choch and ISMAM members has been filled with contradictions, conflicts, encounters, and disencounters, which this chapter could not fully explore. Nan Choch organic vegetable producers have not had the same opportunities in the international markets as ISMAM, because they have been competing against U.S.-subsidized agriculture and also because many of their products are perishable and thus they have had to sell them in local markets. Their relations with the state have been characterized at times by negotiation and at times by confrontation; the cooperative has not always been a harmonious space of collective growth but one where political, gender, and class differences have manifested themselves. Nevertheless, with all their shortcomings, these two experiences have represented an opening in the Mam peasants' universe of possibilities. In the face of predatory technology, a global economy, and the homogenizing tendencies of transnational capitalism, these agro-ecological cooperative societies have given Sierra Madre Mam peasants new fighting strategies. Pointing out and analyzing the processes of historical construction of cultural identities, without mystifying them, is a fruitful way to recognize Mam peasants as social subjects, with their contradictions, aspirations, and internal struggles, and not as ahistorical myths, responding to the needs of an Occidental utopia.



FROM PRONASOL TO THE ZAPATISTA UPRISING

One February morning in 1992 the indigenist radio station XEVFS, "the Voice of the Southern Border," announced that Congress had approved constitutional amendments to Article 27 recommended by the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The amendments would establish the legal basis for the ejido to become private property. The broadcast explained that, among other things, this new Agrarian Law would allow peasants to sell or rent out their lands; and private companies would be able to buy ejidal lands from ejidatarios and investors for private use or to incorporate them into agribusinesses. Finally, the broadcast announced that this agrarian reform meant that dispossessed peasants would no longer be able to apply for land.¹ This was depressing news for Miguel, a resident of Ejido Vega del Rosario, who had been waiting eight years for a decision on his application for land. His was one of 3,483 applications from Chiapas peasants filed at the Ministry of Agrarian Reform (Secretaría de la Reforma Agraria [SRA]) that were awaiting examination by Mexico City civil servants. *Rezago agrario* (agrarian lag) is the official term used to describe the official limbo of many thousands of files like Miguel's. Miguel, who had been helping his father on a coffee plantation, for several months had considered seeking employment in the United States, but his hope of obtaining a piece of land in Siltepec had made him reject the idea. Now his dreams of land had evaporated.

The rumor that land distribution had ended spread rapidly throughout the Sierra Madre. No one knew the details of the constitutional amend-

“As a multi-layered history of power and identity in Chiapas, this study is without parallel. It offers a richly textured and well-documented history of how the Mam of Chiapas have constructed their own conceptions of identity and citizenship.”

—Virginia Garrard-Burnett, author of
Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem

The 1994 Zapatista uprising of Chiapas's Maya peoples against the Mexican government shattered the state myth that indigenous groups have been successfully assimilated into the nation. In this wide-ranging study of identity formation in Chiapas, Aída Hernández delves into the experience of a Maya group, the Mam, to analyze how Chiapas's indigenous peoples have in fact rejected, accepted, or negotiated the official discourse on “being Mexican” and participating in the construction of a Mexican national identity.

Hernández traces the complex relations between the Mam and the national government from 1934 to the Zapatista rebellion. She investigates the many policies and modernization projects through which the state has attempted to impose a Mexican identity on the Mam and shows how this Maya group has resisted or accommodated these efforts. In particular, she explores how changing religious affiliation, women's and ecological movements, economic globalization, state policies, and the Zapatista movement have all given rise to various ways of “being Mam” and considers what these indigenous identities may mean for the future of the Mexican nation. The Spanish version of this book won the 1997 Fray Bernardino de Sahagún national prize for the best social anthropology research in Mexico.

Born in Ensenada, Baja California, on the northern Mexican border, R. Aída Hernández Castillo has worked and lived among Guatemalan refugees and Chiapas's indigenous peoples on the southern Mexican border since 1986. She is now a researcher-professor with CIESAS (Center for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology) in Mexico City.

Also of interest

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