

**Cross-Cultural Encounters:
Gringos and Ladinos in
Zapatista Territory**

Amy Chin
Project Advisor: Miguel Pickard
Academic Director: Antonio Canseco
SIT Mexico: Fall 2006

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Acknowledgements

There are many people who made this ISP possible. I'd like to thank Antonio Canseco, William Stone, Aida Barroso, and the SIT students who supported me and guided me through this whole process. Their wackiness, their humor, and their unique personalities were a source of endless entertainment. They made this crazy semester a truly memorable, once-in-a-lifetime experience that I will never forget. Thanks also goes to:

Miguel Pickard for being an amazing, intelligent, and thoughtful ISP director,

Leire, Ricardo, Jenny, Christian, and Marta for the unforgettable experiences in Olga Isabel,

the people of Olga Isabel for opening up their hearts and their community to me,

Antoine Libert, Onésimo Hidalgo, and Gaby Soriano for sharing their time, thoughts, ideas, and experiences with CIEPAC,

María Elena Martínez for the books and the advice,

Mitch Anderson and Diana for bringing me to Olga Isabel for the first time,

FrayBa for giving me the opportunity to go to Olga Isabel as a human rights observer,

and my families in Oaxaca and San Cristóbal for sharing their lives, opening up their homes, and putting up with this gringa and all of her craziness.

Introduction

Before coming to Mexico, nearly all of my knowledge of Chiapas and the Zapatistas came from *The Zapatista Reader*, an anthology of Marcos's writings and articles about Zapatismo. Like many fans of Zapatismo in Europe and North America, I was immediately captivated by the Marcos mystique—the magnetic pull of this flashy, mythic hero who refused to reveal his true identity. I was enamored with the idea of this modern-day Zorro with his black ski mask and pipe issuing whimsical stories and passionate communiqués from the depths of the Lacandón jungle. That this romantic figure happened to be the spokesperson of a very unusual revolution only deepened my fascination with him and the movement he represented.

As a college student born and raised in the staid, middle-class suburbs of New England, the Zapatista struggle for indigenous rights and autonomy seemed very remote, exotic, and faraway to me. Perhaps it was more the romanticized image of the Zapatista movement as an exciting revolution headed by a dashing masked PR-guy/superhero that really captivated my interest. Before reading about the Zapatistas, the fact that the indigenous people of the Americas had been brutally oppressed and deprived of their human rights ever since the European conquest had never truly registered in my brain. It was Marcos's writing—his lyrical rhetoric, idiosyncratic persona, and playful humor in portraying the plight of the indigenous and the goals of the struggle—that really awakened in me an initial and growing awareness of the deep injustices that the indigenous have endured for hundreds of years.

Like many Zapatista sympathizers who have come to San Cristóbal before me, I arrived with romanticized notions of Zapatismo, idealized visions born of the lofty rhetoric in Marcos's communiqués, letters, and stories. In essence, I came with a basic knowledge of Zapatista ideology and zero knowledge of the indigenous Zapatistas themselves. It was only after a few

weeks in San Cristóbal de las Casas that I started to learn about the different indigenous cultures present in the region and the dynamics of ladino-indigenous relations. It was in this context that I entered my two-week stint as a human rights observer in the autonomous Zapatista municipality of Olga Isabel.

A general lack of knowledge about indigenous language, culture, and society is not uncommon among first-time international human rights observers who enter Zapatista communities. Most human rights observers, myself included, go to communities through the Brigadas Civiles de Observación (Civil Observation Brigades) run by the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center, or FrayBa). While FrayBa trains their observers to be culturally sensitive and respectful, observers receive very little specific knowledge about the language and culture of the communities they enter. During training, observers discuss rules and specific examples of how to be culturally sensitive but receive no basic information about Tsotsil, Tseltal, Tojalabal, or Chol language and culture (the main indigenous groups in the Chiapas). Consequently, the stay in the community itself becomes something of a crash course in the Tseltal, Tsotsil, Tojalabal, or Chol language and way of life.

In the case of Olga Isabel, a Zapatista community that continually receives international observers, there exists a tri-cultural situation: Tseltal, ladino, and gringo cultures are constantly present within the community.¹ The indigenous people in this region of Chiapas are Tseltales who retain their particular language and many of the customs and traditions of their forebears.

¹ In this paper, the terms *Tseltal*, *ladino*, and *gringo* signify a specific ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity. The word *Tseltal* encompasses the particular ethnicity, language, and culture of the residents in Olga Isabel. Definitions and connotations of the terms *ladino* and *gringo* vary widely depending on context and geographic region in which they are used. I use *ladino* to signify mainstream Mexican culture. More specifically, I define a *ladino* as a Spanish-speaking Mexican who may be white or *mestizo* (of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) with no direct, inherited connection to indigenous culture. I use *gringo* to signify a non-Mexican, usually of Anglo descent, from North America or Europe. My interview with Miguel Pickard on 4 December 2006 clarified and developed my understanding of this tri-cultural situation.

The influence of ladino culture in Olga Isabel is present and growing, even though no ladinos reside within the community. Specifically, more Olga Isabelenses (residents of Olga Isabel) are learning and speaking Spanish, the young girls in the community wear the westernized clothing of the *ladinas* instead of traditional Tseltal attire, Mexican pop, rock, and banda music plays continually on the radio, and Olga Isabelenses interact with ladinos in the nearby pueblos of Chilón, Bachajón, and Yajalón as well. Ladinos also come regularly to Olga Isabel to teach *talleres* (workshops) and *cursos* (courses) on various subjects such as sewing and medicine. The gringo influence in Olga Isabel is sustained by the continual presence of international human rights observers who temporarily live in the community for 2-week periods.

This paper is principally an analysis of the international observers' experiences in Olga Isabel and the implications of their continual presence in the community. I begin by explaining my methodology in carrying out this project. I then give a brief history of the Zapatistas, followed by a summary of the present situation in Olga Isabel and its historical and political context. The body of the paper examines the experiences of international observers and the effects of their presence within communities. I conclude by placing my findings in the context of the larger Zapatista movement for indigenous rights and autonomy.

Methodology

The field research for this project consists of participant-observation, informal conversations, and formal interviews with residents of Olga Isabel, international human rights observers, and NGO workers. Ten formal interviews were completed for this project: five interviews with international observers, four interviews with NGO workers from Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria (CIEPAC; in English, the Center

Economic and Political Research for Community Action), and one interview with María Elena Martínez Torres, a professor at Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS; in English, the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology).

Each international observer I interviewed was trained and deployed to Olga Isabel through FrayBa. The vast majority of my first-hand information was gathered through participant-observation and informal conversations with Olga Isabelenses and three ladinos working in the community. The two ladina women I spoke with taught a sewing taller to some of the women of Olga Isabel and were from San Cristóbal and Comitán. The third ladino I informally interviewed was Dr. Juan Manuel Canales Ruiz of Altamirano. Dr. Canales comes weekly to Olga Isabel to provide medical services at the clinic. At the end of my stay at Olga Isabel, Dr. Canales was beginning a three-day medicine course for *promotores de salud* (health promoters who work in the clinics) from the local municipality.

My information from community members themselves came from the men and children, as most of the women did not speak Spanish and spent very little time in public spaces. Among the men, my principal sources of information were Leonardo, Nicolás, Macario, Felipe, Josuel, Jerónimo, and Gerardo. The more in-depth, informative conversations I had with these men are listed in the bibliography as personal interviews. Among the children, my principal sources of information were Marco Antonio, Miguel, Rodolfo, Leticia, Michaela, and María Guadalupe. My informal conversations with the men and the children were interspersed between periods of participant observation. For example, conversations with the children would take place while playing basketball or soccer or while the children were drawing and painting with watercolors.

With the young men, conversations took place while playing basketball or soccer or around the community store in the late afternoon and evening.

The following activities were my principal experiences with participant-observation in Olga Isabel: playing soccer and basketball with the children, Leonardo, and the other observers; helping residents spread out coffee beans on the basketball court to dry in the sun and putting them in sacks before nightfall; attending the all-female sewing taller; attending a morning session of the medicine course; attending the Zapatista blockade on November 20 at Cruce Temóc; and attending a junta, or municipal meeting held to elect new authorities and discuss current issues and problems.

Additional information was gathered through participant-observation and informal conversations during my two-day stay in Morelia. Before going to Olga Isabel, I went with Leire and Ricardo (the two other observers in my group) to Morelia to get clearance from the Junta de Buen Gobierno to stay in Olga Isabel as human rights observers.² While at Morelia, I participated in and observed the celebration of the EZLN's founding and had informal conversations with gringos and ladinos present in Morelia as well. These gringos and ladinos were fellow human rights observers from FrayBa and NGO workers.

Limitations and Points of Focus

The political, social, and economic situations of different autonomous Zapatista communities in Chiapas vary widely. The nature of observer-community interaction differs from community to community as well. Although this project is essentially a case study of one particular experience in Olga Isabel, I believe the findings are relevant to observer experiences in

² Zapatista territory is divided into regions called caracoles. Each caracol has a central authority called the Junta de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Junta). Each caracol contains many municipalities that, in turn, contain many pueblos. Olga Isabel is both a pueblo and the head of its pertaining municipality, which is also called Olga Isabel. The municipality of Olga Isabel pertains to the caracol of Morelia. Any contact between the autonomous communities and outsiders can only take place with the permission of the Junta de Buen Gobierno.

other autonomous Zapatista communities. During my two-week stay in Olga Isabel, much of my time was spent simply learning basic Tseltal words and customs and becoming acquainted with the Zapatistas' social and governmental rituals and structures. My lack of total fluency in Spanish at times impeded my understanding of events I observed and people I listened to.

These factors—my brief time period in the community, my lack of basic cultural and linguistic knowledge about the community, and my lack of total fluency in Spanish—would be considered huge weaknesses in an in-depth study of the cross-cultural dynamics between observers and Zapatistas. However, this project does not purport to be such a study. Rather, this project is an examination of the international observer experience: why observers come, what background they come with, their observations, the interactions they have with community members, and their perceptions of the community as a result of these observations and interactions. Based on these findings, I speculate about possible implications and impacts that international observers have on the community itself. The speculations comprise the analysis of cross-cultural and neo-colonial dynamics in the second part of the paper.

I use the word speculate because I cannot fully understand the socio-political, economic, cultural, and psychological effects of our presence on a local culture that I am just beginning to understand. Without a deep, thorough knowledge of the local culture of Olga Isabel, I cannot accurately analyze and interpret the full impact of our presence on this local culture. A two-week stint as a first-time observer is certainly not enough time to become deeply acquainted with the Tseltal language, customs, and beliefs and the nuances of local politics and socio-economic conditions. Because of these limitations in knowledge and understanding of Tseltal culture and the local conditions of Olga Isabel, I cannot be completely definitive in my analysis of the

impact of internationals on this community. However, I have chosen to include this analysis because understanding the dynamics of outside help is of supreme importance, especially for the outsiders who enter communities.

A Brief History of the Zapatistas

The Zapatistas are a mainly indigenous revolutionary group located in Chiapas, one of the poorest states in Mexico. They call themselves Zapatistas in honor of Emiliano Zapata, an iconic national hero of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Zapata led the Ejército Libertador del Sur (Liberation Army of the South), also known as the Zapatistas. The present-day Zapatista organization consists of a military branch called the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN; in English, Zapatista Army of National Liberation) and a civil branch called the bases civiles de apoyo (civilian support bases).

The EZLN was founded on November 17, 1983 in the Lacandón Jungle. For a little over a decade after its inception, the group remained a semi-clandestine organization largely unknown to the outside world. During this time, the Zapatistas expanded and solidified their support base of impoverished indigenous farmers at the grassroots level. The world got its first taste of the Zapatistas on January 1, 1994, when the EZLN seized seven municipal seats in southeastern Chiapas, including San Cristóbal de las Casas and Ocosingo. The strategic takeover and occupation of the municipal governmental buildings was timed to coincide with the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Designed to eliminate tariffs and other commercial regulations between Canadian, U.S., and Mexican borders, NAFTA's measures essentially robbed Mexican farmers of a viable livelihood by flooding local Mexican markets with cheaper goods and products from their

Northern neighbors.³ In a state where indigenous farmers comprise a large part of the population, NAFTA essentially guaranteed a future of perpetual impoverishment for these farmers. The EZLN's uprising on the day of the treaty's inauguration stood out as a bold protest to the injustice of NAFTA's poverty-enforcing measures.

In the early hours of New Year's 1994, indigenous men and women wearing ski masks and red handkerchiefs over their faces flooded the heart of historic San Cristóbal de las Casas, a tourist-oriented city known for its colonial charm. From the palace balconies, masked Zapatistas read aloud the First Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle. The declaration tallied and denounced the injustices the mal gobierno (bad government) had committed against indigenous people in the 500 years since the Spanish Conquest. The Zapatistas summarized the basic demands they were fighting for in eleven words: "work, land, shelter, bread, health, education, liberty, peace, independence, and justice."⁴

Violent conflict between the Zapatistas and Mexican government forces lasted 12 days, during which the bloodiest fighting took place in the municipality of Ocosingo. Across the countryside, rancheros fled from their properties and Zapatistas moved in to reoccupy the abandoned lands.⁵ The war ended on January 12, 1994, when President Carlos Salinas declared a ceasefire. This initial 12-day war marked the first and last time the Zapatistas and the Mexican government engaged in an officially declared war. Since then, however, government-sponsored, anti-Zapatista paramilitary groups in the region have perpetuated a constant state of low-intensity warfare in the Chiapan countryside.

³ CIEPAC workshop.

⁴ Ross 19-20.

⁵ Rancheros own large tracts of land in the Chiapan countryside. The indigenous who work the rancheros' lands often receive very low pay and endure slave-like working conditions.

Since 1994, the Zapatistas have issued five more public declarations and various communiqués through the press and the internet. Subcomandante Marcos, a mestizo-ladino and one of the founding members of the EZLN, is the principal spokesperson for the Zapatistas to the outside world. In 1996, the Mexican government and the EZLN signed the San Andrés Accords, which granted indigenous rights and autonomy. However, the accords have become a dead letter, as the government has yet to comply with them and paramilitaries continue to threaten the safety and welfare of autonomous Zapatista communities.

The Zapatistas ended a seven-year period of silence in June 2005 with the publication of the Sixth Declaration from the Lacandón Jungle. The Sixth Declaration proclaims that existing mainstream political, social, and economic structures have been and continue to be completely unresponsive to the needs of the indigenous people. As such, the only recourse the indigenous and other oppressed and marginalized people have is to form their own alternative political, social, and economic systems to realize the rights they deserve.

This line of reasoning forms the basis of the Other Campaign, a current Zapatista initiative that aims to unite all oppressed and marginalized people in resisting the neoliberal structures that are oppressing them. The Other Campaign calls for the complete rejection of these neoliberal structures and the formation of new alternatives. This campaign began on January 1, 2006, at the start of a presidential election year. On New Year's Day 2006, Subcomandante Marcos (now going by the pseudonym of Delegate Zero) began a nationwide tour of Mexico to listen to the people and their needs. The Other Campaign's name and Marcos's pseudonym stand out as a symbolic rejection of the Mexican political system.

Olga Isabel: Ongoing Struggle for Land and Autonomy

There have been two main waves of *tomas de tierra* (land reoccupations by indigenous people) since the Zapatistas' 1994 uprising. The first occurred during 1994-1995 and the second during 1998-1999.⁶ The land on which Olga Isabel now sits was reoccupied from the first *toma de tierra*. The *ranchero* who owned the land fled because of the uprising and the ensuing war in Ocosingo, leaving it open for reoccupation.⁷ For many landless indigenous farmers, these *tomas* were the only means of obtaining their own land. In the words of researcher Gemma van der Haar, "For families who lacked their own lands, the Zapatista uprising opened new possibilities for realizing a frustrated ambition."⁸ This opportunity for economic advancement won over many adherents to the Zapatista cause.⁹

Although the land was reoccupied in 1994, families did not settle and form the community of Olga Isabel until 1998 or 1999.¹⁰ The year 1998 saw an intensification in anti-Zapatista paramilitary activity in the region. In response to the increased threat of losing their reoccupied lands, the Zapatistas formed small settlements on these lands to fortify their territorial control. As van de Haar puts it, "Pressures on the part of the EZLN to create new population centers on occupied territories, marked by their politics of consolidating territorial control, accelerated the decision [to create new settlements]."¹¹ It is possible that Olga Isabel was formed as part of this effort to solidify Zapatista control over the reoccupied land.

⁶ van der Haar 123.

⁷ Interview with Leonardo, 24 November 2006.

⁸ van der Haar 125: "Para las familias que carecían de tierras propias, el levantamiento Zapatista abrió nuevas posibilidades para realizar una frustrada ambición."

⁹ Interview with Leonardo, 24 November 2006; van der Haar 126.

¹⁰ Interview with Leonardo, 24 November 2006.

¹¹ van der Haar 128: "Presiones de parte del EZLN para crear nuevos centros de población en los predios tomados, enmarcadas en su política de consolidar su control territorial, aceleraron la decisión."

There are approximately 8-10 Tseltal families currently residing in Olga Isabel, all of whom are originally from the nearby pueblo of Bachajón. All of the residents are members of the bases de apoyo. While Olga Isabel is a Zapatista stronghold, most of the community's neighbors and the nearby pueblo of San Antonio are members of the Organización para la Defensa de los Derechos Indígenas y Campesinos (OPDDIC), a local paramilitary group.¹² Like the Olga Isabelenses, members of OPDDIC are indigenous Tseltal farmers who grow corn, beans, and coffee. Founded in 1998 by priista ex-deputy Pedro Chulín Jiménez, OPDDIC provides economic support to its adherents in exchange for their rejection of Zapatismo.¹³ OPDDIC aims to weaken and destabilize the Zapatista movement by pushing the Zapatistas off of their reoccupied lands.

Members of OPDDIC have repeatedly threatened to enter Olga Isabel and retake their land.¹⁴ In addition to these threats, hostility between OPDDIC and the Zapatistas manifests itself in other ways as well. OPDDIC members shout insults and call names when Olga Isabelenses pass by.¹⁵ The drunks who walk back from Chilón to their houses in San Antonio in the afternoon and night hassle Olga Isabelenses verbally and sometimes physically as well.¹⁶ Additionally, OPDDIC members have slashed the tires of Zapatista cars and accused the Zapatistas of being “narcos” and “trafficking international people.”¹⁷ Drunken OPDDIC members have also entered Olga Isabel at night and broken into houses and buildings. Because

¹² Interview with Leonardo, 24 November 2006; interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006. In English, OPDDIC can be translated as the Organization for the Defense of Indigenous and Campesino Rights. A campesino is someone who lives and works in the countryside.

¹³ Interview with Onésimo Hidalgo Dominguez, 7 December 2006; Mandujano, 30 November 2006. A priista is an adherent to the Partido de Revolución Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolution Party), the party that has traditionally controlled the Mexican government.

¹⁴ Interview with Leonardo, 24 November 2006; interview with Macario, 24 November 2006; interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006; interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006.

¹⁵ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006.

¹⁶ Interview with Leonardo, 26 November 2006; Participant observation, 27 November 2006.

¹⁷ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006.

of these ongoing threats to their land and security, Olga Isabelenses live in an environment of constant tension. Since 2000, Olga Isabel has been receiving international human rights observers to monitor the community's political situation and safety.¹⁸

International Observers

While every observer comes to Chiapas with a different background and for different reasons, observers as a group tend to share certain common characteristics. The majority of observers are from Europe, Canada, or the United States. They also tend to be in their mid-20s to 30s. From informal conversations with observers in Morelia, Olga Isabel, and FrayBa, I gathered that most observers are European and that the majority are Spaniards and Italians.¹⁹ Nearly all of the observers I encountered were politically left-leaning, anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal, sympathetic to the Zapatista cause and ideology, and strong believers in human rights and the right to self-determination. I formally interviewed five first-time observers in Olga Isabel: Jennifer McHugh from LaCrosse, Wisconsin (United States); Marta from Madrid, Spain; Christian from Lausanne, Switzerland; Leire Elorriaga from Madrid, Spain; and Ricardo Canet from Teruel, Spain.

All five observers strongly identified with Zapatista ideology and shared a desire to get to know the indigenous Zapatistas and see first-hand how they enact their autonomy. McHugh explained that she had been interested in the situation in Chiapas for a long time and was here in

¹⁸ Interview with Leonardo, 26 November 2006.

¹⁹ In my observer training session, there were two Spaniards (a man and a woman), two women from the United States (myself included), a man and a woman from France, an Italian man, and a Mexican-Canadian woman. In Olga Isabel, I met three observers: a woman from the United States, a Spanish woman, and a Swiss man. In Morelia, I met eight observers: two men and three women from Spain, a Mexican woman, an Italian man, and a German man. Nearly all of the observers I met were in their mid-20s to early 30s.

Olga Isabel in solidarity with the Zapatista cause.²⁰ Marta's decision to be an observer arose from her belief in Zapatismo as a just cause and as a political movement whose ideology she strongly agreed with.²¹ Christian's belief in Zapatismo as a viable alternative and form of resistance against neoliberalism figured largely in his decision to come.²² Canet explained that he came to Chiapas to support and contribute to the Zapatista struggle.²³ Elorriaga's decision was based on her desire to "know [the Zapatista movement], see how it [it] is, [and] support it." She added that above all, she came to support human rights because it is "ethically correct."²⁴

Like Elorriaga, McHugh and Canet arrived with a strong belief and history in human rights advocacy. McHugh worked for a New York City-based human rights organization called the International Center for Transitional Justice. Elorriaga and Canet came to Chiapas through the Plataforma, an organization in Spain that sends human rights observers to southern Mexico and Guatemala. For McHugh and Christian, issues affecting the Zapatistas were of academic interest as well. McHugh wrote her master's thesis on identity and self-determination in multicultural or plural societies. Her thesis focused on the Basques in Spain as a case study of territory-based identity and Spanish gypsies as a case study of non-territory-based identity. McHugh explained that the "relationship between indigenous identity and the struggle for autonomy" in Chiapas interested her greatly.²⁵

For Christian, a political science major taking a semester off from college, the effects of the neoliberal economic system in Latin America interested him as a possible senior thesis topic. As he describes it, this system allows multinational corporations from the first world to exploit

²⁰ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006.

²¹ Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006.

²² Interview with Christian, 19 November 2006.

²³ Interview with Ricardo Canet, 19 November 2006.

²⁴ Interview with Leire Elorriaga, 19 November 2006: "[Estoy aquí para] conocerlo, ver como es el movimiento, apoyarlo...[el apoyo de] los derechos humanos es éticamente correcto."

²⁵ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006.

the cheap labor and natural resources of third world countries. In general terms, the dominant global economic system allows first world countries to get richer at the expense of impoverished third world countries. Christian explained that after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the communist Soviet bloc, there was no longer a viable alternative to counteract the capitalist system. In his eyes, Zapatismo provides hope in the struggle against neoliberal capitalism because it exists as an autonomous, functioning alternative to the dominant capitalist system.

On the personal front, Christian described a feeling of first world guilt because of his Swiss-Peruvian background. The Swiss banking system facilitates the commerce of exploitative multinational corporations. As a Swiss citizen, Christian explained that he daily and directly benefits from Swiss money made from these dirty, exploitative practices. Christian's mother's family are white Peruvian ladinos originally from Basque country in Spain. During visits to his family in Peru, he described feeling guilty and uncomfortable about witnessing and being part of a society that blatantly discriminates against and exploits indigenous people. As an indirect participant in the exploitation of indigenous people in Latin America, Christian felt a strong obligation to fight the unjust economic system that he, his family, and his country have been benefiting from.²⁶

Canet's decision to be an observer arose largely from his fascination with the indigenous way of life in rural Chiapas. A forest firefighter from the rural, agricultural regions of Valencia and Teruel, Canet believes strongly in being in touch with nature. Before coming to Chiapas, Canet and another friend lived for seven months in an isolated, abandoned mill without electricity or running water. During my stay in Olga Isabel, Canet displayed a passionate interest

²⁶ Interview with Christian, 19 November 2006.

in learning about the plants, animals, and agricultural methods from this region of Chiapas. In our formal interview, Canet spoke animatedly about the indigenous as people who “have values, ways of living, and connections with nature.” He explained that it was impressive that the indigenous had conserved their roots and lived the same lifestyle for centuries. Canet mainly came to learn from the indigenous—to learn about their values, their customs and culture, and their interaction with the natural environment around them. He spoke of his desire to learn, support, and help the indigenous people in whatever way he could.²⁷

From these observer interviews and subsequent informal conversations with Elorriaga and Canet, it became increasingly clear to me that observers come to Chiapas with a very particular vision of what Zapatismo is and how it should be practiced. They also come with very little knowledge of the indigenous people themselves and/or an idealized vision of who the indigenous Zapatistas are and how they live. These pre-existing, idealized beliefs that first-time observers, myself included, arrive with come from literature, press, and other forms of publicity about the Zapatistas and the indigenous situation in Chiapas. Because of the nature of Zapatista press and publicity outside of Mexico, Zapatismo has been romanticized and idealized abroad.²⁸

Zapatista Romanticism

In Europe, North America, and within Mexico as well, there exists a vibrant subculture of Zapatista sympathizers. Participants in this subculture avidly read Marcos’s extensive and eclectic output of communiqués, declarations, letters, and stories and often buy Zapatista paraphernalia (posters, T-shirts, ski-masks, stickers, jewelry, embroidery, Marcos and Tacho

²⁷ Interview with Ricardo Canet, 19 November 2006.

²⁸ The ideas in this paper about Zapatista romanticism developed mainly from my interview with Antoine Libert Amico on 6 December 2006. My interview with Miguel Pickard on 4 December 2006 contributed to the development of this section as well.

dolls, key-chains, etc.). A large part of the international Zapatista movement is a cultural phenomenon. Consumption of Zapatista art, crafts, music, and literature is one major way the movement manifests itself on the international front. In certain European countries such as Italy, there is a niche market for organic Zapatista-produced coffee as well. Driving this consumption of Zapatista culture is an attraction to the Zapatista philosophy and ideology as expounded in Marcos's writings and the many books and articles that have been written about Marcos and Zapatismo.

The Marcos mystique is vital to the outside world's fascination with Zapatismo. Both the media and Marcos himself (through his writings) promote Marcos's image as a dashing, mysterious, romantic hero. The mythic, media-created storylines about Marcos come across as adventurous, alluring, and exciting: He is a modern-day masked Zorro/Robin Hood/Lone Ranger riding to the rescue of the poor and the oppressed. He is a handsome mestizo who has nobly dedicated his life to the struggle for indigenous rights and rights for all oppressed, marginalized peoples. He is an idealistic, former university professor who went off into the jungle, rediscovered his indigenous roots, and single-handedly turned the world's attention to the plight of Mexico's indigenous with his flair for the whimsical and the dramatic. These Marcos myths, combined with the ceaseless speculation about his true identity and whereabouts, only intensify the public's interest in Marcos the man, the icon, and the movement he has come to represent. Although Marcos himself emphasizes that he is merely a humble sub-commander in the EZLN, his charisma and skill as a one-man PR machine is clearly the driving force in Zapatismo's international appeal. As journalist Naomi Klein puts it,

...Marcos himself... writes in a tone so personal and poetic, so completely and unmistakably his own, that he is constantly undercutting and subverting the anonymity that comes from his mask and pseudonym... In *Our Word Is Our Weapon*, we read manifestos and war cries that are also poems, legends, and riffs. A character emerges behind the mask, a personality. Marcos is a revolutionary who writes long meditative letters to Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano about the

meaning of silence; who describes colonialism as a series of 'bad jokes badly told,' who quotes Lewis Carroll, Shakespeare, and Borges...who then sends whimsical mock telegrams to all of 'civil society'...Marcos seems keenly aware of himself as an irresistible romantic hero.²⁹

To the Mexican, North American, and European public, the concept of a movement in which the people, rather than their representatives and leaders, truly hold the power—a movement in which the authorities really do *gobernar obedeciendo* (govern by obeying) as the slogan goes—is unheard of. In the ladino and westernized worlds, even populist, grassroots movements must have their charismatic leaders to unite, lead, and mobilize the masses. The fact that the Zapatistas do not have a strong, charismatic leader heading the movement is hard to imagine for Mexican ladinos, North Americans, and Europeans. Thus, Marcos is often mistakenly thought of as the leader of the Zapatistas. In certain respects, Marcos is the principal leader and mobilizer of international support for Zapatismo. However, he does not perform this role in the actual Zapatista organization itself. It is important to keep in mind that there is a clear distinction between international support for the Zapatistas and the actual Zapatista organization that exists on the ground in Chiapas.

International Zapatismo is essentially a movement based on ideology (for example, support for the idea that every human being has certain inalienable rights, that all of the oppressed—be they indigenous, blacks, gays, Jews, women—deserve these rights) that Marcos expounds and represents. The international public mainly focuses on Zapatista ideology and news events (such as Marcos's national tour to kick off the Other Campaign) rather than the current, day-to-day situation of ordinary indigenous Zapatistas who comprise the Zapatista organization. This lopsided focus on ideology is evident from the fact that many international Zapatista supporters who come to work in San Cristóbal-based NGOs arrive well-versed in Zapatista rhetoric and ideology and clueless about the culture and society of the indigenous

²⁹ Klein 117.

Zapatistas themselves. This is not to say that international Zapatista sympathizers do not care about indigenous people and their plight.

Rather, international support for Zapatismo is generally sparked and sustained by an attraction to the movement's ideology instead of a strong interest in the indigenous peoples and cultures of Chiapas. Additionally, most information available to the international public about the indigenous of Chiapas is ideological and political (and Zapatista-related) rather than cultural or anthropological. Learning about indigenous language, culture, and society is almost always of secondary importance to international Zapatista sympathizers. Often, it is only when internationals start working at ground level with indigenous Zapatistas themselves that they realize they need to learn and understand the culture of the indigenous people they are working with. Without an understanding of indigenous culture, it is impossible for internationals to truly comprehend the problems the indigenous Zapatistas face and act in solidarity with them in a culturally sensitive way.

Idealized Images of the Indigenous Zapatistas

In the outside world, there exists an image of the indigenous as a mysterious, primitive culture shrouded in secrecy, frozen in time, and largely untouched by the ills of industrialization and modernization. Even to the majority of ladinos, indigenous people seem foreign, exotic, and unknown. General knowledge and perceptions of the indigenous are based largely on myth and stereotype. International Zapatista sympathizers often romanticize and idealize the indigenous Zapatistas as a valiant people fighting for a worthy, noble cause.³⁰ Among Zapatista

³⁰ On the flipside, there also exists a prevalent stereotype in Mexican society of the indigenous as lazy, stupid, immoral, alcoholic, and/or addicted to drugs. According to Salvador Carrasco, the indigenous are either invisible or portrayed as criminals in Mexican media (Carrasco 172). In general, indigenous peoples and cultures around the world are seen as primitive and backward from a westernized, first world standpoint. Although international

sympathizers, the indigenous Zapatistas are often perceived as an inspirational symbol or living embodiment of the ideals that Zapatismo stands for, rather than actual human beings with their own legitimate languages and cultures. The information about Zapatismo that the typical Zapatista sympathizer in Italy, Spain, or the United States receives is idealized and one-sided. Most of this information is gleaned from the Internet, Marcos's writings, and pro-Zapatista books and articles. This information often comes in the form of positive, passionate rhetoric that paints a utopic, idealized vision of the Zapatista organization.

The Zapatistas, like any other movement or organization, have their flaws, weaknesses, and internal problems. The absence of widespread information about the more problematic aspects of Zapatismo propagates the romanticizing of the Zapatista movement. Thus, first-time international human rights observers often come with unrealistic, idealized expectations for the communities they observe. Additionally, the challenges of living in an indigenous community in which the language, culture, and customs are foreign and unknown often comes as an unexpected surprise to the first-time observer as well.

Challenges to Zapatista Romanticism

Zapatista romanticism that internationals arrive with becomes challenged when they see that Zapatismo in practice does not measure up to the rhetoric they have read and internalized. Areas in which Zapatismo in practice differs from rhetoric include gender issues, governmental structures, and internal conflicts.

Zapatista sympathizers generally do not agree with the negative views of the indigenous described in this footnote, the observers and the indigenous themselves as well cannot help but be influenced by these negative stereotypes because they live in a society that enforces the notion that the indigenous are inferior to ladino and westernized society.

Gender Issues

The Zapatistas have a Revolutionary Indigenous Woman's Law that guarantees women the same rights as men. This law mandates that half of the authorities in every governmental body and one third of the army must be women. While the rhetoric in this law and other communiqués declares the equality and rights of women, the reality does not coincide with this rhetoric.³¹ In Olga Isabel, women seldom appear or speak in public spaces. They generally stay in the house cooking, cleaning, making tortillas, and doing other domestic chores. While the fact that women remain in the domestic sphere is not inherently sexist in itself, the disadvantages that result from this situation limit women's rights and opportunities.

Most women in Olga Isabel speak Tseltal only and cannot speak Spanish because they have received no or very little formal education. In Olga Isabel, homes are almost always Tseltal-only environments. Men and children generally learn Spanish through formal schooling. The inability to speak Spanish renders most women dependent on bilingual men and children to communicate and interpret for them outside of indigenous society. Indigenous women in general have lower levels of education than their male counterparts. Most have never completed elementary school and seldom attend school after the third grade.³² The type of education that members of Leonardo's family have received is not atypical. Leonardo, a 21-year-old Olga Isabelense, has two sisters and two brothers. Both of Leonardo's brothers have completed junior high school and Leonardo has completed high school. However, his two sisters never finished elementary school. Leonardo's father briefly attended elementary school and his mother never received any formal education.³³ That the males in Leonardo's family have higher levels of

³¹ Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

³² CIEPAC workshop, 24 October 2006.

³³ Interview with Leonardo, 26 November 2006.

education than the females is normal and reflective of the community's educational situation in general, especially among the older generation.

In community *juntas*, or general meetings, women almost never speak. Men control the dialogue and decision-making and fill most of the leadership positions. There are always more men than women at these meetings. The men and women are segregated in these meetings as well. The women generally sit or stand to the side or behind the men, acting more as passive audience members rather than active participants in dialogue and discussion.³⁴ The make-up of various governing bodies—the Junta de Buen Gobierno (Good Government Junta), Consejos Municipales (Municipal Councils), Comisión Agraria (Agrarian Commission), and Honor y Justicia (Honor and Justice: the municipal court for non-agrarian cases) consists almost entirely of men.³⁵ Additionally, many conflicts that come to Honor y Justicia are cases of domestic violence against women.³⁶ The discrepancy between the gender equality that Zapatismo promises and the ground-level reality within autonomous communities is not lost on the Zapatistas themselves. During one municipal junta in which only two or three women spoke, one woman stood up and declared that women should participate and play a more active role in the juntas.³⁷

That the Zapatista rhetoric of gender equality does not match with the ground-level reality comes as a surprise to many international observers. In fact, most observers come from societies in which women have more rights and opportunities than Zapatista women themselves. The discrepancy between the observers' rhetoric-created expectations and the ground-level reality can be disillusioning. Miguel Pickard speaks of one delegation of Italian feminists who

³⁴ Observation of a municipal junta, 25 November 2006; Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006; Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006.

³⁵ Participant observation; Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

³⁶ Interview with Macario (Honor y Justicia mediator), 24 November 2006.

³⁷ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006; Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006.

came away hugely disappointed from their visit to a Zapatista community. These Italian women had come to Chiapas to see for themselves gender equality put in practice. They left the community very disillusioned, telling Pickard that the Zapatistas had made no progress in women's rights since the 1994 uprising.³⁸

While the ground-level reality for Zapatista women may strike internationals as backwards and oppressive, it would be inaccurate to say that no progress has been made. In Olga Isabel, every girl and young woman I encountered understood and spoke Spanish. Although their mothers only spoke Tseltal, these girls and young women had attended or were currently attending bilingual schools and knew how to read and write. Essentially, an entire generation of young women who had been girls of 6, 7, or 8 during the 1994 uprising had become bilingual and literate through autonomous Zapatista schools.³⁹

Currently, the region's autonomous Zapatista high school has equal numbers of male and female students. In the freshman class of thirty, there are 15 male and 15 female students.⁴⁰ In Olga Isabel, there are more girls than boys attending the elementary school.⁴¹ In addition to the dramatic increase in female education, the generation of youth who were children of 6, 7, or 8 in 1994 have been educated in Zapatista ideology both in schools and within their autonomous communities. These youth have learned about the struggle and need for women's rights within Zapatista communities, within Mexico, and in other countries as well. Although the ground-level reality in Zapatista communities is still far from gender equitable, many Zapatistas are conscious of this reality and understand that there is a need for progressive change.

³⁸ Interview with Miguel Pickard, 4 December 2006.

³⁹ Interview with María Elena Martínez Torres, 4 December 2006.

⁴⁰ Interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006.

⁴¹ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006; Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006.

Governmental Structures

In their communiqués, declarations, and other literature, the Zapatistas come across as a truly democratic and inclusive organization. To an extent, this perception is true. In the Zapatista bases de apoyo, governmental bodies are direct democracies in which power remains with the people. Government officials are elected to the juntas, the municipal councils, and the justice tribunals. However, it is the people themselves who discuss and come to a consensus on decisions. Zapatista government officials are essentially mediators of the dialogue and discussion that precedes the final decisions. In contrast, ladino and western democratic governments are indirect, representative democracies, or republics, in which power resides with the representatives rather than the people. The people governed by ladino and western republics choose representatives who make decisions for them rather than making the decisions themselves.⁴² In this sense, Zapatista communities practice a truer form of democracy in which the people retain power and the right to self-determination.

While in certain respects Zapatista communities exercise a purer form of democracy than their ladino counterparts, their degree of freedom and choice is ironically more limited in certain areas. As members of the bases de apoyo, indigenous Zapatistas cannot drink alcohol or take drugs. They must comply with decisions made by the juntas, municipal councils, and local tribunals even if they personally disagree or do not like particular decisions. Each member of the bases must also participate in a *cargo*, or voluntary community work. They must also comply with decisions made by the EZLN even if it negatively affects their communities.

⁴² The ideas about democracy as it is practiced by Zapatistas and the ladino/western world came from a lecture Mitch Anderson gave on 28 October 2006.

For example, the EZLN declared a Red Alert in May 2006 after the massacre in Atenco. During this Red Alert, non-Zapatista outsiders were not allowed to enter Zapatista communities, the Juntas de Buen Gobierno were shut down, and many schools and clinics were not fully operational.⁴³ As a result, projects that depended on outside help (NGO work in schools, clinics, training sessions, electricity installations) could not proceed until the Red Alert was lifted months later. Additionally, the shut down of the Juntas meant that people who were unable to resolve their problems through the municipal tribunals (Honor y Justicia and Comisión Agraria) had no alternative recourse or manner of resolving their conflicts.⁴⁴ Other EZLN-imposed orders on the bases civiles include participation in road blockades, such as the one carried out on 20 November 2006 as a symbolic show of support of the Asamblea Popular del Pueblo Oaxaqueño (APPO—Popular Assembly of the Oaxacan People).

For the Zapatista bases civiles, obeying and carrying out the decisions of their autonomous civil government and the EZLN is mandatory to their membership. Decisions, commitments, and conditions of the Zapatista organization take priority over everything else in their lives. The cargos, the blockades, the long community meetings, and constant problems with OPDDIC take significant amounts of time away from working in the fields where they grow coffee, corn, and beans. Often, the bases civiles receive information from above (from the EZLN or the Juntas de Buen Gobierno) that pertains directly to them and nothing more. They do not know the specifics of how the EZLN or higher-up Zapatista structures function. As Marta puts it, “It is very hierarchical...[the people] receive the information they need and that’s all.”⁴⁵ For example, the Olga Isabelenses participate in a coffee cooperative that sells coffee to Italy. They know how

⁴³ Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

⁴⁴ People who cannot resolve their conflicts in the municipal tribunals take their case to the Junta de Buen Gobierno.

⁴⁵ Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006: “Es muy jerárquico...reciben la información que necesitan y ya.”

to grow, harvest, and store the coffee and then give the coffee beans to a middleman. However, they know nothing about how the coffee gets to Italy, where in Italy it is sold, or how this relationship with Italian vendors was initially established.

In practice, the organization's overarching structure is a rigid hierarchy in which orders come from above (from the EZLN and the Junta de Buen Gobierno) and the people obey. When decisions made by local municipal councils contradict EZLN decision (for example, the Red Alert that halted various NGO projects in communities), the EZLN's decisions take precedence over the local council's decisions. The deeply hierarchical nature of the Zapatista organization often comes as an unexpected surprise to international observers who have only heard Zapatista rhetoric of democracy, inclusiveness, and equality prior to coming to Chiapas.⁴⁶

Internal Conflicts and Weaknesses

Like any other organization, the Zapatistas deal with internal problems and weaknesses. In certain regions, the Zapatistas are economically worse off than the paramilitaries who live in the same region. This appears to be the case with Olga Isabel. Both the Olga Isabelenses and OPDDIC members in nearby San Antonio work the same land and grow the same crops. However, many OPDDIC members in San Antonio live in cement houses built from supplies and money from the Mexican government. In contrast, all Olga Isabelenses live in houses made from wooden planks and zinc roofs. Whereas OPDDIC benefits from government subsidies and other forms of economic support, Olga Isabelenses receive no government support whatsoever and live with the threat of losing their land as well.

⁴⁶ Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006; Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

Although the Olga Isabelenses are able to survive autonomously on their reoccupied land, it is an uneasy autonomy under constant threat of being undermined by OPDDIC. The counterinsurgency not only employs threats of violence and land dispossession but also economic tactics designed to buy the people's loyalty. By offering OPDDIC members the same economic and material benefits that the Zapatistas are fighting for, the government erodes Zapatista morale and loyalty to their cause. In van der Haar's words, "With [the economic subsidies for paramilitaries], [the government] pinpointed one of the autonomous municipalities' weakest points...the high cost that autonomy implied for its participants and the lack of immediate benefits..."⁴⁷

Life for the Olga Isabelenses can be characterized as very harsh, spartan, and insulated in certain respects. They do not drink alcohol or take drugs, they eat a simple, spare diet of beans, tortilla, and pozol, and most spend their entire lives in the same region scraping by on the same plot of land. In this context, city life, with its promise of greater economic opportunity and excitement, can be very appealing, especially to male youth. The allure of migrating to cities competes with the sense of duty Zapatista youth feel to stay and fight for the land that they feel is rightfully theirs.⁴⁸ While most Olga Isabelenses choose not to migrate to cities, the issue of migration has undeniably affected the community.

During one municipal meeting, a major topic of discussion was what to do with Zapatistas who leave the community and want to return. Currently, Zapatistas from the municipality of Olga Isabel are only allowed to leave for a maximum of two months and must send the community 500 pesos each month. In the meeting, there was much debate about what should happen when Zapatistas who have been gone for more than two months want to return.

⁴⁷ van der Haar 135: "Con esto, atinó en uno de los puntos más débiles de los municipio autonomos, a saber el alto costo que la autonomía implicaba para los participantes y la falta de beneficios inmediatos..."

⁴⁸ Interview with Leonardo, 22 and 27 November 2006; Interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006.

No consensus was reached on this issue, although one idea that came up was to have the returning Zapatistas undergo a two-month probationary period.⁴⁹

While I do not know of any Olga Isabelenses who have permanently left the organization, cases of Zapatistas leaving the organization have occurred in other communities. In most cases, ex-Zapatistas want to live autonomously from the Mexican government and work their own land. However, they do not agree with certain conditions, decisions, or requirements that come with being a Zapatista.⁵⁰ In the municipality of Nueva Tierra, there were youth who openly drank alcohol during a festival in direct defiance to the community-wide prohibition on alcohol. At a subsequent meeting concerning their delinquent behavior, the youth were asked whether they wanted to stay or leave the organization. Many initial adherents to Zapatismo from Nueva Tierra eventually left the organization because of disagreements about how the land would be distributed and used.⁵¹

Inter-ethnic conflicts have occurred within the Zapatista organization as well. The Tseltal community of San Juan Cancuc experienced problems after being transferred to a Tsotsil caracol. The community's interests were not prioritized by the Junta de Buen Gobierno, and requests to the Junta were often denied as well. For example, San Juan Cancuc's electricity lines had been cut by local priista paramilitaries. The community received an outside donation specifically to reconnect the electricity. Normally, the Junta keeps 10% of donations for specific projects. In this particular case, the Junta kept 50% of the donation, preventing the reconnection of electricity for many months.⁵²

⁴⁹ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006. Interview with Marta, 19 November 2006.

⁵⁰ Interview with Onésimo Hidalgo Dominguez, 6 December 2006; van der Haar 133-139.

⁵¹ van der Haar 135.

⁵² Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

Dynamics of Cross-Cultural Exchange

The presence of international observers in Olga Isabel leads to inevitable and constant exchange between indigenous and observer cultures during everyday interaction. The dynamics of these cross-cultural exchanges are multi-faceted and complex. The following sections examine three aspects of cross-cultural exchange: the breakdown of myths and stereotypes, linguistic and cultural barriers, and neo-colonial dynamics.

Breaking Down Myths and Stereotypes

Cross-cultural exchange between observers and residents often dispels myths and stereotypes that each side harbors about the other. For observers who generally arrive with very little knowledge about the ground-level reality of the indigenous Zapatistas, a sudden immersion into that reality is eye-opening on multiple levels. Observers realize that multiple Mexicos literally exist—that these Zapatista Tseltales or Tsotsiles form a Mexico that really is separate from the Mexico of the ladinos in San Cristóbal or Comitán or Palenque. Observers realize that this Tseltal or Tsotsil Mexico is a legitimate, functioning, living culture with its own language, perspectives, customs, and governing structures.

They realize that indigenous Mexico—in all of its complexity, diversity, and vitality—cannot be reduced to flat, imperialist stereotypes of noble, long-suffering savages or exotic, primitive peoples. For many observers, living as guests in these communities and simply seeing that these indigenous Zapatistas exist as real human beings going about their daily lives and struggles is hugely transformative. Observers are daily confronted with the fact that the indigenous peoples of Mexico are not simply a statistic, a mysterious legend, a symbol for a

revolutionary cause. They become first-hand witnesses of the fact that indigenous cultures and customs are very much alive and functioning five hundred years after the Spanish Conquest.

Observers break down stereotypes that the indigenous harbor about the Global North (Europe and North America) as well. From international observers, indigenous residents learn that not everyone in the Global North is white, rich, and lives a life of ease and luxury. They learn that countries in the Global North have rich and poor people, corruption and violence, alcoholism and drug addiction, white people and people of color, racism and immigration issues, and struggling farmers who can barely make a living wage.

As the first Asian observer Olga Isabel had ever received, my ethnicity and nationality as a U.S. citizen of Chinese descent was a source of surprise and fascination to the Olga Isabelenses I encountered. Many found it hard to believe that I was born and raised in the United States and had never been to China. Often, I found myself in the strange position of cultural ambassador for a country and a continent I had never been to.⁵³ My family's situation as immigrants in the United States was often the entry point into more extensive conversations about immigration as well, especially with the male youth who were contemplating migration.⁵⁴ These conversations would often evolve into discussions about what the living conditions are like for migrants and immigrants in the United States and Mexico, why people immigrate, and how the immigration process affects immigrants and the family members they leave back home. Other conversational topics included parallel situations and problems in Mexico, the United States, and China. These topics included colonization, racism, exploitation by transnational corporations, religious sects

⁵³ For example, people would ask me what people eat in China (if there are no tortillas, what do they eat), what particular customs Chinese people have, what it's like in China, whether I've ever met Jackie Chan.

⁵⁴ I spoke principally with Leonardo and Nicolás about migration. The two men are 21 and 20 and have older brothers who migrated and stayed in Mexico City.

and missionaries, languages and dialects, the *mezcla* (mixing) of languages and cultures because of migration and imperialism, and the resulting loss of native languages and customs.⁵⁵

Confronting Barriers

While cross-cultural exchange is often an eye-opening experience for both observers and indigenous residents, cultural and linguistic barriers prevent complete mutual understanding and can sometimes cause miscommunication. For observers who are not from Spain, Spanish is almost always a second, third, or even fourth language they have picked up. In this context, observers arrive with different degrees of Spanish fluency. Some are completely fluent in Spanish whereas others, like myself, are moderately competent. Olga Isabelenses possess varying degrees of Spanish fluency as well. Most of the women are monolingual in Tseltal, older men and young children are moderately to very fluent in Spanish, and most young people are essentially bilingual. Except when there are Spanish observers present, all linguistic communication between residents and observers is conducted in the non-native language of Spanish.

Olga Isabelenses are most comfortable and fluent in Tseltal, the language of their native culture and autonomous government. Almost all communication within Olga Isabel is conducted in Tseltal. Given this context, the greatest barrier that observers face in understanding Olga Isabelenses is the inability to speak and understand Tseltal. Without being able to communicate in Tseltal, observers can only interact with Olga Isabelenses on a very basic, superficial level.

⁵⁵ Conversations with Leonardo on 22, 24, 25, 26, and 27 November 2006.

Due to this linguistic inability, observers cannot fully hear from the Olga Isabelenses about their daily lives, fears, and worries about OPDDIC and the military.⁵⁶

Unfamiliarity with Tseltal culture presents difficulties as well. Most first-time observers arrive with very little knowledge of the values and perspectives on which the Olga Isabelenses base their actions. This combined lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge can often result in observers' missing or misinterpreting behavioral nuances and social cues. Likewise, Olga Isabelenses cannot fully understand the observers' words and actions because of linguistic and cultural barriers. These barriers can result in distorted, contradictory information on both sides. Additionally, explanations of particular situations or issues become generalized and sometimes over-simplified in order to facilitate the listener's understanding. While these linguistic and cultural barriers cannot be eliminated, an awareness of these barriers and how they affect communication and understanding is useful for both parties.

Neo-Colonial Dynamics⁵⁷

When gringos and ladinos enter an indigenous community, neo-colonial dynamics immediately and inevitably come into play. Since the Conquest five hundred years ago, whites and mestizos have had a long history of entering indigenous communities to impose specific, self-serving agendas. They have come to take land, to take people, and to take natural resources. Essentially, they have come to control, dominate, and exploit the territory and the people. This process of domination is not only physical and historical but also cultural, social, and psychological. In other words, with physical colonization comes the colonization of the mind.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Interview with Jennifer McHugh, 19 November 2006.

⁵⁷ The ideas in this section developed mainly from my interview with Antoine Libert Amico on 6 December 2006.

⁵⁸ This idea of the colonization of the mind comes from Frantz Fanon, as explained to me by Antoine Libert Amico on 6 December 2006.

From the Conquest to the present-day, indigenous cultures have been belittled, marginalized, and ignored by the dominant ladino culture. Ladino ideas about “what is good, what is pretty, what is nice, what is valued” are viewed as superior to that which is indigenous.⁵⁹ The culture of the colonizer has become the gold standard, producing an inferiority complex among the colonized indigenous.

Within this socio-historical context, well-meaning gringos and ladinos enter indigenous communities to provide various services. They come to give workshops and courses on subjects such as sewing, health and medicine. They come in construction crews to build schools, clinics, and hook up electricity lines. They come as observers to monitor and document the local socio-political situation and human rights violations. They come for more long-term stints as teachers as well. At the local autonomous Zapatista high school that Olga Isabel pertains to, there are 14-15 teachers: 3 ladinos and 12-13 gringos from the United States and Europe. None of the high school teachers are indigenous.⁶⁰

Gringos and ladinos enter communities in three main roles: teacher, provider, and protector. All three roles are positions of power and privilege. As teachers, gringos and ladinos give knowledge. As providers, they build schools and clinics, provide telephone and electricity lines, medical and legal services, and donate money, food, and other supplies. As protectors, they stay in communities to deter paramilitaries from harassing, assaulting, and terrorizing indigenous Zapatistas. That gringos and ladinos can voluntarily provide these services—and, more importantly, provide them for free—places them in a position of power. That they have the economic means to provide services and travel to these isolated, rural communities places them in a position of privilege as well. In this context, power and privilege are inextricably tied to

⁵⁹ Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

⁶⁰ Interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006.

ethnic and national identity. Those who are white, those who are ladino, and those who come from countries of the Global North are always in positions of power and privilege. This link between power and privilege and ladino/gringo identity often acts as a reaffirmation of the colonial idea: that which is gringo or ladino is superior to that which is indigenous.

Is Neo-Colonialism Inevitable?

NGOs like FrayBa and CIEPAC are aware of the neo-colonial dynamics at play in their work with indigenous communities. Both organizations believe that indigenous communities have the right to self-determination. In other words, they believe that indigenous peoples have the right to decide their lives and futures. In this context, FrayBa and CIEPAC emphasize that they accompany, rather than lead or impose on, indigenous struggles and movements.⁶¹ The implication is that these NGOs support movements from the sidelines and the margins rather than leading from the center. However, when gringo/ladino NGO workers enter indigenous communities in the privileged, powerful positions of teacher, provider, and protector, whether they are truly on the sidelines becomes questionable. Former SIT student Tiaa “Jane” Wang explains the issue well. In her words,

I believe wholeheartedly that these civic organizations are not trying to act as the *patrón*... However, as deliverers of crucial information, perhaps they cannot help but find themselves in that position. Therefore, have these NGOs simply fallen into the role of the modern colonizer which they have so carefully tried to avoid? In some ways, it is quite possible that this dynamic of the colonizer-colonized is even more dangerous because the authority of the colonizer is not forced upon the people but rather is respected by the colonized out of reverence. It is an authority conferred upon the NGOs as it stems from the communities' belief and faith in the NGOs.⁶²

⁶¹ FrayBa training session; CIEPAC workshop; Interview with Miguel Pickard, 4 December 2006; Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006; Interview with Onésimo Hidalgo Dominguez, 6 December 2006.

⁶² Tiaa “Jane” Wang, “Challenges to the NGO Popular Education Model,” section of Independent Study Project draft.

While NGO accompaniment of the movement is the goal of both the NGOs and Zapatistas themselves, the ground-level reality reveals that more complex processes are at work.

Exotification and the Museum Effect

The exotification of indigenous peoples goes hand-in-hand with the Zapatista romanticism that exists abroad. Antoine Libert Amico calls the impact of this phenomenon “making a museum of the people.”⁶³ Certain Zapatista communities frequently receive internationals who stay for varying periods of time.⁶⁴ Some stay for months to complete specific projects, some stay for a couple weeks as observers, some stay for a few days to give a course or workshop, and some stay for a day or two as part of study abroad programs, delegations, or tour groups passing through. Many internationals who enter communities for the first time have exoticized, romanticized notions of the Zapatistas. This exotification is harmful in that it reduces the Zapatistas into objects, symbols, and stereotypes. It converts the Zapatistas and their property into the object of stares and photographs, as if they were fascinating artifacts in a museum. As passive symbols (rather than active human beings) in the eyes of the international visitors, the Zapatistas become a spectacle and a novelty, a sideshow for tourists to marvel over. This outsider-imposed objectification is precisely what Zapatismo fights against.⁶⁵

Colonialism treats indigenous people as sub-human objects rather than equal human beings. The indigenous are viewed as either unwanted objects or cheap labor machines. In both cases, they are reduced to lowly pawns in the colonizer or imperialist’s game plan for development. While well-meaning international visitors do not mean to be neo-colonialist, the

⁶³ Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

⁶⁴ Although I use the word “international,” “global-northern” would be a more accurate term. By “global-northern” I mean people (mainly white) from Europe, Canada, and the United States. In the subsequent sections of this paper, I use “international” because “global-northern” is unwieldy and awkward.

⁶⁵ Interview with Antoine Libert Amico, 6 December 2006.

objectification that many practice is essentially a neo-colonialist exercise. It is neo-colonialist because the objectifying gaze is a belittling gaze: the person subject to the gaze senses that they are seen as an interesting spectacle rather than a real human being. During this experience, the subjected person picks up on the detached wonder and judgment of the international visitor. While this museum effect is unintended and unwanted, it is often automatic and unconscious on the part of the visitor.

Fortunately, neo-colonialist exotification can be confronted and challenged through inter-personal interactions. When internationals and indigenous people speak to each other, they partake in a mutually informative cross-cultural exchange. Both sides dispel stereotypes and share histories, viewpoints, and perspectives. Even if these exchanges are more one-sided (such as a question-and-answer session with the Junta de Buen Gobierno), they serve to humanize the Zapatistas in the eyes of the internationals. The problem of exotification persists when internationals do not engage in inter-personal interaction with Zapatistas and when internationals do not approach this type of interaction with sensitive, open-minded awareness.

Help From Abroad

Zapatista autonomy depends primarily on international support. International money finances the construction of schools, clinics, and other infrastructure projects. International niche markets sustain Zapatista coffee and textile cooperatives. International NGO workers come into communities in construction crews, as teachers, and as observers. The living conditions and livelihoods of the Zapatistas are largely based on international support. While the relationship between Zapatista autonomy and international support can be characterized as an accompaniment (because the internationals are not at the center of the movement), it can also be

seen as large-scale dependency. Without economic, infrastructural, educational, and monetary support from internationals, the Zapatista movement would not be anywhere near as successful as it is today. In fact, international support plays a major role in defining the overall direction of the Zapatista movement.

Additionally, international support aimed at combating colonialism's damaging legacy can ironically propagate neo-colonial dynamics. These dynamics become especially apparent when gringo and ladino observers temporarily stay in Zapatista communities. The extreme socio-economic disparity between the Zapatistas and the observers lie at the heart of these dynamics. Observers are clearly in a position of greater power and privilege: they have the economic means to come to the community, stay for a couple weeks, and leave. That they come from faraway lands by plane indicates a level of incredible wealth in the eyes of the Zapatistas as well. That observers bring enough money to buy food and cook for themselves for two weeks is another indication of greater wealth. In contrast, the Zapatistas do not have the economic means to leave their land. They must stay and live with whatever consequences their autonomy and the presence of internationals provokes after the internationals leave. Escape through migration or travel is an unaffordable luxury for most. For many, staying and working the land is the only viable option. The few who do migrate to cities do so only after having saved enough money for transportation costs over a long period of time.

While the recognition of socio-economic disparity is not neo-colonial in itself, how an individual Zapatista interprets that disparity can be the result of neo-colonial dynamics. Through conversations with observers from the Global North, Zapatistas hear about higher standards of living, better pay, more economic opportunities, and a safer and more stable lifestyle in first world countries such as the United States. Through direct observation, Zapatistas see that

observers come with sleeping bags, newer and more expensive clothing, and are able to buy and cook a greater variety of foods.⁶⁶ Essentially, the international presence functions as a constant reminder of the better socio-economic conditions that exist outside of the Zapatista community. Especially among some young Zapatista men, there exists a strong interest in city life, life in the United States, and how much it costs to get there. A couple of my conversations with young men were basically question-and-answer sessions about how to migrate. I was asked about the cost of a plane ticket to the United States, crossing the border, salaries, housing, cost of living, and potential job opportunities. I was asked similar questions about city life as well.⁶⁷

Although the international presence in the communities aims to facilitate Zapatista autonomy, it may also fuel a desire to leave communities and migrate to cities or to the United States. The attraction to migration is a natural response to the socio-economic situation that the Zapatistas find themselves in. However, the pull of migration may also undermine or weaken the Zapatista cause. In a sense, migration means becoming a part of the neo-liberal, neo-colonialist system that has trapped the Zapatistas into poverty in the first place. Leonardo and Nicolás, the two young men I spoke to about migration, seemed to be conscious of the contradiction between migration and Zapatismo. Both expressed their deep loyalty to the Zapatista cause and their strong belief in staying on the land and fighting for their rights to the land. However, both were very open to leaving the community if the opportunity ever presented itself. They never directly stated that they wanted to leave the community and were careful to not appear too eager to find ways to leave the community. Leonardo did say that he would leave for better economic opportunities if he was able to but that if he did he would always return.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ The Olga Isabelenses live on a spare, simple diet of tortillas, beans, and pozol. In contrast, observers in the community (myself included) ate rice, pasta, tuna, tomatos, guacamole, lentils, oranges, apples, and bananas.

⁶⁷ Interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006; various conversations with Leonardo.

⁶⁸ Interview with Nicolás, 26 November 2006; various conversations with Leonardo.

Conclusions

The Zapatista movement arose from a long and painful history of oppression of indigenous people. This oppression was and still is committed by ladino society, ladino government, and the neo-liberal economic system that dominates international commerce today. Because the Mexican government has continually exploited and violated the human rights of indigenous people, the Zapatistas came to the conclusion that total autonomy from this *mal gobierno* was the only viable path to realizing the rights that they deserve. In the struggle for autonomy, the Zapatistas have come to rely on international support to fund and sustain their movement. Instead of relying on the *mal gobierno*, the Zapatistas have developed an alternative economic system of cooperatives that sells Zapatista products to their international support base. They also depend on international donations for projects as well. The Zapatista movement has made real gains in the areas of education and indigenous rights, but problems with the movement still exist.

The Zapatistas' autonomy is an uneasy autonomy in which their land and their safety are always at risk. The government's non-recognition of their autonomous status lies at the heart of the Zapatistas' lack of security and stability. The Mexican government has in fact officially recognized the Zapatistas' autonomy in the San Andrés Accords of 1996. However, the ongoing situation of low-intensity warfare between Zapatistas and paramilitaries reveals that the government has not truly accepted the Zapatistas as a legitimate, autonomous, and separate entity. As van der Haar puts it, "the dilemmas that arise around autonomy are in essence related to the fact that the autonomous municipalities constitute parallel and rival structures to the municipalities [of the Mexican government]."⁶⁹ Unless the Mexican government sees the

⁶⁹ van der Haar 121: "Los dilemas que surgen alrededor de la autonomía en esencia se relacionan al hecho de que los municipios autónomos se constituyen como a los municipios."

autonomous Zapatista government as a separate, legitimate entity rather than an illegitimate rival, the unofficial war against the Zapatistas will continue. In other words, the Zapatistas cannot be truly free to exercise their rights until the Mexican government accepts them as both legitimate and autonomous.

The Zapatistas' large-scale dependency on international support has sustained the movement but also continues to propagate the neo-colonial dynamics that they are trying to fight. These dynamics arise from the fact that the Zapatistas depend on a specific sector of the Global North. This sector of support is still a part of the globalized, neo-liberal economic system that the Zapatistas are trying to free themselves of. At the community level, neo-colonial dynamics arise from repeated contact with gringos and ladinos who come in traditionally more powerful and privileged roles of teacher, provider, and protector. While these neo-colonial dynamics cannot be avoided, they can be challenged through the cross-cultural exchange that occurs through gringo/ladino-indigenous contact. International support of Zapatismo cannot be completely free of neo-colonial dynamics because we live in a world that is very much entrenched in neo-colonialism. However, this same complex system of support contains the tools to resist and challenge neo-colonialism as well.

Like any other movement or organization, the Zapatistas have their strengths and weaknesses, their achievements and ongoing struggles. Even with their internal conflicts and weaknesses, they have managed to practice their autonomy in successful resistance. As such, their existence as a functioning alternative to the bigger, exploitative neo-liberal system continues to be a source of hope to the poor and marginalized in both Mexico and other parts of the world.

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Nombres de l@s Observadores y Nacionalidad:

Amy Chin – Los Estados Unidos

Leire Elorriaga – España

Ricardo Canet – España

Período de Estancia: viernes 17 noviembre – martes 28 noviembre 2006

Nombre de la Comunidad: Olga Isabel

Nombre del Municipio: Olga Isabel

Grupo Etnolingüística: Tseltal

Población Total: 8-10 familias; aproximadamente 70 personas

I. Situación Actual de la Comunidad

- Olga Isabel es una comunidad Zapatista cerca del municipio de Chilón. Las familias de Olga Isabel trabajan en el cultivo de maíz, frijol y café. La mayoría de los hombres y los niños son bilingües—hablan tseltal y español. La mayoría de las mujeres hablan tseltal solamente. En general, los hombres trabajan en la milpa mientras las mujeres trabajan en la casa. Las mujeres y los niños recogen el café de los cafetales en esta temporada.

- *Conflictos* – La mayoría de los conflictos son entre residentes de Olga Isabel e integrantes de la Organización para la Defensa de los Derechos Indígenas y Campesinos (OPDDIC). La OPDDIC es un grupo paramilitar formado por el gobierno priista para dividir y desestabilizar el movimiento Zapatista en esta región. Principalmente, la OPDDIC quiere despojar los residentes de Olga Isabel de sus terrenos. Ellos son vecinos de Olga Isabel y son indígenas tseltales que trabajan también en el cultivo de maíz, frijol, y café. Los Olga Isabelenses han recibido amenazas de muerte y violencia e insultos verbales de la OPDDIC. Hay integrantes de la OPDDIC en San Antonio, un pueblo en la misma carretera que lleva hacia Olga Isabel. En las tardes y las noches, borrachos de la OPDDIC de San Antonio caminan por la carretera gritando groserías al ver Olga Isabelenses. En el pasado, los borrachos han entrado a Olga Isabel para molestarle a la gente.

No vimos estos borrachos hasta el 27 de noviembre al atardecer— estábamos (Leire y Amy) caminando por la carretera con tres chicos de Olga Isabel (Leonardo: de 20 años, Carlos: de 12 años y Sebastián: de 9 años) cuando encontramos a dos borrachos de San Antonio. Ellos empezaron a gritar groserías al vernos. Uno de los borrachos tomó a Leonardo y le dijo que si no quería tomar una chela con él en San Antonio, le dispararía con una pistola. Con la ayuda de Leire, Leonardo se liberó a si mismo del borracho. Caminamos muy rápidamente enfrente de Leonardo. Mientras Leonardo bloqueaba al borracho para que no nos agarrara (Leire y yo—las dos mujeres). Cuando estuvimos más cerca de la comunidad Olga Isabel el borracho paró y dejó de perseguirnos.

Antes del 23 de noviembre (jueves), los Olga Isabelenses recibieron un documento escrito de la OPDDIC que decía que la OPDDIC va a despojarles de sus terrenos. El viernes 24 de noviembre, se programó una reunión entre los Olga Isabelenses y la OPDDIC para discutir este documento, pero la OPDDIC no asistieron.

- *Movimiento Militar/Actividades Paramilitares* – No vimos ningún movimiento hasta el 27 de noviembre. En la tarde de esta fecha, vimos 8 vehículos armados del ejército (modelos: Hummer, camión, pick-up). Habían 4 ocupantes con armas por camión.

- *Efectos de la Militarización* – Los Olga Isabelenses están continuamente en alerta día y noche y a veces han dejado sus trabajos en la milpa para estar en su comunidad. Si hay un ruido en la noche, un compañero se levanta a ver si alguien está entrando a la comunidad.

- *Elecciones* – Votan por autoridades locales (específicamente, los integrantes del consejo del municipio autónomo zapatista). No participan en las elecciones locales, estatales, o federales del gobierno mexicano.

- *Salud* – Hay una clínica con un médico que viene los viernes y sábados (principalmente los sábados). La clínica está abierta de las 9 a.m. a las 6 p.m. los viernes y sábados con un promotor de salud que siempre está ahí durante estas horas. Las enfermedades más comunes son eczemas de la piel, tos, calentura, gripe, y cortes de piel (a causa del trabajo en la milpa, principalmente con el machete). Hay más personas enfermas durante esta temporada porque hay más frío y lluvia. Había un paciente el viernes 24 noviembre y tres pacientes el sábado 25 noviembre—ellos tenían tos, calentura, y gripe. No hay alcoholismo, drogas, o prostitución en esta comunidad.

- *Educación* – Hay dos escuelas autónomas en la comunidad: un pre-escolar y una primaria. El pre-escolar tiene un maestro que se llama Eliazar y 10 estudiantes aproximadamente (no todos asisten a la escuela normalmente). No observamos las escuelas porque ahora están en vacaciones.

II. Organizaciones de la Comunidad

- *Divisiones internas* – No hemos visto.

- *Organizaciones presentes en la comunidad* – EZLN

- *Participación política* – No pertenecen a ningún partido político del estado mexicano. Son parte de la base de apoyo zapatista.

- *Cooperativas* – Hay una tienda cooperativa y un comedor en Chilón. Tienen una cooperativa de café (Nuevo Amanecer).

III. Situación Económica

- *Fuentes de trabajo o ingreso* – los cultivos de café, maíz y frijol, y aves de corral como gallinas y pavos; y las mujeres: en los trabajos textiles (servilletas bordadas)

- *Salario de jornada* – No hay porque trabajan para ellos mismos

- *Precios de los productos* – café: aprox. 15 pesos/kilo; una servilleta cuesta 50-100 pesos

- *Migración* – algunos jóvenes (varones) han migrado al D.F. y ciudades más grandes (3 mínimo)

- *Proyectos productivos* – Había un taller de costura por aprox. 20 mujeres del municipio por dos o tres días. Las dos maestras del taller eran de San Cristóbal y Comitán. Había un curso de medicina a 14 promotores de salud (todos hombres), del municipio en la clínica del lunes 27 noviembre al miércoles 29 noviembre. El maestro era el doctor que viene a la clínica (él vive en Altamirano).

IV. Condiciones del Campamento

- *Camas/Hamacas* – Hay tablas de madera donde pueden dormir cuatro personas y sitio para dos hamacas.

- Ocote, leña, y tortillas aportan la comunidad.

- Hay 2 tazas, 1 olla grande con su tapa, 6 platos, 3 cucharas de metal, 2 cucharas de plástico, 1 tenedor, 1 cuchillito.

- *Clima* – En esta época, por el día aprox. 25-27 grados y por la noche aprox. 10 grados.

- *Tipo de ropa* – Por el día fresca y por la noche algo abrigado.

- Hay necesidad de botas de goma o goretex.

- *Tienda* – Hay una tienda comunitaria con lo básico: huevos, galletas, pasta, arroz, papel higiénico, y refrescos.

- En Chilón hay otra tienda comunitaria, el comedor, e Internet.

V. Comentarios Adicionales

La gente es muy amable y agradable. Puedes observar todo lo que quieras en los talleres y con las familias y preguntarles. Obtuvimos la mayoría de nuestra información de pláticas con la gente de la comunidad.