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Contesting Zapata: Differing Meanings of the Mexican National Idea

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Abstract: *This article examines contesting interpretations regarding the meaning of the Mexican national hero Emiliano Zapata. It discusses how the 1994 Zapatista uprising does not only question the relationship between the dominant post-colonial mestizo Mexican society and the indigenous groups, but also questions the historiography of Mexico. It shows how the Mexican government and the revolutionary Zapatista movement appropriate an identical national symbol for their respective interpretations of history. Indigenous exclusion through the official historical discourse is challenged by the Zapatistas by claiming their own historical discourse, linking it to Mayan mentalities and transferring it to groups and individuals whose 'invisible histories' are not part of a dominant societal ideology.*

1. Introduction

In 2005 I have had the privilege to travel to an indigenous, autonomous community in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico in a region with communities sympathetic to the revolutionary Zapatista movement. I was part of a delegation that was allowed to work with indigenous *promotores* (equivalent for teachers) for autonomous education after having been approved by the Zapatista authorities. Apart from language studies, natural sciences, math and geography, the movement's approach to learning and teaching history was unique. It appeared to me that the history lessons were constructed around popular struggles (especially the Zapatista uprising), the analysis of local, national and global aspects of current social reality and the discovery of forms that allowed for the creation of historical perspective created by the indigenous – all factors that have been fundamental to the public discourse by the Zapatistas. Coming from a Western social and educational background it was a heartening experience to see how the indigenous population consciously worked toward incorporating their untold history into that of the Mexican nation.

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

The Zapatista uprising of 1994 was considered as a new chapter in determining the relationship between the nation of Mexico and its own indigenous population (Jorgensen, 2004). I maintain this notion needs to be taken further, as the uprising does not only question the relationship between the dominant post-colonial *mestizo* Mexican society and the indigenous groups, but also questions the historiography of Mexico.ⁱ In this article I will examine how the Mexican government and the Zapatista movement appropriate an identical national symbol for their respective interpretations of history. I argue that the Zapatista's claims for a different interpretation of the Mexican national history are claims that can be elaborated to groups and individuals whose 'invisible histories' are not part of a dominant societal ideology.ⁱⁱ I will first discuss issues of Mayan indigenous peoples through history. Next, I will compare how "official" Mexican history is determined and how the Zapatista movement contests this notion and claims incorporation of the "real" indigenous history into the national narrative. Later on, I will describe how both the Mexican government and the Zapatista movement claim the national hero Emiliano Zapata as a symbol whose legacy they rightfully uphold. In a following part, I will discuss how the symbol of Zapata is made coherent with Maya mentalities. Finally, I will show how the struggle of the Zapatistas can be perceived as an emancipatory struggle addressing global audiences whose 'invisible histories' are repressed.

2. Mayan Exclusion through History-Making

The notion of history has been used "as guardian to the official collective memory" which is limited to certain societal actors and selective with respect to facts and actions that are considered worthwhile to be "historical" (Aymard, 2004, p. 9). At first glance it seems that historical events are closed off, past events with a universally accepted interpretation based on the most comprehensive collection of historical data. History and its accuracy in Western societies often depend on existing written materials.ⁱⁱⁱ Numerous traditional societies, however, cannot rely on written

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

documentation of their history. Falsely these societies are then depicted as being primitive and without a history. Consequently official national histories have been constructed upon exclusion of societies where the transfer of historical knowledge has been passed on orally.

Habermas (1998) systematically deconstructed the interpretation and the entire notion of history, demonstrating the necessity to rethink historical interpretation. Most importantly he identifies that the meaning derived from historical interpretation “is an aggregate of meanings that are continuously sedimented as the result of new retrospective viewpoints” (1998, p. 155). Thus, as Habermas continues, historians who give attention to historical influence are aware that “the horizon of meaning cannot be closed off” (1998, p.155). In other words, historical interpretation must not be separated from contemporary constantly changing contexts. The interpretation of history works as a function for contemporary meaning-making. History is used by individuals and groups to achieve certain goals such as the formation of a collective identity, justification of actions against others, or the rationalization of societal relationships.

By now it should be clear that history is not straightforward, unchallenged and closed off. As Linstroth (2002) states, the past is imagined as a “multiple, contestable, and negotiated process which may be influenced by several factors simultaneously such as present social circumstances, discourse, politics, and competing ideologies” (p. 180).

To understand the discussed concerns of history-making and interpreting in the contemporary societal structure in Mexico, especially with regard to the relationship between the *mestizos* and the indigenous populations, it is inevitable to include colonial history. Bonfil Batalla (1996) argues that there is a historical connection, even continuity between Mexico’s past and present. At this point I briefly want to summarize the groundwork which has been developed by Bonfil Batalla (1996) and Todorov (1999). The history of colonialism in Mexico and Latin America has

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

been one of exploitation. The invaded (natives) “superdimensioned” the invaders, assigning them with extra-human identities. Several factors contributed to this perception. The most powerful Aztec ruler, Montezuma, considered the Spanish conquistador Cortez as the semi-god who had been expected to arrive and rule his people. Furthermore, the indigenous peoples were not familiar with the soldiers’ horses, which they are said to have perceived as god-like creatures. In essence historical arguments state that the entire technological advantage in warfare displayed by the invaders made them seem “extra-human” to the indigenous (c.f. Diaz de Castillo, 1963; Todorov, 1999; Bonfil Batalla, 1996).

Remaining in line with my general argument, I maintain that these ‘historical facts’ should be viewed very critically. Obeyesekere (1997) heavily criticizes such historical depictions about how the indigenous perceived the invaders. He attributes the indigenous peoples with a universal ‘practical rationality’. The author strongly argues against the apotheosis of the colonial invaders and maintains that it is not the question whether natives think reflectively, but rather how their thinking is interpreted and into which context it is put. Specifically referring to Todorov’s (1987/1999) work he states: “Todorov’s vision of the Other is a continuation of a major Spanish (and European) myth model dealing with the savage mind” (Obeyesekere, 1997, p. 17). Nevertheless it remains clear that a relatively small group of invaders was able to achieve superiority over a group of natives who outnumbered them. The history and relationship between these two societies, which was established at the time of the conquest has continued until the present day. The colonial domination, primarily assured by military force and violence, together with its divine justification was transferred to the modern Mexican state system, where the dominant images of the state and its hierarchical organization have been coercive (Wilmer, 1993). The Spanish colonial rule has created a process of exploitation and cultural formation to produce racial ethnic differences which have lasted for centuries. As a result of this development, the modern national identity has been created in Mexico (Saldana-Portillo, 2002).

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

Benjamin (2000) discusses the notion of people without history within a historiographic and a philosophical frameset. Written history in Mexico has been produced by non-indigenous historians. The indigenous population did not participate in the same “historical trajectory” (Wolf cited in Benjamin, 2000, p. 418). Furthermore, the indigenous populations ceased to be “protagonists of their own story” (Benjamin, 2000, p. 418). Paradoxically the indigenous population was portrayed as passive and backward victims while in contemporary Mexican nationalism the ancient indigenous heritage is emphasized and romanticized.

The notion of *indigenismo*, or the indophile perspective, can be considered a façade to cover up continued domination over and denial of indigenous self-assertion. Nash (2001, p. 14) asserts that *indigenismo* began with radical propositions (i.e. respect for indigenous roots) and later became “the ideological core for preserving status quo” (i.e. negation of self-determination for the indigenous population). In essence, the notion of *indigenismo* aims to integrate indigenous populations into this ideology through a declared pro-Indian policy while at the same time eradicating cultural differences in the nation through cultural assimilation (Nash, 2001). Nash (2001, p. 66) argues that “the Mexican development ideology of *indigenismo* extolled native culture, only to relegate it to the past as integration into the ‘mainstream’ of *mestizo* society”.

In the broader Meso-American context the so-called Pan-Maya Movement emerged as a challenge to notions of historical societal exclusion of the indigenous Mayas. The Pan-Maya movement surfaced in Guatemala during the 1980s. The Guatemalan civil war that lasted for more than 35 years was at its climax. The fighting during the so-called *la violencia* was considered genocidal with disproportionate warfare against the Mayan populations (Morrison & May, 1994). The major objective of the Pan-Maya movement was to unite Mayan groups to get engaged in a process of critiquing and making history. In essence, it is argued that “Pan-Mayanists challenge national histories that exclude

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

them [the Mayas] and utilize history to build a collective sense of nation” (Warren, 1998, p. 133).

Public intellectuals in Guatemala were aware of interpretation of the past as means to legitimize the current social contract in Guatemala. “Official” national histories have been published by cultural elites, foreign scholars, and even the military (Warren, 1998, p. 134). While the official history was one that included family chronicles, family genealogies, surveys of national political development, and polemical denunciations of capitalism, the Mayas “represented a past that could be covered quickly since it left few traces and had no historical future” (Warren, 1998, p. 135).

As peoples left out from the dominant historical narrative, the Mayans have not only been denied their historical collective identities, but they also have remained vulnerable to exploitation and violence as second-class humans.^{iv} By nicely wrapping the social contract into *indigenismo*, a dominant non-indigenous society publicly frees itself from the past evils of colonial domination and violence. Consequently the making of history is a clean, censored version of 500 years of domination.

3. Who determines Mexican History?

National histories often are taken for granted and not dealt with from a critical perspective. “If it’s in the books it must be right” reflects how the public views historical ‘facts’. Here one can draw from Foucault’s epistemological concept that states that power and the social structure determine what knowledge is, how it is used and what is conveyed, while at the same time knowledge is considered a basis of power (Foucault and Faubion 2000: xv).

The Mexican government, mainly through its educational policies, and the mass media are the main parties in determining the “official” Mexican history. Through the respective policies and discourses, these actors contribute to the societal exclusion of indigenous peoples. The relationship between the Mexican government and the

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

media conglomerates is a controversially discussed topic in Mexico and based around two main conceptions. On the one hand it is argued that the Mexican mass media are controlled by leading entrepreneurial families following a capitalist philosophy. Furthermore, it is argued that the media are used as weapons to follow through specific campaigns (Camp, 1989). On the other hand it is argued that television and radio are controlled by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which has held the political power in Mexico for more than seventy years (Warnock, 1995). Any scenario as described ultimately will be one where the constructed historical knowledge is one that denies the indigenous perspective. Indigenous history is not told **by** the indigenous but **for** the indigenous. The interpretation of nation and history goes hand in hand with that propagated by the government through education or the media. It is a history where the indigenous heritage – the great Mesoamerican civilization – is often romanticized for the benefit of tourism, whereas reality for an estimated 10 million indigenous peoples (10% of the entire Mexican population) remains the reality of subjugation and exploitation. ^v In a nutshell, the social context can be summarized in this statement: “Indians may be Mexico’s ideal ancestors, but mestizos are Mexico’s ideal citizens” (Saldana-Portillo, 2002, p. 294).

The production of history, values and knowledge in Mexico are considered to take place on an ‘imaginary’ realm. Rajchenberg and Héau-Lamber (1998, p. 24) point out that the path following an ‘imaginary Mexico’ leads to a “homogenization of cultural values and of the peoples who produce and re-create them”. In his widely acclaimed anthropological work Bonfil Batalla (1996) writes about a cultural duality in Mexico. The author’s general thesis is that of a *México Profundo* (deep Mexico) – the indigenous and culturally diverse one - and an ‘imaginary Mexico’ - based on an exclusionary westernization plan. While I claim Bonfil Batalla is generalizing too much when lumping the entire Mexican population into two categories of civilizations, I believe his main argument is useful to understand how Mexico’s historiography and contemporary societal differences have emerged from the nation’s colonial history.

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

4. The Making of a National Hero

It is widely accepted knowledge that the indigenous population has been subjugated and suffered extreme atrocities throughout Mexican history beginning with the conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) and revolutionary leaders such as Pancho Villa or Emiliano Zapata take on important roles in history-making of the contemporary Mexican nation. The meaning attributed to the actions of these revolutionary leaders, however, has undergone processes of transformation.

Stephen (2002) claims that nation views are shaped and reshaped through discourse, thus they are subject to change over time. Throughout the post-revolution Mexican government administrations, the perception and incorporation of the revolution in Mexican historiography has changed. It was not until the 1930s that Emiliano Zapata, formerly considered an outlaw, was sanitized and re-created as a highly admired national hero (Bruhn, 1999; Stephen, 2002). The *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP - Ministry of Education) included, even canonized the image of Zapata to fit a nationalist campaign mainly by incorporating a 'polished' history of Zapata into the textbooks (Stephen, 2002).

The aftermath of the revolution required a new social pact. Even though revolutionary ideals by Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa and others were directed toward the benefit of workers and peasants, the bureaucrat-professionals tilted the social pact toward business interests (Hodges & Gandy, 2002). Emiliano Zapata's *Plan de Ayala*, a land redistribution plan benefiting the peasant population, was partly implemented into agrarian Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution (Brenner & Leighton, 1971). Various scholars agree that the government's implementation of the land reform plans in post-revolution Mexico was not executed to benefit the indigenous population but rather to assimilate them into the dominant Mexican society which was further reinforced in the neoliberal orientation starting in the 1980s (e.g. Benjamin, 2000; Jung, 2003; Nugent, 1993).

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

The Zapatista uprising most often is considered one against neoliberalism and more specifically the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). On January 1, 1994, an army composed of mainly Mayan indigenous peoples from Mexico – Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN - seized control of six towns in the state of Chiapas. The military seizure took place on the day the NAFTA was put into effect – a day symbolically chosen by the Zapatistas to associate the five hundred year long exploitation with the negative consequences of globalization on indigenous peoples. This uprising, as will be shown, has moved the Mayas from the margins to the center of history making in Mexico by their claim to be the protagonists of their own history.

5. Claiming and Contesting the Official National History

Widely spread interpretations of the Zapatista struggle are too narrow and only limited to the threats to the indigenous population arising out of the emergence of the NAFTA and other neoliberal policy implementations. It is argued that “the pan-Indian nature of this enterprise [the Zapatistas] has a powerful component of postcolonial ethnic affirmation that goes well beyond political action” (Gossen, 1996, p. 536). I follow this perspective and argue that one of the movement’s main struggles takes place on a level which aims to assert the indigenous peoples’ place in history. In this regard, Linstroth (personal communication, April 2007) argues for the need of a reinterpretation of colonial history from the perspective of “the other”, that is from the bottom-up instead of the top-down approaches that have led to the myth-making of colonial history.

The reinterpretation of history is one of the Zapatistas’ measures to achieve post-colonial ethnic affirmation. Similar to the previously discussed broader Pan-Mayan movement and the notion of *indigenismo* it is argued that the Zapatistas in Mexico are engaged in a process of “updating of the collective memory” (Rajchenberg & Héau-Lambert, 1998, p.

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

29) – a collective memory that has excluded the indigenous perspective.

A changed Mexican historiography is part of a Maya revival that has emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. In this historiography the Maya population changes its (self)perception from that of passive victims to protagonists of Mexican national history. Thus the main concern for history lies in the reconstruction of the Mayan's own history which then can contribute to the creation of a new and more just Mexico (Benjamin, 2000). A way for the Mayan Zapatistas to claim a history in general is to challenge the predominant official exclusionary historical discourse determined by the government with its educational policies and through the mass media.

The Zapatista movement is by no means a separatist movement. The Zapatistas claim to be part of a nation, however, a marginalized part of a nation that has not found entry into the history books (Rajchenberg & Héau-Lambert, 1998). The new Maya-centric interpretation of history “is fusing with revisionist national history to create a new historical syncretism” (Benjamin, 2000, p. 441). This notion links the indigenous peoples' desire for cultural autonomy to their demand to be equal citizens. Taking revolutionary Mexican history into account, the Mayan reinterpretation of history was linked to resistance struggles such as the ones by Cuauhtémoc against the Spanish conquerors, the struggle for independence by Hidalgo and Morelos, or particularly Emiliano Zapata's peasant struggle against the ruling elite and the state (Benjamin, 2000, p. 441). In the aftermath of the 1910-1917 revolution, indigenous groups in Mexico participated in the nation as subordinate groups to *mestizos*. The indigenous past was expropriated and the *mestizos* constituted themselves as the hegemonic power through the previously discussed ideology of *indigenismo* (Nash, 2001).

The Zapatistas' contest of Mexican history is closely tied to contesting the modern state. They contest what Edkins (2003) calls a 'contradictory institution' that promises safety, security and meaning while at the same to

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

abusing, controlling and coercing. Edkins' (2003) discussion in relation to (collective) memory can be closely tied to the Zapatista struggle. The way how events are remembered is determined by dominant societal views. In this same line the indigenous history is remembered in a romanticized manner suiting the contemporary meaning-making of the non-indigenous Mexican society. Cultural and archeological heritage seem to have become significantly more important in the present. Supra-national entities such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have been installed to oversee the preservation of peoples, their cultures and traditions. In Mexico the *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples) is Mexico's institution responsible for indigenous affairs. It is my contention that such contemporary institutions often reveal aspects of *indigenismo*, thus their policies and programs are not created to act on behalf of the indigenous populations but to continue to exercise control in the realm of assimilation.

The Zapatista rebellion is, as the indigenous group claims, a cry to end five hundred years of colonial subjugation. In the context of the twentieth century it is a revolution tied to a regionally different interpretation of the Mexican Revolution (Stephen, 2002). The earlier mentioned attempts by the government to create a uniform Mexican nationalist ideology by the SEP's top-down approach was not realized or limited at the best (Stephen, 2002).

The Zapatistas are in a process of articulation and reproducing an alternative vision of social life to that of the Mexican state embedded in a re-interpretation of history. The Zapatistas use their interpretation of history to contest dominant state ideologies. Brysk (2000) refers to the notion of critical theory within which there is a normative commitment of decolonization of the life world by exposing distorting mass media influences, contesting dominant state ideologies, and supporting emancipatory social forces. In this regard the internet is the Zapatistas' "weapon of the weak" through which they expose distorting mass media influences. Subcomandante Marcos states that the

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

movement needed to find new spaces one of which is the “information super-highway – the internet” (Lebot, 1997, p. 349, own translation). The movement can broadcast its reinterpretation of Mexican history through national and international media and especially through the use of the internet (Stephen, 2002). The high exposure in the internet can be considered as ‘political judo’ applied by the Zapatistas.^{vi} Attempts by the powerful Mexican government and media conglomerates of upholding the dominant historical narrative are undermined by a critical global audience in direct and indirect support of the Zapatistas.

6. Claiming Zapata and His Legacy

Stephen (2002) argues that there is a contextualized meaning of the historical interpretation of national symbols where nationalism and ideas of national belonging are constructed differently on local and regional levels. Hall (cited in Nugent, 1993, p. 150) argues that community and state develop a relation through a “dialectic of cultural” struggle. Meanings and symbols produced by the state are not automatically taken over into community meaning structures. The Namiquipans, a peasant group in Chihuahua, embody and elaborate dominant symbols and meanings while at the same time challenging, rejecting, revaluing, and presenting alternatives to them (Nugent, 1993). I maintain that these findings can be equally applied to the case of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.

The Mexican government and the Zapatista movement hold claims to be legitimately entitled to the legacy of revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican Revolution. These claims reflect a ‘duality of history’, according to which single events have different attached meanings (Linstroth, personal communication, April, 2007). Stephen’s (2002) *Zapata Lives* is an excellent source dealing with the questions “Whose Zapata? Whose revolution?” (2002: xxxiii). The author shows the trajectory of the figure of Emiliano Zapata and how its interpretation has taken extremely different paths in contemporary Mexico.

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

Until the present the revolutionary ideals of a land redistribution plan of Emiliano Zapata, which had partly been incorporated into the post-revolution constitution, are contested. Peasant militancy is inspired by the ideals of Emiliano Zapata's revolutionary coming out of the state of Morelos in Mexico. Simultaneously, as discussed above, the Mexican government under the rule of Institutional Revolutionary Party that held on to power for 71 years institutionalized and nationalized the Mexican Revolution and the legacy of Zapata (Stephen, 2002).

In post-revolution Mexico competing discourses regarding land, the revolution, and Zapata developed alongside each other. These discourses are perceived as "competing components in an unstable hegemony" (Stephen, 2002, p. xxxvi) or "selective tradition" which is "an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification" (Williams cited in Stephen, 2002, p. xxxvii). The ruling government administrations in Mexico have used the figure of Zapata to achieve legitimacy for a project contrary to the one he had envisioned. The 1994 uprising in Chiapas re-appropriated Zapata as a symbol not only for themselves but for any marginal groups (Rajchenberg & Héau-Lambert, 1998).

The government's claim to the legacy of Emiliano Zapata in the time before the Zapatista uprising partly took place through President Carlos Salinas's promotion of neoliberal politics changing the course of Mexico's corporatist government.^{vii} His so-called reform of the agrarian reform Article 27 of the post-revolution 1917 constitution enabled privatization of collectively held lands (Nash, 2001). Paradoxically he used revolutionary Emiliano Zapata's legacy to justify this political course, re-interpreting history in favor of the government and investors. Stephen (2002) identifies the farce of using the framework of Zapata and the Mexican Revolution to dismantle land reform under the umbrella of continued commitment to the rural population.

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

The symbolic meaning of Emiliano Zapata in Mexican indigenous communities took a different path than the one promoted by governments, education and mass media. The incorporation of Zapata into local and regional culture in Chiapas (and Oaxaca) did not come until the emergence of peasant organizations in the 1970s and 1980s (Stephen, 2002). Subcomandante Marcos talks about how and why the Zapatistas use Mexican national symbols for their struggle. According to Marcos the issue is simple – the government occupied the territory of national symbols in a way that needed to be challenged. Marcos goes on stating that no new language needed to be invented, but that it was necessary to give new meaning to the symbols and with it to political history (Lebot, 1997). Even the masked, symbolic identity of Subcomandante Marcos is considered that of an “agrarian guerrilla hero”, thus it is directly linked to the legacy of peasant hero Emiliano Zapata (Jorgensen, 2004; Rajchenberg & Héau-Lambert, 1998).^{viii}

The lecture of Brenner’s (1971) *The Wind that Swept Mexico* provides a lively overview of the complex processes that were taking place during the Mexican Revolution.^{ix} The book illustrates convincing parallels between Emiliano Zapata’s struggle and that of Zapatistas in Chiapas. It then comes as no surprise that the contemporary Mayan peasant movement feels entitled to claim historical legacy of the revolutionary Zapatistas. Both the original revolutionary Zapatistas and the present Zapatista movement were/are at unease at the center of political power; both movements had/have no interest in any national/official power. Both movements were/are incorruptible in their demands. Both movements had/have demands affecting them directly but aimed at policy changes contributing to larger population groups of the nation. One must only look Emiliano Zapata’s *Plan de Ayala* which was an agrarian land reform plan that he created for the entire Mexican nation. *La Otra Campaña* is an outreaching campaign by contemporary Zapatista movement to unify nationwide struggles that are challenging the societal status quo.

The movement strongly identifies itself with Zapata’s struggle for the poor landless Mexican population (Jung,

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

2003). However, the non-Mayan Emiliano Zapata also had to be included into the Zapatistas' indigenous Mayan mentality, which took place through the invention of the figure *Votán Zapata*, a hybrid Tzeltal/nationalist figure, and his local struggle (Benjamin, 2000; Stephen, 2002).

7. Linking Zapata to Mayan Mentalities

While it is argued that the urban Mexican left, a context which developed the figure of omnipresent and witty spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, was influential in linking Emiliano Zapata to the indigenous people in Chiapas, one must not perceive this influence as determining the adoption of the revolutionary leader as a symbol. The figures of *Votán Zapata* and *el viejo Antonio* (old Antonio) have been created and are used by the Zapatistas for their own world-making purposes. Both are figures linking the struggle that is taking place in a broad national Mexican context to indigenous Mayan mentality. *El viejo Antonio* is described by Marcos as an old man he met while living in the jungle of Chiapas. The old man, according to Marcos, was the bridge between the rebel fighters and the indigenous base communities in the period preceding the actual uprising.^x Furthermore, *el viejo Antonio* introduced the mythical figure of *Votán*, which the Zapatistas transformed into the figure of *Votán Zapata* (Lebot, 1997). Zapata's original ideology was remade into a "hybrid Zapatismo with specific local meaning" taking the form of *Votán Zapata* (Stephen, 2002, pp. 157-158). The figure became the link between Emiliano Zapata and a spirit of new indigenous Zapatismo (Stephen, 2002). This historical interpretation allows the indigenous population to make sense of Zapata through adopting the figure into a mental concept they are familiar with.

A further importance lies in the heterogeneous nature of Mayan groups in Chiapas. Whereas the Zapatista movement appears and acts as a homogenous entity, the movement is made up of individuals from different socio-lingual Mayan groups. Despite their cultural diversity, the societies of the Tseltal, Tzotzil, Chol and Tojobil have united themselves under one movement, sharing a feature of all indigenous peoples, namely, the common lived experience of colonial domination. *Votán Zapata* "is a unifying figure with

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

local meaning that cuts across ethnic groups and helps bind together thousands waging the Zapatista struggle” (Stephen, 2002, p.164). In a larger context, the hybrid figure makes the indigenous accessible to the non-indigenous and vice versa. Borrowing a term from Nordstrom (1997), I consider the use of these figures ‘symbologues’ (dialogue through symbols) for the purpose of resistance. Using symbols in this way helps tying the struggle to the indigenous Mayan mythology and allows an interpretation of history within this framework.

A communiqué released by the Zapatistas on April 10, 1995, the day on which Zapata’s assassination is remembered, shows how the figure of *Votán Zapata* broadens historical re-interpretation making *Votán Zapata* a figure struggling for all oppressed people (“Votán Zapata se levantó de nuevo,” 1995). Consequently Stephen (2002) argues that the localized figure of *Votán Zapata* has been made accessible throughout Mexico and the world.

8. From Zapata to the Global Oppressed

The Zapatista struggle is supportive of any social emancipatory struggle and not only limited to the benefit of the indigenous population in Eastern Chiapas. I argue that the Zapatistas do not only provide a different interpretation of history but that they are actively and consciously participating in the task of an alternative-history making - one that is taking place side-by-side with processes of globalization. The Zapatistas’ alternative to the highly celebrated NAFTA inauguration in 1994 was the uprising of the voiceless. Here I want to refer to Linstroth’s (2005) notion of ‘invisible histories’ that are “not histories about élites and biographies of the well-to-do but those which emphasize collective discord and collective suffering, individual histories of non-famous peoples, histories of the weak, histories of the voiceless, histories of the developing world and the fourth world, those social and political histories which are the undercurrents of our times” (Linstroth, 2005, p. 14). The Zapatistas achieved to make invisible histories visible to a global audience.

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

Subcomandante Marcos states that it is essential for the movement to have a more open concept of the nation. Thus he demonstrates how the struggle goes beyond that of an indigenous group toward creating a history including individuals and groups such as the harbor workers in Veracruz, the undocumented migrants in Tijuana, the persons working in the tourist business in Yucatan or the workers in hair salons in Mexico City (Lebot, 1997: 338). In a 1994 communiqué Marcos demonstrated how he permits his own rebel identity to be any exploited, marginalized, or oppressed figure. He says:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a gang member in Neza, a rocker in the National University, a Jew in Germany, an ombudsman in the Defense Ministry, a communist in the post-Cold War era, an artist without gallery or portfolio.... A pacifist in Bosnia, a housewife alone on Saturday night in any neighborhood in any city in Mexico, a striker in the CTM, a reporter writing filler stories for the back pages, a single woman on the subway at 10 pm, a peasant without land, an unemployed worker... an unhappy student, a dissident amid free market economics, a writer without books or readers, and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains of southeast Mexico. So Marcos is a human being, any human being, in this world. Marcos is all the exploited, marginalized and oppressed minorities, resisting and saying, 'Enough!' (EZLN communiqué May 1994)

Even though this statement is not directly linked to a reinterpretation of history, I identify a similar pattern. The Zapatistas represent individuals or groups who are systematically oppressed. Thus I maintain that these individuals and groups share a similar fate of being excluded from the dominant societal discourse determining history and history-making. *La Otra Campaña* (the Other Campaign), initiated in 2006, is the Zapatistas' manifest attempt to unify struggles and visualize all these 'invisible histories' and give voice to the voiceless. It is not only an alternative political campaign, but a campaign to re-interpret

Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

history and allow the ones who had been systematically been left out or oppressed to take on active roles in making history.

9. Conclusion

Based on the discussion of the emerged reinterpretation of indigenous history, I have argued that the Zapatista movement can be considered the embodiment of a new form of Mexican historiography. Through their actions the Zapatistas reject the denial of indigenous resistance to domination that has started with the conquest more than five hundred years ago. Therefore the movement places its struggle not only in the context of the NAFTA but within the historical context of colonization and the Mexican Revolution. The Zapatistas' lack of military strength is overcome by the incorporation of nationally accepted symbols into the struggle.

Specifically in this paper I have shown how exclusion through "official" history has been challenged by indigenous groups. Within the Mexican context I have shown how the government through education and the mass media are the main actors for determining the nation's "official" history. I then discussed how the indigenous population claimed to be part of history by contesting the taken-for-granted Mexican history. The legacy of the Mexican Revolution and revolutionary Emiliano Zapata is a highly contested 'symbolic territory' between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. I discussed how the government appropriates Zapata for the dismantling of land reform while asserting a continued commitment to the rural population. The Zapatistas on the other hand incorporated Zapata into their discourse mainly because of his commitment to the poor, the underprivileged. The incorporation of Emiliano Zapata into the struggle of the indigenous Mayas would not have been possible without creating a link between the revolutionary hero and indigenous Maya mentalities. Thus I discussed how the movement created the figure of Votán Zapata which has an identity unifying the heterogeneous Maya groups through the spiritual Mayan figure Votán and linking them to the Mexican nation through Emiliano Zapata. Finally I showed

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

how the Zapatistas' struggle must be perceived beyond the limits of an indigenous group challenging the Mexican government. The challenge to an interpretation of history determined by dominant societal groups is consciously elaborated to a larger level by the Zapatistas linking their struggle to all groups and individuals whose 'invisible histories' have not found their ways into an "official" historical narrative.

Scholarly work, more specifically the field of anthropology, historically has been criticized as an intellectual outreach of colonial ideologies. Clearly contemporary anthropology has moved beyond such notions. On the contrary, I maintain the contemporary anthropological approaches have their strength in questioning historiography. The famous intellectual debate between Gananath Obeyesekere (1997) and Marshall Sahlins (1995) has made it clear that historical preconceptions are not any longer accepted as the *non plus ultra* of knowledge. The two scholars fought over the rightful interpretations of Hawaiian history since the arrival of Captain James Cook. It seems that the Zapatista movement, most visible through the communiqués written by their spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, has taken this debate to a more practical level.

A myriad of intellectuals are engaged in their respective interpretations of the movement's meaning. It is a fascinating struggle to follow, however, despite the intellectual fascination that I share with these scholars one must not forget that the Zapatista struggle contains very tangible factors such as human suffering, militarization, physical and structural violence and exploitation. Intellectuals following the Zapatista struggle must not sacrifice the tangible for their academic egos. Whereas Obeyesekere and Sahlins cannot go back and ask the Hawaiians about Captain Cook, the indigenous populations in Chiapas are very much alive and waiting to make their 'invisible histories' visible.

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Patrick T. Hiller, Nova Southeastern University

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ⁱ People with a mixed racial ancestry are considered as *mestizos*. In broad terms, these are individuals and groups on the upper levels of the racial/social hierarchy

ⁱⁱ This term was introduced by Linstroth (2005) and will be discussed in further detail in this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ The notion of ‘Western societies’ includes those Latin American societies that have emerged out of the context of colonization. More specifically I am including Mexico into this notion.

^{iv} I am deliberately using the term ‘second-class humans’ as opposed to the wide-spread term ‘second-class citizens’. The historical and current maltreatment of the Mayan peoples in Guatemala and Mexico more adequately described as inhuman rather than unjust.

^v Demographic data, more precisely its collection and categorization, fits into the historical development and structure of the Mexican society. With the emergence of the Mexican nation, the alleged equality of the system allowed no room for a legal definition of what it means to be Indian. Bonfil Batalla speaks of a “statistical ethnocide” (Bonfil Batalla, 1996, p. 20). Even though categorization with respect to demographics of population groups must be carefully applied, at least numbers could be estimated in a formal way. The most proximate census data with respect to indigenous population in Mexico is “indigenous language”. According to the Comisión Nacional para el desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas- Mexico’s national commission for the advancement of the indigenous peoples – a third of the population in Chiapas (5 years and older) speaks an indigenous language (as compared to only 10% in entire Mexico)(Comisión Nacional para el desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2000), and thus is considered to be of indigenous ancestry. The data for Chiapas shows that there is a very unequal distribution, meaning that numerous communities have an indigenous population of nearly 100%, whereas others are almost exclusively mestizo communities.

^{vi} ‘The principle of political judo’ implies that “the adversary’s apparent force and errors are used against him, which demands a public construction and in the medias of some epistemic ruptures in people (and if possible in authority)” (Ameglio, 2006, n.p.).

^{vii} Carlos Salinas de Gortari was member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and held his presidency from 1988 until 1994.

^{viii} In all public appearances the Zapatistas are covering their faces with masks. Their explanation for covering their faces is twofold. Security reasons play a role, but primarily it is a symbolic gesture. The Zapatistas see themselves involved in a struggle against oblivion; they are the people without faces, because the society has not seen them and have not wanted to see them for more than five hundred years. By wearing masks they remain anonymous and unseen, on the one hand, but acquire their Zapatista identity on the other hand.

^{ix} Brenner’s work was initially published in 1943.

Contesting Zapata: Differing Ideas of the Mexican National Idea

^x Support from communities is a crucial aspect of the Zapatista struggle. The military arm of the movement does not make any decisions without the permission of the base communities. The slogan they strictly follow is *mandar obedeciendo* (leading by obedience)